

VÁ'EIRA
THE SECRET OF
GALUS AND GE'ULA

A

Moshe's Question

The Midrash on Parshas Va'eira cites a *pasuk*: "I see that with wisdom comes foolishness, because who is man to question what the king has already decreed and done?" (Koheles 2:12)

The Midrash says this refers to the question of Moshe recorded at the end of Parshas Shemos. Hashem told Moshe that Pharaoh would not let the people go. Hashem added that He would strengthen Pharaoh's heart. Moshe knew his mission would be difficult and that he would not succeed right away. Nonetheless, he was upset after his initial meeting with Pharaoh had worsened the Jews' situation as slaves in Egypt—Pharaoh had made a new decree that the Jews would have to gather their own straw to make bricks.

Upset, Moshe complained to Hashem and posed a challenging question: "Why did You send me?"

The Shem Mishmuel notes that the Midrash itself is puzzling. It seems that Hashem was criticizing Moshe for responding inappropriately. But why? After all, when Hashem told Moshe to go to Pharaoh, He had told him only that Pharaoh would not listen. He

did not tell Moshe that things would get worse. Now, Bnei Yisrael had no time to rest from the horrible forced labor. Moshe felt guilty that he had caused this. This aspect of Pharaoh's response was not predicted. Why, then, is Moshe criticized for questioning the meaning of his mission?

Additionally, what is God's answer to Moshe. "*Ata sireh asher e'eseh l'Pharaoh*. Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh?" How does that account for Moshe's complaint?

B

The Deep Challenge of Continuity

To explain this passage, the Shem Mishmuel focuses on a Midrash in Parshas Vayeishev. The Torah says Yaakov sent Yosef "from the valley of Chevron (*emek Chevron*)" to find his brothers. The city of Chevron, however, is on a hill, not in a valley. Why does the Torah say that Yaakov sent Yosef from a valley? Our sage interpret the word "*emek*" as to imply "*eitza amuka*"—the deepest idea of the *tzaddik* Avraham, who is buried in Chevron.

This mission of Yosef would lead him to the place where the brothers would sell him, eventually to become a slave in Egypt. This sale initiated a series of events in which the whole family of Yaakov came to settle in Mitzrayim, where they subsequently became enslaved.

The Midrash explains the geographically inaccurate statement of the Torah. Yaakov sent Yosef based on the deep idea (*eitza amuka*) of the *tzaddik* Avraham Avinu, who is buried in Chevron. Hashem had made a covenant with Avraham many years earlier—the *bris bein habesarim*—wherein Hashem foretold the exile, slavery, and suffering of the Jewish People. This was a deep idea that Avraham Avinu had suggested to Hashem, as we will explain.

The question that Avraham and Hashem were considering was that of continuity. This is the fundamental problem of the

Jewish People. How do we continue from one generation to the next? Avraham was a great man, as were Yitzchak and Yaakov. But how could they perpetuate this greatness from generation to generation? While individual great people do exist, masses of millions of people are not necessarily great. How do you pass on the greatness of an Avraham or Yitzchak to the whole nation in future generations?

Hashem was going to give Bnei Yisrael tremendous blessings: Eretz Yisrael, Torah, and *olam haba*. They are great and unique gifts that the Jewish People is privileged to have received from Hashem. Think about Eretz Yisrael. So many nations continuously want to take that land. No nation has ever successfully done so. It always remains the exclusive gift of the Jewish People. In our days, after a period of 1900 years, the land has come back to its people. No other nation ever has been exiled from a land and returned: not the Nordic tribes of Netherlands and Germany, nor the old tribes that used to live in the English Isles, nor anyone else. The Jewish People, though, returned to the Holy Land where Hashem's eyes watch from the beginning of the year until the end of the year (Devarim 11:12).

Then we have the gift of Torah, the ultimate gift to the human race. We can know God's plans for running the world and what He expects of human beings. It takes us from the lowest levels of this world to the highest level of heaven. The gift of *olam haba* is when the world will change completely and there will be only good, not evil.

But these gifts must be deserved. Otherwise, the whole world would have them; and these three gifts are unique to the Jewish People. They come with serious requirements and prerequisites. *Yisurim*, suffering, is part of the price to earn these gifts.

