



January 27, 2024



Parshas Beshalach

17th of Shevat 5784

Team Hashem

Most people you meet on the street will know how many Jews left Mitzrayim: 600,000. What is far less known is how many people did **not** leave Mitzrayim. The pasuk says that "*chamushim alu miMitzrayim.*" Only one fifth of the Jews in Mitzrayim made it out alive. Thus, if 600,000 people left, that means 2.4 million did not. Simple math. Other opinions, listed in *Shemos Rabah*, translate the word *chamushim* to mean one fiftieth, meaning 29.4 million Jews did not leave Mitzrayim. In short, millions of Jews did not leave Egypt.

And we must wonder, why? What happened to those people? Why did some get a ticket out while others did not? The Midrash gives the following seemingly bizarre explanation. The Midrash says that the people who were able to leave Egypt were the ones who spoke Hebrew, dressed in the traditional clothes, and referred to themselves by their Jewish/Hebrew name. Those who perished in Mitzrayim did not. What is bizarre is that these people otherwise seemed to be good people. They may have kept *halacha*, and come to shul. It does not accuse them of going around worshiping idols or murdering people. Just because they dressed a little Egyptian and spoke a little Egyptian and went by Egyptian names, they were permanently removed from the Jewish people? Doesn't that seem a bit harsh?

The Bird's-Eye View

When one looks at Jewish history with a bird's-eye view, one seems to see this peculiar phenomenon repeating itself. The Gemara in Megillah explains that the reason the Jews were destined to be annihilated during the times of Haman was because they participated in the party that Achashverosh threw. But not one halacha was compromised. Could that be reason enough to wipe out the whole nation?! Again, it seems a little harsh.

The Rambam in Igeres Hashmad (Ma'amar Kiddush Hashem pg. 9) says that there was a decree in the times of the Chanukah story forbidding the Jews to close the front door of their homes. He says that this is what prompted the Chashmonaim to lead the nation into war with the Greeks, and the eventual miraculous victory. Isn't that odd? Open doors?! We were keeping halacha. We were keeping Shabbos. We were doing chesed. Because we had our doors open? Is that what almost destroyed us?

The second Bais Hamikdash was famously destroyed because of sinas chinam, baseless hatred. Ever wonder what was so bad about that? Again, we were following halacha. We were shomer Shabbos. We were not idolaters and adulterers. Okay, so we didn't like that our neighbors were a little loud. So we didn't like how they flavored their cholent. That's what destroyed the Bais Hamikdash? If idolatry, adultery and murder were what brought down the first Bais Hamikdash, this seems to pale in comparison.

In the times of Rebbi Akiva there was a plague that decimated almost his entire student body. Thousands upon thousands died. Why? Because they didn't treat each other with as much respect as required. Now, respecting one's friend is nice and important, but to warrant the mass death of 24,000 people seems a bit harsh. No overt sin was committed. They kept all 613 commandments. Why the huge calamity?

Why is it that whenever we as a nation were collectively threatened, it came about from seemingly insignificant offenses? Is there something fundamental beyond the 613 mitzvos that is required of us? If so, what is it?

If You're Into Hashem, He's Into You

The Bais HaLevi (Yosef Dov Soloveitschik, Rabbi in Brisk, 1820 - 1892), offers the following powerful explanation. If one looks carefully throughout our history, one will find a pattern. Whenever a national lack of pride in Hashem is demonstrated, disaster strikes. Whenever our people act in a way that is demonstrative of disinterest in our nationhood, calamity ensues. In simple English: if you're into Hashem, He's into you. If you're not into Hashem, He's not into you. One can follow the mitzvos to the very letter of the law and yet not feel passionate about being on Hashem's team. There is no fire in his heart. He is just a Jew doing Jewish things because that is what Jews do. He may even daydream about being a non-Jew. He just does it because it's what his parents do, out of rote. Or perhaps due to fear of the social consequences that would ensue if he dropped what his parents and community held dear. Such a Jew, Hashem says, "I don't need in my midst. I want Jews who are on fire. I want Jews who love Me. I want Jews who feel passion and pride".

