

Solving the Incredible Enigma:

How Did the Galus in Mitzrayim Refine Yisrael from the Forty-ninth Level of Tumah?

In this week's parsha, parshas Shemos, we begin to read about the descent of Yaakov and his sons into the Galus of Mitzrayim (Shemos 1, 1): **“ואלה שמות בני ישראל הבאים מצרימה את יעקב איש וביתו —and these are the names of the Children of Yisrael who came to Mitzrayim; with Yaakov, each man and his household came.** Concerning the difficult enslavement they endured in this Galus, it states (ibid. 14): **“וימררו את חייהם בעבודה קשה בחומר ובלבנים —they embittered their lives with hard work, with mortar and with bricks, and with every labor of the field; all their labors that they performed with them was crushing labor.**

We find an incredible passage in the holy Zohar regarding this latter passuk (Bereishis 27a): **“וימררו את חייהם בעבודה קשה, בקושיא, בחומר בקל וחומר, ובלבנים בליבון הלכתא, ובכל עבודה בשדה דא ברייתא, את כל עבודתם וגו' דא משנה”** The Zohar associates each of these types of bitter, crushing labor with a corresponding type of Torah study. [Note the similarities between the names of the types of work and the corresponding Torah study.] At first glance, this seems totally incomprehensible. How is it possible to suggest that the Egyptians embittered the lives of Yisrael with Talmudic questions, applications of the principle of “kal-vachomer,” clarification of points of halachah, study of Mishnah and study of Baraita—elements comprising the entire gamut of Torah She'b'al Peh? First of all, the Torah had not been given, yet. Secondly, the simple reading of the text makes it quite clear that the Egyptians subjected Yisrael to backbreaking labor and not to exercises in Torah study.

Why Did HKB”H Subject Yisrael to the Galus in Mitzrayim?

It appears that we can clarify the meaning of this Zohar based on what we have been taught by our blessed sages—both from those in the Talmud as well as from the Rishonim and Acharonim. They all address the question of why HKB”H subjected Yisrael to the Galus in Mitzrayim—involving two hundred and ten years of brutal slavery at the hands of the Egyptians. As we know, HKB”H does not punish his creatures for naught; punishment is related to some form of transgression.

Adam HaRishon was punished for partaking of the forbidden Eitz HaDa'as. The generation of the flood—“dor hamabul”—was punished for their extreme corruption. Concerning the upheaval and destruction of Sedom and Amorah, it is written (Bereishis 18, 20): **“ויאמר ה' זעקת סדם ועמורה כי רבה וחטאתם כי כבדה מאד”**—so Hashem said, **“Because the outcry of Sedom and Amorah has become great, and because their sin has been very grave. . .”** Yet, here we learn of the difficult slavery endured by Yisrael in Mitzrayim, but find no explicit reason for this severe punishment. The holy Alshich expresses his amazement concerning this matter in Toras Moshe at the beginning of our parsha:

“ראוי כל איש חכם לבב לדרוש ולתור בחכמה, על מה עשה ה' ככה לקדושים אשר בארץ, יעקב וכל הנפש הבאה מצרימה, לתת תחת סבלות מצרים את בנייהם ובני בנייהם מאתים ועשר שנה, בחומר ובלבנים ובכל עבודה בשדה, מה פשעם ומה חטאתם, והלא לא חשיד קוב”ה דעביד דינא בלא דינא חלילה”.

Yaakov and his family were the holiest people in the land. So, why were they and their children and grandchildren enslaved for two hundred and ten years in Mitzrayim? What transgression were they guilty of? After all, we do not suspect HKB”H of exacting punishment without just cause.

