

Emor, 5780 – Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יוסי כל המענג את השבת נותנין לו נחלה בלי מצרים

"R' Yochanan said in the name of R' Yose: One who delights in the Sabbath will enjoy a portion without bounds." -- Shabbat 118a

While so-called homographs of the English language -- such as bass (the fish) and bass (the instrument) -- are likely the products of convention and coincidence, the Divine language of Hebrew contains no such accidents. In a language composed by the Almighty Himself, any linguistic connection must be presumed to be filled with deep meaning. It is thus not insignificant that in the Hebrew language, the word "Mitzrayim" (Egypt) is spelled exactly the same as the word "Metzarim" (limits / boundaries).

Mitzrayim denotes not only the geographic location of our servitude, but also represents a spiritual enslavement to "Metzarim," a mentality of limitations and boundaries. Egypt personified a polytheistic world view with no absolute power, thereby bound by the "limits" of nature and human agency. As Pharaoh put it bluntly, "לא ידעתי את ה'" -- "I do not know Hashem" (Shemot 5:2). The notion of the miraculous was scoffed at, presumed to be no different than an optical illusion or sleight of hand. Things are the way they are, and don't expect them to change. You are a slave. Don't hope. Don't dream. There's nothing anyone or anything can do about it.

When we say G-d "took us out of Mitzrayim," we do not only mean that He took us out of the physical Egypt. Rather, G-d also extricated us from the mentality of "Metzarim," teaching us that the Jewish people ultimately transcends the boundaries and limits imposed by nature, statistics, and habit. Indeed, the climax of the Exodus occurred when we reached the Red Sea -- the most literal symbol of an indomitable boundary -- and we saw that boundary melt away before our eyes, with our jaws dropped. The miraculous history of the Jewish people attests to this truth -- from Yetziyat Mitzrayim to 1967 and beyond -- that perceived boundaries are never insurmountable when we perceive the hand of G-d in human events. To be a Jew means to live a life of constant awe, wonder, and hope that situations can improve, even in the face of the most formidable of barriers.

Reflecting on the past two months, there is something undeniably unsettling about seeing an entire world turned upside down so quickly. Everything in our society that we previously thought was fixed and untouchable crumbled, literally, overnight. Professional sports seasons were canceled. The subways in New York were intentionally shut down for the first time in their history. Even Benjamin Franklin's quip about the inevitability of taxes was debunked (at least temporarily). And yet, without at all diminishing the suffering this experience has caused, there is something deeply inspiring about this transformation. The recognition that nothing in our world is quite as unscalable as we might have imagined brings the simultaneous possibility that the barriers that we face in our own lives are also not insurmountable. That our own personal "Metzarim," longstanding and deep-seated struggles and problems that had always seemed immutable and permanent, may also be changeable, with the help of the Almighty.

Anyone who's ever struggled with anything in life knows very well the basic human tendency to give up. This phenomenon cuts across all areas of life: people who have dated for many years without finding a partner may reach a point where they give up on ever finding someone. People who have struggled with chronic illness for years without relief cannot imagine living a life devoid of pain. People who have failed at job after job begin to assume they're not qualified for anything. There comes a point where a person has just had it, and it is quite understandable to throw up one's hands in defeat -- one can never be judged for doing so. And yet, while it is true that we are strictly forbidden to rely on miracles and are commanded to be pragmatic and logical in how we lead our lives, Yetziat Mitzrayim reminds us that we must balance this pragmatism with a healthy sense of everlasting hope. In most situations, your situation can still change, even if it hasn't for years. Don't give up on trying. G-d has liberated us from a world of Meitzarim, and sometimes we just need to hang in there to see His salvation.

Perhaps this explains why Shabbat, along with all the festivals mentioned in this week's Torah portion, is "זכר ליציאת מצרים" -- in commemoration of Yetziat Mitzrayim. The festivals ("Moadim" means "meetings") are times for us to "meet" Hashem: to step away from the limited physical world and reconnect with the deeper Truth that underlies all of reality. When we do that, we are reminded that there are really no limitations before the Almighty, and we are renewed with hope and belief in new possibilities. And it is precisely through this realization that we merit the blessing of our Sages, "כל המענג את השבת נותנין לו נחלה בלי מצרים" "one who delights in the Sabbath is granted a portion without boundaries."