

PARSHAS SHEMOS

תש"פ

This week's parsha is a beginning of a new phase in the Torah. We now talk about the nation of Klal Yisroel. Sefer Bereishis is a story about individuals—great people such as Odom, Noach, Avrohom, the Ovov and Imahos, the Shevotim and Yosef.

The Sefer begins with the generation of Yaakov Ovinu dying out. What Klal Yisroel did next could only happen after no one who was raised in Yaakov's household remained alive. Why? Yaakov took great pains to insure that his family would be separate and isolated from Egyptian society. This was Yaakov's vision and as long as there was one person who grew up in the house of Yaakov, that vision was kept. Once that generation died, there was a tremendous population explosion, and more importantly, they moved out of the Jewish ghetto of Goshen and spread throughout the land.

Why did they do that? The midrash tells us that the Jews wanted to assimilate into Egyptian culture. They stopped bris miloh—the sign on their very bodies that they are physically distinct from the Egyptians. This is why Klal Yisroel had to have bris miloh again before they left Egypt—except for Shevet Levi who kept the bris and kept learning the Torah of the Ovov the entire time. They were never enslaved because they never sought to become assimilated.

The midrash says the minute Klal Yisroel wanted to assimilate, Hashem turned the love the Egyptians had for the Jews into hatred.

But despite this desire to assimilate, a number of midrashim explain why Klal Yisroel merited the geuloh anyway.

In Parshas Vayigash, the Chumash tells us that when Yaakov came to Be'er Sheva on his way to Egypt to meet Yosef again, he was afraid of what the future would bring. He knew his family was now going into this golus—who knows if they will make it back?

I only appreciated this feeling of dread that Yaakov must have had when I drove down to Be'er Sheva 50 years ago and looked at the scenery. Be'er Sheva was then a small town and it had its original landscape. There was vegetation and greenery growing all around Be'er Sheva. But there was a line where the green stopped and the desert began. It remains barren desert all the way for hundreds of kilometers till Egypt. Yaakov must have seen this scene and realized that it won't be so simple to come back from Egypt. Hashem had to reassure him to go down because he is guaranteed to come back up.

So why did Klal Yisroel need a zechus to come out of Egypt? Weren't they promised? Hashem had no choice!

But there is a choice. If Klal Yisroel had become totally assimilated with no distinct identity, there wouldn't have been anyone to redeem. You wouldn't even know who was Jewish!

In the Haggodoh we read the posuk which says they became a great nation. Chazal explain that it means Klal Yisroel still remained a distinct entity. They could be recognized as Jews. They didn't change their clothes.

We see in Sefer Bamidbor, when they are counted, that they had very Jewish names. We don't find Egyptian names at all in the whole list. They kept speaking loshon hakodesh. Klal Yisroel wanted to adopt the Egyptian culture while remaining Jews externally. But they wanted to stop bris miloh—because bris miloh is an indelible mark on your body that you are different.

Another reason they merited redemption, says the midrash, is that

Jews didn't inform on other Jews to the authorities. This is another aspect of the same theme. They identified with and supported each other as a united group against the larger group outside. They kept their secrets among themselves and didn't open themselves up totally to the Egyptians.

Another midrash says that it was the fact that the Jews remained pure in their family life and didn't intermarry. There was no adultery committed with their Egyptian masters.

The posuk in Acharei Mos says don't imitate the abominable practices of Egypt from whence you came, and from Canaan to which you are going. Why does the Torah have to include those obvious details about coming from Egypt and going to Canaan?

The Ohr HaChayim explains that at different times in Jewish history, Jews found themselves in different cultures with enormous challenges in keeping the Torah. It is very tempting to claim that we can't be expected to keep the Torah in a golus where there are such strong forces pulling us away from Torah and Mitzvos. To counter this claim, the Torah says that it can't be harder than when the Jews were in Egypt and in Canaan. They were surrounded by these two societies—who were the most morally corrupt with the most abominable practices you can imagine. Yet Hashem gave the Torah specifically at a time in history when Klal Yisroel lived under the influences of these two cultures, and they were expected to keep it all despite this.

The midrashim in Bamidbor tell us that the women of Klal Yisroel were never mezaneh—all their children were only from their husbands. The Shechinoh testified to it. There was one case of zhus—Shlomis bas Divri was the sole exception. Bilaam told Bolok that Hashem could not tolerate zhus—keeping away from zhus is what gave them the zechus to be redeemed.

