

“MEMAAYAN HACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit”a

The Exodus for All Generations: to Take “Egypt” Out of the Bnei Yisrael

“... and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and your sons’ sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am Hashem.” (Shemos 10:2)

In his explanation of the scriptural phrase “how I made a mockery”, Rashi writes: “how I ‘played’, as in the verse (Bamidbar 22:29) ‘Bilaam said to the ass, ‘You have made a mockery of me!’ (that is, you have not been serious with me, you played with me—Transl.) From these words of Rashi, we can see that he understands a foundational aspect of the Exodus from Egypt and the Ten Plagues is to exercise upon the Egyptian nation actions which show a lack of seriousness, of play i.e. “how I (Hashem) played”, to belittle and jest with them. We must try to understand what is the purpose, the necessity of this ridicule in the context of the Jewish people’s Exodus from Egypt.

The son of the Chofetz Chaim relates in Collected Writings of the Chofetz Chaim, “One Shabbos evening, I went to visit my father after midnight, and I was startled to hear his melodious voice coming from the window. When I approached closer, I saw that the Sage was sitting on his bed reviewing Chumash Parshas Va’era. As he read each Plague, I heard him exclaim with excitement, “ah-yee, ah-yee!” When he came to the plague of Boils, as Scripture says, (Shemos 9:11) “The sorcerers could not stand before Moshe as a result of the rash (from the boils—Transl.)” he guffawed with a mirth I had never in my life heard from him. His hysteria was such that it was clear that he actually “saw” the Plagues in his mind’s-eye, so intense was his faith in Torah and holiness, and I stood there for over a half-hour.”

We see from this incredible incident how it was the Chofetz Chaim’s opinion that there is an actual precept to fulfill of “ridicule”, as his son testifies. If so, it is incumbent upon us to understand what are the criteria of

this precept and why it is so significant that a Sage like the Chofetz Chaim would be particular to engage in jest and mirth at the expense of the Egyptians during the Exodus!?

First, we must identify an essential, fundamental truth about the Exodus from Egypt—that is, besides the fact that the Almighty took the Jewish People as a whole out from Egypt with Divine Providence, in the exact same way He redeemed each individual Jew. Put another way, just as there was an Exodus of Jews from Egypt, it was necessary to have an exodus of Egyptian-ness from the Jews!

We can see this idea in an analysis of a famous passage of the Rosh’s Orchos Chaim (Day 1, paragraph 26). The Rosh writes, “(One should) trust in Hashem with all his heart, and he should believe in His Divine Providence. . . for he who does not believe (in Divine Providence, as seen in the verse) “I took you out of the land of Egypt”, cannot be said to believe (in the existence of Hashem, as seen in the verse) “I am Hashem your G-d”; (if he professes to utter this verse, as if he believes) it is not a ‘complete unity (yichud shalem, Heb.). (Belief in these two, the existence of Hashem and His special Divine Providence for Israel) is the special treasure of the Jewish People distinct from the rest of mankind and the foundation of the entire Torah.”

By the Rosh’s connection of faith in the existence of Hashem and an awareness of His Divine Providence as evidenced in the Exodus from Egypt, we learn the principle we mentioned above, i.e. that “besides the fact that the Almighty took the Jewish People out from Egypt with Divine Providence, in the exact same way He redeemed each individual Jew.” Indeed, the Seforno expresses this same thought in his commentary to the language of the question of the Wicked Son (Shemos 12:26), “What do you mean by this service (i.e. the offering of the Korban Pesach)?” The intent of the

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Wicked Son's question, explains the Seforno, goes to why it is not sufficient to have a single Korban Pesach for the entire Jewish People, just as we find a single communal offering brought for the total congregation on other holidays? What is the purpose for "this service", that is, for a separate Pesach sacrifice for each and every Jew? The Seforno answers: "Each and every Jew must bring his own personal korban because the miracle was done with unique Divine Providence for each and every individual Jew, not for the community as a whole."

