

PARSHAS SHEMOS

תשע"ט

When Klal Yisroel came to Egypt, they insisted on living in Goshen. Why? The concept is found in a posuk in Parshas Bolok. Billam praises Klal Yisroel because we are a nation isolated from the rest of the nations. The vision of Yaakov was to have Klal Yisroel settle exclusively in Goshen because this is how they were to remain separate from the foreign culture around them. We have our own culture and our own way of looking at the world and evaluating events.

The problem was that the Bnei Yaakov were coming from Eretz Canaan which was a very primitive and rustic society, and were coming to one of the most advanced and sophisticated cultures of the ancient world. They built wondrous structures that till today, we don't know what technology they had to be able to construct them. The pyramids, the Sphinx, etc.

We should notice the exchange between Yosef and his brothers before being brought to Pharaoh. He tells them to bring all their sheep and cattle—even though they were told to leave everything behind. Be prepared to tell Pharaoh that we are simple shepherds who know nothing of the advanced civilization of Egypt. This will allow us to be ghettoized in Goshen because the Egyptians will want to have nothing to do with us. The Egyptians were revolted by shepherds. Yosef presented the weakest brothers to Pharaoh to avoid tempting Pharaoh to use them as their generals.

But despite all this, at the end of Parshas Vayigash, we see Klal Yisroel were grabbed by the world of Egypt. They were taken in by the sophisticated culture and started the process of social integration and ultimately assimilation. This, says the Zohar, is why Yaakov wasn't able to reveal the end of days to his sons 17 years later. When he started to talk to them about it, he realized that they had already been slightly influenced by Egyptian society and were no longer capable of this revelation. So he stopped.

This is where the concept of daas Torah comes to the fore. A person whose whole identity is Torah and all of whose thoughts are Torah, perceives the world and current events through the lens of the Torah. When people approached me in the last election two years ago for the president of the United States, they came with a dilemma about who to vote for. I responded that the moral integrity of the candidates was not a factor. All my life I was in contact with gedolei Torah and they all had one criteria for whom to vote: who was a better choice for Klal Yisroel's needs. There was no hesitation about abetting the declining stature of the office of the presidency, or concern with condoning candidates known for corrupt behavior. All politicians are corrupt—one more than the next. It is irrelevant. As a Jew we have one priority only, and that was who was going to be better for Klal Yisroel. That's the Torah approach to dealing with communal issues.

Yaakov dies when Yosef is 56 years old. For the next 54 years, Yosef has a tight grip on Egypt and a tight grip on Klal Yisroel's social isolation. After he dies, the Shevotim continue in his footsteps. They lived with Yaakov and absorbed his values and his priorities and they kept Klal Yisroel from assimilating. But once they pass from the scene, they start to leave Goshen and spread throughout Egypt. They start assimilating in earnest and stopped bris miloh.

There is an interesting machlokes about this between the Netziv and Beis Halevi.

One says they simply dropped bris miloh altogether. The other says it started gradually in small increments. At first, they continued to

perform bris miloh but then performed cosmetic surgery to pull down the surrounding skin over the area to conceal it. These are the two ways Jews have always assimilated throughout history. One way is to drop everything wholesale, the other is to keep all the mitzvos on a technical level, but to live a completely non-Jewish lifestyle. Frum Jews now go on exotic cruises and take the same vacations and have the same pastimes as the non-Jews around them—but with daf yomi.

But this drive for integration into Egyptian society came with the now classic, immediate reaction. The adoration the Egyptians once had for the Jews became an irrational hatred. They start to suspect them of dual loyalty. This pattern has repeated itself generation after generation. The moment the Jews become too involved in non-Jewish society, the non-Jews push back. And not only that, they take cruel advantage of this drive for acceptance and integration.

Pharaoh couldn't simply force the entire Jewish nation into becoming slave laborers. He employed a strategy: National service. If you want to be a true, patriotic Egyptian citizen, you will surely want to volunteer to build the cities of your beloved homeland! Even Pharaoh himself pretended to join and no Jew who wanted to be accepted in society could refuse. Soon after, the government started to grant exemptions to various segments of the native Egyptian population—until the only ones without an exemption were the Jews. They eventually became slave laborers.

The only ones who didn't join were Shevet Levi. They had no interest in being accepted into Egyptian society. They felt no need to leave the beis medrash and join another culture. As a result, they never volunteered and never became slaves to Pharaoh, and escaped the harshest aspects of the golus.

There is a very deep lesson here for all subsequent generations. Jewish history is filled with national tragedies that are precipitated by the drive for Jews to assimilate and lose their unique Jewish identity. This is the concept behind the Netziv's pshat in the line from the haggodoh: "Vehi She'omdoh." It is the anti-Semitism of the non-Jews—ignited against us whenever we try to assimilate—which has kept us from being totally swallowed up by non-Jewish society in every generation.

Let's take a survey of three national tragedies during the period of Jewish settlement in Europe.

The Jewish community of Spain was extremely integrated into Spanish society for a few hundred years. Jews rose in wealth and prominence and occupied the highest offices in government. Then they were suddenly expelled.

1648-49 was gezeiras Tach ve'Tat. The Jews were the targets of the Polish peasant uprising led by Chmelnitsky and a million Jews were murdered. Why? Because they were identified as occupying the highest level of Polish aristocracy and nobility. They were totally integrated into high Polish society.

