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Tiferes Shlomo on the Parsha

והוצאתי אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים
And I will take them out from beneath the burdens of Egypt

Why does the verse describe the slavery and harsh labour in Egypt with the unusual word סבלותם?

The word סבלותם is related to the word סובל, meaning to bear or tolerate with patience. The Posuk is alluding to the quality through which the Jewish people would merit redemption.

Even in the height of their suffering, they did not question Hashem, saying why do we suffer while the nations of the world live in peace? They patiently accepted Hashem's decree with love and faith.

This is why the sages teach that we should bless Hashem for the bad with the same faith and acceptance as when we bless Him for the good.

This idea is alluded to in the verse ויעבידו מצרים את בנ"י בפרך describing how the Egyptians made the Jewish people work with crushing labour. The sages explain that בפרך is an acronym for בפה רך, a soft speech.

The Aramaic translation of בפרך is בקשיו. This is like the word קושיא, meaning a question or challenge.

The Aramaic translation represents the intention of the Yetzer Hara, which sought to cause the Jewish people to challenge and question the ways of Hashem. But the Torah attests that that they accepted their suffering with "soft speech" and did not challenge the ways of Hashem.

As limited human beings, we cannot understand the ways of Hashem. We must try to have faith and accept that everything that happens comes from Him and must serve a purpose.

By approaching our challenges as סבלות, with faith and acceptance, may we also merit to see our redemption from all of our difficulties.

If Egypt was Gaza

Moshe came to Pharaoh with an unequivocal and non-negotiable demand, "Let my people go."

This was not just a demand, but a warning and threat. Should Pharaoh refuse to set the Jewish people free, Hashem would raise His Hand against Egypt and wreak destruction on the land and its populace. Pharaoh ignored and mocked Moshe's warning. Without the force of a "strong hand" Pharoah would not yield.

After the initial plagues and suffering, Pharaoh begged Moshe to stop the plagues. With crocodile tears he confessed "I am wrong". But each time there was relief; a cease-fire, Pharaoh only further hardened his heart and returned to his stubborn defiance.

As the plagues continued, meeting out even further and greater destruction, Pharaoh was ready to negotiate his way out.

First, he proposed that they "Sacrifice in the land. Go but don't go too far". Then he proposed a partial release of the captive slaves, the men can go, but the children must remain behind.

Moshe did not budge. There would be no partial or staged releases. "We shall go with our youth and with our elders, we shall go with our sons and our daughters, we shall go with our flock and with our cattle." Pharaoh was in no position to dictate terms. If he would not surrender, the bombardment would continue with even greater force.

The plague of locusts brought starvation to the Egyptian population. When they were starved into submission, the Egyptian people came to their leaders, demanding that they release the slaves, "send out the men… do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?".

As long as his own people supported him, Pharaoh could remain defiant. The pressure had to reach a level that in fear of their own death, the people of Egypt would storm their own streets and demand that their leaders release the captive Jews.

With the warning of the final plague and staring death in the face, the Egyptian people had finally had enough of the path of destruction that their leader had taken them down. They turned on their leaders sparking an internal revolt as they attempted to overthrow their regime.

With the final plague, the suffering was so great that the Egyptians themselves urged the Jewish people to leave, coming to the realisation that otherwise "all of us are dead". Pharoah was brought to his knees. In utter defeat, he surrendered unconditionally to Moshe and consented to let all the Jewish people go.

Now, imagine if the United Nations, ICC or EU existed back then. Imagine if the Exodus had taken place in the age of Facebook and TikTok. Imagine the outcry!

Of course, there would have been nary a peep that millions of Jewish people were being held in captivity. There would have been not a word of condemnation of the wholesale attempted murder of the Jewish baby boys. And there would have been silence over the abduction and assault of the Jewish women.

But as soon as the plagues started, these impotent bodies would have quickly discovered their voices.

