


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT
 שבת..... *for Friday nights*..... קדש
 Friday 4 January 2013 - 22 Tevet 5773
 Sedra Shemot

ETERNAL FREEDOM

FREEDOM AND SLAVERY IS THE THEME OF THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW BOOK OF THE TORAH which is begun this Shabbat: the Book of Exodus, called Shemot, which is also the name of the first Sedra¹. The family of Jacob had come to Egypt in order to obtain food during a lengthy famine. They settled there in comfort, farming their sheep, protected by their brother Joseph the Viceroy. They multiplied. In a few generations, instead of being a large family, they became a people.

Then, on account of Pharaoh's fear of the Jews, came the beginning of slavery. The Sages say this was a gradual process. Pharaoh began to make demands that people work for him, and most of the Jews agreed. Then the demands increased. Soon their original freedom was transformed into cruel slavery².

An interesting exception was the Tribe of Levi. From the very beginning they refused to accept Pharaoh's demands, and resisted his threats. Perhaps they felt there is no point in attempting to appease a tyrant. Eventually he will demand everything - and each step you make in appeasement, is a step closer to the brink.

This strategy worked. The Tribe of Levi was not enslaved. Rashi



In Loving Memory of Menashy ben Yechezkel Ezra ע"ה
 24 Tevet - Dedicated by his Family ש"י

points out that Moses and also his brother Aaron were able to come and go as they pleased. They were members of the Tribe of Levi and so they were free³. The Levites refused to give in. They knew they had a spiritual responsibility which could not be compromised.

Wasn't this a dangerous course to take? What if Pharaoh had decided to execute anyone who did not comply with the first stages of the slavery?

This is a decision that has had to be made many times in the history of our people. The Syrian Greeks tried to prohibit Jewish practice: the Maccabees successfully stood up to their pressure. In the later Roman Period, Rabbi Akiva taught Torah at a time when this was forbidden by the Romans. He was killed: but due to his example, the Torah lives on. Later, in the Middle Ages, most Jews resisted the repeated pressures to accept baptism.

The point at which we must refuse to give in varies from situation to situation. Throughout our history, including today, particularly as regards the international hostile stance towards Israel, we are often tempted that if we give in just a little bit more, the demands will cease, everything will be all right. But we must resist.

The Rambam (whose Yartzit was on Wednesday, 20 Tevet) says that in a sense, we can all be in the category of Levi⁴. The Lubavitcher Rebbe comments that this means that, like the Levites in Egypt, we all have the power to transcend every pressure⁵.

How should we do this? Let us take guidance from the Rebbe's ancestor, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad-Lubavitch, whose 200th Yahrzeit will be on Sunday (24 Tevet). Observance of Mitzvot, as described in his Code of Law⁶, and study of Torah, including its spiritual dimension, expressed in books like his *Tanya*, which leads to genuine love of one's fellow, are the way to connect intimately with G-d. This gives us the power to stand up for ourselves, despite any pressures. Thus we discover our reality as Jews, and as human beings: our eternal freedom.

1. Exodus 1:1- 6:1. 2. See Ex. 1:7-14, and Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Shemot sec. 163. 3. Rashi to Ex. 5:4. 4. See Rambam, Laws of Shemitah and Yovel, 13: 13. 5. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.2, p.488. 6. It is known as *Shulchan Aruch haRav*.

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SEDRA SHEMOT

CHALLENGES

“Why is Daddy looking so worried, Mummy?” Sammy asked his Mother. His father had just left the table, looking very disturbed, to answer the phone.

“Daddy’s having some problems at work,” his mother explained. “One of the projects failed somehow, and Daddy’s worried he’s going to lose a lot of money. But don’t worry, Sammy, we’ll be okay,” she ended.

Sammy sighed. “I don’t understand this world” he said. “Why are things so difficult - everyone seems to have so many problems, trying to make enough money, and to be happy. Why couldn’t G-d make a world where everyone has a simple easy life with no problems?”

“That’s a very difficult question Sammy - I really can’t answer you that. But, I think that we all need some challenges in life - we might find this world very boring if there were none. In fact, there’s a very interesting verse in this week’s Sedra Shemot. Do you know what Shemot is about?”

“Hmmm - isn’t it about the Children of Israel being made slaves to Pharaoh, and how he wants to throw all Jewish

baby boys into the river Nile, and about how the baby Moses is born, and how Moses grows up and comes to set his people free?”

“Wow! You really do know it, Sammy!” His mother was impressed. Then she continued: “Well, the verse I was thinking about says that as the Egyptians afflicted the Jews, the more they grew. That means that the more the cruel Egyptians caused the Jews to suffer, the more G-d caused them to keep on multiplying.

“We can learn a very good point from this, I think - that when people suffer or face challenges, they often grow at the same time. For example, they may become a better person. Of course - this is because G-d is helping them overcome their difficulty. But the person has to make the first step.”

Sammy looked thoughtful. “I know what you mean,” he said gloomily. “School is a bit like that - you suffer a lot, but I suppose you grow and learn a lot through it. “

His mother laughed at this. “Oh, Sammy! Surely school is not that bad!” she protested.

“Yes, or rather no, but you understand what I mean,” Sammy said. “Anyway, I think I see your point - we need to have some challenges in this world, because they help us grow, just like the Jews in Egypt grew, despite Pharaoh’s being nasty to them.”

Sammy’s mother nodded. She herself should remember that, she thought.

“Well,” said Sammy, I think I’ll go and tackle the challenges I have for homework..”

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