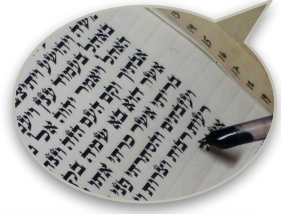




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot

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Oppression Brings Us Close

By Dani Loren

The greatest escape attempts often end in a long, happy, and peaceful life. At least, that's how the movies put it. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, when Andy Dufresne actualizes his long-awaited, meticulously crafted escape plan, it is not followed by a long game of hide and seek. Rather, Mr. Dufresne pulls off his epic plan without any hiccups, leading him to a life of freedom.

Naturally, one can only imagine the sheer terror that Bnei Yisrael felt when they looked up and saw Pharaoh approaching. After witnessing Hashem's might against Egypt, Bnei Yisrael must have assumed that they were heading straight to freedom, leaving Pharaoh and slavery behind. Seeing Pharaoh caused Bnei Yisrael to become tremendously frightened that they thought Moshe had led them out to the wilderness to kill them:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הַמִּבְלִי אֵין־קְבָרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לָמוּת בַּמִּדְבָּר מֵהַזֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ
לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם:

And they said to Moshe, "Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?" (Shemot 14:11)

While their fright and astonishment were logical, why was Bnei Yisrael so taken aback? What exactly transpired that caused them to greatly doubt Hashem? In the preceding verse, something abnormal happened:

וּפָרְעָה הִקְרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲנִה מִצְרַיִם נֹסֵעַ אֹחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד
וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְיָ:

And Pharaoh brought close, and the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to Hashem. (14:10)

When a king of great stature declares war on a nation, he is seldom leading the charge. Instead, a great general or commander will lead the soldiers out to battle. Rashi points out that this was not the case here. The words *וּפָרְעָה הִקְרִיב* directly translate to *and Pharaoh brought close*. Rashi explains that "[Pharaoh] made himself come near—he forced himself to go in front of [his soldiers]." Why exactly is Pharaoh leading the charge? And furthermore, what is the significance of this act?

After experiencing the plagues firsthand, Pharaoh was quite familiar with Hashem's power. Yet he came face to face with Bnei Yisrael, ready to fight against Hashem. Since Bnei Yisrael were only newly freed, they still had a slave mentality. When seeing the person responsible for their suffering, Bnei Yisrael were petrified. They screamed at Moshe and cried out to Hashem because they truly believed they wouldn't make it out of the desert. Perhaps this was the reason Pharaoh led the charge. He knew that his presence would catch Bnei Yisrael completely off guard. Maybe, however, there is a deeper message behind the words וַפִּרְעָה הִקְרִיב.

In Tehillim, Dovid HaMelech calls out to Hashem, בִּצָר הִרְחַבְתָּ לִּי — words that literally mean that Hashem broadened Dovid HaMelech's narrowness (Tehillim 4:2). Being in a state of narrowness means you are constricted and in pain. Imagine being in a trash compactor, and everything is closing in on you. You are suffocating and can barely breathe. The broadening refers to relieving the pain and suffering you feel. The trash compactor reverses, and you are free.

The Baal Shem Tov, the pioneer of the Chassidic movement, connects this pasuk with our words, וַפִּרְעָה הִקְרִיב. He learns that "It is because of our narrowness (מִצָּרִיךְ) that we are brought close to Hashem" (Keter Shem Tov, siman 20). Our pain and suffering allow us to see Hashem. When Bnei Yisrael saw Pharaoh, they immediately cried out to Hashem. Their oppression enabled them to scream out to Hashem in the purest way.

The Baal Shem Tov's remarkable and almost counterintuitive understanding changes everything. As we discussed, וַפִּרְעָה הִקְרִיב means *and Pharaoh brought close*. But according to the Baal Shem Tov's these words tell us that it was Pharaoh's closeness that brought Bnei Yisrael close to Hashem. According to the Baal Shem Tov one of the biggest villains in the Torah helped Bnei Yisrael find Hashem! In a time of immense fright, Bnei Yisrael were still able to see Hashem.

The personal and collective pain we experience can bring us closer to Hashem. We all have our own narrowness, but it is through this constricted state that we can achieve a closer relationship with Hashem. Instead of letting our pain and suffering suffocate us, we, too, can broaden our narrowness and become closer to Hashem.

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