

PARSHA SHEMOT

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SUFFERINGS ARE PART OF THE REDEMPTION

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

Moses returned to the L-RD and said, ‘My Lord, why have You done evil to this people, and why have You sent me?’ ... The L-RD said to Moses, ‘Now you will see what I shall do to Pharaoh, for through a strong hand will he send them out, and with a strong hand will he drive them from his land’” (Ex 5:22; 6:1).

How can one imagine that Moses, the faithful shepherd, “the man of G-d” (Deut 33:1), could have spoken in such a manner to G-d? And if this mission was to have been a source of harm for the Children of Israel, there was no doubt a reason for it. Is G-d not the “Cause of causes”?

It was because Moses thought that the Children of Israel were completely without hope and no longer even thought of the deliverance. In having announced the news of their soon-to-be liberation, he had renewed their faith: “And the people believed, and they heard that the L-RD had remembered the Children of Israel and that He saw their affliction, and they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves” (Ex 4:31). Now, having understood the severity of Pharaoh’s new measures, their despair and disappointment increased even more.

Let us imagine a man beset from all over with problems (overloaded in debt, not being able to eat or sleep properly, etc.) who tries his last chance and buys a lottery ticket. A few days later he is told that he just won first prize, namely an enormous amount of money. He begins to dream already: A beautiful home, servants, marrying off his children, paying off debts, you name it. Then imagine that all of a sudden he’s told that there was a mistake and that he’s not the winner! Wouldn’t it have been better not to have told him that he won in the first place, rather than to cause him such great disappointment?

It was this state of mind that the Children of Israel found themselves in. They had

been told that they would go from slavery to freedom and that their lives would finally change, then all of a sudden Pharaoh heaped upon them even more painful work than before. Completely disappointed, they turned towards Moses and Aaron and said, “you have made our very scent abhorrent in the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his servants, to place a sword in their hands to murder us!” (Ex 5:21).

“It would have been better had I not told them the news of the deliverance,” Moses said to G-d. “I should only have announced this to them after their punishment was over and they had repaired the sparks of holiness” (see Ohr HaChayim, Gen 49:9).

These remarks were certainly cause enough for Moses to be reprimanded for having had, contrary to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, doubts concerning G-d’s plans (Sanhedrin 111a; Shemot Rabba 5:22). Yet G-d wasn’t really angry with him, for He knew that it was only the love that Moses had for Israel that caused him to say such things, and that he was ready to sacrifice his life for them.

“You will see עתה [now]” G-d told Moses. Now as we have seen (Bereshith Rabba 21:6; 38:14) the term עתה always denotes the concept of repentance, as it is written, “עתה[now] O Israel, what does the L-RD, your G-d, require of you? Only to fear the L-RD, your G-d” (Deut 10:12). In other words, the sufferings that the Egyptians inflicted on them drove them to repent, and they finished by repairing the sparks of holiness. Our Sages teach us: “Only suffering atone for sins and leads to repentance” (Menachot 53b) and “G-d inflicts suffering on those He loves” (Berachot 5a). A person can therefore return to Him and can reach the Celestial Throne (Yoma 86b; Pesikta Rabba 45:9). Only G-d can thus help him to triumph over his evil inclination (Sukkah 32b; Kiddushin 30b).

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In Your Name

A Teaching of the Maggid of Dubno

“My Lord, why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he did evil to this people, but You did not rescue Your people” (Ex 5:22-23).

When Hashem revealed Himself for the first time to our teacher Moses, He told him that He had chosen him to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt.

Next, Hashem ordered Moses to go speak to Pharaoh. The Egyptian king was to let the Jewish people go to the desert to offer sacrifices to Hashem. Yet Pharaoh refused not only to let the Jews serve Hashem, but also stopped providing them with straw for producing the bricks that they were forced to make.

Contrary to what Moses expected, the Jews were therefore forced to work even harder than before. So Moses turned towards Hashem and asked Him why the people were suffering even more since he had appeared before Pharaoh. If Moses had not added “in Your Name,” his statement would still have made sense. So why did he include this term in his remarks?

The Maggid of Dubno answers this question with a parable.

Paul and John, two extremely wealthy men, lived in the same city. Each lived in a vast home where numerous cooks and servants bustled about. They each owned all that a person could dream of, yet neither of them was happy because each wanted to be known as the richest and most respected man in the city. Their egotistical desires and feelings of superiority gnawed at them so much that they couldn't find peace in their lives.