Now, in truth, HKB”H revealed to Avraham in the Covenant of the Parts—“Bris bein HaBesarim”—that his descendants would be subject to exile in Mitzrayim (Bereishis 15, 13): **“ויאמר לאברם ידוע תדע כי גר יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם ועבדום וענו אותם ארבע מאות שנה, וגם את הגוי אשר יעבדו דן אנכי ואחרי כן יצאו ברכוש גדול”**—and He said to Avram, **“Know with certainty that your offspring shall be sojourners in a land not their own, they will enslave them, and they will oppress them four hundred years. And also the nation that will enslave them, I shall judge, and afterwards they shall leave with great possessions.”** Nevertheless, even there the reason for the enslavement is not provided. One might suggest that they were enslaved so that they would depart with great wealth. The Alshich discards this notion as follows: **“היאמרו לאיש, נכה אותך אלף מכות ואתן לך אחרי כן אלף כסף, הלא יצא שכרו בהפסדו. ולא עוד, אלא שהרכוש ההוא אינו שוה לנוקד השעבוד”**—clearly the material gain is not commensurate with the damage and suffering incurred during the prolonged slavery.

The Oppression and Servitude Associated with the Torah Complete the Oppression and Servitude in Mitzrayim

In this manner, I would like to present my own interpretation of the private dialogue that took place between HKB”H and Moshe Rabeinu (Shemos 3, 11): **“ויאמר משה אל האלקים מי אנכי כי אלך אל פרעה—Moshe replied to G-d, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim? Rashi explains Moshe’s question as follows: “Why is Yisrael worthy that a miracle should be performed on their behalf, and that I should take them out of Mitzrayim? HKB”H replies to Moshe: “ויאמר כי אהיה עמו, וזה לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך—and He said, “For I shall be with you—and this is the sign for you that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Mitzrayim, you will worship G-d on this mountain.” Here Rashi explains: “They are destined to receive the Torah upon this mountain three months after they leave Mitzrayim.”**

We can suggest that Moshe Rabeinu was asking HKB”H: Seeing as this servitude was already decreed at the “Bris bein HaBesarim”--**“ועבדום וענו אותם ארבע מאות שנה”**—that they would be enslaved and oppressed for four-hundred years—in what merit did Yisrael deserve to be taken out of Mitzrayim miraculously by HKB”H prior to completing the terms of the covenant? To which HKB”H, the Omniscient One, replied that in the span of two-hundred and ten years of extreme servitude, Yisrael had already been purged of the nachash’s contamination and were ready to receive the Torah. This is substantiated by the fact that: **“בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלקים על ההר הזה”**—they served Hashem on the designated mountain and received the Torah shortly after the exodus from Mitzrayim.

Nevertheless, the question still remains. How did Yisrael fulfill the decree demanding four-hundred years of servitude? In fact, HKB”H alludes to this question as well when He says: **“בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלקים על ההר הזה”**. Seeing as Yisrael were destined to receive the Torah, which is only retained by someone willing to sacrifice his life on its behalf, it turns out that the toil exerted by Yisrael in laborious Torah-study completes the deficiency necessary to fulfill the four-hundred year decree. This is why HKB”H specifically employs the term **“תעבדון”** signifying the service of Hashem through diligent Torah-study. Additionally, the term **“תעבדון”** is comprised of the letters **ת עבדון**, alluding to the fact that laborious Torah-study completes the required four-hundred year term of servitude. [The numerical value of the letter **ת** is four-hundred.]

Should a person venture to ask: If so, why did HKB”H wait and allow them to be enslaved even two-hundred and ten years in Mitzrayim? He could have taken them out earlier and allowed them

to fulfill the decree by means of laborious Torah-study. Answer him as follows: HKB”H waited until Yisrael were cleansed of the nachash’s contamination and were worthy of receiving the Torah. Upon seeing that two-hundred and ten years had passed and they were thoroughly cleansed, HKB”H took them out of Mitzrayim. Then He gave Yisrael the Torah as initially intended, so that they would complete the four-hundred year obligation through dedicated Torah-study—fulfilling the intended goal of: **“תעבדון את האלקים”**.

Neshamos that Sinned with the Eitz HaDa’as Were Reincarnated in Mitzrayim

Now, we shall see how the Alshich’s explanation coincides incredibly with the words of the Arizal. He explains in Sha’ar HaPesukim (Shemos) that Galus Mitzrayim was necessary, because all of those neshamos of Yisrael that were enslaved and suffered in Mitzrayim were originally part of Adam HaRishon when he sinned with the Eitz HaDa’as. As a consequence, they required tikun by means of multiple reincarnations in order to refine them and purge them completely of their filth and contamination.

