

TIMELESS TORAH

BO: FREEDOM TO LEAVE, FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

Free to Go

A certain amount of confusion as to when exactly the Redemption occurred surrounds the verses describing the Exodus from Egypt. Immediately after the narrative of the Plague of the Firstborn, the verses (12:31-37) relate that the Egyptians, in their panic, drove the Jewish people out of Egypt. This seems to have happened at night time, shortly after the firstborns died at midnight, and indeed, the verses stress three times that it was still night when the Jewish people were told to leave the country. Nevertheless, only a few verses later (12:41), the Torah emphasises that 'it was on this very **day**' that the Jewish people left Egypt. Other verses (see Bamidbar 33:3 and Devarim 16:1) throughout the Torah also repeat this contradiction, some stating that the Exodus occurred at night and others stating that it was daytime when the Jewish people left Egypt.

Rashi (Devarim 16:1) resolves the problem, explaining that although the Jewish people were given permission to leave at night – and were in fact exhorted by the Egyptians to leave immediately – they actually only started journeying after daybreak. The Gemara (Berachot 9a) elaborates on this, expounding on a well-known dispute as to whether the *Korban Pesach* (and, by extension, the *Afikoman* that we eat on Seder night) must be eaten by midnight or if it can be left until daybreak. The Gemara explains that, while all agree that the *Korban Pesach* must be eaten at the time corresponding to the Exodus, they argue about which stage of the Exodus was critical; the Jewish people were *redeemed* at midnight, when they were told they were free, but they chose to actually leave only the next day.

The self-control needed for the Jewish people to stay those extra few hours must have been immense. After years of slavery, they had seen their masters decimated, and nothing at all was holding them back from leaving the country for good. Their time had finally come, but they chose – at Hashem's command – to remain there. Those few hours on that final night in Egypt encapsulated the key element of the Redemption: the Jewish people would follow the will of Hashem and not the whims of Pharaoh. Freedom to leave was not enough, they were also free to choose.

Night of Protection

With this in mind, we can address a cryptic verse that the commentators struggle to explain. Immediately after the verse (12:41) states that the Jewish people left Egypt in the day, the next verse (12:42) reverts to state that this night is a '*leil shimurim laShem ... l'dorotam*', a night of 'guarding' for Hashem and for all generations. Rashi explains the double connotation: this night was 'guarded' and anticipated by Hashem in order to fulfil His promise to Avraham Avinu, and it is also a night during which the Jewish people will continuously be protected from harmful forces. But what is especially puzzling about this verse is its placement. It would seem far better positioned with the other verses that describe what transpired on that night than as an interruption between the verses of the next part of the narrative.

The Ktav Sofer (Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, Pressburg, d. 1871) makes a fascinating point. We are accustomed to referring to *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the departure from Egypt; we rarely, however, refer to this event as the redemption from our slavery, despite the wondrous miracles involved in



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that redemption. Perhaps, suggests the Ktav Sofer, this is because not all the Jewish people actually left. The freedom from slavery occurred before the actual Exodus, and the Midrashim teach that large numbers of the Jewish people decided to remain in Egypt as free people. The true redemption occurred with those who followed Hashem out of Egypt to receive the Torah and the mitzvot.

This, concludes the Ktav Sofer, is the true meaning of *leil shimurim*. This night was not a night of freedom from slavery. Freedom had already occurred through the miracles of the plagues. Instead, the true significance of this night is that it was 'guarded' for Hashem; it was the night when we demonstrated as a nation our commitment to our Creator by leaving the comforts that Egypt might now have to offer and dedicating ourselves to Hashem's commandments. This, therefore, is why it is specifically the Exodus, more than any other miracle, that is so fundamentally integrated into the Jewish soul.

As the verses underscore the transition from the night when we were allowed to leave and the day when we actually left, we are told that this night was 'guarded for Hashem'. This is the night when we held ourselves back from being driven by our instincts to escape and instead bowed to the command of Hashem to leave on our own terms.

From Then to Now

In a curious sequence, the verses towards the end of the parsha state a number of seemingly unrelated mitzvot. Verse 13:2 introduces the concept of the sanctification of the firstborns, both people and animals, as a commemoration of the final plague carried

out against the Egyptians. The next verses, however, digress to tell about how the Jewish people were taken out of Egypt with a mighty hand and will be taken to Eretz Yisrael; how this should be remembered by celebrating Pesach with its various laws; how we should retell the story of the Exodus to our children; and finally, about the mitzvah of tefillin. Only after outlining all these ideas do the verses go back to the mitzvah of the sanctification of the firstborn.

Rav Hirsch (d.1888) explains that although consecrating certain items or times might be necessary, it comes with the danger that the aspiration for holiness suffices with this tribute. When the verses speak of sanctifying the firstborn, therefore, they immediately emphasise that the Redemption from Egypt placed all of us on one level, and we must all commemorate this on Pesach, teach it to the next generation and remember it every day through the mitzvah of tefillin.

These mitzvot in particular underscore the message we have learnt here. Rabbeinu Bechaya (d.1340) remarks that the first verses of this sequence speak about '*hotzi-acha miMitzrayim*', how Hashem took you out of Egypt. The later verses, however, say, '*Hotzianu miMitzrayim*', Hashem took us out of Egypt. This indeed is the theme of the final stage of the Exodus. On that dramatic night, our ancestors made the vital choice to accept Hashem's command, leaving us, their descendants, the legacy of redemption to this day.

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THE SEA