

BESHALACH (EXODUS 13:17-17:16)

Is Democracy a Torah Concept?

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Every leader has his detractors. No leader in history has had unanimous acceptance among his followers. Moses was no different. Dasan and Aviram are two examples. They were the brothers whose fight Moses tried to break up. (Exodus, 2:13-14) The two of them became lifelong enemies of Moses. In this week's Torah Reading, we learn of their efforts to discredit Moses by challenging his credibility. First, they violated his command that no Manna be left overnight. When that happened, they found that the Manna became spoiled and wormy. Then, when a double portion of Manna fell on Friday, Moses told the nation that the second portion could be safely stored overnight. The reason for the double portion was that no Manna would fall on Saturday. Dasan and Aviram distributed their Manna around the camp late Friday night. The plan was to embarrass Moses when people would see Manna on the ground on Saturday morning.

Their plot was foiled because birds ate the Manna before anyone woke up and looked outside. (Many people have the custom of putting out breadcrumbs on Friday before sundown for the birds. This is our annual "thank you" to the birds for protecting Moses' reputation.)

Fortunately, Dasan and Aviram were two exceptions to the overwhelming support Moses enjoyed among the Israelites. Right? Hardly.

The Torah describes the exodus from Egypt, on the way to the Red Sea: "*G-d took the people on a roundabout path, by way of the desert to the Red Sea. The Israelites were 'CHAMUSHIM' when they left Egypt.*" (Ibid, 13:18)

Commentaries differ as to the translation of the word "*Chamushim*." Among the more common translations is "armed," that the Israelites were prepared for the possibility of war. However, Rashi quotes the Mechilta as finding the root word "*Chamesh*" -- five, in the word *Chamushim*. He then states that the word means "one fifth," which leads to the following translation of the verse: "*The Israelites were 'CHAMUSHIM -- one fifth' when they left Egypt.*" In other words, only one fifth of the nation left Egypt.

Where were the other four fifths?

Four-fifths of the Nation of Israel preferred not to leave Egypt. Why not? Midrash Rabbah (13:3) says that they had "*Patronin*" (translation: patronage?) from the Egyptians and they didn't want to give up their wealth and honor by leaving Egypt.

This is truly mind-boggling. 80% of the Israelites preferred to remain, at best, as second-class citizens in Egypt, rather than to follow Moses to freedom. Obviously, Moses was far from universal popularity. He was not the heroic freedom fighter leading a grass-roots rebellion against the Pharaoh. If anything, he was probably considered a troublemaker, a rabble-rouser.

What would have happened if there had been a New York Times/Gallop Poll in Egypt? Can you see the headlines? "Eighty Per Cent Choose Status Quo...Moses Said to be Preparing Concession Speech."

It is not always easy to do what is right. When the Assyrian Greeks tried to water down Judaism by introducing a statue of Zeus in the Temple, many Jews thought it was a wonderful idea. There is a holiday called Chanukah because a few *Kohanim* stood up against seemingly insurmountable odds. They did what they knew was right, rather than what was popular.

It is common that people leaning toward more observance are reluctant to actually take that step. The problem is a fear of what their friends will say. Most Jews don't observe Shabbos (yet). Many Jews are afraid to be, as a well-known comedian who has rejected his religious roots would say, "too Jewish."

Freedom from Egypt was not popular or politically correct. But it was the right thing to do. You and I are alive as Jews today because our ancestors bucked the system and went with the minority.

As for the 80% majority? They faded away into obscurity.

The four-fifths who had chosen to stay in Egypt perished during the ninth Plague -- the Plague of Darkness. Rashi writes that G-d didn't want the Egyptians to see them die. They were all buried before the darkness lifted.

I would like to suggest another reason for them to die during that particular plague. The Egyptians weren't the only ones "in the dark." The majority of Israelites chose Egypt over freedom because they lacked the enlightenment to see the obvious. Moses was sent to fulfill G-d's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These people were too blinded by the darkness of their wealth to understand that it was time to go home. They listened to their "friends" instead of to G-d and Moses. Therefore, they followed the masses on a path to nowhere.

We could accomplish so much more good if we would stop worrying about what others say and think. When you side with G-d, you are always in a majority of ONE.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