First, they reincarnated into the “dor hamabul”; however, the evil still clung to them, causing them to behave corruptly. Subsequently, they underwent a second reincarnation into the generation of the dispersion. Once again, they failed to correct the defect and continued in their evil ways. The Torah attests to this in the following passuk (Bereishis 11, 5): **“ויירד ה’ לראות את העיר ואת “המגדל אשר בנו בני אדם—Hashem descended to see the city and tower which the sons of Adam built. The passuk clearly alludes to the fact that they were the sons of Adam HaRishon and were part of his being. After that, they reincarnated for a third time into the populace of Sedom. Once again, they failed to correct their ways and demonstrated corrupt behavior, as described by the passuk (ibid. 13, 13): “ואנשי סדום רעים וחטאים לה’ מאד”—the people of Sedom were exceedingly wicked and sinful to Hashem.**

After reincarnating into these three different generations, they reincarnated a fourth time into Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim. By enduring the difficult servitude in Mitzrayim, they were refined to the degree that they merited receiving the Torah. Therefore, just as they were wiped out by the flood in the “dor hamabul” for their corrupt ways, similarly they were now subjected to Pharaoh’s parallel decree (Shemos 1, 22): **“כל הבן הילוד היאורה תשליכוהו”—every male child that will be born, you shall throw him into the river.**

Corresponding to the sins they committed during the generation of the dispersion (Bereishis 11, 3): **“ויאמרו איש אל רעהו הבה נלבנה לבנים ונשרפה לשרפה, ותהי להם הלבנה לאבן והחומר היה להם לחומר—each man said to his fellow, “Come, let us make bricks**

and burn them in fire.” And the brick served them as stone, and the bitumen served them as plaster. They attempted to ascend to the heavens, deny Hashem’s sovereignty and wage war against Him. Consequently, in Mitzrayim, they were punished as follows (Shemos 1, 10): **“הבה נתחכמה לו... וימררו את חייהם בעבודה קשה”**—**“come, let us act wisely toward them. . . They embittered their lives with hard work, with mortar and with bricks.** Corresponding to the building of the city and the tower in that previous reincarnation, they were punished accordingly in Mitzrayim (ibid. 11): **“ויבן ערי מסכנות לפרעה את פיתום ואת רעמסס”**—**they built storage cities for Pharaoh, Pitom and Raamses.**

Thus, the Arizal teaches us explicitly that all of the neshamos that were in Mitzrayim were involved in the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as.” So, when the “nachash hakadmoni” injected his contamination into Adam and Chava, he effectively infected all of the neshamos contained within their beings. This coincides amazingly with the holy Alshich’s explanation—that the purpose of Galus Mitzrayim was to purify and cleanse the holy people that reincarnated into the generation in Mitzrayim of the nachash’s contamination.

In truth, we have spent many years trying to solve this incredible enigma. Concerning the exodus from Mitzrayim, the passuk states explicitly (Shemos 12, 39): **“ולא יכלו להתמהמה”**—**for they could not delay.** The reason for this is explained by our sacred sources in the name of the Arizal. It states in the Arizal’s siddur (Haggadah shel Pesach) that during the Galus in Mitzrayim, Yisrael eventually descended to the forty-ninth level of tumah. Had they remained in Mitzrayim any longer, they would have sunk to the fiftieth level of tumah, and would never have been able to leave. This being the case, how is it possible to conjecture that the purpose of Galus Mitzrayim was to purge Yisrael of the nachash’s contamination in preparation for receiving the Torah? For, we see that they had descended to the forty-ninth level of tumah; in other words, they were hardly cleansed.

Wonderful Revelations from the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh

After investigating in depth and laboring, we have fulfilled the dictum (Megillah 6b): **“אם יאמר לך אדם יגעתי ולא מצאתי אל תאמן”**—**if a person tells you he labored and did not succeed, do not believe him.** We can provide another wonderful explanation based on the incredible teachings of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh in our parsha (Shemos 3, 8). He teaches us tremendous chiddushim related to the matter of Yisrael sinking to the forty-ninth level of tumah.

