

PARSHAS SHEMOS

תשפ"ה

Parshas Shemos is the story of the Jewish people and their future history. In Parshas Shemos there is a very serious lesson that is relevant for all subsequent generations till today.

Hashem told Avrohom Ovinu that his children will go into exile before they will merit to inherit Eretz Yisroel. They will have to be purified by the smelting furnace of Egypt. Avrohom himself did not merit to father Klal Yisroel directly. He had 8 children and only one was worthy of carrying on his legacy. Yitzchok had two children and only Yaakov was worthy of carrying that legacy. Yaakov knew that if he would merit to father Klal Yisroel he would have 12 sons. He was successful in raising those 12 sons, and on his deathbed, he asked them if they were committed to carry on his legacy. They all responded by saying ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד. Then he knew his children would become Klal Yisroel and inherit Eretz Yisroel. But Klal Yisroel still had to go through golus Mitzrayim. They had to undergo terrible nisyonos.

Yaakov and Yosef tried to prepare them to survive this golus in the best possible way. They arranged for Klal Yisroel to be separate from the Egyptians and live only in Goshen. They brought all their sheep and cattle down with them from Canaan in order to continue being shepherds and be second-class citizens. All this was to avoid becoming integrated in Egyptian society. And Pharaoh was willing to accommodate this arrangement and offered to fully support Yaakov's family financially in perpetuity while they lived in Goshen. This was the brocho of Bilaam: "הן עם לבדד ישכון", which results in the brocho of: "וישכון ישראל בטח בדד עין יעקב". When are Klal Yisroel safe and secure? When they remain separate and unassimilated. This plan worked in the beginning, but as time wore on, the plan fell apart.

Klal Yisroel's time in golus Mitzrayim can be divided into three periods: For the first 127 years, there was peace and safety while the Shevotim were alive and Klal Yisroel lived in the Goshen ghetto. All who had lived in Canaan and were directly impacted by Yaakov, had his lasting image in their minds and were able to remain separate. The next 82 years were times of horrible slavery and torture. And finally, the last year of the golus was the year of the 10 makkos when the slavery and torture ended before they left Egypt.

The shibbud started when the Jewish population exploded and they left Goshen. Why did they leave? Not because there wasn't enough room. Chazal explain that they were the second generation of Jews who didn't have that first-hand image of Yaakov Ovinu in their minds. The vision of separation started to fade and they started to live among and adopt the advanced and sophisticated culture of the Egyptians. They started to cover up their bris miloh – or stopped it altogether.

They developed this dual identity where on the one hand they had Jewish names and Jewish language and Jewish dress, and these three things are very crucial to one's cultural identity. But on the other hand, they wanted to assimilate. And immediately, the love and admiration that the Egyptians had for Klal Yisroel suddenly turned into hatred and disgust. The meforshim like the Netziv and Rav Meir Simcha are very clear that this set the pattern for the rest of Jewish history. Rav Chaim of Volozhin famously said that if the Jews don't make kiddush, the non-Jews make havdoloh.

Klal Yisroel are fundamentally a separate nation, and that allows us to survive and thrive. When we try to integrate, we severely endanger ourselves, and one way or another, Hashem will not let it happen.

So the Egyptians are convinced by Pharaoh to persecute the Jews. But how do you enslave a population of a million people? Chazal explain that Pharaoh concocted an immense national construction project which needed massive manpower. In order to recruit workers, they started a national service drive – every loyal citizen of the country had to join. Even Pharaoh himself joined and started to work. So if the Jews wanted to be considered loyal, patriotic members of Egyptian society, this was their chance!

