



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles

Study Guide

Take home Dvar Torah

תשפד Shemot Parshat

January 2, 2024

By: Rabbi Avi Cohen

Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant. Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah

has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

Last week we completed the first book of the Torah, *Bereshit* – Genesis, and this week we begin the second book *Shemot* – Exodus. Nachmanides in his preface to sefer *Shemot* explains that Genesis is called *the book of creation*, but not only because its first chapter describes the creation of the world and everything in it. But because the rest of the book details the creation of the Jewish nation - ***the very purpose of creation*** - starting with Avraham and concluding with the 70 individuals who went down to Egypt. These 70 souls comprised the kernel of the nascent Jewish nation who would blossom into the 600,000 men and approximately 3 million people who miraculously left Egypt to receive the Torah on Sinai.

The end of *Bereshit* reveals the series of events that brought Yaakov Avinu and his family to Egypt, and, within just a few verses, the book of *Shemot* plunges us into the 210-year stint of slavery that they endured in Egypt. The Torah, however, provides us with no clue as to the reason or purpose for this slavery. Where did it come from, and what was its purpose?

Students of the Torah know that this slavery was destined to be part of Jewish history based on a prophesy given to Avraham Avinu 210 years earlier. When Avraham was 70 years old, Hashem appeared to him and told him that his children will be slaves in a foreign land for 400 years. Avraham related this prophecy to his children, and they knew to expect it.

Indeed, our Sages teach us that the entire Joseph saga was just Hashem's strategy for getting Yaakov and his family down to Egypt to begin the slavery.

The Midrash tell us:

מדרש תהלים - מזמור קה

אמר רבי יהודה בר נחמן בשם רבי שמעון בן לקיש, ראוי היה יעקב לירד למצרים בשלשלאות של ברזל ובקולרין, ועשה לו הקב"ה כמה עלילות וכמה מנגנאות ונמכר יוסף למצרים כדי לירד. ויקרא רעב על הארץ, וכל כך למה, (שם מו, ו) ויבא יעקב מצרימה. אמר ר' פנחס הכהן בר חמא, משל לפרה אחת שהיו רוצין למשוך אותה למקולין שלה ולא היתה נמשכת. מה עשו, משכו בנה תחלה והיתה רצה אחריו. כך עשה הקב"ה מנגנאות, שעשו אחי יוסף כל אותן הדברים כדי שירדו למצרים גם כן כדי שירד גם יעקב, שנאמר (הושע יא, ד) בחבלי אדם אמשכם:

Rabbi Yehuda son of Nachman said in the name of Reish Lakish: Yaakov should have been taken down to Egypt in metal chains, but Hashem made different pretenses so that he would go with dignity. Yosef was sold to Egypt, and then there was a famine in the land. Rabbi Pinchas HaCohen said: It's like the cow that would not go to slaughter. They led its son in front of it and it came running. Similarly, Hashem made the pretense by having Yosef's brothers do what they did for Yaakov to go down to Egypt.

To properly understand the reason and purpose of this slavery, we must return to the prophesy that foretold it. It began with Genesis 15:1.

- (א) אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְבַר יְדוּד אֶל אַבְרָם בְּמַחְזָה לְאֹמֶר אֶל תִּירָא אַבְרָם אֲנֹכִי
מִגּוֹן לְךָ שְׂכָרְךָ הִרְבֵּה מְאֹד
(ב) וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֲדֹנָי יְדוּד מַה תַּתֶּן לִי וְאֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ עֲרִירִי וּבֶן מִשְׁק בֵּיתִי הוּא דִמְשָׁק
אֶלְיָעֶזֶר
(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם הֵן לִי לֹא נִתְּתָה זָרַע וְהִנֵּה בֶן בֵּיתִי יוֹרֵשׁ אֹתִי
(ד) וְהִנֵּה דְבַר יְדוּד אֶלְיוֹ לֹא יִרְשֶׁךָ זֶה כִּי אִם אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמֶּעֶיךָ הוּא יִירְשֶׁךָ
(ה) וַיּוֹצֵא אֹתוֹ חוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבֵט נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְסַפֵּר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם תּוּכַל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֶךָ
(ו) וְהָאֱמֹן בֵּידוּד וַיַּחֲשֹׁבָהּ לוֹ צְדָקָה
(ז) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְיוֹ אֲנִי יְדוּד אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לְתֵת לְךָ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת
לְרִשְׁתָּהּ
(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי יְדוּד בְּמָה אֲדַע כִּי אִירְשָׁנָה...
(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יְדַע תְּדַע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֶךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעַבְדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע
מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה
(יד) וְגַם אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנֹכִי וְאַחֲרָי כֹּן יֵצְאוּ בְּרַכְּשׁ גָּדוֹל

1) After these events, the word of Hashem came to Avram in a vision, saying: "Fear not Avram, I am a shield for you; your reward is very great."

