



THE PERSON

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OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

The Redemptive Experience

For several weeks now, we have attempted to define the nature of redemption, *geulah*, in this column. We have struggled with the challenge posed by the Passover Haggadah: “In every generation, each one of us is obligated to see himself as if he had personally left Egypt.”

We have argued that this might not be a requirement to imagine ourselves as shackled slaves who are miraculously enabled to shed our shackles and to march confidently into an unknown wilderness.

Rather, we suggested that the Haggadah is simply challenging us to experience personal redemption. We defined “personal redemption” as does *Ramban*,

Nachmanides, in his introduction to the book of Exodus. There, he writes: “Redemption, *geulah*, means recovering the status of our forefathers.” By this, he means engaging in self-improvement so that one recaptures the moral and ethical stature of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In the past three columns, we outlined specific qualities that our Forefathers possessed, qualities that we can put to use in our own lives.

In this week’s column, we will describe two additional such qualities, drawing upon two analyses of a text in this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Beshalach* (Exodus 13:17-17:16).

The text to which I refer is near the very beginning of the “Song of the Sea,” the triumphant hymn of Moses and the Sons of Israel after miraculously experiencing the splitting of the Reed Sea, the *Yam Suf*. There, we escaped our pursuers and witnessed enemy’s descent into the depths of the sea.

The relevant passage reads:

“...They said: I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;

Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and might;

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and family on the passing
of their daughter
Noa a”h

המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים

He has become my salvation.

This is my God, and I will glorify Him;

The God of my father, and I will exalt Him.

Regrettably, I had only one occasion to converse with the great novelist and devout Jew, Herman Wouk. He is mostly remembered for his prize-winning novel, *The Caine Mutiny*. But for me, and for many of my contemporaries, his masterpiece was his book about Judaism, *This Is My God*.

Herman Wouk “borrowed” the title of his book from the above text. But he informed me that he would have preferred to use the entire sentence as a title and to have called his book “This Is My God... The God Of My Father”. For, he explained to me, each of us has our own relationship with the Almighty which is unique and special. But each of us also must relate to the Almighty in terms of our Forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and internalize the life lessons that they all exemplified.

Let us now examine how two commentators interpret our text. I begin with a passage in the posthumously published essays of a Holocaust victim, Rabbi Abraham Grodzinski. Rabbi Grodzinski was the moral guide for the hundreds of students of the Slobodka Yeshiva during the immediate pre-Holocaust years.

In this essay, Rabbi Grodzinski points out the connection between the phrase “horse and driver He has hurled into the sea,” a phrase which graphically describes the bitter end toward which evildoers are destined, and the phrases “This is my



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God... the God of my father.” He writes, “This song about the punishment of Egypt is an expression of the hatred one must bear, not to those who perpetrate evil, but rather to evil itself.”

He goes on to say that moral perfection must be prefaced by the recognition that there is indeed evil in the world and that one must disdain that evil. Only then can one begin to transform evil, to correct evil, and to appreciate the Almighty fully. The pious person is not naïve but recognizes the darkness that resides in the world. Without that recognition, we cannot achieve the “status of our Forefathers,” who knew evil and combated it, each in his own way. And so must we.

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, who passed away decades before the Holocaust but was also a moral guide for many yeshiva students, has a different take upon this text. He was known fondly by his students as the *Alter*, the “Old Man,” of Kelm. He juxtaposes the phrase “He has become my salvation, my *yeshuah*” with the phrases “This is my God... The God of my father”.

Rather daringly, the *Alter* suggests that just as the Lord is our salvation, so too can we “save” Him! You may ask, “How can one ‘save’ the Almighty?”

To answer this question, the *Alter* relates the story of Shimon ben Shetach, as it is told in the Jerusalem Talmud.

Shimon ben Shetach was a scholar who was once quite poor. His disciples purchased him a donkey to enable him to travel. They obtained the donkey from an

Ishmaelite, an Arab. When Shimon ben Shetach was about to mount the donkey, he spotted a tiny object in the saddle. He soon realized that the object was a large diamond. He asked the disciples for the identity of the original owner in order to return the diamond to him. The disciples objected and argued that the diamond was his to keep.

Shimon ben Shetach famously responded, “I purchased a donkey. I did not purchase a diamond.”

The Ishmaelite was so impressed by the fact that Shimon ben Shetach returned the diamond that he exclaimed, “Blessed is the God of Shimon ben Shetach.”

The *Alter* offers the story as but one example of a person’s ability to “save God,” that is, to bring glory to His name. “Thus,” concludes the *Alter*, “The Almighty brought us salvation, and we too can bring ‘salvation’ to Him.”

It has now been four consecutive weeks that we have identified the moral virtues of our Forefathers. We can now “see ourselves as redeemed from Egypt.” At least to a modest degree, we can attain the “status of our Forefathers.”

In conclusion, by way of review of the previous *parsha* columns, let us list some of the components of the moral and ethical stature of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Firstly, as we saw in *Parshat Shemot*, each of them was a *yashar*. As defined by *Netziv*, a *yashar* is an individual who relates cooperatively and constructively with individuals who differ from him religiously

and culturally, without prejudice.

Secondly, as we saw in *Parshat Va'era*, each of our Forefathers was able to tolerate great frustration without losing their faith in the Almighty.

Thirdly, again in *Parshat Va'era*, each of them was grateful to the Almighty for the everyday blessings that most of us take for granted.

Fourthly, this time in last week's *Parshat Bo*, they each demonstrated *Kreatur-gefühl*, a deep awareness of having been created by the Almighty.

In this week's Torah portion, two early twentieth century spiritual guides brought two additional characteristics of the "redeemed" individual to our attention.

Rabbi Grodzinski taught that the "redeemed" individual does not ignore the prevalence of evil in the world but disdains it and confronts it wisely and successfully.

And Rabbi Ziv, the *Alter*, gifted us with the insight that our relationship with the Almighty can be reciprocal. Yes, He is our Savior. But we can reciprocate His salvation by bringing honor to His name by acting ethically and honestly, even in the face of temptation.

As we draw ever closer to the Passover holiday, *Chag HaPesach*, we now have learned of no less than six paths to redemption, six paths to "seeing ourselves as if we personally were redeemed from Egypt."

Which of the six will you choose as your path? Or will you try your hand at all six? ■

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