



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Pekudei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

March 4, 2011

Pekudei

One Sermon

From Darkness to Light



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

This week’s Torah reading brings us to the end of the Book of Exodus, the second of the Five Books of Moses. And its message couldn’t be more relevant today – with the Middle East experiencing its own “exodus” from oppression. This new “exodus” has now consumed the entire region, bringing on tectonic shifts that will forever change the future of the region and the world.

But today’s “exodus” did not begin a few weeks ago in Tunisia – it began some 3300 year ago, and the Book of Exodus, which documents the process and method of achieving freedom back then, offers us much direction how to do so today.

Following its description of Egyptian bondage, the Book of Exodus gives an account of the redemption of the Jewish people, the miraculous parting of the sea, and the dramatic encounter with God at Mount Sinai. Finally it concludes (this week) with the inauguration of the Sanctuary, nearly a year after the flight from Egypt.

These four major events – the Exodus, the Sea, Mount Sinai and the Sanctuary – are the four pillars which define the path to freedom now and always. Especially in cataclysmic times of upheaval, these pillars serve as secure bearings that can help us find our way amidst chaos.

This sermon explains what each pillar/stage means in the psycho-spiritual progress of humanity and in our personal lives as we move from darkness to light.

Conscious life (as we know it) is a state of darkness, and we must search for light and for meaning. When the divine light shines, everything knows its place in the big picture. Everything feels part of one integral whole. One man cannot raise arms against another man for each senses that we are all one.

That is what we are working toward. It is our purpose to reveal the light and transform the very darkness of matter into a luminous source of spiritual energy ... in this way creating a divine home in the lowest of worlds.

All of history up to this point is the story of this process, including the events unfolding today in the Middle East. This the true inside story ...

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

1. Yankel, the Skeptic (Joke)

Yankel, a conflicted skeptic, was desperately searching for a doctor that can heal his ailing wife, Esther. Exasperated he finally cries out: "God! If there is a God out there please, please I beg of you to find me a good doctor that can save my beloved Esther! If you fulfill my request I promise that I will believe in You and behave accordingly."

As he is about to finish his last words of prayer, a new doctor walks in with an optimistic smile on his face. Without missing a beat, Yankel immediately exclaims: "Forget it God. The deal is off. I found my doctor..."

Yes, indeed we each have our moments of doubt and our bouts of amnesia. When we are desperate, we reach out. But when things seem that

they are going well, we go into denial often forget that God inhabits our world. All we have to do is let Him in (as this week's Torah reading directs).

2. End of Book Two

This week's Torah reading brings us to the end of the second of the Five Books of Moses.

Though this book begins with the enslavement of Israel by the Egyptians and their terrible oppression for 210 years, our sages call the Book of Exodus the "Book of Redemption," for it is the "book in which Israel goes from darkness to light."¹

Following its description of Egyptian bondage, the Book of Exodus gives an account of the redemption of the Jewish people, the miraculous parting of the sea, and the dramatic encounter with God at Mount Sinai. Finally it concludes (this week) with the inauguration of the Sanctuary, nearly a year after the flight from Egypt.

These four major events – the Exodus, the Sea, Mount Sinai and the Sanctuary – are the four pillars which define Jewish life now and always. Especially in cataclysmic times of upheaval, these pillars serve as secure bearings that can help us find our way amidst chaos.

The message couldn't be more relevant – with the Middle East experiencing its own "exodus" from oppression. This new "exodus" has now consumed the entire region, bringing on tectonic shifts that will forever change the future of the region and the world.

But today's "exodus" did not begin a few weeks ago in Tunisia – it began some 3300 year ago, and the Book of Exodus, which documents the process and method of achieving freedom back then, offers us much direction how to do so today.

¹ Nachmanides, on end of Parshat Pikudei.

3. Doorway to Freedom

The original exodus from Egypt – from Mitzrayim, as it is called in Hebrew, meaning from “confinement” – opened the door of freedom for all time. We crossed through that doorway when we crossed the Sea, becoming empowered with the ability to transcend our limits and constraints. Then Sinai gave us the blueprint to integrate our new-found freedom into every aspect of our lives.

And finally, the Sanctuary showed us how to fulfill the purpose of existence: “Build it and He will come.” Or, as God told Moses to instruct the Israelites: “Build for me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell among them.”²

Midrash Tanchuma Lech Lecha 9. Bereishit Rabba 40:6. Indeed, the Patriarchs were shown what would happen to their descendants. See Ramban and Bechaya *ibid*.

The Sanctuary culminated a progression which the Torah has been working up to since Genesis.

4. The Progression

In the Book of Genesis, the stage was set. All the characters that have shaped and continue to shape civilization made their entrance here: Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac, Esau, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers.

