

Parshat Va'era

Contributed by Rabbi Avi Weiss
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Redemption Comes in Stages
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By Rabbi Avi Weiss

In this week's portion, God tells Moshe to tell the children of Israel that He will soon take them out of Egypt. In the words of the Torah, "I will bring you out from under the burden of the Egyptians and I will deliver you from their bondage and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm...and I will take you to me for a people." (Exodus 6:6,7)

Here, the Torah mentions four words related to the Exodus from Egypt. I will bring you out (vehotzeiti), I will deliver you (vehitzalti), I will redeem you (vega'alti), and I will take you (velakhti). In fact, the four cups of wine used at the seder table are meant to symbolize these four words of redemption. Wine is the symbol of joy and hence reflects these words which describe the joyous exodus from Egypt.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin notes that the Hebrew term for words often used by the rabbis is leshonot, which literally means languages. For the Netziv, the terms in this portion denote the language of redemption rather than words of redemption. This implies that each term relates to a stage in the redemption process. The stages indicate that redemption is a process that is gradual.

This idea of process is especially important as it is very common for people, in times of desperation, to believe that the only hope is sudden change - the immediate coming of the Messiah. Note that after the destruction of the Second Temple the great Rabbi Akiva thought that Bar Kochba was such a leader. The belief that Shabtai Tzvi was the messiah came about in the 17th century as the decrees of the notorious Jew killer Bogdan Chmilniki took hold.

And in our portion, the Jews in Egypt were beaten, oppressed, persecuted and even murdered. They were desperate for salvation. They may have felt that the only solution is one that would come quickly and bring a fast transformation from bondage to freedom. And so God tells Moshe, according to the Netziv, that the process of leaving Egypt would not be fast. Indeed, even after the Exodus we spent 40 years wandering in the desert and many more years passed before the first Temple was built.

This idea is important especially in the post Holocaust period. On the heels of the Shoah, even as the State of Israel was born it is important for all of us to remember that redemption comes gradually. Messianism is often associated with the need for immediate salvation, but in reality, it is a goal that is in constant process. Indeed, the rabbis liken the Messianic era to the rising of the sun, it happens slowly, step by step -- in rabbinic terms, kima, kima.

An important message especially during these difficult times in Israel. We believe that we are in the process of reaching towards that redemptive moment but that process has its pitfalls. Sometimes it moves forward but sometimes it stands still and even moves backward. The four languages of redemption teach us that no matter the obstacles, never to give up hope, for slowly the sun will rise and redemption will be upon us.