

Pesach

The Redemption – Causes and Effects

“A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous....” And he became a nation there” - this teaches that **Israel were distinguishable from others there.**”

- From the Haggadah

A discussion topic that frequently arises at our Seder relates to the nature of the Jewishness of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt. Did the Jews in Egypt retain their Jewish identity? Were they indeed, “distinguishable from others there” as indicated by the Haggadah?

One tradition relates that the Israelites “did not change their names, their language etc¹.” In other words, that their cultural identity was strongly Jewish, their heritage resilient despite the hardships of slavery.

On the other hand, we are familiar with opposing traditions², for example, that Israel at the moment of Exodus were on the verge of irreversible assimilation, on the forty ninth rung of Tum'ah (impurity). Or the tradition that only 20% of the Jews were worthy of redemption³, that the nation lacked any virtue. An example of this is the famous Mekhilta quoted by Rashi on Shemot 12:6:

And Ye Shall Keep It until the Fourteenth Day of the Same Month. Why did the Scripture require the purchase of the paschal lamb to take place four days before its slaughter? R. Matia the son of Heresh used to say: Behold it says: “...and, behold, thy time was the time of love” (Ezek. 16:8). This means, the time has arrived for the fulfilment of the oath which the Holy One, blessed be He, had sworn ... to deliver his children. But as yet they had no religious duties to perform by which to merit redemption, as it further says: “...yet you were naked and bare” (*ibid.*7, which means bare of any religious deeds. Therefore **the Holy One, blessed be He, assigned them two duties, the duty of the paschal sacrifice and the duty of circumcision, which they should perform so as to be worthy of redemption.** For thus it is said: “And when I passed by thee, and saw thee wallowing in thy blood, I said unto thee: In thy blood live” (*ibid.*, 6). ... For this reason Scripture required that the purchase of the paschal lamb take place four days before its slaughter. For one cannot obtain rewards except for deeds.⁴

In other words, God **had** to provide them with virtues – Pesach and Brit Mila⁵, otherwise they would have been entirely unworthy of salvation!

¹ Statement of Rav Hunna in the name of Bar Kappara - see Vayikra Rabba 32:5, Shemot Rabba 1:29.

² In the Zohar Chadash (Yitro):

“When Israel was in Egypt, they became defiled through all means of impurity until they sank to the 49th level of impurity. God brought them out of subservience to all these powers and led them to enter the 49th level of wisdom.”

³ End of Rashi's comments to Shemot 13:18.

⁴ For an excellent shiur on this particular Midrash which complements this shiur, see the Bar Ilan Parsha website:

<http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/bo/bur.html>

⁵ According to p'shat, there is no mention of a specific circumcision ceremony prior to the Exodus, despite the explicit law that the uncircumcised male was banned from the Paschal Lamb – see

EVIDENCE IN SEFER SHEMOT

The evidence in the Torah itself is sparse and difficult to process. It is difficult to ascertain with any accuracy the degree and extent of Jewish identity and practice in Egypt. On the one hand, the Jews lived in a distinct locale – Goshen⁶. This would have allowed for a certain isolation, a different dialect and a preservation of tradition⁷.

On the other hand the Israelites are described as filling the entire country, not inhabiting a specific region⁸. Later we read of how the Israelites have Egyptian friends and neighbours⁹, such that God has to jump over the houses¹⁰. So do the Bnei Yisrael live integrated with the local population, or segregated from them?

On the one hand, the Israelites seem aware of their history. Moshe is instructed at the burning bush to tell the people that “the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob” will be taking them to “the land flowing with milk and honey,” (see Shemot 3:16-17¹¹) the assumption is that these symbols, this narrative, is familiar to the nation. They know who and what they are.

On the other hand we do wonder what “Jewish” traditions they could have held seeing that the Torah had not yet been given. What might have been the content of their tradition? Sefer Yechezkel (ch.20) refers to Bnei Yisrael worshipping idolatry in Egypt.

What did they know about their traditions? How aware were they? Were they aware of a simple ethnic identity of being an “Ivri”? Or of a “familial” tradition, going back to Joseph and Abraham? Or were they aware of some of the CONTENT of their tradition?

THE PROMISE

I would like to twist the question around a little. Did the Israelites NEED to merit redemption? Is the question of “worthiness” a relevant question?