Again, we see that Yetzias Mitzrayim includes two separate and distinct redemptions:

1. A general geula, to take the Jewish people out of Egypt; and
2. A personal salvation to remove the "Egyptian-ness" from Bnai Yisrael.

Moreover, this latter geula is the more difficult of the two, as many of the Jewish nation of that time did not want to leave Egypt! The Torah tells us, (Shemos 13:18) "Now the Israelites went up armed (chamushim, Heb.) out of the land of Egypt", to which the Midrash teaches (based on the word chamushim, cognate with chamaish, five) "only 1 of fifty Jews left Egypt". Why? Because the Jews were immersed into the corruption of Egyptian culture and committed to their vile behaviors to the 49th level of impurity. Thus, a significant portion of the Jewish psyche was polluted with "Egyptian-ness", and it was necessary to remove every aspect of this pernicious influence. Just in this manner could they want to leave Egypt, for in truth, only one who wished to leave Egypt could be redeemed. The only way to accomplish this spiritual "roter-rooter" is through the process of ridicule, and mockery. Jest neutralizes and nullifies any prior influence to which one has been subject.

This second, personal redemption is implicit in the Scriptural text. In parshas Ve'eshanan (Devarim 4:34), we read: "Or, has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another . . . ?" This unique phraseology specifically describes what happened in the Exodus. The Bnai Yisrael were so attached to "Egyptian-ness" that Hashem had to disengage the part of their inner essence which had become polluted by the Egyptian foreign character and negative influence within their Jewishness, and He did this through the power of ridicule. We can now appreciate the depth of the Chofetz Chaim's fulfillment of the precept of jest when it comes to Yetzias Mitzrayim, and see that it is incumbent upon all of us.

Like the great Sage, we, too must make the Exodus and the Makkos real to our minds' eye, to use the power of mockery to should in a positive way that we are committed to nullifying the negative and external influences foisted upon us by our own long exile—all to show the Almighty that we, as well, wish to be redeemed in our current generation.

But, the power of jest goes even further. In Mesillas Yesharim (chapter 5), Rabbi Luzzatto zt"l. compares mockery to a "shield coated with oil so that any arrows will slide right off". So deleterious is jest that "one joke and a small flippancy can cause an enormous amount to inspiration to fall away from a person." Once, a young student asked the Mashgiach of Ponevez, R' Chatzkel Levenstein, zt"l., to explain this seemingly verbose statement of the Ramchal. The boy reasoned, every word in the Mesillas Yesharim must be accounted for; if so, why did Rabbi Luzzatto use the phrase "a shield coated with oil"? Couldn't the author compare the power of mockery simply to a "shield", that is—what is the significance of the oil? Isn't the intent of the comparison to show that just as the shield stops incoming arrows, mockery blocks a person from all inspiration?

The following profound insight emerges: while it is true that a shield blocks the arrow, the projectile lodges in the shield—it makes a dent, an impression. However, "an oiled shield" not only stops the arrow, it insures that no impression remains after it's blocked. This exactly describes mockery-- for it not only prevents a person from being affected by rebuke intended for his growth and renders him impervious to attempts to connect him to serious introspection and mussar. But in addition, like the oiled shield, where no impression of the arrow remains, jest removes any impression that positive criticism can make in a person's heart, no matter how small.

But, we can also use the awesome effect of jest for good. The Gemora (Megilla 25b) quotes R' Nachman: "All mockery is prohibited, except for mockery directed at idol worship, which is permitted." This can be seen from the story of the prophet Eliyahu (Kings I 18:27). "When noon came (and the Baal had not answered the false prophets—Transl.), Eliyahu mocked them (the prophets) saying, 'Shout louder! After all, he is a god. But he may be in conversation, he may be detained, or he may be on journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up.'" In this way, Eliyahu nullified the faith the people had in the prophets of the Baal. So, too in Yetzias Mitzrayim, in our parsha, the Torah stresses that we remember and share with our offspring "how I made a mockery of the

Egyptians”—Hashem used the power of leitzanus to neutralize any and all influence of Egypt which may have burrowed into the hearts of the Bnai Yisrael. We too, must remember and utilize these same techniques to protect ourselves in our long exile among the nations of the world from their culture’s foreign negative effects.

