

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Vaeira

Setting Bnei Yisrael Free

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן וַיְצַוֵם אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהוֹצִיא
אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and commanded them regarding Bnei Yisrael and regarding Pharaoh king of Mitzrayim, to take the Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim (6:13)

While the “command” mentioned in this pasuk with regards to Pharaoh is easy to identify – the release of the Bnei Yisrael whom he has enslaved – the command to Bnei Yisrael themselves is a little less clear. What were they commanded to do? Allow themselves to be released?

According to the Meshech Chochmah, the answer lies in the pesukim that follow, which present the lineage of the first three tribes of Israel: Reuven, Shimon and Levi. Commenting on this selective presentation, the Midrash¹ states that these three tribes enjoyed a position of authority (הנהיגו שררה) in Mitzrayim.

From Mitzrayim to Eretz Yisrael

As the Meshech Chochmah points out, the reverberations of this more privileged status which these tribes enjoyed were far reaching. As was foretold to Avraham in the Bris Bein Habesarim, the Jewish People underwent exile in a foreign land and were subsequently redeemed from there and returned to the land of Israel. This sequence of events was not only *historical* in nature, it was also *causational*. The inheritance of the land came as a direct consequence of the exile in Egypt, for it was the experiences in exile which rendered the People eligible to return to their land. In this light, it is fascinating to consider that, in one form or another, none of the first three tribes received a full inheritance in the land:

- Reuven settled on the east side of the Jordan River.
- Shimon’s inheritance is subsumed entirely within that of Yehuda.

¹ Bamidbar Rabbah 13:8. The reader is referred to our discussion in Parshas Vayechi of this year for the Meshech Chochmah’s discussion of the background to this privileged treatment.

- Levi did not receive a tribal portion at all.

Although each of these relationships with the land were also the product of other factors,² the Meshech Chochmah explains that there was an over-arching consideration which contributed to this common outcome; namely, none of these three tribes underwent the persecution in Mitzrayim to the degree that the other tribes did. As a result of this, their holding in Eretz Yisrael was also incomplete!

The First Mitzvah for the Jewish People: “Free the Jewish People!”

In this vein, the Meshech Chochmah further suggests that perhaps the privileged status of these tribes also included their ownership of Jewish servants. This will give a totally new perspective on the “command” with which Moshe and Aharon were sent to Bnei Yisrael, for it was effectively *identical to the command issued to Pharaoh* – to release the Jewish People from their jurisdiction, just as Pharaoh was commanded to release them from his! Indeed, in our pasuk, the Bnei Yisrael are mentioned before Pharaoh with reference to this command; for before going to Pharaoh and demanding that he release his Jewish slaves, the Jewish People themselves needed to do likewise!

This gives us new insight into the Torah’s juxtaposition of the first three tribes to our pasuk, for it was to them in particular that the command was addressed. Indeed, the Meshech Chochmah goes on to explain the concluding pasuk of this section³ which mentions Moshe and Aharon, “to whom Hashem said: ‘Take Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim, according to their assigned groups (על צבאותם)’”. The meaning of the concluding phrase, “according to their assigned groups,” is that when the Jewish People left Mitzrayim, they were to do so in a way where each group was integral and contained only its own members – not people from another group who were enlisted in their servitude!

In fact, the notion that the “command toward Bnei Yisrael” mentioned in our pasuk refers to the mitzvah of releasing Jewish slaves is stated explicitly in the Talmud Yerushalmi.⁴ With respect to this comment of the Yerushalmi, unlike other commentators who explain that the reference is to the *future* mitzvah of

² Reuven’s settling on the east side of the Jordan was ostensibly his own decision. Shimon and Levi’s situation was already referred to as far back as Yaakov’s *berachos* were he said (Bereishis 49:7), “I will disperse them within Israel” (see Ramban there, pasuk 5).

³ 6:26.

⁴ Rosh Hashanah 3:5.

releasing Jewish slaves after the sixth year, the Meshech Chochmah understands that the mitzvah was one of *immediate* relevance – releasing the servants that they had acquired in Mitzrayim.

