

Names of Redemption

Introduction

The title of this week's parsha is Shemos – “Names.” Each parsha revolves around a different theme. The title of the parsha hints to what this theme is.

‘Shemos’, names, seems to have no connection to the contents of the parsha which depicts the pain and suffering of the bitter Egyptian exile.

The Gemara¹ discusses the implication of names. Rabbi Elazar quotes a verse to prove that names are laden with meaning: ‘See the wonders of Hashem Who makes שְׁמוֹת, destruction, in the land²’. Says Rabbi Elazar: Don’t read the word as שְׁמוֹת, destruction, read it as שְׁמוֹת, names; ‘Great is Hashem who makes *names* in the land’. This piece of Gemara requires explanation.

Destructions that Arouse Wonder

There are generations that undergo such severe destruction, that all those who witness it wonder, “Why did this have to be?”

The generation that endured the slavery in Egypt was such a generation. Throughout exile, there have been other generations that lost tens, hundreds of thousands, and millions, of Jews. Many were tortured to death, and great communities were razed without a remnant.

Witnesses of these destructions wondered, “Who are the people who suffered so? Why did it happen to them?”

The Generation that was Enslaved in Egypt had a Previous Record in this World

The Zohar³ reveals the previous record of the generations that were enslaved in Egypt. These were reincarnations of the people who had sinned so grievously during the Dor Hamabul (pre-deluge) era, and during the Dor Haflaga (Generation of Dispersion). Although they had received punishment in previous lifetimes, it was not enough. They had committed terrible crimes many times and had been killed only once.

It was these souls - of the pre-deluge era – who were the innocent infants that were tossed into the Nile. They had to drown many times to atone for the multiple transgressions of previous lifetimes. Thereby they were cleansed and prepared to become part of the great nation of G-d.

The Jews who were afflicted with crushing slavery and forced to build the city of Pisom and Ramseis with חמר and לבנים, brick and plaster, were reincarnations of the sinners of the Generation of Dispersion who had built a tower with חמר and לבנים to fight the A-mighty. Their affliction purified them and prepared them to accept the Torah.

(The tribe of Levi was not enslaved because they achieved their rectification through a spiritual חמר and לבנים, intense Torah study. They engaged in ליבוך הלכה, clarifying Torah law through intense study. Also, one of the methodologies of studying Torah is קל והמר, comparing a more severe case to a less severe one.)

The History of Other Generations that Suffered

The generation that experienced the agonies of the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash (Holy Temple) was the one who had, in a previous lifetime, fashioned and worshipped the Golden Calf. Due to the sin of the Golden Calf it was decreed that the Bais HaMikdash would have to eventually be destroyed. Those who had caused its destruction had to be the ones who lived through it.

In the years 1637/8 Polish Jewry was ravaged by pogroms lead by Khmelnitsky (may his name be obliterated). Tzaddikim (righteous people) of the era revealed that the people who suffered were reincarnations of the ‘Biryonim’.

The Biryonim were militant groups who defied the instruction of the sages during the era of the destruction of the Second Temple. The sages had instructed them to make peace with the Romans thereby aiming to preserve Jewish lives and the Bais HaMikdash, if not national autonomy. The Biryonim disobeyed the sages and fought the Romans, causing the loss of millions of lives and the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash.

The pious Jews who had been murdered during the Khmelnitzky massacres had an unfinished account from previous lifetimes they atoned for by being slaughtered.

In our times, there is no one qualified to reveal who the six million were, but with the coming of Mashiach, their identity, and the rectification they achieved through their suffering, will be revealed.

A Person's Names Contain his Mission

Every person comes down to this world with a unique mission to fulfill. This mission is hinted to in his name. We achieve an understanding of the mission of a person by studying his name.

When Yaakov Avinu conquered Eisav's angel, he asked him, 'What is your name?' The angel responded, 'Why do you ask for my name?' Rashi explains the answer of the angel: Our names change according to our task. In other words, we have no set name; our names vary according to the mission we are assigned.

The name of a being is the name of his task.

The Purpose of Suffering

שמה means destruction that arouses wonder. The word שמה is similar to the word משתוממם, wonder. It is also similar to the word שמים, the heavens, which are removed from our grasp. We do not understand why anyone should have to undergo such extreme suffering.

