

Beshalach: Our Obligation to Jewish History

By: Rabbi Daniel Fridman

Citing the well-known midrash, Rashi interprets a word in second verse in this week's sedra, chamushim, as conveying the astonishing and tragic fact that only twenty percent of the descendants of Jacob actually emerged from Egypt. What is certainly less widely known is the fact that the midrash Rashi cites presents three other views, each bleaker than the previous one, which contend that a mere two percent (1/50), 0.2 percent (1/500) or .02 percent (1/5000) Jews left Egypt.

In this dramatic way, the midrash is highlighting the idea that the centuries long bondage in Egypt was not, for the vast majority of our people, a reversible experience. They became ensnared in the Egyptian cultural morass, and, when the time, came, were no longer interested in redemption. Indeed, Rashi himself alludes to the concept that the basic criterion for redemption was nothing other than the desire to leave Egypt itself. Despite the conditions of enslavement, there were apparently many Jews, the vast majority, for whom the self-awareness of a separate and distinct cultural identity had been totally vitiated when that exalted night of redemption finally arrived.

In reflecting upon this midrashic tradition, it is hard for one not to experience a kind of profound sadness at the thought of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah, and above all, Rachel, crying as she does for her lost children, coming to terms with this anemic rate of redemption. And yet, whatever degree of tragedy this represents, how much greater a tragedy is the modern day scourge of assimilation, in the following sense: if we conceptualize redemption from Egypt as the formative moment of our national existence, we might think of those who did not emerge as never fully having integrated into the Jewish people, akin to Yishmael to Esav. Yet, given the fact that our brothers and sisters here in the United States of America are the heirs to the same glorious heritage we call our own, members of the same "nation who survived the sword", the descendants of those who suffered so much, were martyred literally by the millions, their disappearance from the fold is an incalculably greater national tragedy. Oftentimes, I think to myself, these are the grandchildren of Rashi himself, of Maimonides and Nachmanides, of the Gaon of Vilna. I can sense their expectant look, silently questioning all of us if we have forgotten their children.

Thankfully, there are many wonderful organizations whose *raison d'être* is this very issue, staffed by profoundly committed individuals who have consecrated their lives to try and make good on Isaiah's vision, 'peace unto you, peace unto, those who are far and those who are close.' Yet, the organization efforts do not absolve, and, candidly, are no replacement for, the personal obligation each of us carries in this respect. Maimonides argued that a Jew whose attitude towards Torah was self-centered, who did not care deeply about the spiritual welfare of her fellow Jewess, had internalized precisely the opposite message which the Torah had attempted to instill in us. We all have individuals in our immediate and extended circles teetering on the edge of assimilation upon whom we may be uniquely positioned to make a

positive impression, in a dignified, respectful, and inspiring manner, without resorting to the kind of crass, invasive, or unwelcome advance that would serve nothing but the opposite effect.

When the redemptive moment arrives, let us hope that our numbers are far greater than even that most optimistic interpretation of chamushim. Let us recognize our sacred obligation to each and every member of our faith community, irrespective of denomination and personal observance, and, above all, our obligation to Jewish history itself.