

LET THEM LEAVE, LET THEM LIVE

When Jethro and Moses meet after a long separation, and Moses tells his father-in-law all that had occurred to him and to his people, Jethro responds

ברוך ה' אשר הציל אתכם מיד מצרים ומיד פרעה,
אשר הציל את העם מתחת יד מצרים

"Blessed be God who hath delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh, who hath delivered the people from the yoke of the hand of Egypt" (Exodus 18:10).

The most distinguished commentators -- including Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Seforno -- are puzzled by the redundancy in this verse. Why does Jethro repeat his expression of gratitude "אשר הציל", saying first that God had saved Israel from the hand of Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh, and then repeating that He had saved the people from under the hand of Egypt? Each of these exegetes offers his own answer.

This morning permit me to recommend a solution suggested by a modern Sage, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, in his "מ' מרים." Jethro repeats himself, because he is referring to two different acts of salvation or הצלה. One of them is for the exodus of Israel from Egypt. The second is his expression of gratitude that Israel had managed to retain its own identity, its spiritual integrity, even during the long sojourn in Egypt; he offers a prayer of thanks that Israel managed to survive the pressure of Egypt's culture, religion, and civilization, and that Israel was now drowned in the seas of Egypt's immorality. Hence, it was necessary to repeat "אשר הציל", "that He has saved you," from the political and military threat of Egypt, and also from its cultural and religious imperialism.

I mention this insight, because it is important as world Jewry will shortly begin to devote its serious attention to a significant problem. In the international Jewish meeting shortly to take place in Brussels, concerning the issues of Russian Jewry, the following question will be very high on its agenda: until now, Jews in the free world, including Israel, America, and other countries, have emphasized the theme of emigration from the Soviet Union. We have agitated, protested, exercised all our political and diplomatic leverage, in order to prevail upon the government of the Soviet Union to permit its Jews to leave if they wish. We have rallied public opinion in an attempt to force the Russians to liberalize their restrictive anti-Jewish policies. The question is, shall we now continue in the exact same pattern that we have followed before, or shall we begin to emphasize the quality of Jewish life in the Soviet Union? Shall we use whatever influence we possess to prevail upon the Communists to allow the Jews who want to stay in the Soviet Union, to print Hebrew texts of Jewish religious literature, to establish at least some Jewish schools?

Such efforts have been undertaken by individuals and organizations during the past years. Groups such as Geulim, Chamah, and others, have concentrated on the religio-cultural adjustment of Russian Jews who have come to Israel or America, and some of this literature has found its way back into the Soviet Union. But, by and large, our large organizations have been geared to the emigration issue only, and have not really emphasized the insistence that the Soviets allow Jews to develop greater Jewish consciousness and education within the Soviet Union.

This was one of the main points emphasized by the Chief Rabbi of England in his recent, controversial visit. Many of the militants, in Israel and elsewhere, have criticized this point of view. They maintain that raising these matters deflects public attention from the real issue, which is emigration. They are even suspicious of the Government of Israel, fearing that in a move towards

Israeli-Russian reproachment, Israel will relax its efforts and those of Jews elsewhere towards emigration from Russia, and thus abandon those Jews who aspire to leave, and especially the "refuseniks." Only increased emigration, they say, will assist those who remain to enhance their Jewish identity.

Now, these Russian Jewish militants must be taken seriously. They are amongst the authentic heroes of the Jewish people in our days. Yet, they are not infallible, and the subject demands clear and deep analysis.

I do not by any means believe that we may let up on our demand for Jewish emigration -- even if the Israelis should decide on such a policy. But I definitely do believe that we must emphasize the freedom for the Jews who remain in Russia -- and they will be the overwhelming majority -- the right to develop and enhance their Jewish identity. We must bear in mind not only the *אשר הציל* (salvation) of Exodus, but that as well which has to do with Jews remaining Jews wherever they are. We must work to enhance Jewish identity and national and religious feeling of all Jews everywhere. That such identity amongst Russian Jews heretofore has been exceedingly weak, we in New York know full well. Unfortunately, most of the Russian Jews who have come here -- and we admire them and love them -- have been highly assimilated. It is a pity that they have struggled so hard, and yet are hardly aware of the lofty cause for which they have sacrificed.

But now, something is happening amongst Russian Jews. There is movement in the direction of greater Jewish consciousness and awareness. I am not speaking of the Sephardic Jews, such as the Georgians; not of the children or grandchildren of traditional Jews in Russian occupied Poland or Baltic countries, those who still remember in their families what it meant to be a Jew; certainly not of the Lubavitch groups whose heroism is still an untold story. I am referring to the so-called "real Russians," those whose parents and even grandparents were totally assimilated. These are the people who are the intellectuals and the professors in Moscow -- and Jews form an inordinately large proportion of this group -- and who have been almost totally devoid of any Jewish awareness all their lives. Yet now they are beginning to quest and question and ponder their own Jewishness.

