



Shemot 5776: Thought Experiments

“The first people totalitarians destroy or silence are men of ideas and free minds.”

— *Isaiah Berlin*

The book of Shemot/Exodus brings the struggles and dreams of Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaakob into a national reality. The small family that moved to Egypt at the end of the book of Bereshit is now a multitude — a budding nation within an empire.

And the Children of Israel bore fruit, they swarmed, they became many, they grew mighty in number — exceedingly, yes, exceedingly; the land filled up with them. (1:7)

Yet, a layer of tragedy shrouds the success of their numbers. The nation’s great quantity becomes harnessed by Pharaoh as a force of slave labour for Egypt.

So they, Egypt, enslaved the Children of Israel with crushing-labour; they embittered their lives with hard servitude...and with all kinds of servitude in the field — all with crushing labour. (1:13-14)

The tragedy bears a special poignancy in that these people were the progeny of men who spoke and fought for freedom, human dignity and individuality. And here, 200 years later, their children were living in bondage and servitude stripped of the ability to live their own lives.

Slavery crushes the potentials of humanity in a number of different ways. One of its worst effects is its impact on the human mind. When the ownership of one’s life is taken away one’s thoughts and ideas are imprisoned along with the body. The mind is not free to think, wonder or dream. This was particularly true with the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh goes as far as to credit their pleas for freedom to having too much time on their hands to think.

*The king of Egypt said to them: Why, Moshe and Aharon do you distract the people from their tasks? Go back to your own burdens!...That day Pharaoh commanded the slave-drivers of the people and its officers saying: You are no longer to give straw to the people to make bricks as yesterday and the day before; let them go and gather straw for themselves!...**For they are lazy — therefore they cry out, saying: Let us go...Let the servitude weigh heavily upon the men! (5:4,6-8)***

He was not wrong. Pharaoh knew that a sure way to maintain the subjugation of people is to keep them from creative thought. Piling on the work was not merely a tactic to add suffering as a penalty, it was a tactic to make free-thought practically impossible and it worked well. The people became so inundated with tasks that they barely had the mental capacity or focus to even hear from Moshe anymore.

Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel, but they did not hearken to Moshe, out of shortness of spirit and out of hard servitude. (6:9)

Having time to think is an essential component of freedom. If we cannot contemplate alternate realities and entertain possibilities for our lives we cannot choose to achieve anything. We lock ourselves into the



status quo and succumb to what is rather than what can be. We burden ourselves under work and busyness living lives that are automatic and generic rather than ones that we create with our will and ingenuity.

Though our ability to think is the greatest aspect of human freedom it is also the most vulnerable. The human mind can exist in virtual shackles even in the freest of societies. How we teach, learn and think touches the core of our commitment to a life of freedom. If we embrace preconceptions, fear pondering new ideas and avoid being alone with our thoughts we maintain an internal form of slavery. If, however, we are not afraid to be surprised by and understand the world's truths and we put emphasis on *how* to think rather than *what* to think; if we give ourselves the time for introspection and contemplation we can grasp the light of freedom in even the darkest prison.

Law and Lore

The Amida I

The prayer known as the Amida or "standing prayer" is the centrepiece of every service. It is simply called "Tephila/Prayer" in the Mishna and Talmud because it is seen to be the essential prayer. Every other section of a service is either ascending towards, or regressing from, the Amida.

The Amida is also known as the 'Shemona Esreh'/'Eighteen', because it was originally comprised of eighteen specific blessings. Today there are nineteen blessings in a typical weekday Amida. The number of blessings in an Amida differ depending on the festival or occasion.

Every Amida, however, follows the same template. There are three major sections.

- I. Praise of G-d
- II. Prayer/Request
- III. Thanks/Recognition/Acceptance

(We will explore the specifics of each section in later instalments.)

The word Tephila means 'contemplation' in Hebrew. One's mindset is crucial during the Amida. Rambam writes¹ the following:

How does one focus? The heart is cleared of all thoughts and one sees oneself as if standing before G-d's presence. Therefore, one must pause a bit before prayers in order to focus one's heart and only then pray.

It is important to note that Rambam places the thought of standing before G-d's presence before clearing one's mind/heart of all thoughts. In order to come to the point of standing before G-d all other thoughts must be quieted and only then does one work to bring one's mind into proper consciousness.

¹ Mishne Torah, Tephila, 4:16.



In Shulhan Arukh, Maran R. Yoseph Karo flips the order²: *One who prays must...think that the presence of G-d is before him and remove all distracting thoughts until one's thoughts and mental focus are pure...*

While the Shulhan Arukh lists the requirements, Rambam describes in order what must be done to achieve the required state of mind.

Properly, the entire Amida must be said in this state of mind. However, if only the first blessing was said this way, the obligation is fulfilled.

Parasha Perspectives

I Shemot

- 1 Transition (1:1-7)
- 2 Burdens in Egypt (1:8-22)
Enslavement of the *Bnei Yisrael* (1:8-14);
Pharaoh commands infanticide (1:15-22)
- 3 Development of Moshe (2:1-22)
Birth and hiding (2:1-10);
Kills, runs away, resettles in Midyan (2:11-22)
- 4a Covenant: God remembers Yisrael (2:23-25)
- 4b Burning Bush Revelation: Mission (3-4:17)
God promises to save Yisrael (3:1-10);
Moshe doubts God's method (3:11-22);
Signs (4:1-9);
Aharon is to assist Moshe (4:10-17)
- 5 Circumcision on the road to Egypt (4:18-26)
- 6a Failure (4:27-6:1)
Moshe with Aharon gather the elders and convinces them of God's plans (4:27-31);
Face Pharaoh, but slavery just gets worse (5:1-19);
Moshe complains to God, but... (5:20-6:1)

Taken from, 'Torah for Everyone' by Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum, Dean of LSJS

² Shulhan Arukh, 98:1