The Chazon Ish writes in his sefer Emunah and Bitachon (5:2) about the power of Egyptian culture: “The wisdom of the Egyptian’s knowledge of the technical skill of embalming continue to this day and even the scholars of modern times have been unable to unravel its secrets.” We should recognize from the insight of the Chazon Ish that Egypt of that time was a leading empire in the areas of science and culture, so much so, that even today, Egyptologists pore over their texts of embalming and medical science. Hence, many Jews were drawn to remain in such a paramount society in terms of culture and wisdom. It truly was a tremendous challenge for Bnai Yisarel not to become enamored of their Egyptian hosts, to become so engrossed in their science and civilization that a large majority simply did not wish to leave. Therefore, Hashem had to uproot this pernicious influence from their souls, “to take the Egypt out of Bnai Yisrael.” Further, just as our forefathers were influenced by the Egyptian exile, our generation as well, G-d forbid, may be profoundly damaged as a result of living among the nations in our long galus. Secular wisdom and foreign cultural values threaten to seep into our communities. Hence, we too are obligated to fulfill the precept of mockery to remove the “Egypt” and all other non-Jewish influence from our hearts and to protect our unique character and the nature of Am Yisrael in our deepest essence.

We can now understand a puzzling passage in the Passover Haggada. “If the Holy One, Blessed be He would not have taken our Fathers out from Egypt, we and our children and our children’s children would have still been enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.” The question is well-known: how is it possible the Baal Haggada to say that we might be, even today, slaves to Pharaoh?! History has shown that many Empires have risen and fallen, many revolutions have occurred in the thousands of years since Yetzias Mitzrayim. How then could the author of the Haggada state with absolute certainty that through it all, we would still have been Egypt’s slaves, and to Pharaoh!

As we realize that the Exodus was actually a dual redemption, both from physical bondage and from the spiritual decay which was poisoning our essential nature, we have the key to the Baal Haggada’s phrase. Even if

in fact over the course of the centuries the Jewish nation may have left the subjugation of the Egyptian ruler Pharaoh and found refuge elsewhere in an expression of the first, physical geula, it is by no means sure that the character-change caused by the Egyptians would not have affected the Jews for all time till today. As we stressed above, even more important than an Exodus of Jews from Egypt, it was necessary to have an exodus of Egyptian-ness from the Jews!

This, then, is the deeper meaning of the words, “. . . if HaKodesh Boruch Hu would not have taken us out”, i.e. if the Almighty would not have eradicated from our souls the vile influence of our Egyptian overlords through the process of Yetzias Mitzrayim (and the mockery implicit in that process), the catastrophic effect would have been felt even until today. Therefore, Hashem had to remove the “Egyptian-ness” from our spiritual foundation, to accomplish a second aspect of redemption, a geula of each individual Jew’s soul. We, in turn, must pass on this vital fact to our children, that they too must struggle to remove at all costs all foreign influence resulting from the “goyishkeit” in which we live in golus.

My Father, of blessed memory, used this thought to explain the universal custom to throw open the home’s door during the Seder when we recite the verse from Psalms (79:6) Pour out Your fury on the nations that do not know You . . . “When Eliyahu HaNavi will finally arrive as the harbinger of Moshiach and the final redemption, we will want to show him that we are ready for the geula. The action which will express this in the most unambiguous fashion, which will articulate without any doubt our hatred for the idea of “goy” in our character, is our recital of Dovid HaMelech’s words, “Pour out Your fury on the nations that do not know You . . .” We are proclaiming that a “goy” (no matter what the supposed positive aspects of his character!) is still, bottom-line, a “goy”, of which we no longer want any part. At the end of history, we will show our refusal to have any nearness to the nations, to be assimilated in any way with them—and in so doing, we make clear our fitness to be redeemed and to exit, once and for all, from the golus. At the beginning of the last part of the Seder, our opening of the door and proclaiming Psalm 79:6 illustrates our preparation for the final geula.