2) And Avram said, "My Lord, Hashem/Elokim, What can you give me, seeing that I go childless, and the steward of my house is the servant Eliezer?"

3) Then Avram said, "See you have given me no offspring; and see, my steward inherits me."

4) Suddenly, the word of Hashem came to him, saying: "That one will not inherit you. Only he that shall come forth from within you shall inherit you."

5) And He took [Avram] outside, and said, "Gaze, now, toward the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them!" And He said to him, "So shall your offspring be!"

6) And he trusted in Hashem, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

7) He said to him, "I am Hashem Who brought you out of Ur-kasdim to give you this land to inherit it."

8) He said, "My Lord, Hashem/Elokim: Whereby shall I know that I am to inherit it?" ...

13) And He said to Avram, "Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own – and they will serve them, and they will oppress them – four hundred years.

14) But also, the nation that they will serve, I shall judge, and afterwards they will leave with great wealth..."

Here we have the conversation in which Hashem told Avram that his children will be slaves in a foreign land. But what prompted this harsh punishment to Avram's children?

The following analysis and approach is taken from the בעל מעשי ה' - the sefer *Maasei Hashem* written by Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi (1513-1586).

1) After these events – What are the events that prompted Hashem’s prophecy to Avram to which the verse refers?

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains. The previous chapter tells how Avram and 318 of his disciples miraculously defeated the four extremely powerful kings who had just defeated five other extremely powerful kings. Avram was concerned that perhaps Hashem saved him as payment for his good deeds. This would leave Avram with no reward in the World to Come. Hashem appeared to Avram to mollify him and tell him that he still has great reward awaiting him in the world to come. ***“Fear not Avram, I am a shield for you; your reward is very great.”***

The words ***“your reward,”*** however, caused Avram great concern. “Hashem is going to pay me based only on my actions? My actions are so few and so weak!” (Avram was very humble.)

Avram’s *raison d’etre* – aspiration in life – was to teach the entire inhabited world about Hashem, and to show how all other religions or idolatries were false. How much did he accomplish so far on that score? Based on what he had done so far, his reward would be small indeed.

This is why Avram responded to Hashem with the next verse. **2) *And Avram said, “My Lord, Hashem/Elokim, What can you give me, seeing that I go childless, and the steward of my house is my servant Eliezer?”***

Avram was saying that since he had only his servant Eliezer to help him teach the world about Hashem, his reward was destined

to be very small. If only he had children to help him, he would be able to accomplish so much more.

Seeing things from this perspective resolves a difficult question. Hashem had promised Avram (Genesis 12:7) that his offspring would inherit the Land of Israel. Why, then, would Avram complain about not having children (***“seeing that I go childless”***) if Hashem had already promised him that he would? The answer is that of course Avram knew that he would have children! He would not doubt Hashem’s word. His concern was only that he may have the children later in life and have insufficient time to teach them his Torah and values such that they would be unequipped properly to carry on his work and, in the end, the only one to have all of Avram’s Torah would be Eliezer.

Hashem responded by telling him that *Eliezer his servant* would not be the one to carry on Avram’s holy work; rather, it would be different *servants*, his very own grandchildren in the land of Egypt. Through their Egyptian servitude and their miraculous freedom from it, the reality of Hashem - His power over nature as the Creator of nature and His involvement in the world and with every creature in it - will be publicly seen by the whole world and once and for all be proven beyond the shadow of a doubt.

To Avram Avinu, the person who dedicated every fiber of his being to spreading the reality of Hashem to humanity, this was the greatest piece of news that he could ever want to hear. (More about this later)

This is why Hashem referred to Avram’s children as “stars.” 5) ***“Gaze, now, toward the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them!” And He said to him, “So shall your offspring be!”*** Hashem’s intention was not to indicate to Avram how

numerous his children would be, but rather how influential they would be. They will be like stars who give off so much light and illuminate the night sky. So, too, Avram's children will illuminate the world about the reality of Hashem and bring the light of Hashem and His Torah to all of humanity.

