

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

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At the outset of the redemptive process, HaShem instructs Moshe to tell the people that the first stage of the GEULA will be when He will "take you out from under the burdens of Egypt (6:6). This initial step is repeated in the very next verse: "... and you shall know that I am HaShem, your Gd, Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt. Obviously, this repetition only underscores the importance of rescuing the people from SIVLOT MITZRAYIM as the crucial prerequisite for realizing the remaining three phases of the redemption. But what exactly is meant by SIVLOT MITZRAYIM - the burdens of Egypt?

The Midrash (Yalkut, Sh'mot 177) and most commentators understand this phrase to mean that HaShem pledges to relieve the people of the painful suffering they had to endure as downtrodden slaves, duty-bound to do the bidding of the Egyptians even when not afflicted by the harsh labor imposed upon them. However, the Chidushei HaRim explains that SIVLOT can also mean tolerance. With this definition, in this first stage of the GEULA, HaShem is promising that He will empower the Children of Israel to no longer tolerate the

Egyptian exile and also to reject all that Egypt represented in the ancient world; that is, we should be revolted and repulsed by their ways. The S'fat Emet adds to his grandfather's insight and writes, "The counsel is that one should hate the bad with all his heart, and that is the beginning of his redemption."

The Jewish people had been slaves for 210 years. Over this long period, they had accepted their exilic status as "the new normal". They came to define themselves as nothing more than menial abject servants. Tragically, they despaired of ever being free. Sadly, they had forgotten about their proud and glorious heritage. It was then that HaShem reminds them of their noble and distinguished ancestry and declares to them in so many words: "Your exile in Egypt must not characterize who you are. You are the descendant of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; you are free and independent, upright and dignified, aristocrats and chosen!"

This understanding of SIVLOT MITZRAYIM by the founder of Ger Chassidus may explain another enigmatic comment in the Talmud (Yerushalmi, Rosh HaShana 3:5). The Torah states (6:13): "So G-d spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and He commanded them to the children of Israel, and to Pharaoh the king of Egypt, to let the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt." G-d is charging

Moshe with two directives: Command the people of Israel, and then command Pharaoh the king. However, the verse is ambiguous: What did G-d command Moshe to instruct the people? The message for Pharaoh was clear: Let the children of Israel out of Egypt. But what is it that Moshe is supposed to command the people themselves?

To this question, the Yerushalmi states: "G-d instructed Moshe to command to the Jewish people the laws of freeing slaves." The Talmud is referring to a law recorded later in Sh'mot: If a Jew sells himself as a slave, the owner must let him go after six years. He is forbidden to hold on to the slave for longer. This was the law Moshe was to share with the Israelites while they were in Egyptian bondage. Yet this seems like a cruel joke. The Children of Israel, at this point, were crushed and tormented slaves, subjugated by a genocidal despot and a tyrannical regime, enduring horrific torture. Yet at this moment, G-d wants Moshe to command them about the laws relevant to the feudal lord, the slave-owner?! What is more, as the Torah puts it: "G-d commanded them to the Children of Israel, and to Pharaoh the king of Egypt to let the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt." It seems like the two commands - the one to the Israelites and the one to the Egyptian king - are

linked. But what does the commandment to the Jewish people that they free their slaves one day in the future have to do with the mission to Pharaoh to set the Hebrews free from bondage?

The answer to this question is profoundly simple and moving. Before Pharaoh can liberate the Jewish slaves, they must first be ready to see themselves not as slaves, but as free, unshackled human beings. Hence, teach them the laws pertaining to the manumission of servants so that they define themselves as masters and not as AVADIM. Indeed, as hard as it is to take a man out of slavery, it may prove even more challenging to take slavery out of a man. Externally, you may be free; internally you may still be enslaved. Or, to employ the formulation of the Chidushei HaRim, only when the Jew is rescued from his false identity and discovers his true self-definition, only when HaShem neutralizes SIVLOT MITZRAYIM and quashes the tolerance of exile, only then can the redemption proceed, only then will Pharaoh free the Jewish people.

The Menachem Tzion (Vol 1, p. 204) brings another example of this definition of SIVLOT MITZRAYIM. Earlier (Sh'mot 2:11), we read how Moshe went out to his brothers and VAYAR B'SIVLOTAM, he was struck by how they submitted to their status

as persecuted slaves, how they "tolerated" their subservient status. So much so that when an Egyptian was seen mercilessly beating another Jew, no one rose to the Jew's defense. Moshe "turned this way and that and saw there was no man..." (2:12) Moshe, however, would not "tolerate" that crime; he rescues the Jew and dramatically demonstrates the intrinsic value, dignity and self-worth that must define how a Jew should see himself.

This message not only explains something fundamental about the indispensable ingredient necessary to trigger our redemption from Egypt, but also shines an important light upon what it means to be a Jew today. Before 1948, the Jew had "tolerated" a bitter exile for almost 2000 years. During that time, the Jew was characterized - or rather stigmatized - as a meek servile outlier, often subject to the cruel and antisemitic whims of a ruling tyrant. Never fully accepted wherever he chose to dwell, he could do little to defend himself when he was scapegoated by the mob. Even his accomplishments, when acknowledged, were often done so begrudgingly and with slight lasting effect or appreciation. And so, much like his ancestors in Egypt, the Jew allowed himself to be defined by his tormentors: a suspicious stranger, an alien presence, the "wandering Jew". He had little choice. He learned

to "tolerate" a fraudulent self-definition; he fell into the trap of SIVLOT MITZRAYIM. He knew of no other.

And then, with the rise of Zionism and the founding of the State, something remarkable - some would say miraculous - happened. The exilic Jew discovered that the fighting courageous sabra - the Israeli who would no longer submit and be cowered, the sabra would battle like a fearless and ferocious lion in defense of his Land - was not some newcomer, some fresh Jewish persona. Rather, the Jew realized that this Israeli - notwithstanding his secular outlook - portrayed an identity that was as old as the Bible itself. Throughout the history of the valiant Tribes of Israel in their conquest of Canaan, the wars of Kings Sha'ul and David and their bold and heroic comrades in arms, and all through the periods of the First and Second Temple - the Jew was never seen as some bent-over obsequious cringing second-class citizen. In a word, the 20th century Jew rediscovered his true self-identity. And when the boast of "It is my might and the strength of my hand which has caused all my success" (D'varim 8:17) was humbled and qualified by the very next verse, "But you must remember the Lord, your Gd, for it is He that gives you the power to succeed...", it was then that Zionism was redeemed of its secularity and

the great Biblical Jew was reborn in all his spiritual greatness and proud triumph.

A long time ago, once an enslaved people discovered the truth of who they really were, their deliverance and redemption began. And today, millennia later, in these difficult times, may that same self-discovery be the harbinger of our own speedy redemption. 🙌