***פרשת שמות***

**Parshas Shemos**

Stealing Away

*וְאַחַ֗ר בָּ֚אוּ מֹשֶׁ֣ה וְאַהֲרֹ֔ן וַיֹּאמְר֖וּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹ֑ה כֹּֽה־אָמַ֤ר יְהוָה֙ אֱלֹהֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל שַׁלַּח֙ אֶת־עַמִּ֔י וְיָחֹ֥גּוּ לִ֖י בַּמִּדְבָּֽר: (שמות ה, א)*

*Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness. (Exodus 5:1)*

I – The Rise and Fall of Moshe’s Movement

 Derek Silvers, a famous technology entrepreneur, once gave an incredible TED talk about how movements start. He brilliantly describes the process of how one leader inspires a follower – who then gets a second follower. Then they pull in a third. Soon a few more join in, and now it’s a small group. It keeps getting bigger and bigger, growing exponentially. People keep joining until it’s a huge mass of people who through sheer number and passion can move mountains!

 And when we picture Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest leader of all time, and his movement that was exactly…

 … the opposite of what happened.

 Moshe starts off with a huge audience. He gathers all the elders of the Jews and tells them that Hashem will take them out of Mitzrayim. And the entire nation, believes him! Right away! Millions and millions of people![[1]](#footnote-1)

 And then they go to Pharaoh.

Given what had just happened. We would picture a scene of millions of people marching towards the palace. A line stretching miles long! Then Moshe and Aharon would enter the throne room with all of the elders, demanding in a clear, unified voice, “So says Hashem, LET MY PEOPLE GO!”

 But that’s not what happened.

 Instead, the Torah says, “וְאַחַ֗ר בָּ֚אוּ מֹשֶׁ֣ה וְאַהֲרֹ֔ן וַיֹּאמְר֖וּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹ֑ה.”[[2]](#footnote-2) “And after that, Moshe and Aharon came…to Pharaoh.” Just Moshe and Aharon.

 What happened to the elders? What happened to that movement? It seems to have just vanished into thin air!

II – Measure for Measure?

 The Midrash[[3]](#footnote-3) fills in the blanks for us: הֵיכָן הָלְכוּ הַזְּקֵנִים – Where did the Elders go?! הָלְכוּ עִמָּהֶן הַזְּקֵנִים – The elders started off with Moshe and Aharon, וְהָיוּ מְגַּנְבִין אֶת עַצְמָן - but they stole themselves away, וְנִשְׁמָטִין אֶחָד אֶחָד - and they slunk away one by one. כֵּיוָן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לְפַלְטֵרִין שֶׁל פַּרְעֹה לֹא נִמְצָא אֶחָד – And by the time that the “movement” reached Pharaoh’s palace, not one of them was left. One by one they slipped away in fear until it was just Moshe and Aharon again. Right back to square one.

 The midrash continues that the elders were punished for their abandonment. אָמַר לָהֶם הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא – G-d said to them חַיֵּיכֶם שֶׁאֲנִי פּוֹרֵעַ לָכֶם- “I will pay you back measure for measure!” When? בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁעָלָה משֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עִם הַזְּקֵנִים לְהַר סִינַי לְקַבֵּל הַתּוֹרָה, הֶחֱזִירָן הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא – When Moshe and Aharon ascended Har Sinai to receive the Torah with the Elders, Hashem turned the elders back. Only Moshe and Aharon could go up.[[4]](#footnote-4)

An unfortunate moment in our history, no doubt. But something doesn’t seem to add up. Why did the *zikeinim* run away? The Torah explicitly says that they all believed Moshe. Now a few minutes later, they do a 180 and slink away like non-believing cowards?! What happened?!

What’s even more curious is the poetic language that the midrash uses to describe their defection: מְגַּנְבִין אֶת עַצְמָן וְנִשְׁמָטִין - they stole themselves and left. Aside from being ostensibly completely superfluous, why the word “steal?” What does it add to this picture in our minds?[[5]](#footnote-5)

III – And Where’s Your Plate?