How can the *avos* guarantee that their children will live up to their level? Avraham was having a serious discussion about this. Hashem asked him, "What do you prefer? You can pick *gehinom*, hell, with severe and terrible punishments, so your offspring will

be afraid to stray from the tradition. Or you can choose *galus*, exile, a sort of suffering in this world instead of suffering in the next world.” Avraham chose *galus*, the sufferings and travails in this world of exile from the Holy Land, to be the guarantor of the righteousness of the Jews instead of the suffering of hell in the next world.

Why did Avraham choose *galus*—subjugation and slavery to other nations—as the basic way to guarantee our continuity as a nation? Why didn’t he choose *gehinom*? This is the *eitza amuka*. *Galus* and *ge’ula*, exile and redemption, are the fundamental cycle of our history.

C

The Depths of Exile

Avraham realized a deep idea. If the Jewish People would have the guarantee of the suffering of hell, they would inevitably stray from the Torah throughout the generations. Sometimes, life is too easy, and people take the blessings of Hashem for granted. Sometimes, people feel the desire to taste foreign waters. It is almost inevitable that a generation will drift away from the Torah. If they are brought back because of the punishments of *gehinom*, then their failings remain and are not redeemed. If, on the other hand, the people receive the physical punishment of exile in this world, and we are distant from our land, our God, and His blessings, we can be moved to return. Sometimes there are pogroms, poverty, and hunger. The silver lining in the *galus* is that it must result in a *ge’ula*, redemption in this world. When the *ge’ula* comes, it is a redemption of the *galus* itself. As bad as *galus* is, that is how sweet the redemption will be.

We have suffered physically. Moreover, we have been the target of an ideological and philosophical campaign against our religion. Our enemies in this world have made our faith their target. The

two religions that came out of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, turned Judaism into a target of their hatred and calumny. They claimed that Hashem abandoned His people and replaced us with another. This is a horrible *chilul Hashem*. When we come back now to Israel at the end of this exile of Edom and Yishmael, we are actually seeing the first rays of *ge'ula* with the return of millions of Jews to the Holy Land. This *ge'ula* will prove that the Jews were right despite all the troubles suffered throughout the *galus*. The *kiddush Hashem* of the final *ge'ula* will be directly proportionate to the pain of the *galus*.

D

The Pain of the Exile Teaches the Lessons of the Redemption

The Shem Mishmuel explains that the *galus*-and-*ge'ula* method of Jewish life throughout history is better than hell. Hell has terrible punishments, much worse than what we suffer in this world. But the redemption at the end of the *galus* is a redemption of the *galus* itself. Let's examine the *galus* of Egypt. The worse the exile was, the greater the redemption when it arrived. Indeed, the redemption from Egypt was the defining event of the emergence of the Jewish religion. It established the principal truth of God's intervention in human history, *hashgacha pratis*. God will interfere in human events. He is concerned with good and evil. He wants evil to be punished and good to be redeemed. This lesson was established via the *ge'ula* of Mitzrayim. The worse the *galus*, the greater the redemption and the more significant in terms of our philosophy and beliefs.

The final redemption will be a much greater establishment of God's holiness in the world. After 1900 years of exile, the redemption will be a much greater revelation than ever before. The people will learn about the Torah and about Hashem's interference and

involvement in this world. Hashem will eradicate evil and replace it with goodness in every single person's heart, not just in the Jewish People. As we say on Rosh Hashana, “*v'yeida kol pa'ul ki ata f'alto v'yavin kol y'tzur ki atah y'tzarto.*” Every human being will know that Hashem is the creator and shaper of every person, not just the Jewish People. Since the *galus* was so long and bitter, the *ge'ula* in parallel will be a great, universal event.

This was the idea of Avraham—to take the exile for Israel, the bitterness and suffering of Jews throughout the world. This will be a redemption of the very sins that led to the exile. They will become a part of the redemption.

E

Sins That Drive a Person to Holiness

The Chassidic masters presented a fascinating analysis of *teshuva*. The Gemara (Yoma 86b) says that if a sinner does *teshuva* out of love, his sins become *mitzvos*. What does this mean? People can have different motivations for *teshuva*. A person can repent due to fear of being punished. Or he may repent because he realizes the terrible immoral nature of his sins. He then realizes that the more he sins, the more he must return. The desecration of his character that his sins cause is the impetus for his repentance. In a strange way, his sins drive him towards good. Before sinning, his Judaism was probably boring. He did not feel commitment, and hence he sinned. But those sins caused him to reconsider and redirect his life. The sins caused him to care and to do *teshuva*. Chazal say that *ba'alei teshuva* are greater in some ways than *tzaddikim*. The *ba'al teshuva* has a passion that some good people lack, one which his sins helped to create within him.