Hashem did not see Jews in Mitzrayim who were proud of their Jewish heritage, but “happened” to wear Egyptian clothing or adopt Egyptian names. Hashem saw Jews who wished they were Egyptians. He saw Jews who saw the Egyptian culture and were enamored and secretly wished they could be Egyptian. Whether they would ever dare admit it or not, Hashem knows what is going on in the inside. So they were wiped out in Egypt.

Hashem did not see Torah-observant Jews in Persia who “happened” to be going to Persian parties. He saw Jews who wished they were Persian! He saw Jews who were too afraid to shed their Judaism, but were closet Persians. There was no passion in their Judaism. Therefore, until they cried out in repentance they were destined to be annihilated.

Hashem did not see religious and God-fearing Jews in the times of the Greeks who “happened” to have opened their front doors all day. He saw Jews who wanted every nuance of Greek culture to flood their homes. They brought the street into their houses. They looked at the Greeks with wide eyes, loving every bit of their culture. This enraged Hashem so much that the Jews were moments away from spiritual destruction.

Hashem didn't see good God-fearing Jews in the times of the second Bais Hamikdash who “happened” to not get along with their Jewish neighbors. He saw people who didn't view their neighbors as teammates on Hashem's team; rather as competitors in the game of life. If one truly believed that they were on Hashem's team, every Jew would be a teammate and we would cheer them on with glee. Our baseless hatred revealed that we weren't brothers on Hashem's team; we were enemies in the rat race of life.

Rebbi Akiva's students were not merely disrespectful. They too were demonstrating that they viewed their learning as a personal quest for knowledge and wisdom rather than a collective furthering of Hashem's mission in this world. It showed Hashem that they were, to a degree, in it for themselves and not in it for Him.

The parshah teaches us a titanic lesson. It's not enough to have a big clipboard with 613 mitzvos on it, checking them off one by one. One has to passionately feel that we are on Hashem's team. One has to genuinely feel a loving need for each member of klal Yisrael, for all are teammates on Team Hashem.

The Camp Transformation

For many years I was a counselor in a sleepaway camp. Naturally, I had kids in my bunk who didn't always get along. This boy's socks are on the other boy's bed. This kid can't stand the other one's pet salamander. This fellow can't stand that he sleeps next to someone from Brooklyn. Typical childish squabbling. Every single year without exception, a

phenomenon took place when the camp entered color war. The camp was divided between two teams and half of the bunk was on one team while the other half was on the other. Suddenly, these kids who just prior couldn't stand each other would now cheer each other on. They would slap each other's back. They were lifting each other up and laughing and bonding together. What changed? The desire to win color war was so intense that it smoothed out all differences. It made all differences seem so petty in comparison. Suddenly they weren't competitors fighting to have a good time in camp, they were teammates who both desperately wanted to win color war. His home run was my home run. His three-point shot was my three-point shot. His win was my win. I need him.

If we truly felt proud of our Yiddishkeit, we would feel the same way about our neighbors and friends. We need them. Their win is our win; their loss is our loss. But if we are here merely to enjoy life, our neighbors and friends pose a threat to our enjoyment.

The Baal Shem Tov writes that the degree to which we love Hashem is measured in the degree we love other Jews. For if we don't love whom He loves, then to a degree we don't love Him. A friend of a friend is a friend.

We are grandchildren of people who stared into the face of Egyptians and said, "I will not be like you." We are grandchildren of people that stared into the face of the Persians and said, "I will not be like you." We are grandchildren of people that stared into the face of the Greeks and said, "I will not be like you." We are grandchildren of people who stared into the face of the Romans, the Spaniards, the Frenchmen, the Germans, the enlighteners, the philosophers and revolutionaries, and said it loud and said it proud: We. Will. Not. Be. Like. You.

May our grandchildren be grandchildren of people who stared into the face of modern-day billboards and front-pages and said proudly, "I am on Team God; I will not be like you. I am a Jew and I am proud." May the holy words of the Bais HaLevi live on: If you're into Hashem, then He's into you.