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**The Stealthy Exodus**

**By Rav Meir Spiegelman**

"Our forefathers in Egypt paid no heed to Your wonders, they did not remember Your great mercies, and they rebelled at the sea, at the Red Sea." ([Tehillim 106:7](#))

This verse establishes that Bnei Yisrael rebelled against God at the Red Sea. The nature of this rebellion is not stated explicitly, but the simplest meaning would appear to be a reference to the hostile protest of Bnei Yisrael against Moshe before the splitting of the sea:

"They said to Moshe: Was it then for lack of graves in Egypt that you have brought us to die in the desert? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt – is this not what we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone that we may serve Egypt.' For it would have been better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert." ([Shemot 14:11-12](#))

What is notable about this rebellion at the Red Sea? We may find the answer to this question by looking at the first place that Bnei Yisrael reached after the splitting of the sea: Mara.

Mara

"Moshe led Israel from the Red Sea, and they set out to the wilderness of Shur. They walked for three days in the desert and found no water. They came to Mara, and they could not drink the water of Mara for it was bitter – therefore the place was called Mara." ([Shemot 15:22-23](#))

Why was the first place that Bnei Yisrael reached, after the splitting of the Sea, a place of bitter water? Why could they not have reached Eilim, with its wells and palm trees? Clearly, God could have led them to a more welcoming site. Why, then, did He choose specifically Mara?

In two different places the Torah records that Bnei Yisrael walked for three days before reaching Mara: in our parasha, and in parashat Mas'ei ([Bamidbar 33:8](#)). Nowhere else in parashat Mas'ei does the text detail the length of the journey from one station to another. The importance of the three-day journey to Mara may be understood against the backdrop of Moshe's request of Pharaoh:

"Let us undertake a journey of three days in the desert, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God as He shall command us." ([Shemot 8:23](#)).

Moshe promises Pharaoh that the nation of Israel is going to commemorate a festival to God in the desert. Even without this promise, Am Yisrael should have thanked God for taking them out of Egypt, but once this was promised explicitly to Pharaoh, the festival became obligatory.

But strangely enough, after three days of journeying the nation offers no festive thanks to God. Up until the splitting of the Sea, we may have postulated that Bnei Yisrael were not yet truly free from Egypt; but after passing through the Sea and witnessing the eradication of their Egyptian oppressors, there is no explanation for their behavior. As a punishment, God brings them, after three days, to Mara, where He reminds them of the plagues in Egypt and promises that "all the diseases with which I afflicted Egypt, I shall not afflict you." The message here is clear: the ten plagues befell Egypt because of their refusal to allow Bnei Yisrael to celebrate their festival to God in the desert. Am Yisrael must draw the necessary conclusion, and offer thanks to God for the Exodus.

The problem of the lack of gratitude becomes even more troubling if we remember that even the Song of the Sea itself contains no thanks to God. Throughout the Song there is praise of God and there are descriptions of His great power, but no expression of thanks. At the end of the Song, Bnei Yisrael also demand that God bring them to Eretz Yisrael: "Bring them, plant them, in the mountain of Your inheritance" – but once again, no mention of any thanks.

The Lie to Pharaoh

Why did Bnei Yisrael not express thanks to God? The most obvious answer is that as far as Bnei Yisrael understood, the festival had been merely an excuse to Pharaoh; they had never imagined that they would indeed celebrate their exodus from Egypt with thanks to God.

This perspective brings us back to the well-known question, debated among the commentaries: why did God tell Moshe to lie to Pharaoh? The very first time that God was revealed to Moshe, at the burning bush, He commanded him to tell Pharaoh that Bnei Yisrael wanted to undertake a three-day journey in the desert and to sacrifice to God. Throughout the negotiations, Moshe consistently asks Pharaoh to free them from Egypt only for three days; he makes no mention of the fact that Bnei Yisrael will never return. Indeed, when three days have passed from their departure, and Pharaoh discovers that his slaves are not coming back, he sets off in pursuit.

