



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Beshalach

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January 31, 2015

Beshalach

Adjusting To Freedom



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

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ABSTRACT

The kvetch is an art form practiced by many, mastered by few. To perfect the perfect kvetch takes more than a few years in complaining school.

Every kvetcher worth his salt is intimately familiar with the most crucial and fundamental of all kvetching tools, the two-syllabic wunderkind: *Oy Vey!*

But where does it originate?

The word *oy* is used frequently in the Torah, and *vey* is seen throughout the Talmudic and Midrashic texts.

As well, the Book of Proverbs asks: “*Mi ‘Oy’? Mi ‘Avoy’?*” – “Who [cries] ‘woe’? Who ‘alas?’” – and then comes the Aramaic Targum and translates the word *oy* as *vey*.

That brings us to the Torah reading for this week, where we find someone yelling *Oy Vey!* This man was an Egyptian who evidently spoke fluent Yiddish. This woebegone individual was none other than the King of Egypt, the Pharaoh himself.

In the Pharaoh’s expression of woe – of *oy*, of *vey* – lies a profound message for us about freedom, what it means to be a spiritual light in an oft-dark world, and what it means to be a Jew in today’s day and age.

Two Midrashic texts – comparing the Jews to princes and pearls – explain why Pharaoh was so distressed as to yell ‘*Oy vey!*’ and teach us a profound lesson for our personal lives.

**ADJUSTING TO FREEDOM:
GOING *FREI*, OY VEY!**

1. I Can't Complain (Joke)

A Jewish man in a hospital tells the doctor he wants to be transferred to a different hospital.

The doctor says, "What's wrong? Is it the food?"

"No, the food is fine. I can't complain."

"Is it the room?"

"No, the room is fine. I can't complain."

"Is it the staff?"

"No, everyone on the staff is fine. I can't complain."

"Then why do you want to be transferred?"

"Because I can't kvetch!"

2. The Ultimate Kvetch

The kvetch is an art form practiced by many, mastered by few. To balance the stricken look with the furrowed brow, the hapless expression with the annoyed harrumph, takes more than a few years in complaining school.

Every complainer, every kvetcher worth his salt is intimately familiar with the most crucial and fundamental of all kvetching tools, the poly-syllabic wunderkind: *Oy Vey!*

Where does it come from?

The word *oy* is used frequently in the Torah,¹ and *vey* is seen throughout the Talmudic and Midrashic texts.²

As well, the Book of Proverbs asks: “*Mi ‘oy’? Mi ‘avoy’?*” – “Who [cries] ‘woe’? Who ‘alas?’”³ – and then comes the Aramaic Targum and translates the word *oy* as *vey*. (So *oy vey* seems to mean a “double woe” or a “woebegone” or a “kvetchy complaint.”)

And that brings us to the Torah reading for this week, where we find someone yelling *Oy Vey!* This man was Egyptian but he evidently spoke fluent Yiddish. This woebegone individual was none other than the King of Egypt, the Pharaoh himself.

In the Pharaoh’s expression of woe, of *oy*, of *vey*, lies a profound message for us about freedom, what it means to be a spiritual light in an oft-dark world, what it means to be a Jew in today’s day and age.

3. Parshat Beshalach

Our Torah portion – which speaks of the Jews finally leaving Egypt, finally being released by the Pharaoh – is called *Beshalach*, which means “when [he] sent out.” This word, *beshalach*, is actually the second word of our reading, which opens like this:

*Vayehi beshalach Paro – And it was, when the Pharaoh sent out...*⁴

Every word in the Torah is exact, calculated and intentional. Our portion could have opened simply: *beshalach Paro*, “when the Pharaoh sent out,” so why does the Torah prefix the word *vayehi*, “and it was”?

What does the word *vayehi* come to teach us?

Another question: If *vayehi* means “and it was,” what was the *it* that *was* when Pharaoh sent the Jews out? What happened there?

¹ See for example Numbers 21:29, I Samuel 4:7, Isaiah 3:11, et al.

² See for example Avoda Zara 11b, Megilla 16a, Bereishit Rabba 36, et al.

³ Proverbs 23:29.

⁴ Exodus 13:17.

4. The Midrash

The Midrash says that the word *veyehi* – the first two letters of which (*vov* and *yud*) spell *vey* – implies an exclamation of woe.⁵ Thus, by prefixing the word *vayehi*, the Torah is telling us that, when the Pharaoh finally released the Jews, someone was yelling *Oy vey*, someone was saying “Woe is me.” Who was that someone?

The Midrash says that it was the Pharaoh...⁶

One would think that the Pharaoh would be relieved to rid himself of the Jews whom he evidently hated. Also, one would think that the Pharaoh would be happy that the plagues had finally come to an end. Why, then, was he so distraught when he sent the Jews out of Egypt?

In answering that question, the Midrash⁷ cites two analogies to explain the Pharaoh’s woe. The first is an analogy of a king and prince; the second is an analogy of a purse and pearls. If we pay close attention, we will find that these analogies teach us invaluable lessons about what it means to be free, what it means to be a Jew, and what it means to change the world.

5. Midrash Analogy: King and Prince

This is what the Midrash says:

When the Pharaoh sent the nation, who screamed, “Vey?”

Pharaoh.

This is analogous to a king whose son, the prince, traveled to a certain land. The prince stayed there at the home of a wealthy man, who was most happy to host the prince.

⁵ See Etz Yosef ad loc.

⁶ The Midrash there also has an interpretation that it Moses who was yelling *Oy vey*, for he foresaw that he was not destined to enter into the Land of Israel.

⁷ Shemot Rabba 20.

