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The Value of Gerim (Converts)

*From Rabbeynu Yosef Haim,
the Ben Ish Hai of Baghdad
From Sefer Orach Haim,
Perush on the Pesach Hagadah*

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***“It once happened that R. Eliezer, R. Yehoshua, R. Elazar Ben Azariah,
R. Akiva and R. Tarfon were celebrating the Seder in Benei Brak.
They discussed the Exodus that entire night, until their students came
and said to them, our teachers, it is time to read the morning Shema.”***

We must understand why the text here says, “the Seder [was in] Benei Brak. This phrase seems superfluous. Why should it matter if they were celebrating in Benei Brak or in another place?

The reason why we are informed of this has to do with the fact that they (the Sages) were discussing the Exodus the entire night long, until their students came. With the help of G-d, I will attempt to explain.

It is known that Pharaoh was guilty in that he enslaved Israel not in accordance to the edict from blessed HaShem. HaShem only decreed exile [for Israel]. Pharaoh took it upon himself to enslave them. Regarding what the Merciful One said to Abraham, “they shall serve them and be humbled for 400 years,” this in itself is not a part of the [official] edict. Rather HaShem was informing and revealing to Abraham what the future will hold regarding his children through the choice of Pharaoh and Egypt. Therefore, were they subject to judgment, and [Israel] went forth prior to their time.

I have written in another place how Pharaoh thought, it is true that HaShem did not ordain [for Israel] servitude, but only exile. “However, it is a good thing that I [Pharaoh] have done to place them in servitude. It is for their own good that I have done so. [I have] prevented them from being thieves [of the pleasures] of this world.”

“For Jacob and Esau divided between them the worlds. Jacob took the world to come [as his portion] and Esau took this world [as his portion]. Therefore, all that Israel eats and drinks in this world, it is as if they have stolen it from [the portion] of Esau and all the other nations who are included with him.

“I [Pharaoh] placed them [Israel] into servitude so that all that they would eat and drink would not be considered stolen, but rather wages for work. Therefore, Israel must be servants forever in order to allow them to eat, drink, and enjoy the pleasures of this world in which they have no portion [for this world belongs to Esau].”

With the help of Heaven, I have already written in another place the contradiction in this [Pharaoh's] outlook. Now, I will set the record straight.

From the essence of justice, Israel owes nothing to Esau and the nations for what they eat and drink in this world. The Rav “Yad Avi Shalom” has written that Jacob pays for the pleasures [Israel] receives in this world with what the converts receive in the world to come.

For converts are not Jacob's descendants, they come from Esau and the other nations. Yet, they have a portion in the world to come. However, this is conditional that they share equally.

We thus find, according to this that by the power of converts the outlook of Pharaoh desiring to subjugate Israel is completely nullified. Israel owes nothing for the pleasures they receive in this world. By right do they eat and drink. For the converts enjoy the world to come. Moreover, it is certain that all pleasures of this world are not equal to even one portion in the world to come.

Now, it is known that Benei Brak [was a town founded] by converts who were descended from Haman, as it is written in the Gemara and the Mefarshim. Now we can clearly see and appreciate why the Hagadah teaches us that “the Seder [was in] benei Brak.” In light of this, we see that it was because of the converts that Israel was released from Egypt. For the going forth from Egypt released Israel from their heavy bondage.

If it were not for the converts Pharaoh would not have been accountable for what he had done. For Pharaoh thought that what he was doing was the right and good thing. [He thought] that it is [Israel's] destiny to serve for all their days in order to permit them the enjoyments of this world.

We find that it is due to the power of the converts that HaShem was aroused to judgement against Pharaoh and Egypt, and brought [Israel] out [of bondage] prior to the time.

Therefore, these holy Tanna'im (Mishnaic teachers) [descendants of Haman] sitting around [performing the Seder] in Benei Brak were aroused to expound on the Exodus more than usual [because of what we have discussed].

If it were not for the converts, Pharaoh would not have been subjected to all these different judgements. Therefore, they rose and wondered about the story of the Exodus more than what is expected, and continued to discuss the Exodus “until their students came and said to them, our teachers, it is time for the morning Shema.”

This is why the author of the Hagadah had to inform us that [this Seder] was being held in Benei Brak, to inform us that it was because of them, [the Rabbis who were descendants of converts] that the Exodus occurred in the first place.

With this can we understand, with G-d's help, the respect due to converts [is a Halakha] connected to [the mention of] our slavery in Egypt. "You shall not bother the convert (lit. stranger) for you were all strangers in the land of Egypt. For the converts were the reason for the nullification of Pharaoh's arguments, and the cause of the redemption from the Egyptian bondage.