He begins by endeavoring to explain why HKB”H extended the ten plagues over a period of twelve months. Why didn’t HKB”H visit the plagues upon the Egyptians during a single month in

order to hasten the exodus? Additionally, why did HKB”H wait until Yisrael sank to the forty-ninth level of tumah and were in danger of falling to the fiftieth level? Seemingly, it would have been much better to redeem them much sooner. Let us enjoy the words of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh:

“ואם תאמר ומה בכך אם היה ה' גואל אותם קודם זמן זה. עוד למה ה' הוציאם בזיבולא בתרייתא, בזמן שאם היו מתעכבים קצת היו נלכדים, עד שהוצרך למהר ולא יכלו להתמהמה, והיה לו להוציאם בזמן מרווח. הנה למה שקדם לנו כי עיקר הגלות הוא לברר הניצוצות שנשמעו בני שערי טומאה, וכמו שצינתי דבר זה כמה פעמים, בזה יניח דעת בב' השאלות, כי אם היה מוציאם קודם זה היה מפסידים בירור החלק ההוא.”

In other words, the Ohr HaChaim reveals an amazing chiddush not mentioned anywhere else. The fact that Yisrael sank to the forty-ninth level of tumah was not due to their own abject, lowly state. Rather, it was orchestrated from above that they should fall to such depths for the sake of their ultimate ascent—“yeridah l’tzorech aliyah.” In the process of rising from the depths of tumah, they would be able to take out with them sparks of kedushah—“nitzotzei kedushah”—that had fallen into the hands of the klipah as a result of the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as.” This, in fact, is the significance of HKB”H’s declaration to Yaakov (Bereishis 46, 4): **“אנכי ארד עמוך מצרימה ואנכי אעלך גם עלה”**—**I shall descend with you to Mitzrayim and I shall also surely elevate you.** It is analogous to a king who has cunningly penetrated the stronghold of a gang of bandits with his army in order to retrieve the vast property they had stolen from the people of his kingdom.

This is the reason why HKB”H waited until the last moment—when Yisrael had already fallen to the forty-ninth level of tumah—to take them out and did not do so any sooner. In this manner, they would succeed in extracting “nitzotzei kedushah” from all forty-nine levels of tumah. Had they been taken out sooner, they would have only been able to extract the sparks of kedushah from the levels they had fallen to. Therefore, HKB”H waited and delayed the exodus.

The Ohr HaChaim hakadosh goes on to explain why Moshe Rabeinu and his people, Yisrael, only attained forty-nine levels of “binah.” As the Gemara explains (R.H. 21b): **“חמשים שערי בינה נבראו”**—**fifty levels of “binah” were created in the universe, and they were all given to Moshe with the exception of one, as it states: “You have made him only slightly less than Elokim.”** Hence, we must explain why HKB”H did not reveal the “sha’ar hanun” to him as well.

Seeing as Yisrael only retrieved “nitzotzei kedushah” from the forty-ninth level of tumah, correspondingly they only achieved forty-nine levels of “binah.” Since they did not retrieve or refine sparks from the “sha’ar hanun” of tumah, they did not achieve the corresponding “sha’ar hanun” of kedushah. Nevertheless, during

the final Galus, Yisrael will refine and retrieve “nitzotzei kedushah” even from the “sha’ar hanun” of tumah with their power of Torah. In this merit, they will also achieve the ultimate level, the “sha’ar hanun,” of the fifty levels of kedushah.

The Power of Torah Facilitates the Refinement of “Nitzotzei Kedushah” from the Fiftieth Level of Tumah

We now approach the conclusion of the Ohr HaChaim’s explanation. He addresses the issue of why, in fact, Yisrael did not enter the “sha’ar hanun” of tumah in Mitzrayim—in order to retrieve the sparks of kedushah contained there, as well. Seemingly, this would have enabled them to also attain the fiftieth level of “binah.” Now, we can conjecture that had they entered that depth of tumah, they would never have been able to escape. If that is indeed the case, how will Yisrael in Galus ever succeed in refining the “nitzotzei kedushah” that remain at the fiftieth level of tumah? Here is what the Ohr HaChaim writes:

“וטעם שנסתכנו ישראל במצרים [אם היו עוסקים] בכירור שער הנ, לצד שלא היו בני תורה, מה שאין כן דורות האחרונים, באמצעות תורתם ישיגו ליכנס לשער הנ ולהוציא בלעו מפיו, ואז ספו תמו בחינת הטומאה. ומעתה כל שהיה ה' מוציא ישראל קודם זמן כל שהוא, היו ממעטים בכירור והיה מתמעטים במושג, ולזה הוציאם בנקודה האחרונה של מ"ט [שערי טומאה] וקודם שנכנסו לשער הנ, והוא אומרם ז"ל וגאלם מיד.”