Moreover, they stayed united as a group and maintained solidarity with each other—not letting Egyptians know about their internal secrets. So, as much as they wanted to move into Egyptian neighborhoods and be accepted by them, they still maintained a separate identity.

We need to know what it means to remain Jewish and survive as a distinct people—because we too were raised in a foreign environment and exposed to non-Jewish ideas.

But just being distinct and identifiable as a Jew is not enough.

When Moshe came to Pharaoh at the end of this week's parsha to insist on freeing Klal Yisroel, Pharaoh responds by making things even harder. He instructs his taskmasters to increase their workload so that they won't be preoccupied with "divrei sheker". What was this?

The midrash tells us that while Moshe lived in the royal palace—before he killed the Egyptian and fled Egypt—he convinced Pharaoh to give the Jews a day off every week. He argued that slaves will be more productive during the other six days if they rested from work on Shabbos. Pharaoh acquiesced and the Jews were now able to spend one day a week reviewing the scrolls that recorded the stories of Sefer Bereishis which they had as a mesorah from the Ovov. This is what they did during their leisure time on Shabbos.

Now that Pharaoh felt threatened by this new desire for freedom, he wanted to ensure that the Jews were completely subservient to him. In order to put them under his complete control, he had to keep them working so hard and so constantly that they didn't even have time

anymore to review these scrolls connecting them to the mesorah of the Ovos.

We define ourselves by what we do during our leisure time. When you control one's leisure time, you control the person.

We have a very interesting development. They wanted to join Egyptian society while still being distinct and avoiding zhus. It didn't work. The Egyptians hated them more and more. After 83 years of slavery, the Jews were just plain slaves. But all the while, even when they tried to integrate into Egyptian society, they still reviewed those megillos and were connected to the mesorah of the Ovos.

This describes much of our Jewish society today. Many of us are deeply immersed in western culture and feel completely at home in western society. The better of them go to a shiur now and then, or read the parsha, but some don't even have that.

Pharaoh realized he can't control the Jews unless he controls their leisure time. From now on, no more time to read the megillos. It was a very deep insight on Pharaoh's part regarding how to control the human psyche.

This is the story of Klal Yisroel in Egypt. It is important to explore these elements of Jewish identity in greater detail because our experience in golus parallels many aspects of the golus of Egypt.

They didn't change their names.

A name is a very important thing for a person. It establishes one's identity. When Odom Horishon gave names to all the animals, he was identifying each animal's essential characteristics and its purpose in being created.

The Yalkut in Divrei Hayomim asks why earlier generations gave brand new names to their children—based on the circumstances that were surrounding their birth, and now we only use names that are passed down from earlier generations? The answer is that earlier doros had special insight into the person's neshomo and could give a name that reflected the essence of the child. We no longer have that insight and we choose a name of an ancestor as a tefillah that the child should live up to the middos of the person being named after.

Klal Yisroel in Egypt were still giving special, lofty Jewish names to their children—describing Hashem's closeness and intimate involvement in their lives—even while they were worshipping avodo zoro! It was a very confused generation. The name of a person declares who he is. There is a difference between calling someone Yaakov and calling him George. It tells you something important about the person—to which society he feels he belongs. If your name is Yaakov, you belong to Klal Yisroel. If your name is George, you identify with an American president and American history.

Language is very important to one's identity. We formulate our ideas and feelings in language. Different languages represent different cultures and styles of self-expression. So Klal Yisroel saw to it to communicate among themselves in loшон hakodesh to insulate themselves from the degenerate culture surrounding them.

There are levels of language used within the same society. There is vulgar, gutter language, and it has a real impact on the person speaking it and hearing it. Once a person starts using that kind of vulgar self-expression, his whole psychology starts to change and devolve. Normal, everyday speech has become so full of vulgarities today that you can't hear a few sentences without hearing multiple profanities. It used to be that newspapers wouldn't publish profanities used by politicians in Washington. Now they report everything they say verbatim, and just leave out a few letters in the profane words.

There are people whose minds are immersed in the gutter, their mouth spews the gutter and whose whole identity is the gutter. It is a big nisayon for a ben Torah to maintain his sensitivity to kedushoh and

taharoh when he is out in the working world and exposed to this kind of pervasive, casual, every day, nivul peh.