Everything that transpired since and continues to move the real world happened in microcosm in this first book. For as the Midrash says, “Everything that happened to the patriarchs is a sign for their children.”³

Then, in the Book of Exodus, life began in the real world, and the seeds planted by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob started to take hold. The tools we inherited from them gave us the power to be freed from all forms of op-

² Exodus 25:9.

³ *Midrash Tanchuma Lech Lecha 9. Bereishit Rabba 40:6.* Indeed, the Patriarchs were shown what would happen to their descendants. See Ramban and Bechaya *ibid*.

pression, to be open to receive a higher wisdom than our own and to build a home for God in this physical world.

In the Book of Exodus, Moses finished the process that began seven generations ago with Abraham. And the message is appropriate today more than ever.

As we face the Egypt/Mitzrayim – the confinement and constraints in our lives, oppressive enemies from without and within – we can easily succumb to a feeling of resignation that life is just too overwhelming. We can feel powerless amidst all the intense events happening around us. When external chaos creates internal fear, it destabilizes our basic functional tools and undermines our inner confidence.

Exodus tells us that we can free ourselves from all forms of Mitzrayim. Just as we were freed then, we are promised that we can be freed today.

5. From Darkness to Light (Kabbalistic Insight)

Oppressive Egypt is the archetypal model of the bondage of material life for every type of inhibition or limitation, psychological, emotional or physical, imposed upon us.

The dark Egyptian exile is the physical manifestation of what Kabbalah calls the great tzimtzum – the original “black hole” caused by the concealment of the divine light, which was necessary for the creation of independent human beings.

Incidentally, speaking of black holes, the Official Unabashed Scientific Dictionary defines black holes as what you get in black socks.

[But seriously,] conscious life (as we know it) is a state of darkness, and we must search for light and for meaning. When the divine light shines, everything knows its place in the big picture. Everything feels part of one integral whole. Man cannot raise arms against another man for each senses that we are all one.

That is what we are working toward. It is our purpose to reveal the light and transform the very darkness of matter into a luminous source of spiritual energy ... in this way creating a divine home in the lowest of worlds.

And this is the inside story behind the current upheavals in the Middle East. It is but the latest in a chain of events unfolding through all of history, an accumulative exodus leading us from darkness to light.

6. Stages of Illumination

There are four general stages to this process - which mirror the events described in the Book of Exodus, and which are reflected in our life's journey:

Stage One - the flight from Egypt - the light emerges.

The first stage is to become free from the constraints that bind us. Achieving this requires two key elements: firstly, awareness - recognizing that we are locked, blinded or in some other way limited; and secondly, action - making behavioral changes, or breaking bad habits and patterns that keep us enslaved.

We don't travel alone. Each of us is given divine power through the "Moses" within our souls - manifest as humility and wisdom - to lift us out of any form of material constraint. Through our commitment to study and to virtue, we have the ability to transcend material confines and achieve a level of spiritual freedom.

Stage Two - the parting of the sea - the light expands.

Exodus was not complete until the Jewish people walked through the receding sea and the pursuing Egyptians drowned in the swelling waters. The parting of the sea opened a door between the infinite light (sea) and the finite light (land), and bridged the two, giving us a taste of the seamless pre-tzimtzum reality.

Stage Three – the revelation at Mount Sinai – the light descends.

At Sinai, we formally received the divine mandate called the Torah, which empowered us with the ability to permanently fuse spirit and matter. Before Sinai there was an impenetrable rift between heaven and earth. A schism separated between above and below. “That which was above could not descend below, and that which was below could not ascend above.”⁴ Sinai bridged this breach, marrying in effect heaven and earth.

Stage Four – the building of the Sanctuary – the light finds a home.

Then began the implementation of all that was given at Sinai. By following the Torah guidelines, we build a home for the Divine in our lives – in our homes and in our work. We transform every aspect and fiber of our material beings to become a comfortable and intimate home for God.

What all this is telling us is that we have the power to leave our constraints (Egypt), to taste the interface between the finite and the infinite (parting of the sea), to marry heaven and earth (Sinai), and then to build a home below for the Divine (Sanctuary). But above and beyond all that, we actually have the power, through light, to fuse the existential and the non-existential, the most conscious states of our defined lowly existence with the undefined divine essence.

7. The Secret of Integration

But even if we succeed in accessing this power, how do we hold onto it – how do we maintain and integrate it in our daily lives? What is the secret to success?

The answer to this is: the Torah. It offers us a blueprint for life – an unwavering moral compass – that keeps us focused on the true realities around us. It does not allow us to be lulled into illusions of our own making.

⁴ Midrash Tanchuma, *Vaeira* 15; Midrash Rabba, *Shemot* 12:4.

But even if we are aware, what happens to the world around us? We are not an island unto ourselves ... and as strong as our resolve may be, we see time and again how the forces of society bring the most determined to their knees. We begin our lives being idealistic, we dream of changing the world into a better place, and then the “realities” take over, turning us into conformists. One moment we believe, a moment later we forget. [Remember the story with Yankel?]