All the Shevotim rushed to join the construction – with one exception – Shevet Levi. In Parshas Vayigash, when Yaakov was preparing to bring his family down from Canaan, he sent Yehudah ahead to set up a Beis Midrash in Goshen. The moment they came down to Egypt, there would be a yeshiva waiting for them. The Rambam says the Rosh Yeshiva was Levi. His shevet never left Goshen, never stopped bris miloh, and never stopped being supported by Pharaoh. They never wanted to integrate into Egyptian society and they didn't feel the need to join the national construction project. They were busy learning Torah, so they were completely spared from any slavery for the entire 82 years of shibbud.

The other shevotim however were caught. Pharaoh started giving out exemptions from the national service to his fellow Egyptians, and eventually, only the stupid Jews remained and were never released. They became slaves. This is the pattern of Jewish history.

Being a slave means you are totally controlled by your master – like a soldier in the army, he cannot exercise any freedom of action. And even the mind is controlled and conditioned to obediently follow the orders and commands of the master without question or hesitation. His whole identity is one of his master's.

Klal Yisroel were in a complex situation psychologically. Because on the one hand, Klal Yisroel became slaves to the Egyptians because of their initial desire to become accepted by Egyptian society. And becoming enslaved means you lose your freedom, and you naturally adopt the identity of your master. But on the other hand we see that they kept many aspects of their own Ivri identity through names, language and dress! They still were quite identifiable as Jews! What explains this paradox?

Chazal tell us that Klal Yisroel were never completely broken by the shibbud. Moshe Rabbeinu had arranged for Shabbos to be a day of rest, and Klal Yisroel used Shabbos to review the scrolls containing the story of Bereishis and the teachings of the Ovos that they brought with them from Canaan. In their minds, they were still free men. This is why Pharaoh at the end of the parsha instructed his taskmasters to increase the workload to completely occupy them with physical labor and give them no time to study these scrolls. He wanted to finally break them and completely control their minds and their identities. But by then it was too late, because the makkos would soon begin and the shibbud was over.

What maintains one's Jewish identity? We see consistently in the Torah and midrashim that only limud Torah is able to maintain one's connection to his Jewish identity in the face of all kinds of distractions and preoccupations.

When Yosef wanted to tell Yaakov he is still alive, he didn't just send a message stating he is alive. Because at this point, simply being alive would have been no comfort to Yaakov. If this tyrannical ruler of Egypt who has been torturing them and playing cruel games with them

turns out to be Yosef, what kind of news would that be for someone who needs 12 sons to continue his legacy? So Yosef sends Yaakov the agolos – to tell him that he is still the same Yosef that he knew when he left him 22 years ago. He is still learning the Torah Yaakov Ovinu taught him. This is how Klal Yisroel survives in every golus throughout history.

As golus continues, it is natural for Jews to adopt the culture around them. It is natural for the boundaries and the separateness to gradually fall down and disappear. And the cycle of Jewish history shows us that after there is a flourishing of Yiddishkeit in a certain region, the culture starts to infiltrate Jewish society, and the end of Jewish growth, safety and prosperity in that region is never far behind.

Spain was a country of tremendous growth for the Jewish people for close to 500 years. It produced the greatest Rishonim of our history – the Rif, Rambam, Ramban, Rashba, etc. But close to the end of that period there is a teshuvoh of the Rivosh which describes an unfortunate fact: it was common for the Jews in Majorca to adopt the common legal system of the non-Jewish courts to adjudicate financial issues between Jews. The Rivosh tells them directly that if this is the case, then he doesn't see a Jewish future on the island of Majorca. When non-Jewish culture becomes so pervasive in Jewish society, Jewish identity and survival is at serious risk.

The Rashba had to issue a cherem against studying Greek philosophy in his community because he saw the danger of this kind of intellectual infiltration. The Chossid Yaavetz was the leader of Spanish Jewry at the time of the Spanish inquisition and expulsion of 1492. He wrote that Jews learned Torah exclusively only till a certain age, and then they moved on to secular universities and thought. This significantly eroded the Jewish identity among the Jewish intellectual class, and the Spanish people rejected it and made sure we did not assimilate by starting the Inquisition.