At first glance, it would appear to be absolutely irrelevant. After all, the entire narrative of the slavery and Exodus is shaped by a divine promise, a covenant, to Abraham. This is the critical event known as the Brit Bein HaBetarim – the Covenant between the pieces (Bereshit 15):

BARUKH SHOMER HAVTACHATO LE'YISRAEL BARUKH HU! Blessed is He who keeps his promise to Israel his people, may He be blessed! For the Holy One blessed be He calculated the end [of our bondage] in order to fulfil His pledge to Abraham in the covenant 'between the parts', as it is written "And He said unto Abram: 'You should surely know that your offspring shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great substance'" (Genesis 15,13-14).

- From the Haggadah

As the Haggada tells us, there is a Divine promise, and the Yetziat Mitzrayim is its fulfilment. We read in Shemot:

“And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Exodus 2,24).

In other words it was THE COVENANT that God remembered, not the cries. God mentions the covenant because this is the impetus to the redemption. God is “bound” to a contractual, covenantal obligation!

Shemot 12:44,48. Maybe the tradition here is based upon the passuk in Yehoshua 5:2 talking about a “second” mass circumcision. By inference, we can suggest that the Exodus was the first such event. See also 5:9 referring to the foreskin as “the abomination of Egypt.” Interestingly, archaeologists claim that the ancient Egyptians were circumcised, hence even if the Jews were greatly assimilated, they might have still practised circumcision.

⁶ Bereshit 46:8; 47:6, 27; Shemot 8:18, 9:26.

⁷ Rav Yoel Bin Nun related this factor – their segregation - to the preservation of their distinct spiritual identity, language etc.

⁸ Shemot 1:7

⁹ Shemot 3:22, 11:2.

¹⁰ Shemot 12:13, 27

¹¹ And pay attention to the striking parallel between Shemot 3:16 and Bereshit 50:24)

And when they do leave, we relate (12:40-41 - with a minor discrepancy) to the 400 years promised in Bereshit:

“And Bnei Yisrael lived in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years. And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that selfsame day, all the armies of God left Egypt.”

In other words, we left because the time was up! We had been sentenced to a particular period of exile and suffering. But that period was limited in duration; it was fixed as a particular time period. God keeps his word, and delivers the Exodus on time.

It is not about worthiness, or virtue. However assimilated or undeserving, we should have been redeemed. So what is the need for “distinctiveness” or “merit” in order to leave Egypt? Why couldn't we leave irrelevant of our being on the 49th level of Tum'ah?!

REDEMPTION THEN AND NOW.

To get to the bottom of this issue, let us quote a fascinating dispute that relates to Redemption in general, maybe most particularly, the redemption from our current Exile.

“Rav said: All the anticipated times (for Redemption) have come and gone. It (the Redemption) depends only on repentance and good deeds.

Shmuel said: It is enough for a mourner to withstand his mourning period.”

According to Rav, exile does not have a fixed time-period. Instead, the ultimate redemption will be stimulated by man - by Am Yisrael - who will be found worthy of Redemption. The change will occur by virtue of positive action. Teshuva is the key to Geula.

According to his contemporary Shmuel, there is a fixed duration for Galut. A mourner sits “Shiva” for a week. Then the mourning period is over. Exile is the same. In the same manner that a criminal will sit out a prison sentence, but when the years are over, he is free, likewise. If Galut is punishment for sin, then there must be a fixed period of estrangement, of alienation, of distance, of punishment. It cannot endure endlessly!

These are two classic views as regards the instigation of redemption. Is it dependent upon man, or is it reliant upon God¹²? Will it happen despite our sins, or only as reward for our virtues?

QUALITATIVE DIFFERENCE

Now, which model of Geula would seem to be preferable, Rav or Shmuel? Many people would be happy to accept Shmuel. After all, we would all prefer a fixed end to our exile. The Redemption assured independent of the level of Am Yisrael would be a welcome sign of reassurance in what is a rather unpredictable national historical process.

And yet, there are disadvantages to Shmuel too. It is true that Shmuel assures us redemption, and that Rav leaves us precariously dependent upon the “stiff-necked” Jewish people. But let us think about “the day after.” Let us turn our attention to the QUALITY of redemption rather than the likelihood of its swift arrival.