Rabbi Elazar taught us to read the word שמות as שמות. If you see a שמה, destruction that leads you to wonder, the answer is שמות, they have names, missions. The task of the people who underwent these שמות was to suffer.

A soul that sins needs rectification. This can be accomplished in various ways. The easiest way is through suffering on this world. Furthermore, a person who was tortured and killed because he belonged to the Jewish people achieves a complete rectification and merits a very high place in heaven.

Suffering Hastens the Redemption

A soul sullied by sin would be excluded from partaking of the redemption. Because Hashem insists that not even one of His children be lost, the redemption cannot take place until every Jew is ready.

When the time for redemption nears, suffering increases, since every Jew must be rectified. As seen in this week's parsha, the redemption from Egypt was heralded by an intensification of misery.

Through their suffering, they hastened their rectification, and thereby, the redemption.

A Name can have Multiple Meanings

The names of the tribes were enumerated in Parshas Vayigash as they descended to Egypt. This week's parsha, Shemos, begins with a repetition of the twelve names of the tribes. Why are the names of the tribes repeated?

As discussed above, the name of a person is a reference to his mission on this world. It also encapsulates his essence. However, there are many people with the same names and completely different biographies, personalities and levels of piety.

A name can have many different meanings depending on how we explain it. This is because Hebrew letters can be arranged and understood in many different ways to derive different meanings.

For example:

The name of Hashem, Yud, Keh, Vav and Keh determines the order of each month. However, the climates and seasons vary greatly. This is because in each month the name of Hashem is arranged differently. In Nissan, the name of Hashem is arranged in its usual order and the climate is a pleasant one. In Teves, the name of Hashem is arranged backwards, and the climate is therefore frigid.

The same is with the names of people. Although they may have the same name, in heaven it is arranged completely differently.

Names of Redemption

When the names of the tribes were enumerated in Parshas Vayigash, they were arranged in the order of exile, because the tribes were descending into exile.

This week the names are repeated, because now that we are starting the Book of the Torah where the Jews are redeemed, the names are arranged in the order of redemption. The Midrash⁴, in the beginning of this week's parsha, lists each of the names of the tribes and how it alludes to redemption.

(This may be why we name a baby boy specifically at his Bris Milah [circumcision]. Our tradition teaches that at a Bris Milah, Eliyahu HaNavi - who will herald the Ultimate Redemption – is present. The light of redemption shines, and therefore the name of the infant will be arranged according to its rectified order. If the child merits, his name will be so arranged his entire life. This is why we bless him: Just as you entered your Bris, so may you enter Torah, marriage and good deeds. Just as you entered your covenant with Hashem in the spirit of redemption, so may you continue to remain in this state throughout your entire life.)

A Spirit of Redemption Awakens with Parshas Shemos

The Torah is alive. The events of the parsha reoccur each year as it is read. When the week of Shemos arrives, a spirit of redemption awakens. We begin a period that is auspicious for repentance called שׁוֹבְבִי"ם which is an acronym for יתרו משפטים, בשלח, בא, וארא, שמות, וזאת.

During these six weeks, the Torah narrates the liberation process of the Jewish people. They begin as sullied souls being purified in the furnace of Egyptian slavery, are then release from bondage, progress to mental and physical recovery, and are then, finally, spiritually perfected with the giving of the Torah and mitzvos. (In a leap year we include Terumah and Tetzaveh and call this period שׁוֹבְבִי"ם ת"ה. Then, we consider the building of a home for the Divine Presence as the final touch of the redemption.)

Each of us is in dire need of liberation from our personal spiritual bondage. The period when we read the Torah's account of the liberation of the Jewish people is especially auspicious for releasing ourselves from the yoke of our evil side.

Each Jew's root is in one of the twelve tribes. Just as the names of the tribes were transformed from a name of exile to a name of redemption, so are our names transformed for the better.

Great days are coming; may we merit taking advantage of them.

¹ ברכות דף ז' ע"ב

² תהלים מ"ו

³ עיין שער הפסוקים פ' שמות בתחלתו

⁴ תנחומא שמות פרק ה'