 The answer to this question lies in story that takes place in another a palace, about 50 years ago.[[6]](#footnote-6)

 Shortly after Rabbi Immanuel Jacobovitz became the Chief Rabbi of England, he was invited to a banquet at the palace. Understandably, he was quite nervous and anxious to make a good first impression on the Queen and royal family. But he was also equally anxious to make sure that he wouldn’t accidentally end up eating *treif* food.

 Rabbi Jacobovitz asked the Jewish liaison to the palace about the procedure. The liaison, also a *frum* Jew, assured him that everything was taken care of. The kosher food was kept in a totally different section of the kitchen.

 “But what about dishes,” Rabbi Jacobovitz asked.

 “Don’t worry,” the man replied. “We have our own identical set of china.”

 “But if they look the same, then how will they tell the difference? Maybe the people setting the table will give me a *treif* dish!”

 “Relax,” he reassured Rabbi Jacabovitz. “There’s a little mark on the bottom of the plate. Stop worrying. Everything will be fine!”

 The day of the banquet arrived and Rabbi Jacabovitz is standing next to his table next to the Jewish liaison. He looks under his plate and sure enough, there’s a little mark. So far so good.

 Suddenly there’s a commotion. The Queen has just entered the room and the waiters realized they messed up the seating arrangements. Some of the tables need to be moved around immediately. In a whirlwind, dozens of servants converge on the tables and start moving them.

 Along with Rabbi Jacobovitz’s plate.

 On instinct he quickly grabs his plate before it gets lost and mixed up. He breathes a sigh of relief. Crisis averted.

 But now there’s a new problem.

 Everyone is getting on line to greet the Queen. Including Rabbi Jacobovitz. Who is currently clutching a dinner plate. Because – and let’s remember - the only thing more rude than greeting Her Majesty with a dinner plate, is not eating at Her Majesty’s dinner. All in all, not a great first impression.

His *frum* liaison is mortified at the spectacle that’s about happen. He furiously shakes his head and mutters about naïve religious fanaticism, but there’s nothing he can do as they inch closer and closer to the queen.

Moments later they reach the end of the line. The liaison introduces Rabbi Jacobovitz to Queen Elizbeth and the Chief Rabbi bows, plate and all. Then Prince Phillip asks the question:

“Why are you holding a plate?”

The liaison tenses and Rabbi Jacobovitz explains as best he can. The Queen’s husband nods in understanding and laughs good-naturedly.

Now both the Chief Rabbi and the liaison breathe a sigh of relief. Everything’s going to be ok.

Then Phillip turns to the Orthodox liaison, and says in that demanding aristocratic tone: “And where’s *your* plate?”

The man had no answer.

IV – Knowing Hashem

 Why didn’t that Orthodox Jew grab his plate? Intellectually he knew that he should since he wouldn’t want to eat *treif* food. But that imperative wasn’t part of his core identity. It hadn’t taken hold in his heart on an emotional level. So when push came to shove, he acted on instinct and let the plate be stolen away.

The same thing happened to the Jewish Elders. Why were they scared of facing Pharaoh? The Torah tells us explicitly that they believed Moshe! So what did they have to be afraid of?! The answer is, you’re right. It wasn’t logical. It was instinctual – primal flight.

 They understood intellectually that Hashem would protect them and redeem them. But just because you know something in your head, doesn’t mean that you will on an emotional level. There was something blocking the connection between their head and their hearts. That’s why the midrash says they stole themselves. Their hearts co-opted and robbed their minds of what they knew.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 Thus, Hashem punished them measure for measure. When it came time to receive the Torah at Har Sinai, Hashem asked them, “Where are your plates?! Your fealty and faith haven’t yet made it below your heads. That’s not how I want my Torah to received. It must be written on your hearts!M[[8]](#footnote-8) Part of your core! So stay back and wait.”

V – *Kulanu Yodei Shimecha[[9]](#footnote-9)*

The gemara tells us[[10]](#footnote-10) that each day we accept the Torah anew. And so each day we have the opportunity to re-define our relationship with Hashem and His Torah. Do we go up Har Sinai head and heart together like Moshe and Aharon, or do we steal ourselves away like the Zikeinim? Is our Yiddishkeit merely something that we know or something so much a part of us, so critical to our identity, that in the heat of the moment, it becomes instinct? Will we have an answer when someone down the line will inevitably ask us “And where is your plate?”

