

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

RE'EH

Blessing and Curse - Two Mountains

וְהָיָה כִּי יְבִיאֲךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ... וְנָתַתָּה אֶת הַבְּרָכָה עַל הַר גְּרִזִים וְאֶת הַקְּלָלָה עַל הַר עֵיבָל.

And it shall be, when Hashem your God shall bring you to the land... and you shall place the blessing on Mount Gerizim, and the curse on Mount Eival.¹

As described later on in Devarim,² and elaborated upon in the Mishnah,³ these blessings and curses were administered in the form of six tribes standing on Mount Gerizim to receive the blessings, and the other six tribes standing on Mount Eival to receive the curses. The Leviim, stood in the valley between the two mountains and administered the blessings and the curses to the respective tribes. R' Yosef Zvi Salant⁴ asks a simple question. A mountain is a place of elevation. As such, it is understandable that the tribes who received the blessings would stand on a mountain. However, why did the tribes who received the curses likewise stand on a mountain? Curses are not high points and do not represent the people at their most elevated. If anything, it may have been more appropriate for that second group of tribes to be placed in a deep ravine or valley!

R' Salant answers by referring to an episode recounted by the Gemara,⁵ at the time of the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash, where Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai noticed a girl who was so destitute that she had had to resort to picking barley stalks out of the dung of the Arab's donkeys for food. Upon approaching her, he saw that she was none other than the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion, someone who had been, in his time, one of the wealthiest people in Jerusalem. Upon witnessing this R' Yochanan wept and exclaimed, "Happy are you, Israel! When you perform the will of the Omnipresent, no nation can exert control over you, and when you do not perform the will of the Omnipresent, you are delivered into the hands of a lowly nation; and not only into their hands, but into the hands of the animals of a lowly nation!"

¹ Devarim 11:29.

² 27:12-13.

³ Sotah 37b.

⁴ Be'er Yosef Parshas Re'eh.

⁵ Kesubos 66b.

The Maharsha asks:⁶ How can R' Yochanan exclaim “Happy are you, Israel” regarding both parts of his statement. Certainly, it is appropriate to say this over the elevated status of the Jewish people when they are acting as they should, but how does it also pertain to them when they are in total degradation resulting from them not acting as they should? He answers that the extreme and unnaturally lowly state of the people in these situations is itself a result of the fact that they are Hashem’s people and of the special mission he has for them. As such, even when we neglect our commitment, Hashem’s eternal connection with us – as well as His undying hopes for us – are felt in the extremity of the rebuke, concerning which can thus also say, “Happy are you Israel!”

Rav Salant suggests that it is this very message that was being impressed upon us on that historic occasion when we formally accepted the blessings and the curses, both groups of tribes were placed on mountains; to teach us that even the curses, should they ever heaven forbid have to come about, are an expression of the elevated status of the Jewish people.

Redeemed on Reflection

————— The Exodus from the Perspective of Chumash Devarim —————

וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיְפַדְּךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Hashem, your God, redeemed you.⁷

Among the various terms used regarding the Exodus from Egypt, the term “פדיון - redemption” appears six times in the Torah – and all of them are in Chumash Devarim! Prior to this we hear only terms such as “יציאה - leaving” or “גאולה - deliverance.” What is the unique connotation of *pidyon* within the Exodus, and why is it not mentioned until this point?

R' Chaim Soloveitchik⁸ explains that the term *pidyon* expresses the change in status that something undergoes when it changes domains. For example, the redemption of a sanctified object from the Temple’s domain changes its status from consecrated to mundane. In the context of the Exodus, this term emphasizes that when Hashem took us out of Egypt, He redeemed us from Pharaoh’s domain to His. Thus, for example, we say in the blessing following the morning Shema, “ממצרים גאלתנו ומבית עבדים” – *You delivered us from Egypt, and redeemed us from the house of slavery.* We see that “deliverance” relates to taking us out from the land, while “redemption” addresses our state of servitude.⁹

6 Chiddushei Aggados, Kesubos ibid.

7 Devarim 15:15.

8 Cited in *Haggadah mi'Beis Levi* p. 189. See also *Aderes Eliyahu* to Devarim 13:6.

9 Likewise, in the second blessing of *Bircas Hamazon* we say, “ועל שהוצאתנו... מארץ מצרים ופדיתנו מבית עבדים” – *For that which You brought us out from the land of Egypt, and redeemed us from the house of slavery.*

Ultimately, it is the redemption aspect of the Exodus, which places us in Hashem's domain, that is paramount. However, to truly define the Exodus experience in this manner requires a certain depth of perspective, for it could easily be eclipsed by other more temporal benefits and attainments when we left Egypt. Indeed, later in Chumash Devarim, Moshe himself says to the people that they were not able to fully fathom the events of those times "until this day," having now experienced the ensuing formative forty years in Hashem's domain. Perhaps it is for this reason the Torah itself did not use the term *pidyon* until Chumash Devarim, for it held off from defining the Exodus in this way until the people themselves had absorbed the perspective that enabled them to define it accordingly.

Moreover, this idea may explain another matter. In the end of this parsha, the verse refers to the Exodus from Egypt as having taken place at night.¹⁰ This is in contrast to the relevant verses in Chumash Shemos which refer to it as taking place during the day! The Gemara¹¹ notes this and explains that different aspects of the Exodus took place at different times: Our shift in status occurred at midnight the night before we left, while we actually physically left the next day. In terms of our discussion we can see here, too, that the apportioning of the verses between the two chumashim reflects our understanding at those two times. Since Chumash Shemos emphasizes the physical aspect of the Exodus, it refers to it as taking place during the day. By contrast, from a Chumash Devarim perspective, which defines the Exodus more in terms of *pidyon* shift in status, we are described as having left Egypt at night!

¹⁰ 16:1.

¹¹ Berachos 4a.