

פרשת בא

OVERVIEW

The rhythm of the plagues quicken. The locust finish what the hail spared. Three days of darkness descend on the Egyptian provinces. Finally, the announcement regarding the impending deaths of the first-born males heralds the approaching hour of liberation. The people in Goshen are given, the necessary instruction to prepare for the exodus. The introduction of the Pessach sacrifice adds to the solemnity of the coming event.

In the night of the fifteenth day of Nissan, the angel of G-d sowed death and terror in all Egyptian homes. In total order the Jewish population begins to move out from the deathly silent land of their suffering and proceed in the direction of the red sea. Two commandments establish the permanent status of the Pessach festival and of the priesthood of the Jewish first-born males.

COMMENTARY

Locust and Darkness

These two plagues set in motion the final phase in the struggle between G-d's orders and pharaoh's obstinacy: the death of the first-born males. It should be noted that the plagues of total darkness and locust were actually natural and normal occurrences in Egypt. Their special significance at this crucial turn of events lies in their unusual intensity and extraordinary effectiveness. This was to prepare the Egyptian population for the trauma of the tenth and final plague.

Like the two preceding plagues, the final one involves a natural event: death. However, the scope and uniformity of the nation-wide dying served to demonstrate that every phase of human life, even death itself, is subject to the control and direction of the great Master and Creator. The Egyptians could not accept that nature is subject to a higher authority. To them nature, as symbolized by the over-flowing constancy of the majestic Nile river was the incarnation of all-mighty power. They thought of it as the supreme deity. A mere miracle that would change the fundamental character of a natural occurrence would not have sufficed to correct the Egyptian illusion. By employing the familiar ingredient of nature's way - death - and changing its inherent rhythm to serve a pre-defined and pre-announced purpose, G-d obtained Egypt's grudging recognition of "His Hand's" supreme power.

The Birth of-the-Month

"This renewal of the month shall be for you the beginning of new months; it shall be for you the first among the months of the year" (12:2). Without apparent connection with the account of the liberation from Egypt, the Torah here institutes a calendar rule based on the cycle of the moon. Calendar regulation is without doubt of vital importance for organizing the human society. But,

one may ask, is this purely technical arrangement of such significance that the Torah accords it a place of honor among the national Jewish institutions in that it is the first constitutional law addressed to the Jewish public at large? The answer to this question is of particular meaningfulness.

In order to live up to its singular national status, Israel must strive at all times to maintain a condition of youthful vigor and an ever fresh source of vitality in solving the tasks and challenges it faces in the midst of a great world. Devarim 4:25 speaks of the danger of "aging" referring of-course to a state of mind which is geared more and more to the crass requirements of material well-being to which all spiritual endeavors are subordinate.

The moon with its never-ending rhythm of waxing and waning has been selected as an eloquent symbol precisely because it accentuates the basic prerequisite for the continued existence of Israel as a nation. "This month be for you the first of the month". "For" you, comment the sages, and "through" you. This refers to the solemn proclamation of the new moon's arrival by the highest authority in Israel. In a deeper sense it means that the nation must persist in its tireless efforts to attain the height of perfection and recognition of G-d.

Our perpetual national renewal involves the use of all our spiritual and material resources to meet the challenge. "All is in the hand of heaven except the fear of Heaven". The essence of our humanity is mastery of our moral stance. The moon's renewal reminds us of the need to work at the constant re-invigoration of society and its tasks in an ever-youthful spirit of joyful dedication.

The Passover lamb

Rarely do we find in the body of the Jewish law an institution so replete with ideas and educative power as the commandment of the Passover lamb. In the first place, it is an act of courage in light of the sacred status accorded the animal in Egyptian society. As at the sacrifice of Yitzchak, the Passover lamb symbolizes the total harmony between G-d and man as demonstrated by the offering of the animal, by the blood representing our blood, by the sacrifice representing our self-sacrifice. It is consumed in the circle of the family together with the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs.