In 1648-49, in the middle of the golden age of Polish Jewry, Jews had infiltrated the highest echelons of Polish nobility and Polish high society. And the gezeirah of Tach V'Tat immediately followed, which massacred between 1 million and 2 million Jews by the Ukrainian peasant uprising. This put an abrupt end to that golden age. Jews were no longer a part of Polish high society from then onward.

In the 1800's in Russia, antisemitism rose to incredible levels. All the gedolei Torah of that generation decried the effects of Haskalah and the integration of Russian culture into Jewish education. In Western Europe and especially Germany, young Jews typically went to university – not to yeshivos – for higher education. Even in Poland and Lithuania, yeshiva bochurim numbered in the hundreds, while the university enrollment of young Jews was in the thousands and tens of thousands. But ironically, the first segment of German society to adopt Adolf Hitler's agenda to dehumanize and annihilate Jews were the German intelligentsia and the academic world – the place where Jews thought they were most accepted and valued.

The meforshim say that what happened in Egypt is the prototype for what happens in every golus. And the only thing that helps us survive is our connection to limud Torah.

The most remarkable thing happens when Moshe first approaches Pharaoh to threaten him with makkos if he doesn't release Klal Yisroel from slavery. Hashem originally told Moshe to introduce Him as "the G-d of the Ivrim". But Moshe changed it to "Y-K-V-K, Elokei Yisroel". And Pharaoh claims he doesn't recognize Y-K-V-K and he doesn't know who this nation Yisroel is. What is going on?

Moshe is coming to say we are fundamentally different from all the other religions you are familiar with. All other societies choose which gods representing the various forces of nature they want to manipulate in order to advance the culture and the national identity they made for themselves. Klal Yisroel is the only nation who defines itself by the absolute standards of morality of the One G-d who created the entire universe. Pharaoh just can't relate to this kind of national identity based on absolutes. So Pharaoh needs an entire educational process to teach him, and to teach Klal Yisroel, how Y-K-V-K controls everything and overrides all natural law.

Klal Yisroel are able to keep going because we drill these lessons deep into our psyche every year during Pesach – after Hashem drilled these lessons into us for an entire year during the 10 makkos. Klal Yisroel have to put these lessons into practice immediately when they leave Egypt, because they are going into a complete desert with no long-term provisions. They have to show they are willing to put their lives completely in Hashem's hands – with absolutely no ability to guarantee their survival by themselves. They have to make this choice. They have the option to stay behind in the safety and routine life of slavery in Egypt and not take this tremendous risk. Eighty percent of Klal Yisroel said we will put up with what we have in Egypt, and they all died in makkas choshech.

Shevet Levi was the only shevet who left Egypt in their entirety. They had no desire to remain behind with the Egyptians. They never lost their connection to their heritage – to the Ovos and Eretz Canaan. Their total dedication to limud Torah kept that connection strong and unbreakable throughout the years. It made them impervious to the infiltration of foreign cultures. Limud Torah is a life-long occupation. You can do many other things in life, but without a strong, permanent connection to Torah, you will drift and fade away into the dominant culture of the time.

Pharaoh wanted to control their minds so he had to increase the burden and take away their free time to learn Torah. The Greeks wanted the Jews to adopt Greek culture, so they made gezeiros to prevent limud Torah. This repeated itself in Roman times when they killed Rabbi Akiva and other tannoim. And again when the Russian Government shut down the Yeshiva of Volozhin when they refused to include secular subjects in the yeshiva curriculum. It is all the same strategy. You can only get Jews to give up their separate identity and be assimilated into the dominant culture if you first take away limud Torah.

These stories in Chumash aren't just stories. These are the precedents which firmly set the patterns of all future Jewish history. We are still in golus today, and it will continue until Moshiach finally arrives. The only guarantee that we will make it through the golus until Moshiach arrives, is through a lifetime commitment to limud haTorah.