

### **Parshat Yitro: All that glitters is not gold**

We read this week in the Torah the Ten Commandments and I would like to focus in the first of them, the one that says "I am the Lord, your God, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2)

And I want to ask you a question: If the Torah tells us that God took us from "the land of Egypt", why it also refers to the "house of slavery". Is it not clear that Egypt was the "house of slavery"? So why we need the Torah to repeat and say that we were taken both from "Egypt" and from "The house of slavery"?

Beno Jacob, who was a German Jewish commentator in the nineteenth and twelve century, explains this apparent repetition in the following way: While for the Israelites Egypt was "house of the slavery", for the rest of the world Egypt was the opposite, a "house" of culture and values. And we certainly know that Egypt in those times was the center of the ancient culture; a renowned place thanks to its "wise" men, constructions, pyramids and art. But, Benno Jacob says, that entire empire that was admired by the rest of the world was actually built on human slavery, cruelty and murder. So the Rabbi finishes his commentary saying: "If a land of culture has no room for freedom, the servants of God must renounce culture".

What an important lesson is that us! Because most of the times, when we think about culture our first associations are with music, architecture, literature. We use to think about culture in positive terms, and when we meet someone who, for example, has no artistic or musical knowledge we could say she is an "uncultivated" person.

But what we are saying in relation to Egypt we can apply it to other great civilizations in history as well: Greece and Rome left behind them colossal works of architecture, masterpieces of art, philosophy, medicine, etc. Modern empires and countries like Germany, Austria and France gave to the world the great composers of classical music of all time. But when we dig a little deeper in our memories we remember that those great civilizations were famous not only because of their cultural legacy. They left also persecutions (remember Hanukkah and the rebellion against the Greek-Syrian persecution), destructions (like the destruction of the Temple by the Romans and Adrianus' persecutions), and we also know about the flourishing of music and philosophy before and during the Holocaust. Culture does not necessarily imply moral standards. Sadly enough, good manners can live together with torture. Art, music, architecture and science can be the heritage of the greatest murderers of human history.

Now, what common element all those empires and civilizations had in common? At least one of the elements is the supreme place they gave to the public sphere: The way you look, how you express your ideas, what you choose to dress, what you eat and also who are the people you know and whom you like to be with. The concept of "decorum" was very important for them, but "decorum" shares the same root with the word "decoration", which teaches that without morality any human creation, even if it looks fantastic and we become overwhelmed by it, at the end it is only a decoration.

We will be able to build a better family, a better community and a better world, not by the quality of the bricks, but by the quality of the relationships. It is not the decoration what matters, but the moral values with which we build the bricks and put them together.

May the words of the Ten Commandments which we are going to read this Shabat help us to shape our lives and to become better human beings.

Shabbat Shalom!