With the water-supply cut-off with the plague of blood, the livestock destroyed by pestilence and the crops decimated by locusts, they would have surely slammed the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

They would have slammed the disproportionate use of force. How dare Moshe bring the infinite power of G-d against the finite, human military capabilities of the Egyptians! How dare G-d unleash plagues that would strike the Egyptians but leave the Jewish homes untouched!

They would have decried the genocide of the Egyptians and labelled Moshe a baby-killer, with the plague of the firstborn. Moshe and Aharon would have been put on trial and branded war-criminals.

We would have heard incessant calls demanding cease-fires (cease-plagues?).

Pro-Egypt demonstrators would protest in cities and universities across the world, accusing the Jews of committing genocide. Social media would be awash with posts that glorified the resistance fighters of the Egyptian army. And the media would display the misery of Egypt; the buildings reduced to rubble by the hail, the animals strewn dead across the ground in the pestilence and children with bleeding boils.

And there would have been immense pressure to accept one of Pharaoh's "generous" offers to negotiate a compromise that would have left him in power and seen at least some of the Jews remain captive.

No one would consider that if Pharaoh had never enslaved and oppressed the people in the first place, there would have been no plagues. Had he agreed to let the Jewish people go with the first warning, there would have been no plagues.

Thank G-d the Exodus happened in those times and not in ours. If not, the world would have done its best to ensure that we and our children and our children's children would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.

The Weekly Halacha Analysis

Mundane Conversation on Shabbos - Part 1

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There are a number of laws that relate to the way we speak on Shabbos, particularly in relation to what we may speak about.

When discussing the day of Shabbos, Yishaya Hanovi[1] says "You shall honour it (Shabbos) by… refraining from pursuing your affairs and from speaking profane things". These are two prohibitions; ממצוא חפציך - pursuing your affairs, and ודבר דבר - speaking profane things.

The prohibition of ודבר דבר?

The Gemara[2] explains that from these words we learn that one should not speak on Shabbos in the manner that they do during the week. The type of speech that is actually being forbidden is disputed by the Rishonim.

Rashi writes that this means speaking about doing business and financial calculations.

Tosfos[3] ague with Rashi's explanation, saying that speaking about doing business is covered by the prohibition of ממצוא חפציך, pursuing one's affairs. Rather, the intent of the Gemara is that on Shabbos one may not speak excessive Devarim Beteilim – mundane or idle speech.

Rabbeinu Tam brings proof for this from the Midrash[4] that describes how the grandmother of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai would speak excessive mundane chatter with him on Shabbos and he had to remind her to stop because it was Shabbos. He references the Yerushalmi[5] that teaches that the sages reluctantly allowed us to even to greet someone on Shabbos.

According to Rashi's interpretation, there is no basis in the Talmud for any restriction on mundane chatter on Shabbos.

The Rambam appears to derive both prohibitions from ודבר דבר. In one Halacha[6] he quotes the Pasuk and writes that one may not even speak about their pursuits on Shabbos, for example discussing with one's business partner what they should sell or buy during the week.

In a subsequent Halacha[7], he writes that one should not speak excessive Sicha Beteila – idle chatter, on Shabbos, quoting the explanation that one's speech on Shabbos should be different to the weekday.

The Shulchan Aruch[8], like the Rambam, rules that the prohibition includes both speaking about doing forbidden actions after Shabbos as well as speaking excessive Devarim Beteilim.

Unlike speaking about doing forbidden actions after Shabbos, speaking Devarim Betelilim on Shabbos is not completely forbidden. The prohibition is להרבות, to speak excessive mundane chatter. A small amount is permissible. There is no quantification of what defines a lot or a little.

The restriction is a Rabbinic prohibition that applies equally to men and women. It also applies when one is speaking to themselves. It is also prohibited to listen to excessive Devarim Beteilim, which can be derived from the Midrash quoted above.

The reason for this prohibition is that the sages did not want us to waste the holy day of Shabbos in idle chatter. Shabbos was given as a day for Torah study and prayer and involvement in holy matters. It is also a disgrace to Shabbos.

