

D'var Torah for Parshas Vayechi – January 1, 2021

When did our ancestors become enslaved in Egypt? Next week we will read how a new King arose over Egypt, who did not remember Yosef, and out of his fear of the Israelites, he began to oppress them. Perhaps that was the moment our ancestors became enslaved. Or perhaps the Israelites became enslaved after the death of Yosef, when they no longer had someone to protect them and advocate for them in the Egyptian court. However, I think they became enslaved much earlier than that.

After the death of Yaakov, Yosef's brothers, who had been living in Egypt under Yosef's protection for 17 years, began to get worried. They feared that perhaps Yosef had been kind to them thus far only for their father's sake, and that with their father gone, their powerful brother would finally take revenge against them for selling him into slavery. And so the brothers go to Yosef claiming that their father asked them to tell him to forgive the sin of “עבדי א-להי אביך” (the servants/slaves of the G-d of your father). Even as they spin a fabrication, and not a very believable one, that Yaakov asked them to ask Yosef to forgive them, they do manage to acknowledge their sin before Yosef. Moreover they define themselves here as servants/slaves of the Holy One blessed is he, as people who serve G-d. However, perhaps sensing that Yosef may suspect them of being less than truthful, they immediately go on and throw themselves on Yosef's mercy, declaring “הננו לך לעבדים” (behold, we are your slaves/servants)."

By employing the same word in two consecutive verses to describe their relationship to G-d and their relationship to Yosef, the brothers are giving away their own mental state. They want to be servants of G-d, they think of themselves as servants of G-d, but at the first hint of danger, they panic and instead of relying on G-d, they throw themselves on the mercy of a human master, declaring themselves to be his servants/slaves.

Yosef responded to his brothers by asking, rhetorically “Am I in place of G-d?” This response is often read as a refusal to pass judgment on his brothers, since judgment is the purview of G-d. However, we can also read in Yosef's statement a rebuke of his brothers' willingness to declare themselves slaves to him, when they had just told him they were slaves of G-d. By saying “Am I in place of G-d,” Yosef not only highlighted the contradiction in the brothers' two statements, but implied that choosing to serve a human master is in a sense comparable to idolatry, since both involve putting giving one's trust and loyalty, which properly belong to G-d alone, to something or someone that is not G-d instead.

The brothers might have been acting appropriately to ask their brother to forgive them, and to acknowledge the wrong they had done, but when they declared themselves his slaves, they went a step too far. Though the text does not state this explicitly, I believe that this was the moment that our ancestors became slaves in Egypt. Until that moment they had been living in Goshen as guests of Pharaoh and Yosef, but the moment that, acting out of fear, they declared themselves slaves to Yosef, they actually made themselves slaves to Pharaoh. After all, Yosef himself, for all his wealth and power, was

still Pharaoh's slave. Since the property of a slave belongs to the slave's master, Yosef's brothers, by declaring themselves slaves to Yosef, were at that moment, whether they meant to or not, enslaving themselves to Yosef's master, Pharaoh. Even if we don't assume this declaration had any practical legal effect, even if we don't think that the brothers were technically enslaved at that moment under the laws of the land, by employing this rhetoric, the brothers were still putting their trust and reliance on Yosef instead of on G-d, and in doing so, they demonstrated their willingness to buy security at the price of freedom. The enslavement in Egypt was both a natural outcome and a fitting punishment for our ancestors' willingness to substitute the protection of a human master for that of the Master of the Universe.

Lest we judge the brother's too harshly, this is a trade-off that many of us make throughout our lives. We all face moments when we have to choose between serving human masters and serving the Holy One blessed is He. We all have moments when we are tempted to ignore what we know that G-d from us, what the divine spark within us tells us we must do, because we are afraid of what other people will think. We all of us at times make the mistake of believing that our well-being depends on earthly powers, be they politicians, our employers, or simply people whose approval we crave. When we make our well-being and happiness dependent on mortal human beings and the institutions they build, instead of on the Creator of heaven and earth, we are, like Yosef's brothers, condemning ourselves to a kind of servitude.

However, when we can remember that true security and happiness depend not on earthly powers, but on the Power that formed the universe, then, no matter our place in society, then we are spiritually free. Shabbat is a weekly opportunity to take a step back from the business of life, to remind ourselves of this important truth. We spend six days working and doing and serving human masters and earthly powers, and then we rest on the seventh day, to remind ourselves that our only true Master, the One on whom all our wellbeing depends is the One who worked for six days to fashion this universe, and who rested on the seventh.

May we soon see the day when all earthly fetters are loosed, and all people are freed from the subjugation of other humans, when the entire world can experience the complete Shabbos of recognizing that there is only one Master.

Shabbat Shalom!

Garth Silberstein