



LEVELS OF FREEDOM

JEWISH TEACHING SPEAKS OF THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL and the history of the Jewish people as described in the Torah. The grand events of the slavery in Egypt and the Exodus recounted in the Sedra¹ can take place within the personal world of each man or woman living today.

One example is the Plagues, prominent in the Sedra. On Passover, reading the Haggada, we chant a list of them, spilling out a drop of wine for each. Then the Haggada recalls a discussion about them between two ancient Sages, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Eliezer says that each Plague actually consisted of four Plagues. Rabbi Akiva says not four, but five. Sitting at the Seder table, reciting from the wine-stained Haggada, we hurry on towards the Matza, the bitter herbs and the meal. But what are these two Sages telling us today?

It is at this point that we can discover something about the process of leaving Egypt on an inner, personal level.

The function of the Plagues in history was to break the negative power of Egypt and of Pharaoh, the tyrant who enslaved the Jewish people. Inwardly, the equivalent of the Plagues is our attempt to break through our own situation of enslavement. Who or what enslaves us? Our own Evil Desire, our own Self-centredness.

In this inner enslavement there are four levels, according to Rabbi Eliezer, and five according to Rabbi Akiva. Understanding that, we ourselves are better able to internalise the ‘Plagues’ in order to release our inner self.

The first level is when the Evil Desire has so much power over us that it can force us to do something wrong². This is the plain and simple level of daily life, at which a person struggles to gain self-control.

The second, more subtle level of enslavement is when the person does the right thing. But he is always worried about what other people are thinking about him. He is trapped by his own concept of society.

A third level of enslavement is yet more subtle. The person has a sense of freedom, and stands above the opinions of other people. Yet he remains limited by his own intellect and understanding. He or she remains cold, without passion. By contrast Jewish teaching demands from us the ability to go beyond this limitation: “You should love G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might”. There are situations which demand something more than mere cool rationality.

The fourth level is that the person can go beyond understanding. He or she acts with self-sacrifice. As far as Rabbi Eliezer is concerned, this is the highest level attainable.

But Rabbi Akiva can still see a possible problem. The person may continue to be limited by their own sense of righteousness: “I am sacrificing myself! Aren’t I wonderful?!” For Rabbi Akiva the fifth level of freedom is when the person is totally free of self³.

Then he or she can truly be devoted to the service of G-d, bringing Redemption ultimately not just to themselves but to the whole world.

1. Exodus 6:2 – 9:35. 2. In Jewish teaching there are three levels of human activity which are subject to direct and constant control: action, speech and thought. 3. Based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 16 p.92.

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SEDRA VA'ERA

DRY ICE

“Around 1835 the French chemist Charles Thilorier published the first account of the formation of dry ice, frozen carbon dioxide. It is called dry ice because as it thaws it moves from solid to gas without become liquid in between”.

The room was quiet as the boys in Ben’s class sat and listened to their teacher Mr Levy explaining ideas about dry ice. He also showed some slides with pictures of dry ice being used for a variety of purposes. “Dry ice can be used for many things,” explained Mr Levy. “In particular, for refrigerated packaging and for making ice cream”.

Usually, the reference to ice cream would set everyone thinking about having some, but on that cold January day the direction of thought was different. Ben was wondering about different uses he would have for dry ice, if he could get hold of some. For example, he was imagining what effect it might have if he put some in the fish tank in his room.

Later that day, on their way home, Ben’s mind was still thinking about dry ice, and also about other things he had heard that day in the various lessons. One of them had been about the Jewish people in Egypt many years ago.

“Moses told the people that he had come to set them free,” he said to David, “and yet they did not want to go. They were angry that Moses had begun interfering, and that Pharaoh had made them work harder. This made Moses very upset.”

“You would think” said David “if they were going through such a hard time in Egypt than of course they would want to be free. They would see the extra work as a temporary difficulty but in the end there would be freedom”.

“Imagine being so cold that you can’t even become excited” Ben said. “It’s as if they were all frozen”.

“Yes, Egypt was like one big pot of dry ice which managed to freeze all the Jewish people” David said.

“So how did the Jewish people ever go free if they were so frozen up?” Ben asked, wondering.

“Well,” David said, “Hashem sent the ten plagues to warm them up”.

“So you mean the plagues had an effect on the Jewish people as well as on the Egyptians. They made them realise the power of Hashem, that He can do anything”.

“Yes,” said David. “That’s it. The plagues warmed them up so they weren’t frozen any more.”

“So now dry ice not only can be used for packaging food and making ice cream” Ben said “but it can also be used to help us understand the Sedra”.

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