



## STAGES OF FREEDOM

**A**RE WE SEARCHING FOR FREEDOM? THEN THE TORAH WILL help us in our search. The Torah focuses on the pursuit of freedom, as we see in the story of the Jews in Egypt: how they suffered as slaves, and how they attained liberation. Then came their slow journey through the desert, eventually reaching the Promised Land.

All this did not take place in one single step. Freedom has many stages, and the journey through the desert was itself part of the process. When they left Egypt they were not yet ready for the highest levels of freedom. Forty years later they were still on a journey, and so are we...

This idea is expressed by a detail of the wording in the Sedra<sup>1</sup>. This is called Mas'ey, meaning 'Journeys', and it begins with a list of the forty two stopping places where the Jews camped during their years of travelling through the desert. Yet the Torah does not call them halting places, camp sites or anything similar, as would suit the name of a place where, for a while, the Jews stopped travelling. Instead it calls them 'Journeys', expressing the idea of leaving one place and coming to another.

A further point is the fact that the Torah text states: "These are the journeys of the Children of Israel through which they left the land of Egypt..."<sup>2</sup> One can ask a question about this. Surely they left Egypt at the very beginning? Why does the Torah speak of all forty two

stages as if each one was leaving Egypt?

The Torah wants to teach us, as suggested above, that the Jewish people did not leave Egypt in a single step. Each journey mentioned in the Torah was another stage in the long process of leaving Egypt and attaining freedom.

Further, the Torah is not just telling us something about the history of our ancestors in the remote past. It is also helping us to understand our own lives in the present.

We too are seeking freedom, are trying to escape from limitations. The Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, is very similar to the Hebrew word for limitations: *meytzarim*. The escape of our ancestors from Egypt thousands of years ago parallels our own attempts to transcend limitations today.

How exactly we define these limitations, our own individual "Egypt", will vary from person to person. For one it means dealing with external problems, arising from factors outside a person's direct control. For another it means the problem of inner conflict and struggle. For a third person it means the quest for spiritual freedom, transcending one's materialist, self-centred ego.

The teaching of the Sedra, telling us about the many 'journeys' from Egypt, is that we must be prepared for many different stages in attaining our goal. The first step towards freedom becomes another, more subtle form of limitation and slavery. When we succeed in escaping from that, and have reached the second stage of freedom - we discover that again we must strive for yet another level of liberty<sup>3</sup>.

Thus it goes on, step after step. Each time we are escaping from yet another aspect of our personal Egypt. It may seem an endless task. Yet in fact every step truly brings us closer to genuine fulfilment, as an individual, as part of the Jewish people, and as a genuine member of humanity. Every step forward brings us closer to the Promised Land.

1. Numbers chs. 33-36. 2. Numbers 33:1. 3. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.2, pp. 348-354.

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*SEDRA MAS'EY*

**JOURNEYS**

"It's your birthday soon, isn't it, Avigail?" Gila asked her cousin as they sat in her garden, sipping cold lemonade.

"That's right, I asked my parents last night and they said they'll make me a party. I'm really excited!"

"Do you remember what my sister Zehava told me on my birthday?" Gila asked.

"She said that I should make a good resolution for the next year of my life. Do you also want to do something like that?"

Avigail sighed. "I hate making resolutions. Anyway, doesn't it just come to a point - when a person's really old or something - that they're just perfect and don't need to improve themselves anymore?"

For a time the two girls were silent. Perhaps they were imagining being perfect, and no one telling them they had to improve.

"Weren't we learning something about that today in school?" Gila wondered. "Oh yes!" she continued. "We were learning about Sedra Mas'ey, which means journeys, journeys to get out of Egypt. Then Mrs Lerner asked us why we thought the Sedra was called journeys, in the plural, when the Jews only really made one journey to leave Egypt and then they were free."

“Yes, and she put a map on the interactive white-board, and we could see the first journey leaving Egypt, from Ramses going to a place called Succot. Then there were lots of other stopping places,” said Avigail.

“Then she explained that when the Jews left Egypt, they were on a very low level, and they had to keep improving themselves until they were on a level that they could enter the Holy Land!”

“Yes, I remember that,” Avigail said. “She said each stopping place was a kind of journey out of Egypt. Because on each journey the Jewish people were changing and improving, as if they were getting free from Egypt all over again.”

“Yes,” said Gila. “She said that we are also like that - a person has to keep improving and adding to themselves their whole life - you can’t just keep still, because there are always new challenges.

“I remember thinking that it’s true, just when you think you’re really good at being nice to everybody, a new girl comes into the class who you don’t get on with, or you get a new teacher who’s horrible, and you find it’s not so easy to feel Ahavat Yisrael, love for your fellow - at least as far as those people are concerned!”

“I know!” answered Avigail. “And even without those people, I always feel I can be nicer - like now - I should really go and get you some more lemonade because there’s a dead fly in yours, but I feel too lazy.”

Gila giggled and took both their glasses. “Oh well, I guess today it’s my Ahavat Yisrael which is going to improve - so I’ll get some more, for both of us.”

“Thank you. And at least that gives me something to think about for my upcoming birthday: a good resolution about Ahavat Yisrael!”

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