The prohibition only applies to speaking. Thinking (הרהור) about mundane matters, or about doing forbidden Shabbos activities during the week, is permissible[9].

What types of speech are included?

Mundane speech includes speaking about news, politics, world events and other worldly matters such as speaking about one's work or profession. It also includes jokes, speaking about sports and general chit-chat.

What if one enjoys speaking mundane chatter?

The Ram"o writes that if someone has Oneg (enjoyment) from speaking about these things, they may do so on Shabbos. This is because the mundane speech then becomes part of Oneg Shabbos. The prohibition only applies to one who does not delight in them. One must genuinely have active enjoyment from the conversation[10].

The Ta"Z rules that even if one personally does not have enjoyment, they may speak about these things if it brings delight to others. However, the simple reading of the Ram"o[11] suggests that this is forbidden. This is the position of the Alter Rebbe[12].

The Poskim write that whilst permitted as a matter of enjoyment, it is not Middas Chassidus to engage in excessive mundane chatter on Shabbos. Some suggest that the Ram"o is only being Melamed Zechus on those who do. Bnei Torah should not engage in excessive mundane conversation[13]. The Alshich writes that Oneg Shabbos is about delighting the Shabbos, rather than delighting oneself.

For a Mitzvah

From the phrasing of the prohibition of ממצוא חפציך - pursuing your affairs, the sages derive that only pursuing one's personal matters are forbidden. Matters of Heaven i.e. Mitzvah related matters are permitted. The same applies to ודבר דבר, if the speech itself serves a Mitzvah purpose.

The same applies to the idle chatter dimension of ודבר דבר which will also be permitted if it is being done for a Mitzvah.

One may engage in mundane conversation with their parents if doing so is on account of an fulfilling Kibbud Av V'eim.

It is common in some communities to have Badchanim to entertain wedding celebrations with jokes and the like. This would be permissible as a Mitzvah prpose, being for Simchas Chosson Vekallah.

A more practical example is engaging in mundane conversation to make guest feel good and comfortable in their home or at their table. The Mitzvah of Hachnosas Orchim applies specifically to guests who are in need, such as people who have nowhere else to go.

The same would apply to an even greater degree in Kiruv settings, where one is interacting with less-observant people and building a relationship with them to foster greater observance. However, the Poskim write that one should guide the conversation as much as possible to inspiring words of Torah.

Speaking mundane conversation and telling jokes with one's children could also be classified as a Mitzvah purpose, because maintaining a good relationship with one's children is critical for their Chinuch and development.

Kabbalistically

Whilst technically only excessive mundane speech is Halachically forbidden and there are additional leniencies for enjoyment, the Zohar takes a stricter position, teaching that when celebrating the delight of Shabbos, one may not speak even a word of mundane speech. Doing so causes a blemish on the holy day and if one does speak mundane speech, they have desecrated the Shabbos.

The Mekubalim also explain Speaking mundane chatter drives away the Neshama Yeseira, which swears not to return. Reishis Chochma castigates those who sit in Shul and speak about other people, both the living and the dead, noting that all Machlokes starts from these gatherings.

In the end of the Tanya, the Alter Rebbe writes that one should take great care not to speak any mundane speech on Shabbos. This is like Hashem who created the world through "speech" and rested from His "speech" on Shabbos.

1. Yishaya 58:13
2. Shabbos 113a
3. Shabbos 113b ד"ה שלא
4. Vayikra Rabbah 34
5. Shabbos 15:3
6. Hilchos Shabbos 24:1
7. Hilchos Shabbos 24:3
8. Orach Chaim 307:1
9. Nonetheless, there is a Middas Chassidus to refrain even on the level of thought.
10. Eshel Avraham Butshash
11. 307:1
12. 307:2
13. Elya Rabbah 307:18 writes that even on a weekday this is forbidden as Moshav Leitzim. This is also brought by the Alter Rebbe. Additionally there is the issue of Bittul Torah.
14. Igeres Hakodesh Hocheiach Tochiach