



Our Personal Torah Desert

What's the American Pharaoh—and why we shouldn't go back to Egypt.

The American Pharaoh

Good Yom Tov!

Since we are celebrating Shavuos, the holiday that comes 50 days after the Jewish Nation escaped the rule of the Egyptian Pharaoh, let's talk about a different kind of Pharaoh: An American Pharaoh.

But seriously, for those of you into horse racing, you'll surely know what I'm referring to: Several years ago, there was the American Pharoah, the thoroughbred horse—with the name "Pharoah" spelled wrong, but that's whole other story—that won the three races that form the Triple Crown in American equestrian events, and then went on to win the Breeder's Cup, making him the first horse to win the "Grand Slam" of American horse racing.

Before American Pharoah won the Triple Crown, people were saying that if he were to win (as he did), it would be the first time in 37 years that a horse pulled it off—and would raise his worth by millions.

So let's ask the first question: What is it about horse racing that gets 300,000 people to participate?

And while we're asking questions, what kind of a name is "American Pharoah"? And why is it spelled wrong?

Horses in Torah

Now, the owner and breeder of American Pharoah is Achmed Zayad, an Egyptian immigrant.

But what a lot of people don't know is that Mr. Zayad is an Orthodox Jew of Egyptian Sephardic heritage who lives in New Jersey, and who

could not personally attend his horse's races when they occurred on a Shabbos.

Now, Achmed Zayad knew exactly what he was doing when he named his horse "Pharaoh." In the Five Books of the Torah, the first people mentioned to be using horses were the ancient Egyptians. When the Jewish Nation left Egypt, the Pharaoh—the real Pharaoh, not a horse named Pharaoh, and his army, chased after them on horses. As the Torah tells us, "Every horse of the Pharaoh's cavalry and his chariots and soldiers" (Shmos 14:9). Immediately after that, we read about the Splitting of the Reed Sea: "And Egypt gave chase and came after them, all the Pharaoh's horses, his riders and chariots, into the sea." We thus have it that horses are associated with Pharaohs.

What's more, in the Book of Devarim, when the Torah commands us to appoint a king in saying, "You shall surely place upon yourselves a king," the Torah warns the future king, "But let him not amass horses, and not return the nation to Egypt so as to amass horses when G-d said to you, 'You shall not return that way anymore'" (Devarim 17:16).

So there, the Torah warns the king to not build up his horse collection. The world capital of horses back then was Egypt, where they bred the most expensive horses. And so, if the Jewish king were to develop an obsession for horses, he'd ultimately end back up in Egypt—where G-d Himself said, "You shall not return that way anymore."

Now, when did G-d say that? In the Torah portion of Beshalach, before the Splitting of the Sea, when the Jewish Nation saw the Egyptians approaching on their horses and cried out to G-d in their terror. And then, G-d told them (Shmos 14:13), "For the way you have seen the Egyptians is [only] today, [but] you shall no longer continue to see them for eternity."

But there is one more place in the Torah where it is written that it is forbidden to go back to Egypt.

In the Torah portion of Ki Tavo, after all the curses mentioned in that portion, the Torah tells us that the worst possible thing that could happen is that "G-d shall bring them back to Egypt in ships, on the way I had said to you, 'You shall no longer see it.'" (Devarim 28:68) So here we have it that the Torah repeats this prohibition three times.

So now we can ask, why was G-d so worried that the Jewish Nation not go back to Egypt that He explicitly repeated the prohibition three times?

In the Desert

The answer is found in the Torah itself. In the Parshah of Achrei Mos, we are told: “Like the practice of the land of Egypt, in which you dwelled, you shall not do”—G-d didn’t want the Jewish Nation to learn from the corrupt acts of the Egyptians, and so He warned them not to go back there. At that time, Egypt was the world capital of idol worship, where they served false gods, engaged in immorality and so on. G-d didn’t want them going back there.

The same verse (Vayikra 18:3) continues: “And like the practice of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you shall not do,” on which Rashi comments, “[This verse] informs [us] that the deeds of the Egyptians and the Canaanites were more corrupt than those of all other nations, and moreover, that the [Egyptians residing in that] region [of Egypt] in which the Israelites had dwelt, were the most corrupt of all.”

Therefore, the Jewish Nation could not remain in Egypt—because they would be influenced by the immoral conduct of the Egyptians. They couldn’t be brought into the Land of Canaan either because the Canaanites’ behavior was more corrupt than those of all other nations—and so what did G-d do? He found a solution: He brought the Jewish Nation out to the desert.

And that’s the entire book of Bamidbar—which doesn’t translate to “Numbers” as the English version has it, but to “In the Desert.” In the first five Torah portions of Bamidbar, we are told about the start of the 40 years in the desert, and the last five portions tell us about the end of the 40 years.

So what we learn from all that is that the spiritual state of the Jewish Nation was not molded in the Land of Israel—they arrived there already molded and prepared to change the existence of the Land of Canaan into the Holy Land. Where was the Nation’s spiritual state molded? Where was the Jewish Nation born? Specifically in the desert—a desolate place where no one lives. And there, far from any other outside influence, specifically there was the Jewish Nation able to internalize that they are “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Man is Territorial

Maimonides writes (*Guide to the Perplexed*, Part II, Chap. 40) that “man is territorial”—meaning that no one can say that the environment has no influence on him.

For example, Ashkenazi synagogues tend to be similar in appearance to Christian houses of worship. On the other hand, synagogues built by North African Jewish immigrants in particular, and Sephardim in general, look more like mosques. Why is this so? Because where a person lives, whether by choice or by force, whether consciously or subconsciously, he or she is influenced by the surrounding environment.

And so the Torah was given specifically in a desert, a place where there are no distractions and nothing else—just “Israel and the King together.” The Jewish Nation experienced a 40-year disconnect from any contact with outside cultures, and thus merited to raise a new generation in the desert in an original way, without any influence from other cultures.

This concept is hinted in the Midrash. On the verse in Shir HaShirim (the Song of Songs), “Who is this coming up from the desert?” (Shir HaShirim 3:6), the Midrash says: “Elevation from the desert, Torah from the desert, the Sanhedrin from the desert, and prophecy from the desert” (Shir HaShirim Rabbah). Precisely from the desert was there able to emerge Torah, prophecy and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish “Supreme Court” of ancient times.

So what is the lesson for us?

Today is the holiday of the Giving of the Torah—and the Torah was given to us in the Sinai Desert.

The Rebbe says we, too, need to go out into the desert every day. For at least a few minutes every day, we need to disconnect from all worldly experiences and dedicate them to G-d, whether that be in prayer or Torah study. Regardless, take five minutes to turn off the phone and anything else that distract a person from concentrating and go into your personal desert. (Sichos Kodesh 5722, pg. 481.)

Good Yom Tov!