**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHEMOT**

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Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Shemot of how God heard *Benei Yisrael*’s cries as they suffered under bondage in Egypt, whereupon He appeared to Moshe and sent him back to Egypt to lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom. The Torah writes: “God saw the Israelites, and God knew” (2:25).

Different interpretations have been offered for the expression, “*va-yeida Elokim*” (“and God knew”). Rav Saadia Gaon and Rabbeinu Chananel understood “*va-yeida*” to mean not “knew,” but rather “pitied.” Rashi explains, “He paid attention to them and did not ignore them.” Ibn Ezra suggests reading the verse to mean that God “saw” the oppression suffered by *Benei Yisrael* out in the open, and He “knew” of the suffering they endured at the hands of the Egyptians in private, which was not known to anybody else. Seforno writes that God “knew” that the people’s prayers were sincere and wholehearted.

*Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel* translates the phrase “*va-yeida Elokim*” as, “It was revealed before Him the repentance which they performed in private, which people did not know about each other.” According to *Targum Yonatan*, the Torah refers here to the nation’s indiscernible repentance. Outwardly, it did not appear as though the people changed their conduct or their character, but God “knew” that the people indeed repented privately, and He lovingly accepted this private repentance and proceeded to begin the process of redemption.

How might we understand this reference to private repentance? What does *Targum Yonatan* mean when it speaks of the people repenting in a manner that was known only to God?

The explanation, perhaps, is that *Benei Yisrael* did not undergo the kind of fundamental transformation that *teshuva* ideally requires. They did not change their conduct to such an extent that they appeared as drastically different people. Their repentance was slight and subtle, and hence indiscernible. The change occurred mainly within their minds and hearts, and was thus visible only to the Almighty.

If so, then *Targum Yonatan*’s translation of this verse teaches that even small, modest measures of *teshuva* are significant and valuable. While we must, of course, always strive to perfect ourselves, and we indeed pray three times each day, “*hachazireinu bi-tshuva sheleima lefanekha*” – “bring us back to You in complete repentance,” nevertheless, every small step we take is cherished by God. The most effective change is gradual change, a long-term process of modest, incremental steps towards improvement, each one of which is significant and precious. God brought redemption to our ancestors in Egypt when, according to *Targum Yonatan*, He saw just the initial, internal stirrings of *teshuva* – teaching us that every small step we take towards self-improvement is inestimably valuable and lovingly accepted.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Shemot of Moshe’s experiences as a young man when he decided to leave Pharaoh’s palace, where he was raised, and observe the plight of the Israelite slaves. On the first day, Moshe saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a helpless slave, and he promptly killed the taskmaster to rescue the slave. The next day, Moshe saw two Israelites quarreling with one another, and he tried to intervene, asking the guilty party, “Why do you strike your fellow?”

The man replied, “Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” (2:14).

The Torah says that Moshe at that point realized that “*noda ha-davar*” – “the matter is known.” The simple meaning is that Moshe recognized, to his horror, that despite his attempts the previous day to ensure that nobody would witness his strike of the taskmaster, and his quick burial of the taskmaster’s remains, the incident was seen, and the news had likely spread. Moshe was thus forced to flee from Egypt.

The *Midrash Tanchuma*, however, as Rashi cites, finds a deeper level of meaning in Moshe’s exclamation, “*noda ha-davar*.” According to the Midrash, Moshe was saying that he now understood the reason why *Benei Yisrael* were deserving of such unusual persecution. Until then, the Midrash teaches, Moshe wondered why *Benei Yisrael* were singled out for such suffering, but now, upon seeing the way they treated one another, he understood.

*Ketav Sofer* offers a creative explanation of the Midrash’s comment. He suggests that the Midrash refers not to the general plight suffered by *Benei Yisrael* in Egypt, but specifically to the Egyptians’ suspicion of them. As we read earlier, the period of enslavement began when Pharaoh expressed concern that *Benei Yisrael* – whose population was rapidly growing – would support Egypt’s enemies, and they thus posed a grave threat to the empire. Pharaoh regarded this threat as so serious that he felt it necessary to enslave the nation in order to keep them at bay. Moshe wondered why Egypt looked upon *Benei Yisrael* with such suspicion, presuming that the people whose ancestors were welcomed by Egypt when they faced deadly famine in their homeland would be disloyal – and were so suspicious that they deemed it necessary to enslave and persecute them. Moshe found the answer, *Ketav Sofer* explains, when he saw how *Benei Yisrael* betrayed one another. In *Ketav Sofer*’s words:

We are considered among the nations as people of deceit and various schemes, people of quarreling and the like, because they see that people rise against each other to completely knock him down, to speak evil about him, and to hand him over to his foes. They conclude *a fortiori*, [figuring,] “If they mistreat their fellow, then certainly they would despise us and always devise plans against us how to deceive and mislead.”

