

WERE THE TEN PLAGUES REALLY NECESSARY?

Category: Shemos, Va'eira

Getting the Jews out of Egypt.

Going Back To Egypt

My brother in law is a Chabad Rabbi in Russia. My father, of blessed memory, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg, simply refused to visit them at home. He was never at his grandsons' brisses, or special occasions. Not for love or money will he ever step foot into that "cursed" land again! For he was born there and he grew up there, and he remembered vividly how the Jewish people as a whole and he in particular suffered terribly at the hands of the brutal Jew-hating Russians. For the same reason he refused to speak Russian in the home or to teach his "mother tongue" to his children.

This is understandable. People never wish to return to places which haunt them with horrid memories. It is to be expected.

When reading the story of the Exodus we find a very interesting and perhaps disturbing fact:

The Jewish people who were slaves in Egypt and have been freed by G-d through the hands of Moses are constantly complaining that they wish they were *back in Egypt!* Yes Egypt! The land in which they suffered torment and back breaking slave labor is where their fancies take them any time the going in the desert gets rough!

When the spies returned from Canaan with their fearful report, the people said, "Let's appoint someone to lead us back to Egypt."

When *Korach* and his cronies tried to rise up against Moses one of their challenges to him was, "Isn't it enough that you took us away from a land flowing with milk and honey..." When you see this you almost can't believe what you're reading! They were describing Egypt as the most wonderful, beautiful place.

Later they complained that the *Manna* was getting boring, “We miss the fish we used to eat in Egypt and the onions, garlic and watermelon.”

It seems that they missed Egypt so much that G-d found it necessary to explicitly decree that, “As you have seen Egypt today you shall never see it again,” meaning the Jew was forbidden to return to Egypt.

Some wish to explain that this is simply a phenomenon of human nature. People tend to remember only the good things and forget the bad.

This explanation does not suffice, however, for this didn't start only forty years after they left Egypt. The people were saying this even while they were still in Egypt. When Moses approached them for the first time with the news that G-d had heard their prayers and that they were going to be taken from Egypt to the Promised Land they said, “Go home! Leave us and we will continue to serve Egypt for serving them is good for us.”

Obviously this deep feeling for the land of Egypt was not only due to short term memory, it seems that they actually enjoyed the life they were living!

Enjoying Exile

We must therefore conclude that not everyone suffered in Egypt.

First of all the tribe of Levi who never agreed to work for Pharaoh from the beginning, they were not caught in the net of slavery.

Additionally, it would seem from the Midrash that the tribes of Reuben and Simeon didn't suffer from the Egyptian slavery either. The Midrash states that among the reasons why only the first three tribes are counted again in our Parsha and not the rest is because these three tribes were influential (politically etc.) in Egypt while the others were not.

It looks like there were different social “echelons” even among the Jewish people. The poor Jews were the slaves. There were however many wealthy, well connected Jews, men of influence. They were the doctors and businessmen.

They too suffered from many of Pharaoh's decrees, for example, their sons also had to be thrown into the river. They were not treated like the slaves, however.

We can take this a step further. The Talmud (*Yerushalmi*) says that the first thing Moses was to do when he arrived in Egypt was to teach the Jewish people the laws of freeing slaves.

Why would these rules be so important at a time like that? The answer must be that the wealthier Jews themselves owned Jewish slaves!

The point is that not everyone suffered in Egypt. On the contrary many Jews were quite comfortable there. Therefore when Moses came to take them out of Egypt they - the successful Jews - didn't want to go!

Moses knew however that when the Jews left Egypt he was to make sure all of them came, not only the poor "*shleppers*" as it was when Ezra traveled back to Israel after being exiled by Nebuchadnezzar, thousands of poor Jews, those who had nothing to lose, flocked to him and joined him on the journey to rebuild the Temple. But the wealthy people, those who were successful in Babylon, stayed. They didn't want to leave their wealth and the comfort of their influential positions. By this Exodus every Jew had to leave Egypt, and to achieve this was very difficult indeed!

This is also the answer to the oft asked question; if the goal was to free the Jews why did G-d have to perform all of those signs and plagues on the Egyptians? Why couldn't Moses just stand at the border of Egypt and announce that all Jews should gather and for they would be leaving Egypt. Then G-d could make one small miracle that the Egyptians wouldn't chase after them. Why this extravagant show of miracle after miracle?

According to what we just learned, the answer is quite obvious:

Many Jews did not want to leave! This made it necessary for Egypt to suffer plague after plague until the Egyptians themselves would *chase the Jews out*, for otherwise many wouldn't leave on their own. As the Rebbe once commented, "Why would the Jews have to be chased out of a land where they suffered such horrid labor? Wouldn't they be more than willing to leave on their own? Rather, there were Jews who were so sunken in the exile mindset and in the paganism of their Egyptian neighbors that they *had* to be forcibly removed."

As stated clearly in the scripture, "So the Egyptians took hold of the people to hasten to send them out of the land. The people picked up their dough when it

was not yet leavened.” And Rashi adds, “The Egyptians did not permit them to tarry long enough for it to leaven.”

This is in fact one of the most amazing thing about the Exodus from Egypt. It was the non-Jews who forced the Jews to leave their exile.

Since then the Jews of many generations have remained Jewish because the nonJews forced them to remain separate through the ghettos, the “Jewish Street” and all the other anti-Semitic decrees.

In our generation on the other hand, we are approaching the third and final redemption about which the prophet Isaiah says, “For you will not leave hurriedly and you will not travel pursued, rather with tranquility and restfulness shall you be redeemed.” We are already tasting the fulfillment of this prophecy, as hundreds even thousands of Jews are returning to the Jewish faith, not because they have been persecuted, not because the non-Jews are forcing upon them an awareness of their heritage. Rather on their own they are suddenly feeling a thirst for G-dliness and they return to G-d and his Torah “being of sound mind and body” each on their own time and at their own pace.

This is the true greatness of our generation. For it is possibly the first time in history that Jews who enjoy every benefit life has to offer are searching for spirituality. It is clearly not for physical gain that they are turning to G-d for G-d has already blessed them with abundance. These days Jews are searching for G-d simply because they want to get closer to him!

Listen! Can't you just hear the footsteps of Moshiach?