

The Messages of *Galut Mitzrayim*

Rabbi Herschel Reichman

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

On a national level, the Jewish people are more inclined to think about *geulah* than about *galut*. We daven for *geulah* daily and gladly proclaim 'Next Year in Jerusalem,' but it's much harder to contemplate the purpose of *galut* and its role in Jewish history. But *galut* has played a critical role in the historical and spiritual development of the Jewish nation, which has spent most of its existence in exile. *Galut Mitzrayim* is particularly significant, for as chasidic and kabalistic sources teach us, *galut Mitzrayim* is the paradigm for all future exiles. What can we learn from *galut Mitzrayim* about the purpose of our *galut*? How is *geulah* reconciled with *galut*? These and other important questions are addressed by the Shem m'Shmuel, the second Sokatchover Rebbe, in his chasidic discourses.

On the surface, the transition from life in Eretz Yisrael to slavery and subjugation in Egypt seems quite abrupt. At the end of Sefer Bereishit, the family of Ya'akov is living comfortably in Egypt, their welfare seemingly guaranteed by Yosef's position of prominence. We enter into Sefer Shemot, and suddenly the Jews are enslaved and their children are being thrown into the river. But the transition is not as rapid as it seems. Earlier in the Torah, at *ברית בין הבתרים*, Hashem tells Avraham about the exile and enslavement in Egypt.

12 And it came to pass, that, when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Avram; and fear and a great darkness fell upon him. 13 And He said to Avram: 'Know that your descendants shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them for four hundred years.

Bereshit 15:12-13

(יב) ויהי השמש לבוא ותרדמה
נפלה על אברם והנה אימה חשכה
גדלה נפלת עליו: (יג) ויאמר
לאברם ידע תדע כי גר יהיה זרעך
בארץ לא להם ועבדום וענו אתם
ארבע מאות שנה:
בראשית פרק טו

Although the exile in Egypt was to last four hundred years in total, Shem m'Shmuel learns from the pasukim that there were really four distinct stages – your descendants shall be a stranger (גר יהיה), in a land that is not theirs (בארץ לא להם), and shall serve them (ועבדום), and they shall afflict them (וענו אותם).

It's clear from the pesukim that we spent far less than 400 years in Egypt. Chazal explain that the count of 400 years started with the birth of Yitzchak. Although Yitzchak spent his whole life in Israel, he was dependent on the good will of the local Canaanite inhabitants, as was his son

Ya'akov. Hence, it was appropriate to count their time in Israel as the first stage of exile, that of גר יהיה זרעך. 190 years later Ya'akov and his family of seventy offspring left Israel to Egypt, beginning the next stage of לא להם בארץ. Chazal teach that the enslavement began after Ya'akov and his children died, beginning the third stage of ועבדום. The fourth and final stage of וענו אותם was represented by the decree that all male Jewish children be thrown into the river.

Several commentators ask what triggered the transition from one stage of exile to the next. Why did the Jews have to spend so much time enslaved in Egypt? Hashem did not fix how long each stage would take. Why couldn't the Jewish people spend more time in Israel, with subservience to the Canaanites counting towards the total of 400 years, as it did for Yitzchak and Ya'akov?

Beit haLevi and others explain that each successive stage of exile was triggered by various national sins. The transition from גר יהיה זרעך to לא להם בארץ was caused by the brothers' sale of Yosef. For that terrible sin, Hashem decided that the time had come to leave Israel and sojourn in Egypt. The Jews may well have stayed there comfortably for the remaining 400 years, with a small amount of enslavement and oppression at the end. But another national sin brought on the enslavement much earlier. Midrashim explain that the Jewish people in Egypt underwent painful surgical procedures to cover up their brit milah. By seeking to eliminate the sign of Jewishness from their body, they committed a serious transgression. They did so not intending to abandon G-d and the Jewish faith, but in order to win social acceptance from their Egyptian neighbors. They hoped to avoid anti-Semitism and integrate themselves into the Egyptian society and economy. They forgot the example of Yosef, who rose to prominence and success in Egypt, and still managed to keep his Jewish identity.