When Moshe saw the way *Benei Yisrael* acted with hostility toward one another, he understood why they aroused suspicion among the Egyptians, who saw *Benei Yisrael* as people who could not be trusted. When we fail to treat one another properly, if we are dishonest and disloyal to other members of our nation, then it is only natural that other nations will distrust us and look at us with suspicion.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot (1:13) tells that the Egyptians enslaved *Benei Yisrael*, forcing labor upon them “*be-farekh*.” Most commentators interpreted this word in accordance with the usage of the root *p.r.kh*. in Talmudic literature as meaning “break.” Rashi, for example, writes that the Egyptians forced upon *Benei Yisrael* “labor which breaks the body.” Onkelos translates this word as “*be-kashyu*,” which likely means “harshly,” or “severely.”

An entirely different interpretation of the word “*be-farekh*” is offered by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who associates this word with the word “*parokhet*,” referring to the partition that separated between the two chambers of the *Mishkan*. According to Rav Hirsch, the word “*be-farekh*” indicates that by enslaving *Benei Yisrael*, the Egyptians effectively drove a wedge between *Benei Yisrael* and the rest of the country, singling out the former as a fundamentally different – and inferior – class. Rav Hirsch writes:

By declaring them slaves, they [the Egyptians] divided them off from the rest of the people, as being creatures without any rights whatsoever, they shut them right off from all the rest of the population who could claim legal rights. Slaves are declared to be a different order of beings to ordinary human beings. Ruthless harshness…then follows automatically.

Thus, the word “*be-farekh*” indicates that the Egyptians created a “partition” between themselves and *Benei Yisrael*, designating them as a slave class that deserved no rights and could be tormented and abused freely.

The significance of this reading of “*be-farekh*” extends beyond the context of Egypt’s enslavement of *Benei Yisrael*. Many people, in some way and to some extent, erect various “partitions” between themselves and certain groups. They view those different from them as not merely different, but as separate and apart, and as inferior beings. These “partitions” might relate to financial status, social skills, professional skills, appearance, ethnic or geographic origin, level of religious observance, or any other distinguishing feature. Our legitimate pride over our background, achievements and way of doing things can easily lead us to regard as inferior those from different backgrounds, who have not achieved what we have achieved, or who conduct their lives differently than we do. The retribution visited upon Egypt for its mistreatment of *Benei Yisrael* teaches us of the evil of “*be-farekh*,” of erecting artificial “partitions” that set apart certain groups of people as inferior. We are certainly entitled to take pride in our unique identity and accomplishments, but at the same time, we must avoid building mental “partitions” between us and others, and looking with disdain upon those who are different from us.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot (1:14) tells that the Egyptians imposed upon *Benei Yisrael* “*avoda kasha*” – “hard labor.” The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (11b) cites one view explaining this expression to mean “that they would transfer men’s work to women, and women’s work to men.” As the Egyptians’ aim was not the product of *Benei Yisrael*’s labor, but rather to crush their spirits in order to subdue and humiliate them, they distributed tasks not in a manner that would maximize efficiency, but in a way that maximized suffering. To that end, the Egyptians specifically assigned the wrong jobs to the wrong people – forcing men to do work for which women were more naturally suited, and forcing women to do work that was more naturally suited for men. This system, quite obviously, compromised the slaves’ productivity, but it had the desired effect of intensifying the people’s frustration and angst, as they needed to struggle to perform tasks for which they were ill-suited.

Unfortunately, many people endure a type of self-imposed “slavery” by forcing themselves to make commitments and pursue goals which are not appropriate for them. They look to other people’s lives as the models of who they should be, how they need to live, what they, their homes and their families need to look like, and what they need to accomplish, such that they become “enslaved” to those models. And they then end up spending their lives struggling to fit into a mold that is not right for them, trying to be people who they are not meant to become, and undertaking tasks for which they are unfit. Not all people are naturally suited for the same occupation, the same social habits, the same pastimes, or the same courses of study. Not all people are meant to achieve the same financial status, or spend their resources of time and money the same way. All people are different and are naturally inclined to lead different lives and do things in different ways. If we feel pressure to follow models set by other people for which we are not suited, we essentially “enslave” ourselves, and will find ourselves feeling unhappy, unfulfilled and frustrated, forced into a life that we are not meant to live.

