

Parashat Shemot: Shades of Geula

Chavruta

Please study the Ramban's introduction to Sefer Shemot.

(The notes of Chavel in the Mossad Harav Kook edition or Torat Chayim should be useful. Also, look up pesukim that he quotes in order to gain a full understanding.)

Shiur

This week we excitedly begin a new book of the Torah. When we read a book, any book, someone might ask us: "What is it about?" It is sometimes difficult to encapsulate a book in a short phrase or comment, but it is a task that forces us to think about the central messages and to examine the storyline of the book in question. This is true about the Torah as well. Many of our sages tried to give titles or themes for the books of Chumash. As we begin Sefer Shemot, we might want to think about the central theme, the content of Sefer Shemot. What is the motif of the Sefer?

In his introduction to the Sefer, the Ramban makes this comment:

"The Book of Shemot is dedicated to the first Galut (Exile) and to the Redemption from it."

Here the Ramban sets out the theme of the Sefer – Exile and Redemption; Galut and Geula. But the Ramban adds the following explanation:

"The Exile is not complete (ended) until they return to their land and to the (spiritual) level of their forefathers. Now when they left Egypt even though they had left the House of Slavery, they were still considered to be in a State of Exile, for they were in a foreign land, wandering in the Wilderness. However when they reached Mt.Sinai and set up the Mishkan, and God returned to them, establishing his Shekhina amongst them THEN they returned to the (spiritual) level of their forefathers i.e. the presence of God upon their tents.... And THEN they were considered to be redeemed."

In connection to this Ramban I would like to focus upon two valuable observations:

I.

First, the Ramban casts the Book of Shemot as a book of Exile and Redemption. Shemot is much more than Exodus. It is not simply about Yetziat Mitzraim, the escape from Egyptian slavery, for were that the case, if it were simply about Freedom, the book could close in Chapter 12 as the Bnei Yisrael cross the Egyptian border! But the book continues to Chapter 40. It talks about Matan Torah, Torah laws, the construction of the Mishkan. Why? How does this fit in to the Exodus?

Maybe we can gain some insight this by referring to an idea that was discussed by one of the great philosophers of the Twentieth Century. In a celebrated essay written in the 1960's Isaiah Berlin argued that there were, in essence two types of Liberty; negative and positive. Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty when nothing imposes outside limits or restrictions to ones free actions. But Positive liberty is the possibility of acting - or the fact of acting - in such a way as to take control of one's life and realise one's fundamental purposes. It expresses a positive world-view, a goal and a plan to realise that goal.

Shemot is not simply about Freedom, Exodus. That is Negative Liberty. The Ramban explains this is a book about Exile AND Redemption. The question is not whether man is free. The question is what man is planning to do with that Freedom.

Freedom becomes Redemption when it leads to something higher. In our case, we are talking about Torah (Mt. Sinai) and God's Shekhina, his proximity, expressed by God's manifest Presence in the Midst of the Camp, as represented by the Mishkan.

The story of Sefer Shemot is not merely the manner by which we became free. It is not simply about the escape from Egypt. It is the story of the development of a Jewish *raison d'etre*, a meaningful and purposeful Jewish culture, a sacred way of life.

II.

Here we come to a second point that is worth dwelling upon as we read the Ramban's introduction. The Ramban is a little confusing as he defines Redemption. First he says:

"The Exile is not complete (ended) until they return to their land and to the (spiritual) level of their forefathers."

But then he says:

"...when they reached Mt.Sinai and set up the Mishkan, and God returned to them, establishing his Shekhina amongst them THEN they returned to the (spiritual) level of their forefathers i.e. the presence of God upon their tents.... And THEN they were considered to be redeemed."

The obvious contradiction is this. In the first sentence, the Ramban talks about the End of Exile as return to Eretz Yisrael. But in the second sentence he admits that once the Torah has been received and God's Shekhina been associated with the people (via the Mishkan) then they are considered as redeemed.

What is redemption? Israel or Shekhina? If they are still in Exile, can they still experience Redemption?

I think that the Ramban is accepting the fact that Redemption does not need to take place in one fell swoop. There are certain stages in the Redemptive process. Our pesukim (see Shemot 6:6-7), our four cups of wine, reflect this fact: "Vehotzeiti, Vehitzlati (both indicating salvation – Negative Freedom) and then Vega'alti, Velakachti" (a connection with God – Positive Freedom.) Each stage is a new fresh dimension of Geula, a "cup" within its own right, upon which we may recite an independent bracha. Geula is made up of small steps, each one taking us closer to the ideal. And yet, each stage is a mini Geula, each step merits that special title. And hence, Matan Torah and Mishkan can be considered to be Geula, even though the Ultimate Redemption, the return to Eretz Yisrael still eludes the nation.

Here, I feel, is a point that is fundamental for our generation to grasp. Some people in our time refuse to see any religious significance in Medinat Yisrael. For

them, they know the definition of Geula. It is the Mikdash rebuilt, Mashiaich, the ingathering of the Exiles, World Peace, Techiyat Hameitim. That is Geula perfectly defined. Anything that falls short of that Geula is by definition – Galut! It is all or nothing! Black or white! It is a binary approach that offers nothing between the two poles. There are no steps that link Galut to Geula. It happens in a quantum leap; the Beit Hamikdash will descend in flames from the heavens.

Maybe the Ramban teaches us a different perspective. He presents an alternative notion: Geula as a process. That there ARE shades of gray between black and white; that there are in-between, imperfect stages that lie upon the road from Galut to Geula, and that these intermediate points each signify a dimension of Redemption too! They are not the final perfect result, but they are also coloured with the hues of Geula. I do not subscribe to a binary vision of the Redemptive process. It is not a question that may be answered with a simple Yes or No. Even an imperfect Medinat Yisrael, a partial ingathering of Exiles, may be experienced as both as a step upon the road to the Ultimate Redemption, but also as an inkling of redemption in its own right; A God given gift of redemption, however imperfect, in our time.

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Further Study.

1. In his opening lines, the Ramban makes a comment regarding the theme of Sefer Bereshit and its relationship to Sefer Shemot.
 - What is Sefer Bereshit?
 - How does he view the relationship between the two? (Chavel points us to the difficult, Kabbalistic comments of the Ramban to Bereshit 12:6 for more explanation.)
2. The Ramban notes that Sefer Shemot begins in a manner that echoes Bereshit 46:8-26.
 - In the view of the Ramban why is it necessary for the Torah to repeat these details?
 - The Ramban expands his previous reason in his commentary to passuk 1 s.v. V'Eleh. What does he point out there? What is the proof from Divrei Hayamim?
3. See Chavel's notes and the Midrash that he quotes to the notion of "Merkava" referred to at the end of the Ramban's introduction.