For abandoning the mitzvah meant to distinguish us from the gentiles, Hashem punished the Jewish people measure for measure. Instead of accepting the Jews, the Egyptians began to suspect the Jews' efforts to win favor. The Egyptians began to suspect the Jews' loyalty and to consider them a dangerous threat to Egypt's security. We find a similar process throughout Jewish history; whenever we abandon our identity to ingratiate ourselves with the non-Jewish society, the ultimate response is rejection and persecution. The Torah demands that we be proud of our distinctness, and proclaim our identity in order to sanctify Hashem's name by our conduct. When we refuse to do so, we subvert an important purpose of *galut*, of sanctifying Hashem's name in our encounters with the non-Jewish world.

Until this point, although the Jews were covering up their brit milah, they were still observing the mitzvah. However, at some point after the enslavement began, there was a national consensus to stop brit milah entirely. This is why, as the pesukim tell us, Hashem commanded the Jewish people to circumcise themselves before making the korban Pesach. This sin triggered the fourth and final stage of the exile, וענו אותם, Pharaoh's decree against the Jewish male children. The punishment was measure for measure, with the blood of the Jewish children corresponding to the blood of brit milah which the Jews had abandoned.

We tend to think of *galut Mitzrayim* as a uniquely Jewish experience. Indeed, the above analysis, in which the national sins of the Jewish people triggered the successive stages of that *galut*, supports this perspective. However, Kabbalistic sources teach us that *galut Mitzrayim* was an

important event in the larger development of human history. According to the Zohar, the Jewish people in Egypt had the reincarnated souls of Adam, the generation of the flood, and the generation of Migdal Bavel. The different types of suffering the Jews experienced in Egypt atoned for the respective sins of these earlier generations. This idea seems as astonishing as it is hard to relate to. However, it contains an important lesson for us. Although they ended up making the wrong choices, Adam, the generation of the flood, and the generation of Migdal Bavel had the potential for spiritual greatness. If they had lived up to their potential, all of humanity would have received the Torah and its mitzvot. That Hashem gave these gifts exclusively to a 'chosen nation' was not a foregone necessity. The Zohar teaches us that the purpose of the ethics, values, and spirituality modeled by the Jews was originally intended for all of the nations. Until the world accepts the values and ideals of the Torah, the Jewish people must, by necessity, hold themselves separate. But this is only a temporary measure. Eventually, all of humanity will acknowledge Hashem and his Torah, and accept their Godly responsibilities that are temporarily the exclusive possession of B'nei Yisrael.

The Pattern of *Galut* and *Geulah*

Galut also reflects a basic pattern in the world. God made the world in a pattern of waves where one cyclically travels between low points and high points. In *Chasidut* this is referred to as “*yeridah l'tzorech aliyah*,” a descent for the sake of an even greater ascent. Rav Nachman m'Breslov explains that exile is a necessary component in our relationship with Hashem.

Peace, peace, to him that is far off and to him that is near, says God Who creates the fruit of the lips; and I will heal him.

Yeshayahu 57:19

From a distance God appears to me. “I have loved you with an eternal love, and so I have drawn you with kindness.”

Yirmiyahu 31:2

בורא ניב שפתים שלום שלום לרחוק
ולקרוב אמר ה' ורפאתיו:
ישעיהו נז:יט

מרחוק ה' נראה לי ואהבת עולם אהבתיך
על כן משכתיך חסד:
ירמיהו לא:ב

A nation first must be distant to come close to Hashem. Rav Nachman explains that in life, people who don't work for things tend not to value them. A person must be strong to face the difficulties of life. And the difficulties of life require difficult training.

