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A D'var Torah for Passover

Karen Miller, Editor

TOWARDS PERSONAL REDEMPTION

By Jennie Rosenfeld¹

ולפעמים נדמה לי כשבא לי להרים ידים
פרעה הוא הפרעה שלי וצר לי ממצרים.
ולפעמים נדמה לי שאנחנו שם עדיין
הולכים בדרך אל ההר מתחננים למים.

And sometimes it seems to me when I am ready to give up [literally, throw up my hands in defeat]

Pharaoh is my disturbance and Egypt is too confining for me.

And sometimes it seems to me that we are still there [in Egypt]

Walking towards the mountain complaining that we want water.²

These lyrics were written and sung by Etti Ankri, an Israeli rock singer, who has recently taken a spiritual turn. The song, entitled “*Yetziat Mitzrayim*,” blends together the ancient past with the present, as it begins by re-telling the experience of the Exodus and ends by wondering whether we ever really left. Following the movement of the song, there is hope emanating from past redemption, which transitions to despair about current exile, and then ends with the prayer of a new redemption.

This song also embodies the words of the Haggadah, when it mandates that it is incumbent upon all of us to participate in the process of redemption:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים.

In each and every generation a person must see her/himself as if s/he personally left Egypt.

Each year, as we read this line at the Pesach Seder, it is particularly difficult to imagine how anyone so historically removed from the Egyptian exile can personally experience the redemption from Egypt in the same way that the Jewish slaves experienced it. And yet, when a secular Israeli sings from what she feels to be a place called *mitzrayim*, one has to wonder whether merely feeling “*ke’ilu*,” “as if,” we left Egypt, is enough. If we use this season in order to tap into our personal need for

¹ Jennie Rosenfeld currently teaches Talmud at the Yeshiva University High School for Girls. She is also pursuing a doctorate in English at the CUNY Graduate Center as a Wexner Graduate Fellow.

² All translations are my own, and often contain more than a literal translation.

redemption in the here and now, we can either vicariously relate to or truly experience *yetziat mitzrayim* (exodus from Egypt) in our own lives.

The *Sfat Emet*³ elaborates on how we can truly experience *yetziat mitzrayim* in our time. He discusses several different types of holiness, which serve as avenues through which one can access God even in the absence of a *Beit Ha-mikdash* (Temple). One type of holiness is *kedushat hazman*, holiness of time; the time of year in which miracles occurred in the past has within it the potential for future miracles. Jewish holidays both commemorate past miracles and contain the *kedushat hazman*, the temporal holiness, which we can access to effect miracles now. Though it is possible for a person to improve her/himself at any time during the year—*teshuvah* (repentance) and growth are not restricted by any season—the time in which a miracle occurred has an extra potential for the miraculous to occur again.

According to the *Sfat Emet*,⁴ by believing in the miracle of *yetziat mitzrayim*, we can experience it again now in our personal lives. Every individual can tap into this season in order to leave his/her personal *meitzar* (place of narrowness or confinement) or *mitzrayim*. The fact that Pesach occurs in the spring, the season in which nature renews itself and the flowers begin to blossom, foreshadows this potential for personal growth.

The *Sfat Emet* then builds upon this idea and takes it to the next step; not only do we have the potential to find and experience personalized forms of redemption, but the experience of exile is essential to such *ge'ulah* (redemption). Living through *galut* (exile) we cultivate the ability to connect to God even when God is most hidden, and thus, the *galut* actually contributes to the *ge'ulah*. The *Sfat Emet* uses a word play to underscore the continuum between the suffering of the exile and the subsequent revelation. The word for exile, *galut*, and the word for revelation, *hitgalut*, actually have the same *shoresh*, or Hebrew root, just as the terms themselves are related, so are the processes.

In many ways the concepts of *galut* and *ge'ulah* are related to those of *cheit* (sinning) and *teshuva* (repentance). *Cheit* corresponds with *galut* in that both connote a state of distance from God, and *teshuva* corresponds with *ge'ulah*, in that both terms evoke a return to a state of closeness with God and/or personal wholeness. Just as we can view *galut* and *ge'ula* as interconnected we can also see a connection between *cheit* and *teshuva*. *Teshuva*, as an action or as a lifestyle, cannot exist independent from *cheit*. Just as *B'nei Yisrael* underwent a process of *galut*, during which they acquired a slave mentality and could not instantaneously become a free people, so too sin is often internalized into the self and personality, and we require a process to free ourselves from its hold on our identity.

The Talmud,⁵ in speaking of one who is a *mumar le'echol neveilot*, one who is known to eat improperly slaughtered meat to gratify his appetite, brings two competing opinions regarding the psychological motivations of such an individual. The dispute arises over the question of whether or not one is permitted to eat from the slaughter of a *mumar* when one hands him a kosher slaughtering knife; the following is the opinion which permits meat slaughtered by a *mumar* in this context:

אמר רבא: ישראל מומר אוכל נבילות לתיאבון, בודק סכין ונותן לו, ומותר לאכול משהיטתו. מאי טעמא? כיון דאיכא התירא ואיסורא, לא שביק התירא ואכיל איסורא.

³ Written by Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of the Gur dynasty, of late 19th century Polish Hasidism.

⁴ See *Sfat Emet* on Leviticus; in the beginning of this volume he has a section on Pesach.

⁵ BT Hullin 4a.

Rava says, regarding a *mumar* (a Jew who is known to eat improperly slaughtered meat to gratify his appetite), that one may eat meat which he has slaughtered if one first checks the slaughtering knife and then gives it to him. What is the reason for this? Since the *mumar* has the option of either making the meat permissible (by slaughtering it with the kosher knife) or forbidden (by slaughtering it with an invalid knife), he will not give up on eating kosher meat just in order to eat non-kosher meat (meaning that as long as it is convenient for him to eat kosher meat, he would rather eat kosher meat than non-kosher meat).