The cruelty of the Egyptians towards *Benei Yisrael* perhaps alerts us not to treat ourselves with this same kind of cruelty, not to impose upon ourselves tasks which we are not cut out for, and to instead enjoy the most precious aspect of freedom – the freedom to maximize our own unique talents and our own unique potential, and to make the decisions and reach for the goals that we truly believe are right for us.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Sota (11b) that when the Torah speaks of the Egyptians imposing “*avoda kasha*” – “hard labor” – upon *Benei Yisrael*, it means that “that they would transfer men’s work to women, and women’s work to men.” As part of their scheme to demoralize *Benei Yisrael*, the Egyptians not only forced them to perform labor, but forced them to perform labor for which they were ill-suited – having men do work normally done by women, and women do work normally done by men.

This comment appears also in the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:11), which, interestingly, asserts that this is the meaning of the term “*be-farekh*” which the Torah (1:13) uses in reference to the slave labor imposed upon *Benei Yisrael*. According to the Midrash, the implication of “*be-farekh*” is that the Egyptians had *Benei Yisrael* perform jobs more suited for the opposite gender. Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, explains the Midrash’s comment by noting a verse in Sefer Mishlei (2:12) which refers to a dishonest swindler with the term “*medaber tahpukhot*” (“who speaks opposite [of the truth]”). The *Targum* translates this expression as “*memaleil* ***mefarkheyata***” – indicating that the root *p.r.kh.* can be used to mean “opposite,” or “reverse.” Accordingly, the Gemara interpreted the term “*be-farekh*” as indicating that the Egyptians reversed accepted roles, forcing upon *Benei Yisrael*’s men and women the jobs more suited for the other gender.

Rav Mecklenberg himself, however, offers a different explanation of the word “*be-farekh*,” citing Rav Shlomo Pappenheim. He writes that the root “*p.r.kh.*” denotes “stopping,” or discontinuing, and it is used in reference to *Benei Yisrael*’s slave labor to indicate that the Egyptians would frequently move the slaves from one task to another, so that they would never feel comfortable at ease in any given job. The hardship to which the Egyptians subjected *Benei Yisrael*, according to this reading, involved not necessarily the nature of the work itself, but the fact that *Benei Yisrael* were never given the opportunity to grow accustomed to, or familiar with, any one task. This was part of the Egyptians’ plan to demoralize *Benei Yisrael* and crush their spirits. Rav Mecklenberg explains on this basis the otherwise difficult description of the Egyptians embittering *Benei Yisrael*’s lives “with mortar and bricks, and with all work in the field, all their work which they imposed upon them *be-farekh*” (1:14). The Torah here speaks of the Egyptians forcing *Benei Yisrael* to perform a wide range of different forms of work, and states that it was all imposed “*be-farekh*.” According to the standard interpretation of “*be-farekh*,” as referring to backbreaking labor, it seems difficult to understand what the Torah means when it speaks of the Egyptians forcing many different types of jobs upon the slaves “*be-farekh*.” Rav Mecklenberg noted that according to his reading, this verse is easily understood, as it informs us that the Egyptians routinely switched *Benei Yisrael*’s jobs in order to keep them uncomfortable and unfulfilled, always enduring the hardship and frustration of new, unfamiliar work. (*Ketav Sofer* offers a similar explanation to 1:13.)

It is worth noting the theory advanced by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch in his commentary to this verse, where, as we mentioned earlier this week, he associates the word “*be-farekh*” with the word “*parokhet*” (“partition”). Rav Hirsch explained “*be-farekh*” to mean that the Egyptians set *Benei Yisrael* apart from the rest of Egyptian society by designating them as members of a distinct slave class, bereft of rights and undeserving of any dignity or consideration. Rav Mecklenberg’s understanding of this word, interestingly enough, also accommodates this association with the word “*parokhet*,” as a “*parokhet*” is an obstruction, blocking a person’s view or path forward. Accordingly, the root *p.r.kh*. is used here to denote the repeated discontinuation of *Benei Yisrael*’s work, as they were frequently shifted from one job to another.

Thursday

We read in the beginning of Parashat Shemot of the cruel attempts made by Pharaoh to curb *Benei Yisrael*’s population growth, culminating with his edict ordering that all newborn males should be cast into a river (1:22).

The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (12a), as cited by Rashi, advances a surprising reading of this verse, asserting that this edict applied to all newborn males in the empire, including those of the native Egyptians. Rashi explains, based on the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:18), that Pharaoh’s astrologers determined that the leader destined to bring *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt was born (or, according to the text of the Midrash, conceived), and so Pharaoh went ahead and decreed that all newborn males should be killed, to ascertain that this future leader would never arise. Hence, this edict, which was intended not simply to slow *Benei Yisrael*’s growth, but also to prevent the emergence of the nation’s leader, was decreed upon the entire country, and not only on *Benei Yisrael*.

Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, finds grammatical support for the Gemara’s counterintuitive reading of this verse. He notes that the standard construction normally used in reference to a command issued by one party to another is to connect the two parties with the word “*et*.” For example, in reference to Yaakov’s instructions to his servants who brought his gift to Eisav, the Torah writes, “*Va-yetzav* ***et*** *ha-rishon…****et*** *ha-sheini…****et*** *ha-shelishi*…” (Bereishit 32:17,19). Later in Sefer Bereishit (44:1), we read of Yosef’s command to his butler: “*Va-yetzav* ***et*** *asher al beito…*,” and his command to the physicians to embalm Yaakov: “*Va-yetzav…****et*** *ha-rof’im*” (Bereishit 50:2). Here, however, in the context of Pharaoh’s edict, the Torah writes not that Pharaoh commanded “***et*** *kol amo*,” but rather “***le-****khol amo*.” Rav Mecklenberg cites numerous examples of how the preposition “*le-*” appearing after the verb *tz.v.h.* (“command”) denotes not the recipient of the command, but rather the subject of the command. When a group of people asked Moshe for the opportunity to offer the *pesach* sacrifice despite their state of impurity, Moshe responded that he must wait to hear “*ma yetzaveh Hashem* ***lakhem***” – “what the Lord will command regarding you” (Bamidbar 9:8). And after Moshe reached an agreement the tribes of Reuven and Gad, who wanted to permanently settle east of the Jordan River, “*va-yetzav* ***lahem*** *Moshe* ***eit*** *Elazar…ve-****eit*** *Yehoshua*” – Moshe issued commands to Elazar and Yehoshua about these two tribes (Bamidbar 32:28). Here in Parashat Shemot, too, the Torah writes, “*Va-yetzav Pharaoh* ***lekhol*** *amo*” – indicating that the command was issued not *to* “his nation” (“*amo*”), but rather *about* the Egyptians, that even their newborn sons should be cast in the river.

In the course of his discussion, Rav Mecklenberg offers a novel interpretation of one of the most famous verses in the Torah: “*Torah tziva lanu Moshe*” (Devarim 33:4), which is commonly translated as, “Moshe commanded us the Torah.” As the word “*tziva*” is followed by a form of the preposition “*le-*” (“*lanu*”), Rav Mecklenberg writes, the correct translation of “*Torah tziva lanu Moshe*” is “He [God] commanded Moshe the Torah for us.” After all, the commands of the Torah were issued not by Moshe, but rather by the Almighty, and so it seems more likely that Moshe is mentioned in this verse not as the one who issued the commands, but rather as the one who received the commands, which were given “*lanu*” – for us to observe.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot (2:10) tells us that Moshe was given his name by the princess of Egypt who discovered him when, as an infant, he was placed in a basket in a river by his mother, trying to rescue him from Pharaoh’s edict to kill newborn boys. The name “Moshe” commemorates the fact that “*min ha-mayim* ***meshitihu***” – “I drew him from the water.”

Chizkuni observes that seemingly, the more appropriate name for Moshe would have been “*mashui*,” which means “drawn.” The name “Moshe,” Chizkuni writes, appears to reflect the active form of this verb, denoting not “being drawn,” but rather “drawing.” Chizkuni explains that the princess chose the name “Moshe” to indicate that “just as I drew him, so will he draw others, meaning, that he would ‘draw’ Israel from Egypt.” According to Chizkuni, then, the name “Moshe” refers not to Moshe’s having been drawn from the water, but rather his destiny as the one who would “draw” others from situations of crisis just as he had been during infancy. (This explanation also appears in the *Midrash Ha-gadol*, as cited by *Torah Sheleima*, and in Seforno’s commentary.)

Significantly, as many have noted, Pharaoh’s daughter – according to Chizkuni – saw fit to name her adopted child not after the events that he experienced, but rather after what she hoped he would do for others. The educational principle underlying this decision is that children must be raised to focus more on what they are capable of doing than on what is done to them against their will. If we define ourselves and our existence based on what happens to us, then we feel helpless and will likely lead passive lives. But if we focus our attention on our capabilities, then we are driven to achieve and accomplish. And so Moshe’s adopted mother gave him a name that signified not what he experienced, but what he could achieve, empowering him with the knowledge and confidence that he is capable of impacting and helping the world.

All of us, like Moshe, have been “drawn” by people and circumstances, brought by external forces to certain conditions at various points in our lives. Chizkuni’s insightful comments teach us that we must view ourselves not as “*mashui*” – helpless objects controlled by factors beyond our control, but rather as “*moshe*” – capable beings with great potential to achieve. Rather than live passively, waiting to see how we will be “drawn” from our current condition to a different one, we are to utilize our God-given talents and capabilities to “draw” the world from its current condition to a better one. What defines us is neither the good fortune we have enjoyed nor the misfortunes we have endured, but rather the decisions we make and the work we invest to develop ourselves and to make the most significant contribution to the world that we are capable of making.

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