We find that the greatest gifts Hashem has given to the Jewish people have always followed a *galut* experience. The Torah, which is the greatest gift possible, and the *Mishkan*, God's presence within Israel, came only on the heels of *galut Mitzrayim*. Similarly, the second *Beis HaMikdash* was only erected after the *galut of Paras and Madai*. The great *galut* which we have experienced for almost 2000 years is so deep and terrible because it is the precursor for the ultimate redemption. The greater the *geulah*, the greater the *galut* that precedes it. The *galut of Bavel*, which lasted for only seventy years, produced the Second Temple, which was not the ultimate redemption. Only the great *galut of Edom* that we are in now can produce the ultimate redemption.

This back and forth rhythm of highs and lows was built into the fabric of creation when God created night and day. It is reflected in nature, such as the low and high tides of the oceans. The descent of *galut* is a training arena for the Jews to grow spiritually. When someone lacks something the desire to get it grows. The deeper the *galut*, the more the Jew wants the redemption. The more we want the redemption the greater it is.

The word *galut* (גלות) is related to *l'galot* (לגלות), meaning that exile reveals and brings out our strength, and compels us to rise above our environment to discover our spiritual strengths. One of the great benefits of *Galut* is that it reveals the hidden faith of the Jewish people. Jews are blessed with the spiritual genetics of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov, the genetics of faith in God. The Rav zt"l once interpreted the symbol of the burning bush, the original symbol of redemption, as representing the inner fire within the Jewish people, a fire of faith and hope despite a barren world which seemingly is a thorn field, bereft of anything productive. The sages say that the twelve sons of Yaakov were all named after the concept of redemption. For example, Reuven is "*ra'ah ani*" God sees my suffering. Shimon is "*Shma tza'akasi*" God hears my prayers etc. which indicates how faith is at the core of every Jew.

This is why the Jewish people are believers in a brighter future and in God's ultimate salvation. When Moshe tells Hashem that the people won't believe in him, He responds that "*b'cha ya'aminu*" they will believe in you. We know that the slogan of the redemption of Egypt was revealed by Yosef, "*pakod yifkod*" "the moment of redemption shall come." The repetitious phrase of *pakod yifkod* implies certainty, as Yosef told Pharaoh that his double dream meant that the fulfillment of the interpretation of the dream was imminent. The certainty of redemption is rooted in the certainty of Jewish faith.

Thus, we see in our own time that Jews have an obsession to fix the world. The Jew has an innate instinct that the world can become and should become a better place. The Jew is optimistic about the possibility of improving the human condition. The Jewish people are all Messianic in this belief in a brighter future. This comes from our *galut* experiences. The *galut* and *geulah*, the wave-like historical experience has taught us that the world can become a better place and that redemption is a certainty.

The Blessings of *Galut*

Another aspect of how *galut* is a very powerful positive influence is in the Jewish quality of appreciation. Because of Jewish suffering the Jew has learned to appreciate the good things of life and to be "*makir tov*," to appreciate blessings. First and foremost a Jew appreciates God's blessings and responds with 100 blessings a day. Jews also appreciate other people, as reflected in the incredible loyalty of Jews to their parents in fulfilling the mitzvah of *kibbud av v'em*, in the mitzvah of *k'vod Rav* and ultimately in the mitzvah of *k'vod habriyot* by appreciating all people for what they do. When somebody experiences *galut* and realizes how cruel people can be, an appreciation for other people grows immensely. This is another blessing of the *galut*.

Another benefit of *galut* is that it reduces and hopefully eliminates *ga'avah* – smugness and hubris. The Torah mentions many times that "you must remember that you were a slave in Egypt". You must always remember your humble beginnings. No matter how comfortable life is

today we must always remember how it all began. It is for this reason that the Torah emphasizes *ahavat ha'ger* – loving the convert as we were strangers in Egypt. Another aspect of this humility that *galut* has bestowed upon us is the countless acts of *chesed* and *tzadakah* that Jews do. Jews are the kindest of all people. Jews are on the forefronts of social justice and charities. This is because the *galut* experience has shown us that we should provide help for the less fortunate.