Israel's devotion to its G-d is the fruit of its harsh experiences under Egyptian bondage. Total reliance on divine guidance forms the ideological underpinning of our national structure. The annual offering of the Passover lamb in Jerusalem calls on the nation to perpetuate the spiritual grandeur the Jewish people exhibited at the time of the exodus.

The Matzah

The Matzah is not only a symbol of the suffering in Egypt; it also represents an ideal portrayal of

Israel's soul. In the symbolic language of the Torah the missing element of fermentation mirrors the dependence of our entire human potential on the rulership and guidance of the divine will. Matzah transforms the state of suffering into a condition of inner oneness replacing anxiety and despair with a deep sense of hope and peace. It is logical that the liberation is accompanied by the institution of Matzah that is to imbue the people with the sense of the profound uniqueness of the liberation from Egypt.

Liberation in itself does not mean the attainment of a goal. It is a physical and political upheaval leading the people towards a great spiritual awakening that is to climax in the overwhelming experience at Sinai. Thus the presence of the Matzah at the time of the exodus, with its pure whiteness and simple ingredients, is of incomparable import far beyond the mere aspect of a historical reminiscence.

The Exodus

"At the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that very day, all the hosts of G-d went out from the land of Mitzrayim" (12:41). Israel's first appearance in its social structure contains characteristic elements that we meet in the fundamental outlines of our history. These are the legions of G-d, cohorts in the service of an invisible Master, obeying precise orders, marching in unity on the path to freedom. During the long years of oppression the moral fiber of the Jews was not crushed. They emerged, not as submissive slaves, but as men of courage and determination. To date Israel exhibits this phenomenal ability of moral resistance that has always aroused the grudging admiration of the nations of the world.

The exodus took place as a result of the sudden end to the slavery that had remained in effect until the last moment. An act of direct divine intervention, the great decisive factor in Israel's history. No day passes in the life of the Jew without a reminder in his prayer of the exodus from Egypt. It is treated not as a purely historical phase but as an event of timeless significance that crosses the boundary of accepted historical concepts. No celebration, be it the Sabbath or the festivals, without references to the exodus. No Jewish thought without the subliminal perception of our nation's epic beginning. The exodus is not just another interesting, or even essential, item in our national chronicle. It is in deed and truth the very fundament of our nationhood enshrined in the uniqueness of our constitution, the Torah.

Two types of individuals did not take part in this great event: the "mumar" who betrays the divine

covenant through his treasonous conduct, and the "Arel", the uncircumcized male who does not bear the "Milah" either from birth or by a conscious refusal to carry the symbol of the Abrahamic covenant. This does not signify a rejection of the non-Jew per se who desires to ally himself with the Jewish national body by accepting the Torah's eternal precepts, the "Ger Tzedek". It is certainly true that Jewish birth complicates the case of the sinful Jew while he who is born of a gentile mother has no natural place within the Jewish community. G-d's army is recruited from the ranks of those who adhere to the criteria of Jewish nationhood and are determined to uphold the Jewish ideals.

The first-born

Israel is now established as a nation, but a nation composed of individual families, a family nation. In every family one member was singled out, the first-born male, to join the ranks of those who bear the responsibility for the spiritual integrity of the nation and its loyalty to G-d's Torah. Later on, after the fatal episode of the golden calf, they were replaced by the priests and levites.

The first-born's role as the people's spiritual mentor is not necessarily identical with his vested rights, such as the doubled share of his inheritance. He must be the rightful first son of his mother that excludes the case of an older sister or brother from a previous marriage. In the eldest son we recognize not only his personal dedication and obligation but also that of his mother whose first fruit he is. Women are not included in the divine service, not as a result of an alleged inferior religious status, but because the task of the first-born (and later the priest and levite) requires a degree of energy, independence and objectivity which the woman cannot achieve with the same intense concentration.

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