In fact, this parasha presents us with a dual problem: firstly, on a moral level, how could God lie? The commentators address this question at length, but for the purposes of the present shiur we shall steer clear of their learned discussion.

I believe that the lie to Pharaoh presents another problem, even more serious than the first. Every year, at the Seder table, we commemorate one of the most awesome events in history: the exodus of Bnei Yisrael from Egypt. But that great incident, described as a departure "with a strong hand and an outstretched arm," concludes – in a certain sense – with a whimper. Bnei Yisrael leave Egypt like thieves in the night, having deceived Pharaoh. Instead of God coming to redeem His people with a high hand, forcing Pharaoh to free Bnei Yisrael and to pay them their due wages for hundreds of years of servitude, God frees them in the middle of the night, and as for their pay – they are forced to acquire it through trickery, by asking to borrow various items. It makes no difference even if the Egyptians knew that their possessions would not be returned to them; either way, there are certainly more honorable and respectable ways in which Bnei Yisrael could have received their payment.[1] Why, then, did Moshe not ask Pharaoh to free Bnei Yisrael outright, without lying to him or misleading him?[2]

A Wandering Aramean was My Father, and He Went Down to Egypt

A clear parallel exists between Yaakov's flight from Lavan and Bnei Yisrael's exodus from Egypt.

In the beginning, Yaakov flees to Lavan and indentures himself to him against the background of his dispute with his brother, Esav, over the birthright. Similarly, Yosef is brought down to Egypt because of the rift between him and his brothers concerning the birthright. Then, after years of service, Lavan hears of Yaakov's escape after three days; he pursues him and catches up with him after seven days. Pharaoh likewise begins to pursue Bnei Yisrael after three days, and he reaches them at the shores of the Red Sea, after seven days (according to Chazal's exegesis [3]). Yaakov furtively receives the payment that is owing to him, rather than engaging in a head-on confrontation with Lavan, and Bnei Yisrael likewise receive their payment not directly, but rather through trickery. The two stories conclude in different ways: Lavan gives up after God reveals Himself to him and commands him to desist from pursuing Yaakov, but Pharaoh continues to chase Bnei Yisrael although God has told him several times not to. Therefore, Lavan merits to meet with Yaakov and to forge a covenant with him, while Pharaoh is drowned in the Sea with his entire army.[4]

In light of the above comparison, we may posit that the deceitful exodus from Egypt was a result, an effect, of Yaakov's deceitful flight from Lavan. Had Yaakov stood before Lavan and demanded his rightful pay and his wives, Bnei Yisrael, too, would have merited to receive their payment and their due rights in a more respectable way. Since Yaakov chose the way of deceit, his descendants were likewise saved through deceit. And because on the seventh day Yaakov finally faced up to Lavan and declared openly all that he had to say, Bnei Yisrael also merited, on the seventh day, their public redemption, when

the Sea opened for them, then closed again on the Egyptians, and they watched the Egyptian perish.[5]

Why did Moshe ask to worship God in the desert?

Thus far, the subject of our discussion has been theoretical: why the victory of Bnei Yisrael over Pharaoh was not an open, public one. I believe that our question has another answer – a practical one: why a furtive exodus, made possible through deceit, was preferable to a great, noisy one.

Let us mention here a similar question, posed in a different context: why did God strike Pharaoh with ten plagues, when the same end-result could clearly have been achieved through a much smaller number? In fact, this question is just the tip of the iceberg, concealing a more fundamental one. God could have brought Israel out of Egypt on eagles' wings, with no need for Pharaoh's permission. God could equally have killed Pharaoh and all of his army on a single night, not waiting until the splitting of the Sea to annihilate them. Why, then, did God choose to afflict Pharaoh, to force him to free Bnei Yisrael willingly, as it were, and then ultimately to drown him and his army in the sea?