Yet another lesson of the *galut* experience is that of the power of prayer. The Jews in Egypt prayed, and prayed without stop for hundreds of years until their prayers were heard as the Torah writes:

23. *And it was in those long days, and Pharaoh had died, and the Jews groaned from their work, and called out, and their cry arose to God from their work.* 24. *And God heard their cry, and God remembered their covenant, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaacov.*

Shemot 2

(כג) ויהי בימים הרבים ההם וימת מלך מצרים ויאנחו בני ישראל מן העבדה ויזעקו ותעל שועתם אל האלהים מן העבדה: (כד) וישמע אלהים את נאקתם ויזכר אלהים את בריתו את אברהם את יצחק ואת יעקב:
שמות פרק ב

This is the prayer that Dovid Hamelech describes in Tehillim – “*mima’amakim keraticha Hashem*” “I call to you Hashem from the depths of suffering”. This is prayer even after one has given up hope. It is the prayer after *yiush*. It is the prayer of one who realizes that no human being can help him, only the almighty God. This is the prayer of Chana who prayed for a son even after everyone around her gave up hope. When even her husband told her that he was better to her than seven sons, she prayed from the deepest depths and that’s when her prayers were answered.

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

There’s a great *machloket* as to whether the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt because of *teshuva* or despite the lack of *teshuva*. Yonatan Ben Uziel, based on the *pasuk* “*Va-Yar Elokim et b’nai Yisreal Va-Yayda Elokim,*” says that God saw the repentance of the Jewish people and accepted it. However, Ramban disagrees and says that the redemption from Egypt was purely because of *chesed elyon*, God’s limitless kindness towards His children, the Jewish people. According to Ramban the redemption is described, as Dovid Hemelech says about a certain relationship that we have with the Almighty “*ki-gamul alay imo*” as a baby on his mother’s breasts. The baby receives direct beneficence from his mother without any good deeds. This concept is spelled out in Tehillim:

Throw your load on God and He will support you, He will not allow the righteous to be moved.

Tehillim 55:23

השלך על ה' יהבך והוא יכלכלך לא יתן לעולם מוט לצדיק:
תהלים נה:כג

Ramban has a very amazing insight in this regard. When Moshe asks Hashem what name to use in identifying Him to the Jewish people He says “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*” “I shall be what I shall be”. What is the meaning of this mysterious name? Ramban explains that this means that “I Hashem will be what you want Me to be.” In other words, if you want Me, Hashem, to have mercy upon you, then you must have mercy on one another. If the Jewish people are people of *chesed* with

others than Hashem is the *Av HaRachamim*, the merciful father. This is the concept of *middah k'negged middah*. What Ramban is saying is that even though the Jews in Egypt did not do *teshuva*, God invested in them, as He knew that in the future they would do *teshuva*. God took the first step of *chessed* so that the Jews themselves would follow suit. According to *chasidut* the ideal is that the human being should take the first step towards God as we need Him and He does not need us. We should be the ones to do the *teshuva* and then God will respond, as it says “*v’shavta ad Hashem Elokecha v’shav Hashem.*” First you return to God and then He returns to you. However, sometimes the Jew is so distant from Hashem, so depressed and so forlorn that he cannot take the first step. So Hashem takes the first step as He knows that the Jew will respond. According to the Ramban, Hashem took us out of *galut* even without *teshuva*, as He knew that it would be a good investment as we would become the people of *chessed* and *teshuva*.

Rashi gives another insight into the mysterious name “*ehyeh asher ehyeh.*”

I will be with the Jew in this time of travail and I will be with them in other times of travail.