John even wished that Paul would lose his fortune so that he could be the richest man in the land. They hated each other so much that no one dared to pronounce the name of one in the presence of the other.

Tom, one of Paul's servants, was coming back from the market one day carrying a basket of fresh fruit. On the way he met John, who took advantage of the situation to express his hatred for Paul. When Tom passed nearby, John violently pushed him to the ground. Tom lay in the mud moaning as he rubbed his shoulder, yet the humiliation that he felt to have been so roughly treated made him jump to his feet.

“Do you know who I am?” he shouted. “I work for Mr. Paul, the richest and most powerful man in the city. When he hears of this, he'll have your skin – you'll see!”

“What? The richest in the city? The most powerful? I'll show you right now who's the real boss in this city.”

And so he jumped on poor Tom, pummeled him with punches and then left him unconscious by the side of the road. Passers-by later brought the unconscious young servant back to his home.

When Tom presented himself before Paul, before he had time to explain what happened to him, Paul asked him about his scars and bruises.

“What happened?” asked a surprised and worried Paul. “Why the swollen eye and the bandage around your hand?”

Tom then recounted the entire story.

“Perhaps he didn't know that you worked for me,” Paul suggested.

Tom was waiting for this question in order to arouse a feeling of vengeance in Paul. He then spoke, carefully watching what he was about to say.

“He didn't know? Of course he knew who I was! And when I mentioned that I worked for you, he hit me even harder! I even warned him that he should watch himself because you would do the same to him.”

Paul's blood began to boil. Tom was only an excuse for the hate that smoldered between these two rivals for a long time. He grew white with anger.

“Wait a little,” he thundered, “and you'll see what happens to him!”

Paul kept his word. He planned a trap on John and took vengeance on him a hundred fold.

Our teacher Moses knew that the Jews did not yet possess enough merit for Hashem to save them from the decrees of the cruel-hearted Pharaoh.

However, the people of Israel were under his protection and responsibility. He loved them more than he loved himself. And while knowing that the Jews had not yet performed enough mitzvot to obtain their deliverance, our teacher Moses was still determined to find a way to put an end to their suffering.

This is precisely why Moses said, in his remarks to G-d, that in speaking to Pharaoh he said “in Your Name” – in Hashem's Name, as if Moses had wanted to say, “Even if we, the people of Israel, don't merit to be saved, remove us from Egypt for Your Name; in other words, to save Your Honor.”

And so Hashem replied, “Now you will see what I shall do to Pharaoh, for through a strong hand will he send them out, and with a strong hand will he drive them from his land” (Ex 6:1).

Eishet Chayil

Shabbat Candles – Part IV

The Time for Lighting

20. One should not light the Shabbat candles when it is clearly daylight and there is still more than an hour and fifteen minutes before the stars come out, meaning before Plag Mincha.

21. The proper time to light the Shabbat candles is about twenty minutes before sundown.

22. If, for whatever reason, one has delayed in lighting the candles, yet is absolutely certain that sundown has not yet occurred, one may light. However, when one is not certain of the exact time of Shekia (sundown), one must absolutely not risk transgressing Shabbat.

Our saintly and venerated teacher Rabbi Yaakov Abihssira, may his memory be blessed, was born in Tafilalet, Morocco in the year 5567 (1807). At the time he was born, a great brightness illuminated his room, and his father Rabbi Messod and the entire community were joyous. They knew that a child prodigy had just been born.

In growing up, Rabbi Yaakov showed a particular interest, and a seldom-seen aptitude, for Torah study. His father initiated him in the different disciplines and the young man showed a great ability for understanding. Rabbi Yaakov soon grew to adulthood and his love for Torah increased ever more. He quickly became a Kabbalist and saintly man renown for his great piety. He slept very little and would spend the entire week, night and day, in the Beth Hamidrash devoting himself to the study of our Holy Torah. He would leave only on the eve of Shabbat to go home. When necessary, he would journey from city to city to collect funds for the destitute and sick. Even when bothered in the middle of the night, he would never complain. He was a generous man and his home was open to all who visited. People came from everywhere to consult with him, and he was ever careful to ensure that peace reigned between the members of his community. He had a sharp sense of justice, even if his decisions appeared at times surprising. Thus a rabbi who was staying with him for an entire year had the impression that Rabbi Yaakov was judging cases in ways that hardly conformed to the Din (Jewish Law), and this greatly surprised him. Yet in every case, the truth suddenly dawned upon him and it turned out that Rabbi Yaakov had correctly judged from the outset. It is said that the truth was shown to him from Heaven, and that G-d had steered him clear of the least trouble.

