



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY JANUARY 9TH, 2013 / כד' טבת תשע"ג

PARSHA:

Vaera / וארא

SERMON TITLE:

Only a 3 day Journey

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Vaera

Only a 3 day Journey

In this day and age, with all the safety and technology that we have nowadays, we would think that ships wouldn't sink anymore. However, if you recall, it wasn't that long ago that a modern-day cruise ship ran aground off the coast of Italy.

Fortunately, it was close enough to the shore for almost 4000 passengers to get off alive. Unfortunately, it happened too quickly and resulted in too much confusion and flooding for 32 passengers who did not make it.

At other such situations, when similar things happened, even to much smaller groups of people, there were a lot more injuries and fatalities, and often made worse by mass panic as people scramble to save themselves. However, with the Costa Concordia, over 97 percent of people on the ship got off alive and healthy.

But the hot story of the whole Costa Concordia saga was that of Captain Francesco Schettino, who apparently had not only caused the accident, but had even abandoned ship before all the passengers had been evacuated. The captain, however, said that he had fallen off the ship into a lifeboat.

Which reminds us of a story of the Rebbe.

There were many times that people asked the Rebbe why he didn't make aliyah to Israel. For example, the legendary Ariel Sharon, former IDF general and Israeli Prime Minister, asked the Rebbe this question, and so did the majority of the Israeli leaders who came to visit the Rebbe in one form or another.

On many occasions, the Rebbe replied with the analogy of a sinking ship on which the passengers must be saved—in which case international law dictates that the captain must leave last.

The Rebbe would add that Diaspora Jewry was in danger of assimilation and intermarriage and therefore, so long as Jews are here in the Diaspora and need his help, he has to stay here. The Rebbe reasoned that this law didn't apply just to him but to every rabbi or community activist who contributes to Judaism in his city—if he were to leave his post and go to Israel, he would be just like that captain who abandoned that ship off the coast of Italy.

While the survivors of the Costa Concordia were happy that they got away with their lives, the bottom line was that they were left with nothing—no clothing, no passports, no money, and so on, in addition to their completely ruined vacations. Here they had planned a getaway of ten days or two weeks, and they ultimately ended up going home after a few days with their lives and little else.

And with that, we come to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah, we read about the exact opposite situation—about a tour that was supposed to take just a few days but ended up taking 40 years.

This week, we go further into the saga of the Exodus from Egypt. Not too many people are aware that when Moshe Rabbeinu came to the Pharaoh for the first time and spoke the famous words "Let my people go," he didn't ask the Pharaoh to set the Jewish Nation free but rather, made a very modest request: "Let us please go a distance of three days in the desert, and we shall sacrifice unto the L-rd our G-d" (Shmos 5:3).

All he really was asking for was a three-day vacation.

And it wasn't even his idea—G-d had commanded him to do it: "And you and the elders of Israel shall come to the king of Egypt and say unto him... Let us please go a distance of three days in the desert, and we shall sacrifice unto the L-rd our G-d" (3:18). And thus, all throughout the saga, Moshe continued with the same story that they only want to go a three-day distance into the desert.

In this week's Parshah, we read that after the fourth Plague, the Plague of Wild Beasts, the Pharaoh summoned Moshe and Aharon and suggested, "Go sacrifice to your god in the land," meaning within Egypt—why must you go outside the borders of Egypt? What's so terrible about making this pilgrimage you're talking about right here in Egypt? But Moshe rejected the idea and again repeated the question: "We shall go a distance of three days into the desert, and we shall sacrifice unto the L-rd our G-d" (8:23). And thus, to the end, the Pharaoh was sure that the Jews were only going out for a short visit to the desert—and so, in the Torah portion of Beshalach, two weeks from now, the Torah tells us that when they finally actually left Egypt, "And it was told to the king of Egypt that the nation had *fled*" (14:5). Why does it say that? Because the Pharaoh had been sure that they were going to come back.

