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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

RUBASHKIN AND THE FALL OF THE JEDI

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Fantasy trilogies have a predictable structure. The first book introduces the characters, their abilities, and the conflict; the third resolves the conflict on the basis of the characters' growth or failure to grow in understanding the extent and limits of their abilities. The middle book is mostly action scenes. As with so many other forms of human literature, the origin of the fantasy trilogy is in Torah. Parshat Vaera is that middle book.

In mediocre trilogies, the middle book could easily be replaced by an index card summary of the old silent-movie type (or scrolling text). In great trilogies, the middle book makes you realize things you had completely missed in the first book, and is essential for understanding how the resolution can occur only when the hero comes to embody the initial conflict. I suggest that great trilogies are implicit midrash, and this structure can help us recover an often-missed aspect of Sefer Shemot.

I'll lead with this: The core conflict in Shemot is not between Mitzrayim and Yisroel, or between our G-d and theirs. We understand from the beginning that only our G-d is real, and Benei Yisroel take almost no active part in the destruction of Mitzrayim. (Even in the sequel, "Hashem will fight the battle for you; your task is silence".) No - the unresolved issue is whether Benei Yisroel can **deserve** redemption, or whether G-d's love for them is unjustified nepotism.

This framing is captured by a brilliant and deeply unsettling comment of Meshekh Chokhmah.

Shemot 6:13 (for the gematriists among you, the verse that sums it all up) reads:

וידבר יקוק אל משה ואל אהרן
ויצום אל בני ישראל ואל פרעה מלך מצרים
להוציא את בני ישראל מארץ מצרים:

*Hashem spoke to Mosheh and Aharon
He commanded them toward Benei Yisroel and toward Pharaoh King
of Mitzrayim
so as to remove Benei Yisroel from the Land of Mitzrayim*

Meshekh Chokhmah comments:

ייתכן כי גם אז במצרים
היו גדולי האומה אשר היו שרים נכבדים ואפרתים,
והם היו משעבדים את בני ישראל לעבדים,
שמכרו המצרים להם . . .
לכן ציוה השם יתברך
שבני ישראל גם פרעה יוציאו את בני ישראל מהשעבוד.

*It seems likely that even then in Egypt
there were greats of the nation who were honored aristocratic authorities
and they would enslave their fellows of Benei Yisroel
whom the Mitzriyim sold to them . . .
therefore Hashem may He be Blessed commanded
that Benei Yisroel **and** Pharaoh
remove Benei Yisroel from the enslavement.*

Mosheh and Aharon have a dual mission. They need to destroy the Mitzri power structure that has legitimated systematic oppression. At the same time, they need to reform the internal Jewish structures that legitimate oppression directly through collaboration and indirectly by undercutting the moral basis of the Jewish civil rights movement.

The verse implies that their mission to Benei Yisroel was primary. I suggest that Mosheh and Aharon were not needed for the destruction of Mitzrayim, and the subsequent Exodus. G-d could have handled those Himself, and would have done so in order to fulfill His covenant with Avraham. But He needed Mosheh and Aharon because He hoped that the Exodus would be preceded by a moral awakening.

Meshekh Chokhmah notes that our verse is followed by a peculiarly partial genealogy that cover the tribes of Reuven, Shimon, and Levi through Mosheh and Aharon. He suggests accordingly that these were the tribes that were most guilty of enslaving their fellows. In other words: Mosheh, as a prince turned civil disobedient, represents the possibility of Egyptian teshuvah. Aharon, as the *nasi* of Levi, represents the possibility of Jewish teshuvah.

In this light we can see that the key moment of Parashat Shemot – the first book – is when Mosheh’s initial idealism is spoiled by the two Jews’ fighting, and their subsequent collaboration with Pharaoh to make him an outlaw. The core conflict is whether he is right in deciding, as he does in the moment, that there is nothing to choose between the Jews and the Egyptians, and so he is best off on the sidelines in Midyan.

Readers who expect a full resolution are sadly disappointed. The very first laws G-d gives the newly constituted Jewish nation – the preamble to whose Torah/Constitution emphasizes that G-d took them out of slavery! are about the regulation of intra-Jewish slavery. Centuries later, Yirmiyahu haNavi (Chapter 34) tells us that these *bediavad* regulations were the basis of G-d’s covenant with us, and yet we could not even keep them – and so the Beit HaMikdash is destroyed, and we are sent back into exile.

So the initial trilogy is not the end of history; we’re in the middle of at least Episode 8 by now. Chazal note that each previous Redemption has been characterized by a similar form of Divine ambivalence: does it happen because we finally deserve it, or because we’ve failed so badly that we need to be extracted lest there be no basis left for trying again?

If the pattern holds, each opening to redemption comes together with an opportunity to learn from our mistakes and to finally internalize the message that G-d loves the Jews, but he hates oppressive labor practices, and He – k’b’yakhol – wants these two emotions to be in harmony.

So far, I think, I’ve engaged in pure Torah interpretation; the ideas I’ve put forth can be judged on their fidelity to the text of Torah and/or to the ideas of Meshekh Chokhmah. I hope that you’ll decide they are compelling interpretation, and develop your own applications, whether or not you agree with my own following application.

Mr. Sholom Rubashkin was recently released from prison. There are compelling arguments that his sentencing was both procedurally and substantively unjust. His family both loves him and needs him, and no one’s interests were served by keeping him imprisoned. Every report that I have seen verifies that he did many good and important philanthropic deeds within his home community. It is plausible that a core goal of his business was to make kosher meat more affordable, and we should be aware that his home community includes a high percentage of families that would be challenged economically even if being Orthodox carried no financial cost.

But it is also clear that Mr. Rubashkin’s business rested on a structure that allowed for and likely depended on the exploitation of workers, especially workers who were in a land not their own. He prevented unionization; he gave workers no safe avenue to complain about bosses who extorted them or sent them into unsafe working conditions; and this despite knowingly hiring employees who were desperately vulnerable because of their immigration status.

I must make absolutely clear that I am not advocating here for either looser immigration enforcement (so illegal workers will be less vulnerable) or tighter immigration laws (so that there will be fewer undocumented workers to exploit). My political analysis is that we have here (and in Israel) a “Baptists and bootleggers” situation, in which liberals and conservatives combine to create a moral situation much worse than either’s policies could independently create (the equivalent of making whiskey easily available but only from criminals). But my political analysis has no claim to be Torah.

What I am claiming on the basis of Torah is that we should be very, very wary of celebrating a Jewish redemption that is not accompanied by a profound sensitivity to labor ethics. One of the sequels to Vaera is Yirmiyahu 34.

Shabbat shalom!