How can one person prevent that from happening?

By changing the world before it changes you. By influencing others before they influence you. By building a Sanctuary for God from your material world. By taking all your material possessions, your skills and your opportunities and transforming them into spiritual vehicles.

The nature of materialism is such that if you don't affect it first, it will affect you. If you don't control it, it will control you. Materialism is like an invisible shroud that slowly envelops and seduces you into feeling that there is nothing else but this outer layer of existence, and all that matters are your immediate selfish needs and interests.

[Let us learn from Yankel how not to take for granted our blessings.]

8. The Nature of Materialism

This does not mean that the material world is a bad place. It just means that this is the nature of the beast, so to speak. Tevah is the Hebrew word for “nature,” and tevah also means “submerged.” Like objects submerged in water, the inner, true nature of our beings, the deeper spirituality within existence, lies submerged in the natural order of the universe.

We are charged with the mission and power to free those inner forces. And we do this by building a Sanctuary from the fabric of the material world.

Nothing less will give us the ability to subdue and control the world's upheavals.

9. Nothing New Under the Sun

King Solomon famously said, “There is nothing new under the sun.”⁵

Which brings me to the question: “Which is more useful, the sun or the moon?”

One kids’ answer: “The moon because the moon shines at night when you want the light, whereas the sun shines during the day when you don’t need it.”

As we close book two, we need to realize that the events of today are not new. Our present experiences are not happening in a vacuum. And we have the cumulative power from generations past to overcome any challenge. Those that came before us prepared the ground well; we need but hold on to their heritage and their commitments. And then we can also hold onto their promises.

Close to 4000 years ago God promised Abraham that his children would be as plentiful as the stars in heaven. Turn the clock four millennia forward and behold: The promise was fulfilled! As skeptical as you may be, this fulfilled promise is hard to deny.

And it doesn’t end there. The world battles today are between the children of Abraham. Doesn’t it make sense then to find out what God told Abraham about these battles and what we can do about them?

What God told him is that I am giving you a system that will empower you to face any challenge, and it is all here – in book two.

The system revealed in book two also offers us invaluable lessons to the current Middle East tremors. It teaches us that the healthiest transition from darkness to light – from autocratic oppression to freedom – requires four stages:

- 1) Exodus/emergence (which is currently happening).
- 2) Expansion – as the waves of freedom spread through the region (and are not an anomaly).

⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:9.

3) Manifestation – developing a constitution that can govern effectively and ground the light of freedom.

4) Implementation – establishing infrastructures and institutions that allow for freedom to flourish amidst the diversity of different peoples.

10. Book Three

As we conclude book two, we must ask ourselves: Are we ready to enter book three?

Book three is called Leviticus (referring to the work performed by the Levites in the Sanctuary), and in Hebrew is called Vayikra (from the first phrase of the book “And He called”) which could be loosely translated as “the Calling.”

What is Vayikra calling us to do? To come close (l’karev) to God, hence korban, the Hebrew word for offering which is the main vehicle described for achieving this. The central theme of this book is the actual service in the Sanctuary that was built at the end of book two.

So, are we ready to answer the call? Are we ready to begin the actual service of God, the day-to-day work of refining and transforming the material world into a dwelling place for the Divine? After leaving darkness, are we ready to bask in the light?

11. The Final Frontier

Some may argue that the world today is basking in an abundance of light. But it is all artificial light. Yes, our standard of living has never been as high. Yes, energy in all forms – physical, electrical, atomic and nuclear – has transformed virtually every aspect of our lives (in medicine, communications and technology).

But high tech (with all its powers) cannot conquer the final frontier of light – the personal frontier. As comfortable and advanced as our lives may be, our home and family lives, our psychological and emotional lives, love, intimacy and relationships seem to be suffering wherever we look.

We have one final step to achieve in generating light into our lives – to become intimate with light, to build an intimate home for our souls ... a home where we can commune with the Divine and with each other ... a place of comfort and security where love can thrive.

We do this by not just by being light/energy consumers, but by becoming ourselves energy reactors and light generators. By becoming walking candles and candle lighters that illuminate everything and everyone around us.

By-the-way, how many atheists does it take to replace a light bulb? Two. One to replace the bulb, another to film it for evidence in case someone claims God did it.

So the next time you change a light bulb, think about the illuminated blessings of our times – all the amazing technological advancements and comforts that brighten and warm our lives – and remember that these are divine gifts. No matter how many atheists film the event, there is a God in here somewhere.

We always have two choices in every one of our activities: to serve ourselves or serve a higher cause. We become radiant light through selflessness – through committing to a cause greater than ourselves, to becoming a channel for the Divine.

When we become light, we become intimately one with God, the source of light.

This is our challenge today – to build for God a Sanctuary, so that He will dwell among us – all of us, as one. Amen.

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