Rashi Shemot 3:14

אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה: אֱהִיָּה עִמָּם בְּצָרָה זֹאת אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה
עִמָּם בְּשֶׁעֶבֶד שְׂאֵר מַלְכוּת.
רש"י שמות ג:יד

This is the very profound idea of “*imo anochi b’tzarah*” that God Himself is in the *galut* together with the Jew. It is the simple meaning of the burning bush – God Himself is in the thorns together with the people. This is referred to as *Shchinta b’galuta* – the *Shechina* is in *galut*. Chasidim explain that this is the paradox of *galut*. Superficially it appears that God is not with us as it says “*v’Anochi hastir astir panai.*” However, this is only superficial, as in a more profound way He is together with us in the *galut* and suffers with us. This is also the secret of the four-letter name of God which is spelled *Havayah*, To Be, but is pronounced *Adnus*, To Rule. The four-letter name *havayah/adnus* expresses out loud God as a distant ruler, the *adon*, but in reality He is very close, *havayah*, with us every step of the way. The *shem havayah* is a hidden part of the name. This paradoxical form of God’s name is only in *galut*, outside of the *Beis HaMikdash*. However, in the *Mikdash* the pronunciation matches the spelling, since God’s closeness to us is clear in that place. According to our sages, the *shem Havayah* is described as the name of *chessed* because it implies that God is as close to the Jew today in *galut* as He always was, even in the *Beit HaMikdash*. It is only the name of *adnus* in which Hashem is far from us.

This secret is really the key to prayer. The Jew knows that even if he seems to be very far from God in some external way, really He is very close. In a certain way He is closer than ever as God is suffering with every Jew. In this *galut* a Jew can pray in the strongest way. In fact he can pray for the *tza’ar* of the *Shechina*, for the suffering of God Himself, as we say “*aseh li-ma’an shimecha*” – do it for Your name. According to chasidic traditions, when a Jew prays for God’s own name, that prayer must be answered. The evil forces that oppose Jewish honor cannot oppose the honor of God and His holy name.

Two Forms of Redemption

Galut develops and displays the heroism of the Jewish people. In Egypt there were certainly Jewish heroes. Yocheved and Miriam were two such heroes, as they refused to obey Pharaoh’s

orders to kill the Jews, risking their own lives to do so. Moshe, as the prince of Egypt in Pharaoh's palace, risked his life to save a single Jew being beaten by an Egyptian. The fact that the Jewish people had so many babies in Egypt despite their suffering is an expression of their general heroism and their desire to survive. Jewish women made the Jewish family an unbreakable link in the Jewish people's existence in Egypt.

However, Hashem tells Moshe a very interesting thing. We mentioned that "*pakod yifkod*" "I will redeem" was the slogan of the redemption coined by Yosef. This double expression also implies that there can be two redemptions. The first redemption was the result of Jewish heroism. Only 20% of the people were able to be heroes. The other 80% could not do it, and according to our sages never left Egypt. This first redemption is that of the heroes, the people who still had faith, the people who still had some hope and the will to survive. Many Jews had lost every trace of their faith, pride and will to survive. They opted to assimilate into Egyptian society and never left.

However, the second redemption is one that all the Jews will deserve. It is even greater than the first redemption. It's the final redemption of Mashiach.

Redemption is not a straight line up; rather it is a wave that goes up and down. The key to reach the high tide is to have faith throughout the cycle, even at the lowest point. This is a very important lesson for us today as we go through different difficulties and troubles in our process of *galut* and *geulah*. We must be very careful, despite the blessing of having returned to the state of Israel, to avoid hubris and smugness. Sometimes God gives up a blessing with *ehyeh asher eheyh*, a call for us to respond. The blessing of the state of Israel is really a call for us to do *teshuva*. We must strengthen our *teshuva*, *tefila*, *u'tzedaka*.

As we return to Israel we have to bring the good lessons we learned in *galut*, *l'galot*—we have to reveal the *kedusha* which the Jewish people discovered in the *galut*. Our goal has to be to get every Jew to become part of this redemptive process so that no Jew should be left behind, unlike the redemption from Egypt in which many Jews were left behind. The future redemption, for which we pray for every single day, must be a *geulah* for every Jew and every person in the world. May this long exile serve as the catalyst for our meriting the *geulah* speedily in our days.

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