After Avram expressed his concern that his reward would be paltry because of a lack of helpers in his holy work, Hashem corrected him and told him that He didn't mean that all he would receive is reward for his actions. Indeed, He would bless Avram with abundant good in the form of "pure kindness." To underscore His point, Hashem reminded Avram that He saved him from the fires of *Ur-kasdim*, and at that point, even before Avram began his campaign to publicize Hashem to the world, Hashem promised to give him the Land of Israel. **7) He said to him, "I am Hashem Who brought you out of Ur-kasdim to give you this land to inherit it."**

Upon hearing this, Avram was comforted and realized that Hashem didn't mean that he would only receive the reward for his actions. Hashem was really promising him abundant reward in the form of "charity" – a gift of much more than he deserved. Yet something in what Hashem said created a new concern in Avram's mind.

Earlier (12:7), Hashem had said:

(ז) וַיֵּרָא יְדֹדָאֵל אֶל אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר לְזַרְעֲךָ אֶתְּן אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת
7) And Hashem appeared to Avram and said, "To your offspring I will **give** this land.'

Similarly, in (13:15) Hashem told Avram,

(ט) כִּי אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה רֹאֶה לְךָ אֶתְּנֶנָּה וּלְזַרְעֲךָ עַד עוֹלָם
15) For all the land that you see, to you I shall **give** it and to your offspring forever.

Avram was under the impression that the land was ownerless, and that Hashem would give it to him and his children. But when Hashem said, **“to inherit it”** Avram understood that the land already had an owner, Canaan, and that he would need to *inherit* the land from him.

Addressing this concern, Avram responded, **8) He said, “My Lord, Hashem/Elokim: Whereby shall I know that I am to inherit it?”**

With this, in essence, Avram was asking Hashem to give him the Torah right now. Why?

Rashi’s first comment of on the Torah cites Rabbi Yitzchak’s famous question: *Why did Hashem begin the Torah with a description of Creation? Isn’t the Torah’s purpose to convey to man his obligations in the form of the commandments that he must fulfill? So why didn’t Hashem begin the Torah with the very first mitzvah given to the Jewish people - the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon - which does not appear until the Book of Exodus?*

Rabbi Yitzchak answers with Psalms 111, Verse 6.

(ו) כַּחַם מַעֲשָׂיו הִגִּיד לְעַמּוֹ לְתִתּוֹ לָהֶם נַחֲלֵת גּוֹיִם :

He (Hashem) declared the strength of His deeds to His people, to give them to inherit the nations.

For if the world’s nations should tell the Jewish people, “You are thieves for having conquered the seven nations dwelling in the land of Israel and taken the land from them,” we can respond, “The whole earth belongs to Hashem since He created it. Until now, He let you have it; but now He has chosen to give it to us.”

Avram wanted the Torah so that he could respond to the nations that he would be expelling from Israel without being subject to their allegations that he stole their land from them. This is what he meant when he said, ***Whereby shall I know that I am to inherit it?*** Whereby shall I know what to respond to the nations of the world if you do not give me the Torah.

Hashem answered Avram that the Torah could only be given through Moshe Rabbeinu, and that it was too early to give it now, but his children, the ones who would ultimately enter Israel and conquer it, will have the Torah with the appropriate answer to the nations of the world.

At this point, Hashem told Avram a little more about how his children would carry on his holy work of publicizing Hashem to the world. They would be slaves in Egypt, and then Hashem will take them out with great miracles and wonders, and, through them, show the entire world that He is Hashem.

This is the meaning behind Hashem telling Avram that He will punish the nation that afflicted the Jewish people. ***14) But also, the nation that they will serve, I shall judge, and afterwards [the Jewish people] will leave with great wealth...***

The commentaries explain how the ten plagues - plague for plague - punished the Egyptians for a specific hardship that they caused to the Jewish people during their slavery. The crescendo of the exodus, the splitting of the Reed Sea, in which the remaining Egyptian army perished, created great fear and awe among the nations of the world. The battles against the most powerful nations that they won without losing one soldier struck fear in the hearts of all their opponents.

In summary, hearing from Hashem that his children would be slaves in Egypt was the most exciting piece of information that Avram could have received. He learned that his holy work would continue for another few hundred years, through his grandchildren, the 70 souls who would enter Egypt as Jews, Hashem's nation of ambassadors to the world, and that, through the slavery, the greatest possible respect and honor would be accorded to Hashem because of their miraculous exodus.

This explains why none of the forefathers attempted to abolish this decree and why Yaakov, knowing what he was getting his family into, did not hesitate to descend to Egypt. He and they understood that this was their calling as the children of Avraham Avinu, and that this is what it means to be a Jew - to be an ambassador for Hashem - to teach the world about Hashem.

