

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Beshalach 21 “Addicted to the Path”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. Our parsha discusses the Jewish people finally leaving Egypt after a long, arduous process. The parsha begins with the words *vayehi, and it was*. Based on a concept brought in Meseschet Megilla 10b, the midrash says that this phrase typically connotes something negative, like *woe is me*. It even *sounds* like that lament. But the commentators struggle with that idea, wondering what negative aspect there could be to our liberation from slavery?

In past years we’ve offered an interpretation from the perspective of the Jewish people. But the midrash tells us that it was Pharaoh who said those words. Although there are many explanations about what specifically provoked his lament, it’s fairly obvious that he was bemoaning his utter defeat. As we explained in parsha class a couple of weeks ago, what we witness in this narrative is Pharaoh’s unraveling. He suffered that fate not simply because of his accumulation of bad **behaviors**, but because he chose a thoroughly evil **path**. He was so far down that road that he could not extricate himself, even after the 8th plague of arbeh, locusts, when he admitted he had sinned. Because doing teshuva on an entire path requires a complete overhaul, not simply a onetime admission of regret.

I think this lamentation of *vayehi* expresses Pharaoh's devastating realization of the fate he'd brought on himself. And that is why the midrash says that after the Red Sea parted and the Egyptians were vanquished, he was finally able to do genuine teshuva. The midrash tells us that in the story of Yonah, Pharaoh became king of the City of Nineveh and led the teshuva campaign for all the city's inhabitants.

I think Parshat Beshalach is helping us understand the complex nature of freedom. It is not simply a binary state of being – either you're free or you're not free. If you are self-absorbed and believe you are the absolute master of your destiny, you can unwittingly become psychologically enslaved by a way of life – a path -- from which it is very difficult to escape. That is what happened to Pharaoh. Like many addicts, he was enslaved by his way of life and was not motivated to change until he saw his world blowing up. His story can inspire us to reflect on the way we live and not make the same mistake, which is a particular danger during this pandemic, when it is all too easy to withdraw into an isolating bubble. Over the last few months, we've acknowledged some positive aspects to this time we have to ourselves. But it is equally important to avoid taking our self-containment to an extreme, lest we fall into the same trap that ensnared Pharaoh. Shabbat shalom.