

This Week In Torah *Vaera*

Redemption is a big concept in Jewish thinking. It is the physical act of moving back to *Eretz Yisrael*. It is a major theme in our Passover seder where we drink 4 glasses of wine as we recall the 4 different times in this week's *parasha* that God speaks of redeeming our ancestors. In Exodus 6:6-7, we read: "I will bring you out;" "I will deliver you;" "I will redeem you;" and "I will take you." Redemption is part of our daily liturgy – after we recite the *V'ahavta*, which ends with a Divine promise of redemption—we recite the *Geulah*/redemption section of the service which culminates with the reciting of *Mi Chamocha*/who is like God from Exodus 15. Then in the daily *Amidah*, it is the seventh blessing of the 18 prayers which asks God to rescue us.

While the concept of redemption is often associated with a physical movement to rescue and restore the Jewish people, many Jewish theologians followed a more mystical understanding that this can have a metaphysical connotation to this as well. Thru prayer, meditation, and acts of loving kindness, we can ascend to spiritual heights where our souls can transcend to new spiritual heights—which is a type of redemption. *Shabbat* is the perfect vehicle for such a redemption. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world."

Let me expand on this concept. In the mystical teaching, the *sitra achra* is defined as the evil side of things. It is believed that it is the outer covering of divine sparks that are trapped in the universe. If we can crack thru these *kleipot*/sacred vessels, we can tame evil urges and release holiness into the universe. Rabbi Heschel's teachings encourage ritual practices to help us see the sanctity within our world. Like the Jews in Egypt, we are enslaved by these husks that hide spiritual revelation from us. We are worshipping gods of money, technology, social status, etc. rather than the Holy One. As Rabbi Jeff Salkin sarcastically says about the conflict between our kids' activities and Sabbath worship: "The god of soccer is a very demanding deity!"

The Slominer Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky [1911-2000], taught that the Exodus description of redemption is an allegorical road map for making *Shabbat*. It culminates with a fifth statement of bringing our ancestors into the land. Rabbi Jonathan Slater interpreted the Rebbe's teaching this way: "Although R. Shalom Noach identifies five stages in the process of redemption, in keeping with the terms in the verses from Ex.6, he seems most interested in the first, and the last (two). Surely, the first stage, as he describes it, is the most complete form of slavery and servitude. In that state, there is no consciousness of one's self; no capacity to imagine any other condition, any other possibility. The image he employs to describe it is striking in its power: we were like a fetus in the womb of an animal. We were fully dependent on the husk of Egypt, the Sitra Achra, drawing nourishment through our umbilical cord. We knew nothing beyond the sounds of the mother's body, whatever light or sensation might come through her belly. This is the lowest level of servitude, the place from which we begin the process of liberation."

Let's now apply this-- "I will bring you out" -- is our mental awareness that Shabbat is approaching. Schedules cleared, challah bought, table set, etc.

"I will deliver you"—is the act of bringing the self to Shabbat; turning off the cellphone, breathing a spiritual sigh as Shabbat candles are lit.

"I will redeem you" -- is marked by the rituals that we perform. Not only those involving blessings, but the ones we refrain from doing as the Talmud marked out by the 39 categories of work.

"I will take you" -- is the liturgy of the Sabbath day.

The fifth verse from Exodus that marks our spiritual redemption, "I will bring you into the land which I swore to give...." [Exodus 4:6] is what Jewish tradition calls the *Seudah Shlishi* /the Third Meal of the day when Jews gather to eat, sing a dstudy as a community before *Havdallah*. For the Slominer Rebbe, this act was as if he was Jerusalem at the entrance to the holy Temple.

For us, spiritual redemption should be viewed as a step by step process that brings us to a kinship with God and each other. Redemption might be defined physically but it also can be a mindset.

SHABBAT SHALOM!