 It’s not an easy question to answer, but as descendants of those who told Hashem *na’aseh v’nishma*,[[11]](#footnote-11) we can do it. We have the power to be *koseiv al luach libecha* – to etch the Torah onto our hearts! And *im yirtzeh Hashem* when that someone comes along, whether it be Prince Phillip or our neighbor next door, we will hold our plate high.

1. Exodus 4:29-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exodus 5:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Shemos Rabbah 5:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Exodus 24:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Now this seems to be a pretty clear case of a measure for measure punishment. The Elders abandoned Moshe and Aharon when they went to see the king of Egypt, so they were not allowed to accompany Moshe and Aharon when they went to meet the King of the world. But something doesn’t fit quite right. Is it really measure for measure?! The Elders abandoned Moshe going to the king’s palace. Har Sinai wasn’t Hashem’s palace! It was a place where Hashem descended to give the Torah. If we wanted to find a ‘better’ analogue, maybe they should have been barred from entering the Mishkan. That’s Hashem’s house! Instead, the true measure for measure seems to be specifically related to receiving the Torah from Hashem. But how does that connect to Pharaoh? [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. While this story was told to me by a reputable source, I find it too spectacular for it to actually have occurred. Be that as it may, it illustrates the answer to our question quite pointedly. As such, I urge the reader to at the very least consider this story a powerful *mashal* (parable) whose historical accuracy should not detract from the saliency of its message. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In that respect, the Arizal says, they were no different than Pharaoh. I’m pretty sure that at some point during the makos that Pharaoh understood in his mind that Hashem was calling the shots. But his hardened heart blocked that knowledge from becoming part of him. Another question is why the language of “theft?” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Proverbs 3:3, Tanchuma Yisro 6, Pri Tzaddik Shavuos 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Text of Birchas Hatorah. Literally translated as “we shall all know Your name,” this phrase is the antithesis of Pharaoh who stated (Exodus 5:2) “Who is Hashem that I should listen to His voice…**I do not know** Hashem.” Furthermore, the Torah is described as being comprised of the names of God (see Ramban introduction to Biblical Commentary; Zohar 2:87a). In this blessing on the Torah, we beseech Hashem to know His name – His Torah. The term “know” connotes the internalization of something to the extent that it becomes part of the person’s essence (see Genesis 4:1). Thus, when the elders slunk away from Pharaoh, the one who refused to know God, they evinced a lack of internalization of their commitment to God and knowing Him. Thus, they were unable to know God in the fullest sense by the revelation at Sinai.

In a broader sense this was the goal of the Exodus; Hashem repeatedly asserts that the purpose of the Ten Plagues is that “Egypt shall know that I am Hashem” (e.g. Exodus 7:5). However, a careful read of the aforementioned verses highlights that the Egyptians never relate to the name of God, merely God as an entity. Rather, knowing God’s name appears to be an endeavor relegated to the Jewish people. Moshe anticpates that the Jews will ask Hashem’s name (Exodus 3:13-15)). Similarly, Hashem assures Moshe that unlike the Avos, the Jews will come to know His name, the Tetragrammaton (Exodus 6:3). It would seem that knowing God’s name connotes a more intimate relationship than knowing God generally. As per Ramban’s statement above that the Torah is manifestation of the names of God, one could explain that merely knowing God implies a basic relationship of recognition to God as a presence and power. Thus, commands that reflect this reality, such as Hashem’s *kol* to Pharaoh to release the Jews (Exodus 5:2) are delivered to Jew and Gentile alike. Indeed, the word *kol* is a much more general and primal method of communication than words and is often used to *herald* God’s actual words (See Exodus 19:16,19; Psalms 29 and Zevachim 116a; 1Kings 19:12 and Brachos 58a). Similarly, knowing God in the general sense in Egypt was a steppingstone to the more intimate, nuanced revelation of God’s name to the Jews at Sinai with Hashems actual words in the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tanchuma Ki Savo 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Exodus 24:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)