

Parashat Shemot: How to Keep Our Freedom – January 5, 2013

This week we start reading the book of Shemot, and through its Reading, we will revive the enthralling stories of Moses with Pharaoh, the plagues, the departure from Egypt... in short, perhaps the most beautiful stories in the Torah, and also the most important, for it is in this book where we Jews constitute ourselves as a people, by receiving the Torah and setting up the covenant with God at Mount Sinai.

One of the most interesting things in this book, and in our parashah in particular, is the fact that our birth as a nation was linked to a situation of slavery. Let us recall that it was in Egypt where our ancestors multiplied, and from being a family of sixty members, in four hundred years became a “strong and numerous” people.

By considering our adverse origins, we can see that the genesis of the Jewish people marked its historical evolution throughout the generations: years of glory and prosperity outside their land, with kings and pharaohs who acted amicably while it was good for them, and then oppression, slavery, persecutions, and also extermination. What is interesting is that we discover, in this book of Shemot, not only the slavery and freedom of the Jews in Egypt, but also the oppression and future redemption of all the Jewish generations, in the world and in each one of its periods.

A famous Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 44) wonders: what was the merit of this nation of slaves that made it worthy of liberation on

the part of God? And the sages answer by saying that, notwithstanding the difficult conditions of slavery, the Jews were able to guard four aspects of their identity: their traditional names, the Hebrew language, the Brit Milah (ritual circumcision), and a shared identity and commitment.

And taking into account that this book of Shemot became the paradigm of the Jewish history in the Diaspora, I believe it is interesting for us to wonder whether we, in our practice of these four values, that according to the Midrash were kept by the Jews in Egypt, are in any condition to ensure our freedom in the present time, as it occurred with them in the past.

The first question is whether we keep our Jewish names: it is true that Hebrew names are frequently used by many people, even among non Jews. But how many of us actually know if their name has a Jewish origin, or its meaning? For instance, how often does it happen that we ask people their Hebrew name for an Aliyah, and they barely remember it?

In second place, do we still have Hebrew, or some other Jewish language, as the language of our people? Yiddish unfortunately is almost lost, and other traditional dialects are even less known. Hebrew reemerged in the 20th century to the purpose of replacing them, but unfortunately, outside Israel, it could not fulfill that goal. Nowadays, when we think about our children's education, we grant more importance to French or other languages and though their relevance cannot be discounted, the unavoidable consequence is that Hebrew gets to occupy a very low place in our priorities.

The third element preserved by our ancestors in Egypt was the Brit

Milah, the Jewish circumcision. I believe that, in this case, we can indeed say that it is a custom truly valued by our people. But anyway, it is worth questioning whether by fulfilling this tradition, we do so as a continuation of an ancient practice that “must be done”, or else as our commitment as parents to form a Jewish home, in which our children are raised based on a daily example of Jewish experience and study of our traditions.

Finally, the fourth element has to do with the identity and commitment shared by the Jewish people. Throughout the generations, the rest of society has pointed out that we Jews help each other and are supportive of our community. Can we maintain that this is still the case? I think we can. However, in the last few years there has been a falling out in the contributions to traditional Jewish causes on behalf of other needs foreign to the immediate interests of our people, which could become worrisome.

If we play a little bit with this Midrash, and make a quick diagnosis of the situations applicable to our generation, we could conclude that, although in some cases we come out looking good and in others not so much, the final result is that there is room for improvement, for us to reach the example of commitment set by our ancestor in Egypt.

The message, then, of our Parashah and the book of Shemot, is that beyond all external factors, the freedom and general survival of the Jewish people depend on our own conviction and ability to care for what is ours, and which in consequence we should not neglect.

Let us recall, then, the teaching of the Midrash: to care for our

Jewish names, our language, the Brit Milah, and the supportive commitment with our fellow Jews. And just as it happened with our ancestors in Egypt, we do not need any savior in order to keep them; it just depends on us.

Shabat Shalom!