When the king heard where his son was staying, he sent a letter to that wealthy man, saying, “Send my son back home at once.” When the prince did not return, the king sent more letters. Eventually, he went himself to extract the prince and bring him home.

When that happened the wealthy man began to wail and his neighbors asked, “Why are you crying?” He replied, “It was an honor for the prince to stay with me, for the king would write many letters to me, and he would depend on me, and I was important to him. Now that the prince has left my home, I have lost that honor.”

So said the Pharaoh: “When Israel was with me, God depended on me, and I was important to Him, and He would send me messages all the time, saying, *So says God the Lord of the Hebrews – Send My nation!*

But, when God saw His request was not honored, He descended upon Egypt and extracted Israel, as it says, *I have descended to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptian.* And then the Pharaoh began to cry, “*Vey*, woe that I sent out the Children of Israel” – this is why it states: *Vayehi... And it was, when Pharaoh sent out...*

From this analogy we now understand why it was that the Pharaoh cried, *Oy vey*, when the Jews left Egypt.

The Pharaoh thought: “Once the Jews are no longer with me, I will no longer receive communications from God ... once the prince leaves, I will no longer have a relationship with the King ... once the Jews depart, my relationship with God will be over.” Thus he cried *Oy vey!*

6. Midrash Analogy: Purse and Pearl

The second Midrash explains Pharaoh’s woe, his *oy* and his *vey*, in a slightly different manner. Says the Midrash:

This is analogous to a traveler who found a purse of pearls and did not know what he had in his hand. He said to a man he met on the road, “Would you like to carry this purse that I have in my hand?”

The man replied, “What need do I have for your purse?” To which the traveler said, “Take it and do whatever you like with it.” So the man took it.

When the man got to the city, he sat down and began stringing the pearls, separating between the small ones, the medium and the large. The traveler who gave him the purse entered the city and saw the man to whom he had given the purse, sitting with the purse open and people buying from him. The traveler heard them ask, “How much are these small ones?” And he heard the man answer, “One thousand.” “And how much are the medium?” “Ten thousand.” “And how much are the large?” “Fifty thousand.”

When the traveler realized what he had done, he rent his clothing and cried, “I had all of these riches in my hands, and I gave it all away for free!”

So was it with the Pharaoh: he had the bundle of pearls in his hands – that is the people of Israel – and he said, “Get out.” Moses then began to count them ... When Pharaoh saw this, he started yelling *Vey*.

The Midrash here compares the Jewish people to pearls. When the Jews were in Egypt, the Pharaoh found these pearls to be in his hand, under his rule. But the Pharaoh did not realize that the Jews were pearls; he thought that all he had was a heavy bundle in his hands. So he did not open it to see what was inside.

Once Pharaoh freed the people and sent them out of Egyptian slavery to freedom, he saw Moses counting the pearls that were the Jewish people, and Pharaoh realized what preciousness he’d had in his hand and what preciousness he had let go. So the Pharaoh cried, *Oy vey!*

7. Lesson For Us

What does all of this teach us? What keen insight into our lives today can be provided by these two analogies and the Pharaoh’s regretful sorrow?

The *Oys* in life and the *Veys* in life are plenty. We need not look far for woe, sorrow and misery. But realizing that we are princes and princesses, sons and daughters of the King, and priceless pearls can help us alleviate the *Oy veys* of reality.

As Jews, we have many characteristics that define our purpose here on earth. Two of them are: royalty and priceless value.

First, there is something that we need to know: when princes (or princesses) travel somewhere, anywhere, they represent the royal house of the king. When Jews travels somewhere, anywhere, they represent the royal house of God. It is through us – through our actions, examples and lights – that the world communicates with God.

And also the Pharaohs of the world need to know: If you send away the Jews, you are sending away God.

Secondly, too often do we see the bundle, the purse, the package and forget to look inside.

As much of the world has not realized for thousands of years, we Jews make wherever we are better. It was only once we've left (read "been expelled" or "been exterminated") that those countries where we have dwelt realize – like the Pharaoh – who it was that they chased away.

Jews are princes and princesses, sons and daughters of the Almighty King of the Universe. All the while we dwell some places, the King communicates with that place and the host nation. Sending us, the princes, away, is sending God, the King, away.

So the world needs to hear: Don't enslave us in material chains, allow us to be royal and we shall reveal your innate royalty as well. World, you hold a purse of pearls in your hands – look inside and appreciate what you have. If you give up on us or give us away, you are giving up the most priceless jewels.

And if this is something the Pharaoh himself realized, how much more so must we, Jews, princesses and princes, children of the King, realize it about our own selves. We are princes, princesses and pearls. *Jew-els* if you will.

8. Something to Complain About (Joke)

An old Jewish man riding on a train begins to moan: “Oy, am I thirsty; oy, am I thirsty,” to the annoyance of those seated around him.

Finally, one passenger gets a cup of water from the drinking fountain and gives it to the old man, who thanks him profusely and gulps it down.

Happy he solved the problem, the passenger sits down again, only to hear “Oy, voz I thirsty; oy, voz I thirsty.”

9. Changing Oy To Yo (Conclusion)

Some people are only happy when they have something to complain about. But most of us would rather not be miserable.

An *oy* and a *vey* – an *Oy Vey* – happens when we think we have lost our connection with God, as when we realize that the bag we gave away had contained precious pearls.

We are royalty, communicating the word of the King to the world. And we are precious pearls, bringing value and beauty to the world.

This is what it means to be truly free.

Let us never again say, “*Oy vey* – woe is me.” But rather let us embrace the divine gifts we have been granted and realize their supernal potential.

Shabbat Shalom!

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