

Why Didn't They Flee

Category: Bo, Shemos

Why didn't the German Jews leave Germany? Didn't they see the writing on the wall?

When They Could Have Left, But Didn't

This past Friday was international Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Some half a million Jews lived in Germany in 1933, when Hitler rose to power. He had long engaged in anti-Jewish rhetoric, and he immediately acted against the Jews when he became chancellor. On April 1st, just three months after he rose to power, the Nazis held a boycott against Jewish businesses. Nazis stood menacingly in front of Jewish businesses, destroyed merchandise, hit Jews in the streets, and ensured that no one entered their stores. 200 Jews were fired from government offices, and just a month later, on May 10th, Jewish books were publicly burned.

In fact, violent attacks had actually begun earlier. During the year or two before they rose to power, Hitler youth had already become accustomed to attacking Jews in the streets.

Why didn't the Jews leave?

At the time, it was quite easy to leave Germany with one's entire estate. It was also relatively easy to find another western country to which to immigrate. Jews are smart people; why didn't they do that immediately?

Surprisingly, many people who did leave actually chose to return. Thousands of Jews who left Germany in 1933, in wake of the anti-Jewish activities returned when those activities seemed to calm down. The stream of returnees was so large that the government decided to hold them in concentration camps — an act which dramatically lowered the amount of people seeking to return. But still, there were Jews who insisted on returning to their “beloved homeland.”

Parallels?

We find this exact story in the Torah portion. This week, we finally get to the actual story of the Exodus. G-d gives the Jewish people final instructions before the journey — take a sheep home, slaughter it on the 14th of Nissan, spread the blood on the doorposts, and hold a Seder when you are ready to leave. This meal was to take place in the chaos of leaving, with coats on, shoes tied and suitcases packed.

When Moses passed on these instructions, he added an important rule: “No one is to leave their homes until morning.” There was a strict lockdown. Why? Rashi explains that on that evening, G-d gave the Angel of Death free reign in Egypt to kill all the firstborns. The Angel of Death didn’t differentiate between righteous and evil — it would kill anyone that didn’t have the identifying mark on the door.

But perhaps there is more to it:

There is an interesting parallel between our Torah portion and the portion of Vayera, and that is in the use of the word matzah. We all know matza to be a uniquely Passover food, but we actually find it in the story of the angels who came to visit Abraham and Lot. Lot invited those angels into his home and served them a feast — and matza. Rashi says that it was actually Passover.

He Didn’t Want to Leave

Before the angels managed to tell Lot why they had arrived, the entire Sodomite population had gathered around their home to protest the guests — which were strictly not welcome according to Sodomite policy. They demanded that the guests be handed over to them, so Lot emerged from his home try to come to a peaceable conclusion, but the mob could not be calmed; the angels had to go outside and pull him back to safety.

With all these events, it was clear that Lot was no longer safe. Nonetheless, when the angels told Lot that he was to collect his family and leave with them before they destroy the city, he wasn’t very enthusiastic. The verse says that before he collected his wife and daughters (his sons-in-law refused to join), he procrastinated. He was trying to save his estate as well. The angels were forced to drag him out of the house; even when he finally left the city, he made sure not

to go too far — he clearly wanted to return at a later point.

G-d Learned His Lesson

This story tells us that it's very difficult to abandon your home. Even when angels of G-d come and beg you to save yourself, when everyone around your home is clamoring to kill you, it is still hard to leave everything behind.

Therefore, the next time G-d has to do an Exodus — with an entire nation from an entire country — he made sure to orchestrate it such that it would not allow for any hesitation. Therefore, after they witnessed the 10 plagues and after they slaughtered the Egyptian deity (the sheep), G-d instructed that they remain home all night; this was to ensure that nobody met a good Egyptian friend and allowed himself to be convinced to remain. G-d also ensured that Pharaoh would beg them to leave and that the entire nation would chase them out. Otherwise, apparently, they would never go.

In fact, the Jewish people try several times to return to Egypt. In the first verse of next week's Torah portion, G-d specifically directs the Jews in a roundabout way to ensure that the Jews don't encounter war with the philistines — and attempt to return to Egypt. Why are we so sure that that would happen? Because it did! Just a year later, when the spies come back with bad news from the land of Israel, people immediately stood up and said, "Let's go back to Egypt."

It's actually much worse than the story of Lot. Lot was procrastinating because he wanted to save his money, but the opposite happened with the exodus; the Jews became incredibly wealthy because they left Egypt and because they collected all the wealth at the Red Sea, but nonetheless, they wanted to return. They missed Egyptian culture, and that wasn't something they were willing to give up.

And that's exactly what happened in Germany. The Jews felt so German that they couldn't give up their identity. In the First World War, 100,000 Jews served in the German army, and 12,000 lost their lives defending their homeland. They felt totally German; were they supposed to leave Germany just because Hitler came to power? Therefore, even when they left and escaped the persecution, they ended up coming back.

(From alephbeta.org)

A Lesson

What's the lesson?

The Alter Rebbe writes in Tanya (chp. 47) that every single day, a person should see himself as if he left Egypt. What does this mean?

The word Egypt in Hebrew, mitzrayim, has two meanings. It refers to a location, but it also means “constraints.” Every person has his own constraints, the limitations which he imposes upon himself. We are all creatures of habit; despite our best intentions to change and to go on a diet, it doesn't take long until we revert to our former behavior. Despite our best intentions to exercise — and even hire a personal trainer — we end up canceling the appointment. This is all the more true regarding character traits, like learning to control anger or see others in a positive light.

For this reason, the Alter Rebbe says, we need to leave Egypt. It's not an event that took place 3000 years ago — it's something we need to experience every single day.