This does not mean that a person should sin and then do *teshuva*. But if a person did sin and follows it with *teshuva*, then his sins become *mitzvos*. A sinner is not condemned. He can repent,

which will give him power and energy to serve Hashem. This is something I have seen year after year. The people who come back after sinning have an amazing fire and appreciation for Torah and *mitzvos*. People who come from plainer backgrounds often seem bored with their mechanical Jewish lifestyle. They exhibit a *blasé* attitude towards Judaism. I don't recommend sin; it is, after all, prohibited. We need to come up with other strategies to inspire people. But if someone made the mistake of sinning, he should realize that the sin made great trouble for himself. He can then use that realization to propel himself to heights of *avodas Hashem*. The sin then becomes a *mitzva*.

F

Galus* Inevitably Leads and Contributes To a *Ge'ula

Galus and *ge'ula* on a national level have a tremendous impact on us. The nature and essence of *galus* is *chilul Hashem*. We are the people of Hashem. If we are suffering in exile, then God is suffering in exile, too. His holy name, which is associated with us, is a target. People can say that God has abandoned us and chosen another people. Nonetheless, God made His choice of His people forever, and He does not change. But the saving grace of the exile is that it must conclude with a *ge'ula*. This was Avraham's suggestion that Hashem accepted. They committed themselves to a pact based on this idea at the *bris bein habesarim*. Hashem said to Avraham, "Your nation will be servants and slaves for 400 years, but afterwards I will take them out with great wealth." This promise of redemption holds true for every *galus* we are in, including the current long exile.

Yosef and his brothers fought with each other and caused the exile in Egypt to begin. When the people finally left Egypt, however, they received the great treasure of the Torah. In Egypt they

learned the enthusiasm for the Torah, and when Hashem offered them the Torah at Har Sinai, they excitedly exclaimed, “*na’aseh v’nishma*.” The people learned to appreciate the lessons of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. They learned the lesson of the *galus*. They were comparable to an individual who does a sin but then does *teshuva*.

Galus is indeed a terrible desecration of Hashem’s name. But *ge’ula* is a reaffirmation of His relationship with the Jewish People. This brings about a sanctification of God’s name, powered by the very questions the *chilul Hashem* of *galus* aroused.

Every *galus* leads towards a *ge’ula*. Being slaves in Egypt brought us to the Torah at Har Sinai. The knowledge of this secret makes it easier for us living in *galus*. The Shem Mishmuel lived around 1910, before the State of Israel, during the bitter years of European exile. He said that the suffering of his *galus* would lead to a greater redemption. The sanctification would be so much greater based on the problems of the difficult *galus*. This idea should give us hope while enduring our own troubles today.

G

The Weekly *Galus* and *Ge’ula*

The six days of the week are a *galus* of the soul from spirituality. During the six days of the week, we feel profane, alienated, and frustrated. We would want every second of the week to be spiritual, like *olam haba*. We crave sweet and pleasant Godliness. After the sin of Adam and Chava, though, Hashem saw that this was not the right prescription for humanity. People must be alienated and separated from spirituality for six days so that they will appreciate the sweetness of the spirit. The week is a spiritual *galus* for the soul. We face many difficulties that make us feel distant from Hashem and even, perhaps, from ourselves. This distance,

though, helps us value and achieve on Shabbos the closeness that we missed during the week.

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 3a) teaches that whoever works on Erev Shabbos will eat on Shabbos. Whoever struggles to prepare food on Friday will eat and enjoy the meals of Shabbos. From a *drush* perspective, someone who struggles with the alienation and spiritual distance he experiences during the week will experience the connection and strengthening of Shabbos. He will enjoy Shabbos. He will even retroactively enjoy those six weekdays without the Shabbos. The *galus* itself will turn into a *mitzva*, into something good, because it makes a *kiddush Hashem* at the end.

The *pasuk* states, “*Mikolos mayim rabim adirim ... adir bama-rom Hashem*. From the voice of the raging powerful waters and waves in the ocean is God powerful in heaven” (Tehillim 93:4). The Gemara (Menachos 53a) explains that the raging waters refer to the many nations who array themselves against the Jewish People. Egypt was the worst and most powerful of those nations. From these exiles, from these powerful waters, comes Hashem, the Ultimate Power. In the end, the *galus* produces a great sanctification of God’s name.