And we see this same behavior in another subject, and at the very beginning of last week's Torah portion of Shmos.

There, two verses after G-d commands Moshe to ask the Pharaoh to free the Jewish Nation for just three days, G-d then informs him that the Nation will not be leaving Egypt empty-handed. "And a woman shall ask of her neighbor for silver and gold vessels and clothes... and you shall despoil Egypt." G-d orders that the womenfolk (for the most part) should ask their Egyptian neighbors to loan them silver and gold vessels—but why as loans? Because it was only going to be a vacation of a few days. Then they would return to Egypt and the Egyptians would get everything back.

Each Jewish woman was to turn to her Egyptian neighbor and asked to borrow a nice dress for the grand occasion of a nation of slaves getting to celebrate in the desert—for which they would also need jewelry, of course. And the Egyptians were to be generous and be happy to lend their finest clothing.

So essentially, they were to convey the sense that it was temporary.

So we thus have it clearly that the story the Egyptians heard was that the Jewish Nation would be going for a three-day desert tour, after which they would be coming back to Egypt. So it's very likely that if all the Egyptians believed this story, then the Jewish Nation certainly believed the same story—it doesn't make sense that an entire nation keeps the secret that they were really going to be leaving Egypt for good and the Egyptians don't hear of it. (The Elders, however, apparently heard that they were really intending to leave for good.)

So if so, we can ask the question that all the commentators ask: Why indeed did they not tell the Pharaoh the truth that they would be leaving Egypt for good? On top of that, they had "persuaded" him with ten horrific plagues—so for the same price, they could have told him the truth! It's doubtful that he could have opposed them, anyway.

And we can ask the same question on the great spoils that the Jewish Nation left Egypt with: If "G-d had put the Nation's charm into the eyes of Egypt" (12:36), then the Egyptians would have given them their wealth in any case—because the bottom line was that G-d had done major miracles here. And so, why did they not tell the Egyptians the truth in the first place?

To answer these questions, we might possibly say that the true reason behind the "three-day vacation" story was not so much about the Pharaoh as it was about "internal requirements" for the Jewish Nation. The Children of Israel were not ready to leave Egypt and just go out into the desert for good. True, they did not want to be slaves. But that didn't mean that they were prepared to leave their native-born land and go out into the desert for an unlimited period of time.

As we see in G-d's promise to Moshe at the end of the Torah portion of Shmos: "You shall see... for with a mighty hand he shall send them forth, and with a mighty hand he shall banish them from his land" (6:1).

The Rebbe explained many times that this was good news to Moshe, because the Children of Israel of their own accord were not that excited about leaving Egypt—and so the Pharaoh himself had to be compelled to kick them out of Egypt. And that's what actually happened: "And Egypt pressured the Nation to hurry to send them forth from the land" (12:33). And from that came the whole story of the matzos, which the Jews did not have time to bake "for they had been banished from Egypt" (12:39).

And so, in order to convince the Jewish Nation to leave Egypt, they had to tell them a story about a three-day vacation—and only at the Splitting of the Red Sea were they informed that "just as you see Egypt today, you shall not continue to see them anymore forever" (14:13).

So what is the lesson here?

What we learn from all this is that when we want to get a Jew out of his or her personal Egypt, we cannot throw the entire book at them and tell them the entire Torah. Rather, one must “banish” him or her slowly.

And that’s true for everything.

People who resolve to take on an extreme diet, promising themselves that from this day on, they will never eat anything containing sugar, or flour, etc., in general, such diets last for very short times. Why? Because they are extreme changes. For a person to succeed in making changes in his or her life, he or she needs to take one step at a time, and then there is a chance that it will last.

And if that’s true for physical or material change, it’s all the more true for spiritual change.

So, when you meet a Jew who is not involved in Judaism, tell him to start with a “three-day vacation.” Two days Rosh Hashana and on day Yom Kippur!

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