Rabbi Yaakov Abihssira was infused with Ruach Hakodesh (the Holy Spirit) and had the power to perform miracles. Examples of such are numerous and are illustrated by authentic recounts that have been transmitted across time. His body, people say, was connected to the earth, but his spirit sailed about in the upper worlds.

Rabbi Yaakov Abihssira authored twelve books. Some find an allusion to these works in the verse that states, "The sons of Jacob [Yaakov] were twelve" (Gen 35:22). Among his books are commentaries on the Torah: Pituhe Hotam, Mahsof Halavan, and Levona Zacca; Responsum: Yoru Michpatcha Leyaakov; a collection of Drashot: Doresh Tov; and works on Kabbalah: Bigde Haaserad and Guinze Hamalech. All of these were printed after the death of the Tzaddik.

One day his son, Rabbi Messod, asked his father for permission to publish his works. Rabbi Yaakov replied, "My son, you will not print them until after I join the next world. There I will see if they have G-d's consent, and I will let you know in a dream." In fact, after the death of the Tzaddik, Rabbi Messod saw his father in a dream, at which point his father asked him to publish his works, for he then knew that they had been approved by G-d.

His love for the Holy Land ran deep. On several occasions he expressed the desire to leave everything and go there, but the community never wanted to separate from the Tzaddik. When he had reached an advanced age, he informed his entourage that the time had come for him to move. He felt compelled as by an overwhelming force, yet wasn't sure that he could realize his dream. He managed to travel all the way to Egypt, to the city of Damanhour (near Alexandria). This place would be the last step of his long journey. Once, at the outset of Shabbat, while he was preparing to recite Kiddush, a candle suddenly went out without apparent reason. He then said, "Fine! May the soul return from where it came and may the body go to where it should." Those who heard these remarks were perplexed.

The next morning Rabbi Yaakov fell ill. His condition became worse during the entire week that followed, to the point that he found himself on death's door by Thursday. His host, Mr. Saroussi, had a doctor come by, a pious man, who announced that, unfortunately, there was nothing that could be done for the Rabbi and he would certainly pass away that night. When the doctor left, Rabbi Yaakov got up and asked his host what he had said. Mr. Saroussi, however, didn't want to reveal the doctor's remarks to him, but on the Rabbi's insistence he eventually did.

"I must still live until just after Shabbat," Rabbi Yaakov said in correcting the doctor's prognosis, "and I have certain things to do." Friday morning, when the doctor returned to confirm the death (for he was convinced that the Rabbi was already dead), he was stunned to see the Rabbi (clearly better) with a Torah book in his hand.

Sunday morning, numerous merchants in the city came to see him for a blessing. He told them, "Today you will not go to work, for the time has come for me to leave this world." Then he looked at them one by one and called out two Rabbis among them, asking them if they were prepared to take care of his body after his death. He warned them, however, that it wouldn't be long before he died. The two learned men agreed. And so Rabbi Yaakov began to recite the Song of Songs, Vidui, and other prayers to ask forgiveness for his sins. He was then asked if he wished to be buried in Damanhour, and he agreed on condition that it be in a Jewish cemetery. Finally, he recited the Shema and entrusted his soul to G-d. He passed away on Sunday, Tevet 20, 5640 (January 4, 1880).

The following epitaph is engraved on his tombstone:

Tombstone

Choice Cut Stone

Pain for this Splendor

That Fades Away in the Earth

The Great Man from Maghreb

Exceptional Teacher

Patriarch of Law

Holy Kabbalist, Pious and Saintly

Leaned in the Sciences

Revealed and Hidden

Our Teacher, Our Rabbi

Crown of our Head

Diadem of our Glory

Rabbi Yaakov Abihssira

May the Memory of the Righteous and the Saintly be Blessed

May His Merit Protect Us

Called to the Celestial Court

The 20th of Tevet in the Year 5640

May His Soul be Bound to the Light of Eternity