H

Hashem Wanted Pharaoh to Just Say No

This explains why God willed that Pharaoh not succumb during the last five plagues. Hashem gave Pharaoh unnatural strength so that he would be punished five more times. And even if he had wanted to change, Hashem would not have let him do so. Removing someone’s ability to change is an unusual punishment. The Shem Mishmuel explains that before Moshe went to speak to Pharaoh, Moshe protested, “I stutter. I am the wrong person to talk to Pharaoh.” Hashem said, “Don’t worry. I will be in your mouth.”

Some of the Sages have said that when Moshe opened his

mouth, Hashem Himself spoke (Shemos Rabba 3). You can imagine that when someone would hear God's voice, he would feel compelled to comply. Even evil Pharaoh would have responded, "Yes, I will listen to my Master and Creator."

But Pharaoh defied Hashem, saying instead, "I will not let them go." This was a crazy perversion. Human beings can make themselves absolutely evil. We have seen Hitler and Stalin. Today, we see the religious jihadist murderers who want to destroy the Jewish People. Their hatred is fanatical and their wickedness is astounding. Pharaoh, Amalek, Hitler, and other scoundrels pervert even God's voice. They convert it into the power to do evil.

Thus, Pharaoh made things even worse *after* hearing God's voice emanating from Moshe's mouth. He decreed that the Jews must gather their own straw. So Hashem said, "If you pervert even My voice to add power to evil, I will take away your power of *teshuva*. I will take away a fundamental human gift—the power to change." Before God created man, He created *teshuva* to be available to give man the ability to change. But Pharaoh wouldn't listen even to God Himself. So, Hashem took away his chance to repent and change.

Moshe needed to go to Pharaoh and bring the voice of Hashem to his ears. The Shem Mishmuel contends that God would have given Pharaoh 100 plagues, but the Jews were at the breaking point, so He took them out sooner.

How many plagues does a Hitler or Stalin deserve? Ten wasn't enough for Pharaoh. He deserved to lose the power of *teshuva* so that he could receive a few more plagues.

I

Why Did You Make Things Worse?!

Moshe challenged Hashem, "Why did You make things worse?" Hashem responded by explaining the promise He made to

Avraham. There are many lessons to teach the world. The world needs to know that God is Creator of heaven and earth, that He controls water, earth, animals, and the skies. These lessons were taught via the plagues. People needed to learn of God's control over life and death, and even (in Pharaoh's case) over the human spirit. God is concerned with good and evil and ultimately will cause good to triumph. The sanctification of Hashem's name will thus be that much greater. The darker the *galus*, the greater the *ge'ula*. This was why it had to become worse before it got better.

This was Hashem's answer to Moshe. Today, we still need to get to the ultimate level of *kiddush Hashem* in order to justify the suffering of the Jewish People over the 1900 long years of our exile.

This is why the Midrash criticizes Moshe. Moshe should have recognized this on his own. If God said, "I will strengthen Pharaoh's heart," then Pharaoh's heart would be strengthened, and Pharaoh would make things even worse. Nothing Moshe could say would convince Pharaoh to let the Jewish People go. Moshe, at his great level, should have understood this instead of asking questions.

A profound lesson is hidden in this idea of the Shem Mishmuel. As we go through the difficulties of life, the six days of the week, and the sufferings of the exile, we must have hope and feel encouragement that the *ge'ula* will be even greater than the exile. As we have faith in the coming redemption, we should take strength and encouragement during the exile. As we go through the sufferings of the covenant between Hashem and Avraham, the *eitza amukah* of the *tzaddik* buried in Chevron, we know the great future that is developing. This is the plan for Jewish history until the advent of the redemption, which we eagerly await.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the *eitza amuka* of Avraham Avinu?
2. How are *galus* and *ge'ula* the basic history of the Jewish People?
3. What is the purpose of *galus*?
4. Explain the six weekdays and Shabbos using the *galus* and *ge'ula* model.
5. How do *galus* and *ge'ula* affect *teshuva*?
6. Why did Hashem take away Pharaoh's ability to do *teshuva*?

PERSONAL QUESTION

1. How does *galus* affect your life? Does it affect you for better or for worse?