In Germany in the 20th century. Compare the statistics about Jewish enrollment in yeshivas and universities. There were tens and tens of thousands of Jews enrolled in university and they dominated all the higher professions. Completely integrated into German society. Then Hitler rose to power and it was all wiped away.

How are Klal Yisroel to be "a light unto the nations" if we isolate ourselves from wider non-Jewish society and just learn Torah? The answer is that when we concentrate on allowing the Torah penetrate

our being and elevate us morally and spiritually, we will be able to live a superior way of life. Other people will notice on their own and they will be overwhelmed by the wisdom of our values and our lifestyle.

There two ways Jews impact the world. For Avrohom Ovinu, without a nation and without Mattan Torah, his job was to bring the concept of Hashem to the masses. But after we have Klal Yisroel, we concentrate on building ourselves up and maintain our high level, then the impact moves out organically.

After the Jews came back from Bavel to build Bayis Sheini, Anshei Knesses Hagedolah were concerned that avodo zoro would destroy the second Beis Hamikdosh just like it destroyed the first. So they davened that the drive for avodo zoro be destroyed. Hashem acquiesced and there was a tremendous explosion of Torah sheba'al peh. Hashem arranged that a new philosophy would sweep the world. The greatest of the Greek philosophers, Aristotle, has a disciple called Alexander who would be instrumental in spreading Greek culture throughout the ancient world. The influence of Greek philosophy stopped precisely where Alexander the Great's conquering army was halted: in India. From there eastward, all the old avodo zoro still exists till this day.

Chazal tell us that after Klal Yisroel asked that the drive for avodo zoro be removed, Hashem's plan was that Greek philosophy would eliminate avodo zoro from the wider world and allow the ideas of the Torah to fill the vacuum. Had the Jews be totally devoted to limud haTorah, we would have been an example to the world and the world would have woken up to the truth and Moshiach would have come. But instead of using Greek philosophy as a tool for Torah, the Jews imported Greek culture to compete with the Torah. Instead of being the light to the nations, we brought the darkness of the outside world in and allowed it to contaminate us and corrupt us.

Then the course of history changed. At the time of the rise Christianity, much of the Roman Empire were enthralled with Torah and Klal Yisroel. There are different statistics given by historians: 10% of the empire or 20%. But we weren't on the level to be an example to the world. There was in-fighting and sinas chinom and the beis hamikdosh was destroyed. We failed to rise to the occasion. The Rambam writes that Hashem used Islam and Christianity to replace the old avodo zoros and introduce the ideas of Torah and Moshiach into the world.

We influence the world by acting the way the Torah prescribes. Klal Yisroel have a problem when confronting other cultures. We get impressed and overwhelmed. Sometimes we are impressed with high culture and intellectualism—art, literature, science and philosophy. Nowadays, we are being swept away by a very low-level culture—popular music and entertainment. But through learning Torah, we have to develop Jewish attitudes and behavior patterns. We need to try as much as possible to push western influences away and try to maintain purity of mind and heart.

The intellectual world is deeply anti-Semitic nowadays. Anti-Semitism

in general is now on levels that we haven't seen for forty years. All the money and organizational efforts that have been poured into projects to educate and fight anti-Semitism has been for naught. The root of all our problems is our own failures. If we would only absorb Torah concepts and ideas and live a pure Torah lifestyle, and work hard to keep the contamination out, we will become a light unto the nations. When we get impressed with the non-Jewish culture, we corrupt ourselves, lose our unique identity and lose all respect in the eyes of the world.

This is the story of Egypt and it repeats itself over and over again throughout Jewish history. Klal Yisroel spread out to integrate themselves into wider society and try to imitate their lifestyle. Some people stopped bris miloh entirely and some tried to keep bris miloh while pretending not to. It's acting and feeling like a non-Jew with the hechsher of the Badatz.

The current alcoholism epidemic that is rampant in today's frum society is a total perversion of what Jewish society used to be for the past 3,500 years. Never in our history have so many frum Jews felt so easily able to lose their sobriety on a regular basis. In Russia and Poland, there was a "Moshke" in every town. He was the local Jew who bought the concession from the nobleman to exclusively sell alcohol to the public. It was always a Jew because no non-Jew would be capable of running a profitable alcohol establishment. He couldn't be trusted not to drink all the alcohol in the store himself! Only Jews were able to control their consumption. Today, we live in a world where Jews cannot control their consumption of alcohol or any other drug. A major sign of our becoming westernized is our abuse of alcohol.

Someone asked, what about using alcohol to enhance kedushas Shabbos? It's a mistake. Kedushoh means connecting to Hashem and doesn't come from using chemicals like alcohol. It comes from singing zemiros and learning and davening, and enjoying a family meal with a sober father at the head. We connect to Hashem directly.

Shabbos is supposed to be an oasis of kedushoh and connecting to Hashem at the end of the work-week. A hundred years ago, Jews didn't get drunk on an average Friday night and act like goyim. Alcohol abuse is one overwhelming example of our process of assimilation of the culture of the street.

It is a big avodah to keep our lifestyles pure from contamination. We live in a world where it is hard to maintain purity and keep foreign cultures out of our minds and our hearts. What is a ben Torah? It is someone whose entire culture is one of Torah. His attitudes, his values, his behavior are determined by the Torah.

When Klal Yisroel lose that and become like goyim, we cease to be a light unto the nations. The nations have become a light for us! A light to the nations is being a living example of what the Torah is about, and living up to its ideals and standards.