

Parashat Beshalach, Rabbi James Proops

The *parasha* opens “...וַיִּהְיֶה יְיָ בְּשַׁלַּח פְּרָעֹה אֶת־הָעָם... - Now when Pharaoh sent out the people...”. This seems to be a very strange way to describe *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt. Rather than highlighting that *Bnei Yisrael* had been taken out by the Hand of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* for the great purpose of becoming *Am Yisrael*, who would go on to receive the Torah at *Har Sinai* and settle in *Eretz Yisrael*, the *pasuk* seems to imply that the departing from *Mitzrayim* was in fact at the behest of Paro. Highlighting the role of Paro insinuates that there was something inherently necessary in his role of sending them out, whereas we would have assumed that they did not need to be sent, but rather would be running to freedom! We generally have an image of *Bnei Yisrael* leaving *Mitzrayim* inspired by all that they had witnessed in in the preceding months, a people who gladly accepted the new *Mitzvot* of Hashem and who now recognized the greatness and Holiness of God as well as their purpose and mission in this world. How does all this fit with the connotation that Paro had to actually send them away?

Following the explanations of the Malbim we can see in the opening verses of *Parashat Beshalach*, the Torah uses two different words to make reference to the Jewish People. These words are used very specifically to describe two different groups that existed, and will always exist, within *Bnei Yisrael*. First there is “*Am*”, the ‘rank and file’ of the Jewish People, and then there are those referred to as *Bnei Yisrael*, which connotes the leaders and those who are purpose driven. In essence, we have the leaders and the followers. The “*Am*”, at this point in the Exodus, did not fully understand what was going on; they were not driven by a distinct purpose but they were following the leaders. They were following Moshe Rabbeinu and going along with the rest of the People. If it had not been for the momentum, left

to their own devices and convictions, they may well have decided not to upset the status quo and continue living in their current conditions and existence. These people needed a push from Paro himself to leave *Mitzrayim*, he literally had to send them out of the country. Whereas there were also those amongst the people who were turned on and attuned to that which was taking place. They left *Mitzrayim* not only willingly and joyfully, but with a very certain sense of purpose and direction for where their destiny lay, and in this context this group is referred to as *Bnei Yisrael*.

This distinction becomes clearer with a closer analysis of the opening *pasukim*. The Torah uses the reference “*Am*” three times, describing first how they were sent out by Paro and then twice more reflecting the concern that if they faced war with the *Plishtim* “פְּנֵי־יִנְחָם הָעַם בְּרֵאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרַיִם” - Perhaps the people will reconsider when they see war and they will return to Egypt”. We can understand that for the members of the Jewish People who did not hold steadfast conviction in their new higher purpose nor had fully embraced a more intimate relationship with Hashem, returning to Egypt could be a real option. However the Torah continues that “וְהָמָשִׁים עָלָו בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם” - The Children of Israel were armed when they went up from Egypt”, referring to the group who understood why they were leaving and where they were going. They were armed in a sense because they were ready to fight for their destiny as well as armed with a belief and recognition that they were the Chosen People being led by Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

That there exists within *Klal Yisrael*, as well as wider society, these two groups is not a novel idea or new revelation to us. There has always been and will always be those who are driven to forge ahead, leading by example and demonstrating their conviction through action. Similarly there is always a group, often larger in

number, that is more apathetic, less inclined to bring about change but happy to go along with what they are told and where they are led. The question that each of us must face is whether we want to be considered amongst the “*Am*” or “*Bnei Yisrael*”. In specific reference to the Jewish Community, we approach a crossroads in community involvement and affiliation. As we approach a year of restrictions, ‘stay at home’ orders and quarantines, the impact these have had on community engagement, shul-life and our connection to Jewish institutions and Synagogues has been devastating. With the continued vaccination rollout and the hope that the numbers of cases and deaths will decrease greatly, we will all have to make a decision. Will we be part of *Bnei Yisrael* who help rebuild and reshape our community so that we can continue our higher purpose of communal engagement, education and inspiration, or will be happy to sit back and participate as part of the “*Am*”, content to be led by those who recognize the importance of the tasks ahead and who are willing to lead? When the time comes to leave our homes will we recognize it as a redemption and great opportunity or will we leave hesitantly and require being sent on our way?

Shabbat Shalom