In Rava's conception of the *mumar*, the sin of eating non-kosher meat is viewed simply on the level of external action. This leads Rava to say "*lo shavik heteirah v'achil isura*", that when faced with two equally convenient options of *issur* (prohibited) and *heter* (permitted), even such an individual will obviously choose the permissible option. There is however, a competing opinion brought by the Talmud, which rejects Rava's premise. This opinion is un-attributed and mentioned in passing on Hullin 4b, "כיון דדש" "ביה כהתירא דמי ליה" literally, "once he has trampled upon it (the prohibition), it is as if permitted to him." According to this opinion, once a person sins, s/he is no longer faced with the two neatly demarcated options of *heter* and *issur*, because the sin itself causes a blurring of boundaries. Sin does not remain on the level of external action taken; rather, it invades the personality to the point that objectivity is lost and one no longer has the ability to differentiate between the two options. Therefore, even when a *mumar* is given a kosher slaughtering knife we cannot assume that he will choose to use it, because once eating non-kosher meat enters his way of life, he loses the ability to see the non-kosher knife for what it is and he loses the ability to make distinctions between *heter* and *issur*.

Just as the act of sinning penetrates one's personality, so too, the process of *teshuva* must be seen as having corresponding depth. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his famous work on repentance, *Al Hateshuvah*, has a chapter in which he discusses a seemingly strange passage in the Rambam regarding professional gamblers. The Rambam, in a discussion regarding gamblers' lack of ability to serve as valid witnesses, discusses at what point they are considered to have repented.

מאימתי חזרתן? משישברו את פספסיהן, ויחזרו בהן חזרה גמורה שלא יעשו דאפילו בחנם לא עבדי.

And when is their repentance complete (such that they are again fit to testify)? From when they break their stones/ gambling chips, and repent fully, to the point where they will not even gamble for free (though gambling for fun without using money or other stakes is technically permissible).⁶

The Rav uses the Rambam to make the point that *teshuva* does not only mean cessation of the actual sin, but also distancing oneself from the entire environment that contributed to the sin. Using the concepts from the Talmud in Hullin, since sin takes place on the deeper level of one's personality, repentance must correspondingly take place on that level as well—if the sin penetrates deeper than external action, we cannot be content with any less in regard to the repentance. Therefore, it is not enough to stop gambling, or whatever the forbidden action may be. We must also distance ourselves

⁶ Hil. Eidut 12:5-8 (as quoted by the Rav).

from the entire atmosphere that fostered sin, from what the Rav calls the *derech chataim*, the way of life of the sinner.

Both the un-attributed opinion brought by the Talmud in Hullin as well as this passage from Rabbi Soloveitchik illustrate the extent to which sin can affect one's personality and identity, and, correspondingly, they highlight the depth of *teshuva* needed to really move past the sin. This movement, from *cheit* to *teshuva*, is a complex and lengthy process, similar to the process of moving from *galut* to *ge'ulah*, in that one is moving from a personal exile to a personal redemption. Examining the depth of sin, one is led to wonder whether it is ever possible to leave it all behind, to shave off layers of one's identity. Moreover, regarding redemption, is it possible or even desirable to forget our enslavement, to shut ourselves off to either a collective or personal past?

If we look to *yetziat mitzrayim* as a model we may be able to find an answer to how to foster personal growth as well. Looking through the verses in the Torah that describe the Exodus, as well as the subsequent wanderings of *B'nei Yisrael*, we are never told to forget about *galut mitzrayim*. On the contrary, we are often being reminded of our experience in Egypt and told to remember it in the context of certain *mitzvot*, such as being kind to the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt, as well as celebrating Pesach and eating *matzah* for seven/eight days each year. In addition, the first of the *sheish zechirot* (six remembrances) which some recite daily is that we should remember the day we left Egypt all the days of our lives.⁷ Though we may not be in a state of slavery now, the past is something that we must carry with us, wherever our future leads us. No matter how far we move from the slave mentality, the memory of the enslavement (as well as the Exodus) must always remain with us and guide our actions, ensuring continued kindness to those who are less fortunate.

Herein lies the similarity between the movement from *cheit* to *teshuvah*, and from *galut* to *ge'ulah*. *Teshuvah* is not about negating the memory of who one used to be or becoming a newborn person with no past. Just as the experience of having been slaves in Egypt must inform who we are today, so too who we were yesterday must inform who we are today, even if we have grown in new ways. Since sinning cuts to the core of our personality, we cannot surgically remove the sin without removing other parts of our identity as well. *Teshuvah* is about using our past to transform the future, never losing sight of that past, however painful it may be. Reb Zadok⁸ speaks about this *teshuvah* process in his classic work, *Zidkat HaZaddik* (#100). He defines *teshuvah*, which stems from the root "*shav*," to return, as when a person returns the aspect of their personality that they had used for sin, to God. Similarly, we cannot reach a state of personal or national redemption without preserving the memory of what it was to be enslaved, to be in exile.

Change, or psychological redemption, is a difficult process, one which the *dor hamidbar* (the generation that wandered through the desert) struggled with for forty years during their wanderings, after they were physically redeemed; the redemption was not felt in a day. And perhaps, as Etti Ankri sings it, we are still struggling today to feel that same redemption. May we all be blessed this Pesach with the ability to feel *yetziat mitzrayim*, on the national level and on the personal level, so that we are redeemed from whatever confines us.

⁷ based on Deuteronomy 16:3

⁸ Reb Zadok haKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin was born into a Lithuanian rabbinic family in the early 19th century and turned into a Hasid later in life.