The reasons for this are manifold. First, there is the endemic anti-Semitism that is a part of the legacy of the whole of Russian history. Then, there is the feeling on the part of many Jewish intellectuals that Russian society is reaching a crisis stage, and will look for scapegoats -- and what better scapegoats are there than the traditional scapegoats of the Western world, the Jews? But even more important than these, is a new spirit that has gripped many nationalities from amongst these intellectuals: the search for roots. Jews, along with others, are beginning to search out those roots, to look for them, and to want to grasp them. (See the recent article by Professor Alexander Voronel in Soviet Jewish Affairs, Volume 5, Number 2.)

It is remarkable that, unlike just ten years ago, the most sought-after underground literature today is: Bibles and religious texts. Moreover, this has resulted in a widespread interest in religion that has focused on Christianity. In a way, this is a good symptom, because it leads Russian Jews to investigate their Judaism. In another way, it is rather sad: there have been a number of important conversions by Jews to Russian Orthodoxy -- although, ironically, some of them who have become priests now suffer from anti-Semitism by the Russian Orthodox hierarchy which can't forgive them the fact that they were once Jews! And Jews, even those who have no immediate desire to emigrate, are looking all over for Hebrew texts, religious texts, books on Jewish philosophy!

Hence, we have before us a historic challenge and opportunity, and a moral obligation, to assist in this search for Jewishness where it exists -- and to

help create it where it does not. As Jethro said, *ברוך השם*, "Thank God," for two salvations, so must we continue on both avenues: we must not let up on our insistence to the Russians concerning their Jews that, "let them leave," and we must now insist with equal vigor, "let them live" as Jews!

In a sense, this dual approach is indicated in our prayers which we recite thrice daily, in the Amidah. There are two blessings in this prayer which, at first blush, seem redundant, for both are prayers for redemption. In one we say

ראה נא בעינינו ור'בה ריבנו... ברוך אתה ה' גואל ישראל,

"See our affliction, take up our cudgels for us... blessed art Thou O Lord who redeems Israel." The second blessing is *תקץ בשופר גדול לחרותינו... ברוך אתה ה' מקבץ נדחי עמו ישראל*

"Sound the great Shofar for our freedom... blessed art Thou O Lord who gathers together the dispersed of Israel."

Are these not really identical prayers for the redemption of Israel?

The answer is that here too we find a fundamental difference. One commentator (R. Jonathan Eibeschutz, in his "*יערות דבש*") maintains that although all the blessings are phrased in the present tense, not all refer to the present. Most are petitions for the future. The first of the two blessings under discussion, however, refers specifically to the here and the now. The blessing of *גואל ישראל* is a plea to God to continue to redeem Israel right now, to grant us that whole spectrum of factors that insure our survival as Jews wherever we are. The second blessing, that of *מקבץ נדחי עמו ישראל*, is directed to the future: it is a plea for national liberation, for exodus from the lands of our dispersion, for the final and complete and comprehensive ingathering of exile -- even from the United States!

Moreover, the first blessing refers to the survival of Jews as both individuals and community, but more in the spiritual and cultural sense, rather than the political and historical. Whereas the second blessing is concerned exclusively with the historical element -- the political redemption of our people. This is indicated by the fact that in the first blessing, *גואל ישראל*, Israel is mentioned as such: *ישראל*, not as *עם ישראל*, the People of Israel. In the second blessing, however, we clearly identify ourselves as the People or Nation of Israel: *מקבץ נדחי עמו ישראל*, "Who gathers together the dispersed of His people Israel."

So, we need both, and we must now allow any one of these issues to claim our exclusive attention to the detriment of the other.

This is relevant not only to Russian Jewry, but to American Jewry as well. For a long time, Israelis erred in assuming that the entire function of Diaspora Jewry was to contribute money and to go on Aliyah to Israel -- and they completely brushed aside our very proper concern with enhancing our own Jewish life here. They were almost contemptuous about American Jewish needs. It is only in recent years, largely as a result of the efforts of the late and lamented Pinchas Sapir, that the Israeli Government circles began to realize the importance to Israel of an American Jewry that will be aware, alert, and Jewishly strong. On our part, we must not at all ignore Israel, and not ignore the importance of Aliyah. Both must be emphasized by us.

Ironically, the same might be said for Israel itself. We must pray *תקץ בשופר גדול לחרותינו* -- for Israel's national and military success, its achievement of the goal of peace and the ingathering of the exiles, so that it can devote itself to its inner upbuilding. And we must pray as much for *גואל ישראל*, for the survival in the State of Israel of Jewish consciousness,

awareness, and religious depth and growth.

May the time come that the Redeemer of Israel will answer both our prayers, and with the final redemption bring about both our inner and outer salvation, our religious and national redemption.