Korbanos in the Land of Egypt

וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְלֵאמֹר וַיֹּאמֶר לְכוּ זָבְחוּ לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם בְּאֶרֶץ

Pharaoh called for Moshe and Aharon and said, “Go, bring offerings to your God in the land” (8:21)

Our pasuk describes how, during the plague of wild beasts, Pharaoh consented partially to Moshe’s demand, namely, that Bnei Yisrael could have their religious festival, but that it should be in the land of Egypt – only to retract all of this once the plague had been removed.

Conceding Backwards

What is behind this partial concession? We may explain simply that, at this stage, Pharaoh was not prepared to agree fully to Moshe’s demands. The problem is, however, that he had already done precisely that. During the earlier plague of frogs, the pasuk⁵ relates that Pharaoh called Moshe and said, “Beseech Hashem so that He may remove the frogs from me and from my people, *and I will send the People forth* so that they may bring offerings to Hashem.” This presents us with a difficulty: having already fully consented to Hashem’s demand that the People celebrate in the wilderness, why does Pharaoh now modify his position to only partially agreeing, insisting that they do so in Mitzrayim?

The Meshech Chochmah prefaces his explanation by noting that, on the two most recent occasions,⁶ Moshe himself had phrased Hashem’s demand simply as “Let My People go and they will serve Me,” without mentioning that this should take

⁵ Pasuk 4.

⁶ 7:26 and 8:16.

place “in the wilderness,” as he had done earlier on.⁷ Perhaps Pharaoh took this as an indication that Hashem Himself was relenting on this point and was no longer insisting that the festival take place outside of Mitzrayim.

Sanctified through Divine Providence

However, Meshech Chochmah proceeds to present a deeper approach to this matter, whereby Pharaoh was arguing that the reason behind the initial demand for the festival to take place in the wilderness *no longer applied*.

Since Pharaoh took the request for a three-day festival at face-value, i.e. that afterwards the people would continue working for him, he understood that the demand that it take place specifically outside of Mitzrayim was on account of the fact that Mitzrayim was full of idol-worship, making it devoid of godliness and therefore inappropriate as a place for the Bnei Yisrael to worship. Based on this, Pharaoh says, “Although initially you may have judged my country unfit as a place of worship for your God, it has since become fit – as a result of the plague we have just experienced!” As predicted by Moshe, although wild animals roamed the land of Mitzrayim indiscriminately, none of them entered the land of Goshen where the Bnei Yisrael resided. This was a stunning display of Hashem’s Divine supervision over His people. As such, argues Pharaoh, there is no need to leave Mitzrayim for your festival. With God’s presence so profoundly manifest in the land of Goshen, its status had thereby risen to that of a most eminently suitable setting for offering *korbanos* – “go, bring offerings to our God *in the land!*”

The First Korban Pesach

Was there any veracity or validity to Pharaoh’s claim?

In truth, even if Pharaoh’s contention was valid, it was not relevant to the situation at hand, for in reality Bnei Yisrael were not coming back to Mitzrayim after their festival. However, the idea that Pharaoh recognized and expressed was in fact true in itself. This was reflected in the one *korban* which the people did in fact offer in the land prior to leaving – the *Korban Pesach*. By the time the *Pesach* was to be offered, the land of Goshen had indeed become a place which was suitable for *korbanos*!

⁷ 5:1 and 7:16.

Indeed, this idea goes further still, finding expression in a way which even Pharaoh did not envisage. As the pasuk states,⁸ the blood of the *Korban Pesach* was to be applied to the doorposts and lintel of every Jewish house. As we know, every animal *korban* requires having some of its blood applied to the *mizbeyach* as part of the avodah. How was this fulfilled in the case of the first *Korban Pesach*, where there was no *mizbeyach*? According to the Gemara,⁹ the doorposts of Bnei Yisrael's houses in Mitzrayim, to which the blood of the Pesach as applied, served the role of the *mizbeyach* for that *korban*!

How did the doorposts come to attain the status of a *mizbeyach*?

The answer is: through the plague of the Smiting of the Firstborn!

The Divine Providence which was revealed through Hashem skipping over every Jewish house – in commemoration of which the *Korban Pesach* itself is named – was so intense that the doorposts of those houses, representing the revelation of the Divine Presence at that time, were elevated to the status of *mizbeyach* for that *korban*!¹⁰

⁸ Shemos 12:7.

⁹ Pesachim 96b.

¹⁰ Meshech Chochmah, Shemos 12:24.