If Geula is delivered because “the time is up” then what sort of a redemption might we anticipate? What would be the mood, the atmosphere of that redemption? After all, the Jewish people might return to their land, to self-government, to a Beit Mikdash. But all the frictions and problems would still be with us.

These two models might be well compared to a married couple who find themselves estranged from one another. They separate. And

¹² The Ramban on Parshat Bechukotai suggests that for Galut Rishon there was a fixed time period – 70 years – whereas for our current Galut, the end of exile is dependent upon Teshuva. The Ramban – Hilchot Teshuva 7:5 - would seem to concur. The Ramban's distinction is based upon the difference between the Geula as described in Sefer Vaykra and Devarim. We touched upon this in our shiur on Parshat Nitzavim http://www.lind.org.il/features/rai_nitzavim64.htm. This machloket might also be related to the discussion as to whether the 3rd Beit Hamikdash will descend intact from heaven, or will be built by man. Again, redemption is God's hands or in ours.

here are two options. Imagine that their psychologist insisted that they move back in together living under one roof, to “try it again.” The mood would be tense, difficult. One wonders if anything fundamental would have been solved. What is the likelihood of success? But imagine a different scenario. That husband and wife contact one another and decide to talk about their mistakes, decide to improve, to change. They meet and patch up their differences, once again falling in love with each other, and then they decide to return to living in the same home. The difference between these two situations is radical, enormous. One is forced, the outer shell without the inner content; the other is a living relationship filled with joy, reconciliation, with love.

The same is true about our Geula.

We can have Shmuel's Geula but it will be redemption in name only. None of the problems solved, we have to wonder whether it can succeed. But Rav's Geula, the Redemption of Teshuva and improved action is a genuine reunion with God, a relationship of love, a true repair and resolution.

BACK TO EGYPT

“In the month of Nissan we were redeemed; in Nissan we shall be redeemed once more.”

There is a corollary between the future Redemption and the Redemption of yesteryear. The two models apply in Egypt too!

There is a covenantal model of the Egyptian exile. The 400 years are up! But where is Am Yisrael in its relationship with God? Can they relate at all simply on the basis of a promise 400 years ago? Yes, we can rely upon the Brit Bein HaBetarim, but is that enough to become God's people? With no inner change is there real Geula?

But, in contrast, if the Israelites are truly committed to their tradition, or even if they have made some effort to engage in Mitzvot – Pesach and Milah – then they are moving in the right direction, then they have expressed a keen interest in God.

“Ko Amar Hashem – So says God; I remind you of the intimacy of your youth, the love of your wedding. How you followed me to the wilderness, an unsown land.” (Yirmiyahu 2)

The prophet Yirmiyahu reminds Am Yisrael that Yetziat Mitzrayim, the Exodus, was an act of love, a moment of togetherness, a wedding between God and Israel. Can this be a result of forced action, of abject spiritual distance, or is there something else here? Maybe this is the reason that Chazal frequently stress the virtues of the Bnei Yisrael in Egypt. It was virtually impossible to imagine the Exodus without a powerful spiritual link between the God of Israel and the Children of Israel.

TESHUVA, BEFORE OR AFTERWARDS?

And yet, the question remains an open one. I would like to end the shiur with a fascinating quote by the Sefat Emet¹³.

“In every situation, Tahara (purity) precedes Kedusha (holiness)... but in Yetziat Mitzrayim the holiness came from “above” (from God) before the Children of Israel had managed to purify their souls. This is the unusual aspect of Pesach in that it came without a (prior) process, as it says; they were on the 49th degree of impurity and their freedom prevented their descent to the fiftieth... and they received a temporary state of Kedusha. However now, afterwards, they need to purify the 49 levels with the Sefira (HaOmer – which has 49 days!)”

Sometimes the Teshuva comes before, but apparently there are times in which the Redemption is FOLLOWED by Teshuva¹⁴, spiritual growth and ascent.

Wishing you all a Chag Kasher Vesameach.
-Alex

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¹³ See also his comments Shabbat HaGadol 5661 where he suggests that God stimulated Israel to make a small start – Pesach and Milah - so that God could indeed reciprocate. It's a beautiful piece. Well worth reading!

¹⁴ Check Yechezkel ch.20. I believe that this is the way in which the order works there.