Let us explain. The tumah of the “sha’ar hanun” is so great that it is impossible for any living creature to actually enter its domain and escape unscathed. This notion is expressed by the passuk (Mishlei 2, 19): “**כל באיה לא ישובון ולא ישיגו אורחות חיים**”—**all who come to her do not return, nor do they attain the paths of life.** So, during the later exiles how will Yisrael refine the “nitzotzei kedushah” from the “sha’ar hanun” of tumah? The Ohr HaChaim answers that this process will only take place by means of Yisrael’s occupation in Torah-study. In Mitzrayim, this was not possible, because Yisrael had not yet received the Torah.

Now, it is crucial that we do not misinterpret, chas v’shalom, what he says. He is not saying that with the power of Torah it is possible, chas v’shalom, to actually enter the fiftieth level of tumah—just as Yisrael actually entered the forty-ninth level of tumah in Mitzrayim. For, it is forbidden to deliberately enter any level of tumah, even for the sake of a mitzvah. The Gemara (B.B. 57b) teaches us explicitly that if a person chooses to go where it is improper to go: “**אי דאיכא דרכא אחריתא רשע הוא**”—if an alternate route exists and he goes anyway, he is considered a “rasha.”

Rather, this is what the Ohr HaChaim is saying. By engaging in Torah-study, we have the power to refine and retrieve sparks of kedushah from the “sha’ar hanun” even from a distance—without actually entering that domain. Although we have not yet attained the fiftieth level, nevertheless the Torah consists of fifty levels of “binah.” Therefore, by engaging in Torah-study with kedushah and taharah, the Torah itself will act like a magnet upon the “nitzotzei kedushah” located in the “sha’ar hanun” of tumah.

Let us add an additional thought. The entire Torah teaches us how to differentiate between “kodesh” and “chol”—that which is sacred and that which is secular and mundane—as it is written (Vayikra 10, 10): “**וליהבדיל בין הקודש ובין החול ובין הטמא ובין הטהור**”—**to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the impure and the pure.** Therefore, by engaging in Torah-study, the Torah itself penetrates the “sha’ar hanun” of tumah, in order to differentiate even there “**between the sacred and the profane, and between the impure and the pure.**” In this manner, the “nitzotzei kedushah” are refined and separated even from the fiftieth level of tumah.

Notwithstanding, we find that the words of the Ohr HaChaim still require further amplification. We have stated that in Mitzrayim Yisrael could not actually enter the fiftieth level of tumah, because they had not yet received the Torah; however, the process of refining the sparks from the fiftieth level in the subsequent galuyos was accomplished by means of Torah-study. This being the case, the Ohr HaChaim’s question still remains. Why didn’t HKB”H take Yisrael out of Mitzrayim before they sank to the forty-ninth level of tumah?

We cannot answer--as the Ohr HaChaim did--that HKB”H intended for them to enter the forty-ninth level of tumah so as to extract the “nitzotzei kedushah” from that domain. For, if the Torah possesses the capacity to clarify the sparks from the fiftieth level of tumah—a tumah which is so intense that it is impossible to escape from its domain—it certainly has the capacity to clarify the sparks from the other forty-nine levels, as well. So, why indeed did HKB”H delay taking Yisrael out of Mitzrayim until they had sunk to the precarious forty-ninth level of tumah?

In order to fully explain the meaning of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh, we need to delve deeper into another aspect of the Galus in Mitzrayim. So, at this point, we will take a brief respite to digest and review what we have learned thus far. Next week, G-d willing, we will resume our discussion and expand upon what we have learned in the essay on parshas Vaaira.

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