

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Bo

Protecting Israel until Daybreak

וְאַתֶּם לֹא תִצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח בֵּיתוֹ עַד בֹּקֶר

And you, each man shall not leave the entrance of his house until morning (12:22)

When considering the state of the Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim, we find that in terms of mitzvah performance, they were sorely deficient, to the extent that they had abandoned *milah*¹ and had even descended into *avodah zarah* itself.² There was one area, however, in which the people distinguished themselves – and in whose merit they were redeemed: they steadfastly retained key elements which preserved their distinct identity. Thus, the Mechilta³ informs us that throughout their time in Mitzrayim, they did not change their names or their language, nor did they slander each other. These safeguards enabled them to survive the galus as a defined and distinct entity, allowing them to leave as a nation and receive the Torah.

Bnei Yisrael, the Red Sea – and Iyov

With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains a most unusual comment of the Midrash,⁴ which states that when the Satan was accusing the Bnei Yisrael at the time of the splitting of the Red Sea, stating that, having worshipped *avodah zarah*, they did not deserve such a miracle to be performed for them, Hashem gave him Iyov to deal with instead.

What is behind this seemingly diversionary measure?

Although Iyov is described by the pasuk as a God-fearing person who committed no sin,⁵ he did not invest in any protective measures around his mitzvah performance. This can be illustrated by the parties which his children held, which were not forbidden in and of themselves, but which could very easily lead to sin

¹ Yalkut Shimoni Devarim sec. 828.

² Midrash Shocheh tov 15:5.

³ Parshas Bo sec. 5.

⁴ Shemos Rabbah 21:7.

⁵ Iyov 1:1.

(as indeed Iyov himself offered korbanos on their behalf afterwards⁶). Hence, the primary accusation which could be levelled against Iyov was in the area of protective measures. In that context, the one area in which Bnei Yisrael distinguished themselves while in Mitzrayim – that of setting of protective fences – became highlighted, and the Satan's accusation as to their worthiness to have a miracle performed for them was silenced.

The Mitzvos of Pesach

It is fascinating to consider, in this regard, an unusual aspect which exists within the mitzvos of Pesach. In addition to the prohibition against eating chametz, the Torah has another prohibition which serves as a protective measure to ensure that a person not come to eat chametz – it forbids even having chametz in one's possession on Pesach.⁷ This is most unusual! Since when does a Torah prohibition serve in the role of protecting against another Torah prohibition?

The reason, says Meshech Chochmah, is because these mitzvos celebrate our redemption from Mitzrayim; therefore, they *reflect the nature of how we came to be redeemed* – by maintaining protective fences which preserved our identity. This is a truly remarkable situation, whereby the forces which were at play in the redemption become reflected as qualities and characteristics within the mitzvos which celebrate that redemption!

Mitzvos and Boundaries – in Mitzrayim and in Bavel

It is most interesting to compare the Bnei Yisrael at that time with the Jewish People in a later *galus*, where the situation was practically reversed – the Babylonian exile. There, they entered the *galus* keeping mitzvos, but did not set up any protective measures through which to maintain their identity intact in the *galus*: they adopted the names and language of the host country and in the end, most of them assimilated.⁸

Indeed, although we were ultimately redeemed from that exile, it was on a much lower key than our redemption from Mitzrayim, accompanied neither by miracles nor full independence from foreign rule. The Gemara itself notes this,⁹ saying we should have been redeemed from Bavel in the same miraculous fashion through

⁶ Ibid. pasuk 5.

⁷ See Commentary of Ran beginning of Maseches Pesachim.

⁸ See Nechemiah 13:23-24.

⁹ Berachos 4a.

which we were redeemed from Mitzrayim, except that sin caused us to forfeit that level (שגרום החטא). The Gemara does not specify the nature of the sin which so compromised the nature of that redemption. However, the Meshech Chochmah explains that it was the sin of not setting up protective measures to maintain our identity while in *galus*. As if to say, while protecting mitzvos is always a value, when the Jewish People are in exile, it takes on an especially vital role – that of preserving the distinction between them and their host nation.

Ultimately, Hashem will never allow his people to fade away among the nations, which means that if the Jewish People fail to preserve their own identity while in exile, Hashem will employ other means, often involving the host country discriminating against the Jewish people in a way which will not allow them lose that identity. The full measure of this idea is that, while exile is never meant to be pleasant, the question of just how trying it becomes depends on whether Jewish identity is maintained from the inside or needs to be asserted from the outside. In this vein, the Meshech Chochmah explains Hashem's words to Bnei Yisrael while they are experiencing the tribulations of exile:

כִּי אֲנִי ה' לֹא שִׁנִּיתִי וְאַתֶּם בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב לֹא כָלִיתֶם. לְמִימֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם סָרְתֶם מִחֻקֵּי וְלֹא שָׁמַרְתֶּם

For I, Hashem, have not changed, and you, the sons of Yaakov, have not perished. Since the days of your forefathers you have swerved from My laws and you have not protected [them].¹⁰

The name *Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh* represents the attribute of mercy. Here, Hashem is informing the people that although they are undergoing difficult times in the exile, He Himself has not changed His name, for these experiences, too, are acts of compassion, as they allow for the continued existence of the Jewish People, so that “the sons of Yaakov will not perish.” In principle, these trying experiences reminding the People of their distinct identity should not all have been necessary, for the Jewish People could have kept themselves intact through their own protective measures. Therefore the following pasuk explains why they are happening nonetheless: “You have swerved from my laws and you have not protected (וְלֹא שָׁמַרְתֶּם),” i.e. you have not protected *yourselves* by setting up boundaries.

¹⁰ Malachi 3:6-7

“Even were Eliyahu to Come”

In this light, the Meshech Chochmah offers a stunning interpretation a statement found in the Gemara¹¹ regarding the famous eighteen protective decrees which were formulated by Hillel and Shammai, saying that even if Eliyahu himself would come and say that they had been annulled, we would not listen to him. The explanation of this statement that is generally given is that these decrees are of such an authoritative status that even someone of the stature of Eliyahu cannot annul them. However, the Meshech Chochmah explains differently. As we know, the arrival of the mashiach will be heralded the day beforehand by Eliyhau Hanavi. The Gemara is thus stating that these protective measures are of such importance for the Jewish people in *galus* that even were Eliyahu to come – which means that the *galus* will finally be over within twenty four hours and many of these measures will no longer be necessary – we would not listen to him until the *galus* is entirely over with the arrival of the mashiach himself! At that time, the Jewish People will be finally and fully redeemed and their exalted nature will be universally recognized, so that the notion of them aspiring to be like the other nations of the world will disappear. But not a day before!

Until Morning

This central idea, says Meshech Chochmah, is summed up in our pasuk, which exhorts Bnei Yisrael, “Do not leave the entrance of your homes until morning.” The concept of “your homes” represents a domain which separates the Jew from his gentile neighbors. The idea of “staying within your homes” means protecting what that domain represents and ensuring that the distinctions between us and our host nations are clear. This remains an absolute imperative if we are to survive the exile, and thus remains in force “until morning” – until the daybreak of the final redemption comes.

¹¹ Shabbos 13b.