Along these lines, I also once heard from my Father, my Teacher zt”l., something he said in a light-hearted manner, which while it was said in a different context, applies well to what we have said above. We all recognize that the Jewish world is comprised of many different types of Jews, each with his own customs,

manner of speech, history, dress, head coverings, etc. We also all admit that unfortunately, these various types of Jews often do not get along well with each other. What, my Father asked, was the reason for this lack of closeness? Aren't we all Jews, in spite of our differences?

At that time, my Father answered thus: as a result of the long centuries of exile living among different types of non-Jews, every Jew absorbed into his inner essence a certain percentage of the values and spiritual make-up of those very non-Jews with whom they lived. My father, concluded, "the Jews all get along fine; the problem is that it is the goyim inside of us that don't get along!" The percentage of the Russian, the Hungarian, or the Litvak inside each and every one of us, it is they who don't get along. As for the Jews, the Torah tells us, (Bamidbar 23:9) "There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations". This idea wondrously compliments our earlier explanations. The exile in Egypt left a residue from the Egyptian culture, a certain amount of "goyishkeit" in our innermost spirit, and just as the Almighty did for us in his individual geula then, we must work throughout the long exile to root out from our personalities any influence of the "goy".

R' Aharon Levine, zt"l., the Reisher Rav, once explained the verse in Isaiah (56:7) " . . . For My House shall be called A house of prayer for all peoples" with an allegory (Transl. I've updated the story for a modern description). A person once entered into the home of a non-Jew, and there he saw all forms of equipment for entertainment—computers, play-stations, televisions. However, l'havdil, when he came into a home of a Jew, he saw only pictures of Gedolim on the walls, bookshelves filled with holy texts, religious articles carefully displayed on the shelves—the home was a veritable synagogue! This, the Rebbe explained, is Yeshaya the Navi's comment: "My home", that is, the home of the Jew, "shall be called A house of prayer for all peoples" i.e. it shall be seen by anyone coming in from outside that it is an abode of sanctity like a synagogue. Such an idea is exactly the inner purpose of each Jew, that he work to insure his home is one of holiness, so that even the non-Jew entering can recognize this quality. Anyone can see that

the Jew takes refuge there amidst spirituality and holiness, without giving any notice to the roiling winds of the street outside, to the influence of this physical world. In this way he protects the purity of his inner sanctum and recesses of his heart.

In summary, throughout the entire progression of the Yetzias Mitzrayim the concept of "the mockery of Egypt" stands out. We have learned that the Ten Plagues were, of themselves, insufficient to free the Jewish people. A central aspect of the Plagues and the Exodus was that in addition to a physical freeing of the Bnai Yisrael from Egyptian bondage, there had to be a removal of the effects of that bondage from the souls of the Bnai Yisrael. This process entailed a cleansing of the inner nature of the Jews of the "Egyptian-ness" that had developed within them. To do this, "the power of litzonus—of mockery" was required to function as a "well-oiled shield" to wipe away all influence which had previously infected the Jews' psyche. In turn, we can learn a lesson for the generations, to reject the "goy" which dwells within us as a result of our centuries being influenced by the non-Jewish with whom we have shared this exile. The Chofetz Chaim gives us an example of using the biblical text to create a clarity in our mind's eye of the power of jest over the non-Jewish imprint on our souls. Further, we can learn to ignore the "goy" living within us to better appreciate our fellow Jews and distance ourselves from his fight with the "goyim" in others. By proclaiming King David's words, "Pour Your fury on the nations" we can cleanse ourselves from every aspect of "goyishkeit" and show ourselves fit for the final geula, soon.



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