The situation of Klal Yisroel in Egypt deeply parallels our situation. There was a mentality which set up the whole problem. They stayed Jewish—with their distinct Jewish dress and Jewish style of speech and Jewish names, but inside, they wanted to be total goyim. We are part of a powerful, wealthy, sophisticated culture, but we want to retain our Jewish identity. This is a very pervasive mentality among Jews today.

There are two aspects to one's style of dress.

Clothes identify what social group we belong to. Different forms of clothing are developed by different groups of people. Adopting a group's unique clothing means you are choosing to belong to that group. The issue of wearing non-Jewish clothing is not discussing shirts and pants or glasses. There is the clothing unique to a nationality or religion and there is clothing that comes with spiritual or moral messages. Tznius is a way of defining the essential nature of what a human being is. As in Ancient Greece, today in the non-Jewish world, the human being is only a body—the nicer the body, the better the human being.

The image I present to other people around me by how I dress, is ultimately the image I have of myself. If I wear tight clothing to show off my body, this emphasis on the appearance of my body will seep into my psyche. I will eventually start to think that I am only a body. If the purpose of clothes is to cover your body and take away attention from it, you are declaring you are more than just a body — there are aspects of me that you should pay more attention to than my body.

The Greeks looked at the human body as an object of beauty. They made statues of the naked human body because they saw them as objects of art. But we as Jews look at the body as having kedushoh—it is a means of serving Hashem. We cover objects of kedushoh because they are reserved for a higher purpose. We are a neshomo who is using a body as a tool to serve Hashem.

Nowadays clothing in the non-Jewish world is primarily to accentuate the body—because the body defines their essence. We live in a world of zhus, just as Egypt was a culture of zhus. The pesukim in Acharei Mos-Kedoshim which forbid arayos are forbidding the relationships that were rampant in Egypt and Canaan. They included incest, mishkav zochor and mishkav beheimoh.

Once a society views the human being as a body, the relationships between people are only physical—they don't know how to relate to another neshomo and make distinctions between animals and people. Yes, Jews have marriage between men and women with a physical relationship, but it is about relating to another human being as both a body and a neshomo—the whole person. The problem with a lot of relationships today is that they are technical and one-dimensional. There is texting and e-mailing and social media—but people aren't used to confronting other human beings as a body and neshomo.

There are many problems created by the widespread pritzus in our society. The more subtle problem is that it teaches people to relate to other people only as a body without their tzelem Elokim. The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim writes that a person's tzelem Elokim is not a permanent aspect of a human being. A person can behave and think in ways which suppress their humanity and push it out of their consciousness. They will lose their tzelem Elokim.

Klal Yisroel in Egypt were similar to what went on during golus Yovon. Then they wanted to become Greek and perform in the Olympic games.

But there was a barrier to Jewish participation in the Olympic games since they were performed without clothes and having a bris miloh would disqualify them. So the Jews invented a form of cosmetic surgery which concealed their bris miloh, so they could have a bris

miloh but then hide it to make them acceptable to Greek society. It was the ultimate dream of being Jewish and being a goy at the same time.

Klal Yisroel in Egypt preserved themselves as a nation—otherwise there would be nothing left—there would be no one for Hashem to take out. So they maintained a certain distinctiveness, but were Jewish goyim.

How does Hashem take care that this doesn't happen? Hashem tells the goyim not to allow it. He flips their love of us into hatred. While they lived in Goshen, nothing happened. Once they moved out, Pharaoh used the Jewish craze of desperately wanting to be accepted by the Egyptians as a tool. He manipulated the Jews into joining the national service by going out himself to work. All the Egyptians started working, so naturally the Jews wanted to fit in and joined them. Slowly exemptions were issued—but only to Egyptians—and eventually over time, only the Jews remained in service and were enslaved. This was the chochmoh.

But there were one group of Jews who didn't want to be Jewish goyim—Shevet Levi. When they came down to Egypt, Levi was the rosh yeshiva and he prevented his shevet from assimilating by making sure they were sitting and learning. They were too busy to go out to join the national service and remained free. They kept bris miloh openly. When their minds are immersed in Torah, they are connected to Hashem in a deep and lasting way and just didn't want to be Jewish goyim. It didn't interest them.