The Egyptians apparently had good reason for enslaving Bnei Yisrael. When Yaakov and his family went down to Egypt, during the seven years of famine, they were taken care of – as were the Egyptians – by Yosef. But in contrast to the Egyptians, who became servants to Pharaoh in return for the food that they received, Bnei Yisrael remained free. If God had taken them out of Egypt without forcing the Egyptians to agree to it, the Egyptians could then have claimed that Bnei Yisrael were still their slaves – for they had never agreed to freeing them. God chose to force Pharaoh to free the nation, in order that the Egyptians could never claim that Bnei Yisrael were still their slaves. However, if God were to hold a gun to Pharaoh's head, as it were, and force him to free Israel, then his agreement would have no validity. Pharaoh could still claim that they remained his slaves, that their departure was forced upon him and was invalid. In order to prevent the possibility of such a claim, God did not kill the Egyptians prior to the Exodus, but rather waited until the splitting of the sea – seven days later – and only then killed Pharaoh and all of his host.

Now we can also understand why Moshe lies to Pharaoh, asking only that he allow Bnei Yisrael to go for three days. The Divine plan stipulated that Moshe would ask again and again that Bnei Yisrael be freed for three days, but after the ten plagues Bnei Yisrael would be so despised by Pharaoh that he would expel them utterly from his country. Such an expulsion would be an expression of Pharaoh's own free will: God admittedly sent ten plagues, but His demand remained, all along, only that Pharaoh "Let My people go and serve Me in the desert." Since Pharaoh decided to expel Bnei Yisrael without God requesting this, he could never claim that Bnei Yisrael were still his slaves. From the very beginning, it was clear that the purpose of the Exodus from Egypt was to reach Eretz Yisrael, but the way in which this aim would be realized was to be through requesting of Pharaoh that the nation be allowed to go for three days, in order to worship God in the desert.

Indeed, if we look closely at the verses we discover that at the burning bush God already tells Moshe that Pharaoh will let Bnei Yisrael go after the ten plagues:

"I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go, if not by a strong arm. And I shall send forth My hand and strike Egypt with all of My wonders that I shall perform in their midst, and afterwards he shall send you forth."  
([Shemot 3:19-20](#))

The term "shiluach" (sending forth) in Tanakh implies that there is no intention of any return. At the end of parashat Shemot we are told explicitly, "For with a strong arm he will send them forth, and with a strong arm he will expel them from his land." Various commentators who address the literal text explain that the "strong arm" here refers to Pharaoh's own arm, but Rashi maintains that "with a strong arm He will send them forth" refers to God's strong arm, while "with a strong arm he will expel you" refers to Pharaoh's arm. This may hint at what we have said above: Pharaoh lets Bnei Yisrael go because of God's strong arm, but he expels them altogether of his own free will.[6]

On the night of the death of the firstborn, when Pharaoh seeks out Moshe and Aharon, his words are quite clear and unequivocal:

"He called to Moshe and Aharon in the night, and he said: Arise and go out from amongst my nation – you and Bnei Yisrael, and go, worship God as you have spoken. Take also your sheep and your cattle as you have spoken, and go, and bless me also." ([Shemot 12:31-32](#))

Three days later, when Pharaoh sees that Am Yisrael has taken his advice and is not returning to Egypt, he retracts his hasty approval. Suddenly he remembers that Bnei Yisrael asked to be freed only in order to go and worship God, and it was he himself who offered the expulsion on his own initiative. Hence he sees himself as justified in pursuing Bnei Yisrael in order to enslave them once again.[7]

At this point, however, God no longer needs Pharaoh's cooperation. Since he has already expelled the nation of his own will, his will no longer has any significance, and there is no reason not to drown him in the Sea, thereby saving Bnei Yisrael. Moreover, since Pharaoh regretted his decision and tried to capture Bnei Yisrael back as his slaves a second time, he is deserving of an even more severe punishment; it is appropriate that he drown in the Sea.

In light of what we have said, we may explain the difficulty raised by many of the commentators: why did God first harden Pharaoh's heart, and then punish him for not freeing Bnei Yisrael? And if we say that Pharaoh was not punished for the hardness of his heart - why did God not just send Pharaoh the number of plagues that he deserved, rather than continuing to harden his heart?