The exodus from Egypt is where Hashem chose to show the world that He is its Creator, and that He controls every aspect of it. He also showed the world that He knows each person and is involved in his life. These are the fundamentals of our Torah, and they were shown for all to see in Egypt.

This is why the exodus from Egypt is such an important event in our daily routine. We must remember it twice daily in the Shema. We must remember it when we don our tefillin in the morning. We must remember it when we recite the kiddush Friday night. We must remember it when we kiss the mezuzah on our doors. Hashem is real; the whole world saw it. These mitzvot began then, and are still being performed now in an unbroken chain, many thousands of years later.

As we begin the book of Shemot, we should keep in mind that all of this affliction was for the greater good of teaching the world about Hashem.

Our Sages teach us that this is also the goal of our exile. By keeping the beautiful upstanding moral laws of the Torah, we model the “Image of G-d” to the nations. If we do it right, they cannot help but see Hashem.

Before the exodus from Egypt and to prepare the elders for what was going to occur, Hashem sent Moshe to perform a few miracles before the elders of the nation. It would seem that the same is occurring today. Hashem is showing us open miracles to help us prepare us for the coming redemption - the Mashiach

I am referring to the many stories told by those who miraculously survived the attack on Shabbat Shemini Atzeret, October 7, 2023.

The following story was related by Rabbi Malkiel Kotler, shlit”a, Rosh Yeshiva of the Lakewood Yeshiva. He heard the story from a person who heard it directly from the interrogator.

It is now well known that Hamas had planned this attack for many months, and that they had detailed information about every kibbutz, city, and moshav that they were going to attack. One such city, Tifrah, had a Yeshiva in it and the instructions to the terrorist were not to leave a single soul alive in that place. In the end, the Yeshiva was left unscathed. When one of the terrorists who attacked that city was questioned, “Why did you leave that building alone?” he answered, “When we went to attack it, we saw that the building was enveloped in flames. We saw that our work was done for us, so we left.”

[Then there is Amnon's Story (Reprinted with permission from Chayeinu Magazine)]

Shabbat Morning. I was strolling with Yigal, Rafi, and Avichai, enjoying the gentle breeze. Rafi pulled out two cigarettes and handed them to me to light. We continued on our way, kicking stones and sharing the latest news.

Suddenly, Yigal screamed. I looked up and we all started screaming. From the distance we saw mobs of terrorists running at us with knives, guns, and hand grenades. Frantically, we looked for a place to hide. The closest building was a gas station – not a smart choice, with its glass walls that could be easily smashed with a bullet or even from pounding. But for the lack of a better option, we ran in and locked the door.

Avichai broke the silence. "I promise You Hashem, I'll put on tefillin every day. Just let me live so I can show You how sincere I am."

"And I promise Shabbat. Hashem, every single Shabbat for the rest of my life. Just let me live." Rafi cried out, dropping his cigarette stub.

"Shabbat and tefillin and tzitzit too..." We all cried and thought of all the mitzvot we could remember – hoping to live long enough to realize our promises.

There they were. Arabs on the other side of the thin glass that divided us. Banging, pounding, kicking, and even shooting. But that thin glass wall seemed to have the strength of iron barriers. The more they shot and banged, the more we cried and promised. And all four of us lived to realize our resolutions. We are now connected to that Power that held the barrier firm בין ישראל לעמים - between the Jewish nation and the gentiles.

It is also noteworthy that of all the religious cities, moshavim, and kibbutzim not one was attacked on that fateful day, and we have not heard about even one religious person who perished on that day.

It is remarkable that Hashem is allowing us to see Him so clearly. Usually, Hashem makes the miracles behind the scenes where only those involved see the Hand of Hashem at work. From the event on October 7, many stories have emerged from all types of people, all citing the miracle done for them by Hashem.

This is how Hashem is preparing us for Mashiach. The goal of Mashiach is to reveal Hashem to the world, as is says in the prophet (Isaiah 11:9):

כִּי מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ דַּעַת אֶת יְדוֹד כַּמַּיִם לַיָּם מִכַּסִּים

For the earth will be filled with knowledge of Hashem, as water covering the seabed.

By allowing us to see Him in the open Hashem is nudging us towards the time when the whole world will see Him, just like in Egypt. However, first, we, Hashem's nation, must see Him clearly and then we will be able to share it with others. Hashem also showing us that Shabbat and the mitzvot protected the people. Let us open our eyes to the miracles and our hearts to His message!