The Jews kept together as a separate nation with their unique dress and their own sub-language. They kept their own business to themselves. They wanted to be goyim, but distinctly Jewish goyim.

For 83 years Klal Yisroel endured backbreaking labor. Pharaoh was out to break them—so you would assume 100% of the Jews would want to escape slavery. But it didn't happen. Why not? The vast majority of Jews in Egypt didn't want to trade one type of slavery for another. Moshe Rabbeinu said it clearly from the very beginning. Hashem has only one purpose in taking us out—to serve Him. Otherwise, the whole back-and-forth between Moshe and Pharaoh about leaving for three days and coming back is simply a lie. The truth is they were leaving slavery temporarily. When they reach Har Sinai, they don't know what Hashem would ask of them. They are switching one servitude for another.

So this left many Jews in a quandary—they wanted to be Jewish goyim and even though it means enduring backbreaking labor. The idea of being a Jewish Jew and being a servant to Hashem was so foreign that it wasn't a possibility in their minds. They just weren't interested—and they all died in makkas choshech.

This is true in the times of golus of Egypt and every golus in our history. Hashem arranges things and won't let us become goyim and He even won't let us become Jewish goyim. This is how the Netziv learns as the pshat in the Hagoddoh. What will protect us from generation to generation? That in every generation the goyim themselves will make sure we don't assimilate.

We aren't talking about completely assimilated Jews. We are talking about Jews who took pains to retain their identity—but they wanted to be Jewish goyim. Hashem gave them a choice. They had to decide to leave their non-Jewish identity behind and become Jewish Jews.

Those who couldn't make that decision were left behind.

Hashem allowed them to assimilate and discover for themselves what kind of people the Egyptians were. You think they are so advanced and sophisticated? They will torture you and throw your newborn boys into the river. They will take your babies and use them as bricks to build them into the walls. This is the people you so admire and so much want to be accepted by? If you want to be a part of a culture that looks at the human being as a body, you will see first-hand what that culture is capable of doing to you. They will treat you as a body—a human animal, a slave—completely expendable and disposable.

Once you understand that culture, and you see the bankruptcy of their view of people, then you will appreciate what it means to be a member of Klal Yisroel. You can then aspire to accept the Torah and to identify as a neshomo who uses the body as a tool to develop the neshomo. Egypt was a smelting furnace for Klal Yisroel. You take iron ore and purify it and turn it into steel. Klal Yisroel were exposed to the culture of the body and through the process of slavery, revealed that it is cruel and vicious and depraved. This is the human being without a neshomo—without a tzelem Elokim, they devolve into animals.

The Jews in Russia in the 19th century worshipped Russian culture—wonderful authors—and wanted admission to the Russian universities to study Russian culture. But it all turned on them. Joseph Stalin became the greatest murderer in human history—responsible for the death of 25 million people. Jews also worshipped German culture, admired their music and their philosophy. Hashem showed us what that culture is capable of. They wiped out 6 million Jews—nine million people.

The culture of the Torah is unique. We have a unique perspective that the human being is a neshomo and uses the body to serve Hashem. We express our neshomos through our clothes, our language and our lifestyle. We relate to other human beings as neshomos and forge real relationships.

The whole idea of znus is detested by Hashem because znus is about two animalized human being getting together for selfish, physical gratification. The Torah wants marriage where two human beings come together as body and neshomo and relate to each other as whole people with a tzelem Elokim. Everything else is contemptible.

The story of the golus of Egypt is a story about the world we live in today. So many Orthodox Jews want to be Jewish goyim. They will wear their black hats and speak some form of Yiddish/English/Aramaic/Hebrew, but they want to be Jewish goyim. Hashem is not going to let it happen.

Curiously, anti-Semitism is on the rise again in America and Europe—with politicians openly spewing anti-Semitic tropes and canards. They are the leaders of major political parties. Don't think they can't win national elections—they can. And everyone's nervous. The vicious, deadly attacks on Jews are becoming a daily occurrence. It's no coincidence that together with the Orthodox Jewish community becoming more established and comfortable in the west, we have the goyim push back with open disdain and hatred for us. They will never allow us to become Jewish goyim.

To be a Jew means we are a body and a neshomo and the purpose of the body isn't to serve itself. The purpose of a human being is to use his body to help his neshomo serve Hashem.