We may answer that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order that when his resolve finally cracked, he would expel Bnei Yisrael altogether from his country. Therefore God afflicted him with a great number of plagues that did not involve any direct mortal danger,[8] in order to create a situation of ongoing discomfort. After Pharaoh "cracked" and decided to free Bnei Yisrael, he was not satisfied merely to let them go to the desert; rather, he banished them totally. Thus God ensured that no one would ever be able to claim that Bnei Yisrael were still his slaves. Following the giving of the Torah, we are slaves only to a single Master: the Master of the Universe.

Notes:

[1] In my shiur on Lekh-Lekha, I addressed at length the reason for the Torah attaching such great significance to this payment. (See Hebrew VBM archives.)

[2] Clearly, Pharaoh would have agreed to all of Moshe's demands following the death of the firstborn.

[3] The Torah also employs similar syntax in relation to Lavan and Pharaoh: "For I have seen all that Lavan does to you," vs. "And I have seen the affliction with which Egypt afflicts you."

[4] Even the actual servitude of Yaakov to Lavan was similar to Pharaoh's enslavement of Israel: neither of them was slavery in the usual sense of the word. Yaakov was not Lavan's slave, but rather worked for him, and received Lavan's daughters and some sheep in return. Bnei Yisrael in Egypt were likewise not regular slaves. It is clear from the verses that Bnei Yisrael were enslaved as a nation, not as individuals. This is the only way to understand how it was that the tribe of Levi was not forced to work, how it was that Bnei Yisrael had houses and property, and why Pharaoh commanded that they not be given straw. Regular slaves work all the time, whether they have straw or not. Here, the Egyptians demanded that Bnei Yisrael supply a certain quota, and it made no difference to them who it was from Bnei Yisrael who provided the goods. Clearly, I do not intend to belittle in any way the severity of the servitude; I mean only to point out that it was different from the classic situation of slavery. For the same reason, some among Bnei Yisrael longed for Egypt and remembered the good food that they ate there. Since the enslavement involved the nation as a whole, we may assume that some enjoyed an easier situation than others, and were therefore able, later on, to look back on Egypt with nostalgia.

[5] A similar example, demonstrating how God helps a person in accordance with his behavior, is to be found in Sefer Melakhim (13:18). Since the King of Israel struck, with the arrows in his hand, only three times – Bnei Yisrael defeated Aram only three times. "And the man of God became angry at him, and he said: Had you struck five or six times, you would have demolished Aram completely. And now – only three times will you defeat Aram." In the same way, since Yaakov did not engage in direct confrontation with Lavan, the victory of his descendants over Egypt was similarly not a direct one.

[6] This distinction is also mentioned in the Chizkuni. Chizkuni proves his contention from the verse that appears prior to the

death of the firstborn: "One more plague I shall bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall send you out of here. And when he sends you out, he shall expel you altogether." The purpose of the plagues that visited Pharaoh was to cause him to let Bnei Yisrael go, but when this aim would finally be realized and Pharaoh would agree to send them, he would banish them utterly of his own free will.

[7] We may add another point: It is possible that Pharaoh thought that banishing Bnei Yisrael to the desert was a punishment for them. Egypt was the leading civilization of the time, and Pharaoh could not understand how Bnei Yisrael could wish to leave the cultured world and set off for wanderings in the desert. This is the meaning of his words, "See, there is evil against you" - it is not recommended that you set off for the desert; you should rather remain in Egypt. It is possible that Pharaoh banishes Bnei Yisrael in order to punish them: Leave Egypt as you requested, but know that you will not be able to return here after you have sacrificed to your God in the desert. Pharaoh thought that Am Yisrael would return on their own initiative, begging him to allow them to come back. But to his great surprise, Am Yisrael had no desire to return. When Pharaoh discovered this, he set off in pursuit.

[8] Before the plague of the firstborn, there were no casualties except for those who did not heed God's warning prior to the plague of hail.

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