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The Stage In Between The Exodus and Eretz Yisrael

After the event of the exodus, where Pharaoh sent out the Jewish people, **וַיְהִי בִשְׁלַח אֶת הָעָם**, there was a period of time in between the exodus and entering the land of Eretz Yisrael, a transition stage in between leaving Egypt and entering the Land. It should have taken only 40 days to get to Eretz Yisrael, but the 40 days became a decree for 40 years, to spend in the desert. Leaving Egypt and entering Eretz Yisrael did not happen all at once – there was a long stage of transition in between these two stages.

They could have reached Eretz Yisrael quickly had they traveled through Palestinian territory, but Hashem knew that they would become frightened from their enemies and wish to return to Egypt. Therefore, Hashem made sure that they would deliberately take an alternate path, which would take longer. Our Sages tell us that “there were ten *nisyonos* (trials) given to our fathers in the desert”, and this was bound to happen, for they would be spending a long amount of time in this situation. If it was going to take time to get from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael, there were definitely going to be *nisyonos* (trials), obstacles in their path, which would test whatever spiritual attainments they had achieved through the exodus.

The Torah records explicitly what indeed happened to the generation, amidst all of their trials in the desert. Part of the generation wanted to go back to Egypt. The generation that left Egypt did not actually enter Eretz Yisrael, and the only members of the generation who entered Eretz Yisrael were Calev and Yehoshua.

The Nisyonos (Difficult Periods) Of Life

There is a deep lesson contained here: in the way that Hashem has designed Creation, there is always a path that one must traverse in between his starting point and his goal. Along that path, there will be difficulties and obstacles, which cause him to think that it will be impossible to get to the endpoint, to the goal.

There are several kinds of obstacles which prevent a person from getting to his goals. One kind of obstacle will temporarily stall a person. Some obstacles prevent a person for a longer amount of time, and some obstacles cause a person to think that he will never be able to get to his goal. That was happened after the exodus, as the people desired to get to Eretz Yisrael. The tests which the Jewish people experienced in the desert, in between the exodus from Egypt and on the way to Eretz Yisrael, were the kind of tests that made them feel impossible to reach their goal, that they were stuck in the

place where they were in, and that they cannot get to where they want to get to.

To give a general description, the first major *nisayon* that the people went through was when they were being chased by the Egyptians. When Pharaoh heard that they had escaped Egypt, he gave the command to chase them down, and when the people realized that they were being pursued, it made them feel like the exodus was a short-lived miracle.

This was their first *nisayon*. There were more *nisyonos* that would follow, but this was their first: when they thought that it will be impossible to get to Eretz Yisrael. Later they were once again tested like this, when it was decreed upon them to dwell in the desert for 40 years, because they thought that Eretz Yisrael is a place of fearsome giants who would be impossible to defeat; once again it seemed impossible for them to reach their desired goal.

The Different Nisyonos (Trials) Faced By The Jewish People - And In Our Personal Souls

If we reflect, we can see that there are two kinds of *nisyonos*. One kind of *nisayon* is when a person thinks that he cannot get out of the situation he is in, and another kind of *nisayon* is when a person thinks that it will be impossible to get to his goal. In the ten trials which the people were tested with in the desert, each of these difficulties made it seem to them that they won't be able to get further.

If we think about it, there were altogether three kinds of *nisyonos* which the Jewish people faced altogether, since the exile in Egypt and through the desert. The first *nisayon* they faced was in Egypt; they thought it will be impossible for them to leave Egypt. The second *nisayon* they faced was when they saw that the journey towards their goal is wrought with obstacles. The third *nisayon* they faced was that they thought they will never reach their goal, Eretz Yisrael.

They went through 42 journeys throughout the desert, and the Baal Shem Tov taught that each Jew goes through "42 journeys" in his own soul – the various difficult tests in his life. Every Jew goes through a similar experience, within himself, of these "42 journeys" that the Jewish people went through in the desert; on a deeper note, one goes through the same lessons as all of these trials experienced by the people in the desert.

This is the idea so far that we are explaining here. There is a kind of *nisayon* a person experiences where he feels like it is impossible to get out of his situation. There is also another kind of *nisayon*, where a person feels like there are obstacles in his path, which are preventing him from getting to the next step. And there is also a third kind of *nisayon* – which comes last: when a person feels that it is impossible for him to reach the goal – the purpose of his life.

We can give an example that is very common, especially amongst teenagers and adolescents, who are usually very aspiring for growth. There are some people who feel energetic in their youth and they have aspirations for growth and to attain goals. But there are others who give up after some time, feeling that it is impossible for them to move beyond their current situation. Others have taken some steps forward and they were trying, but then they feel as if they want to "turn around and go back to Egypt" – they feel that they cannot continue anymore, so they want to go back to their previous situation. And others get stuck in the middle of their journey, feeling that they are doomed to "die in the desert".

All of these kinds of people feel the *nisayon* very strongly: they have begun to travel the path of life, but they do not see how they will possibly get to the goal and purpose of life.

Starting Out Our Journey

We must know that we cannot expect how our lives will look like. Unless a person has *Ruach*

HaKodesh, he cannot see the path of his life from beginning until end, with all of the details that the path will entail. A person cannot know what will happen to him in life, what events and changes he will go through. So we cannot plan out how our life will look like.

But – with a big emphasis on the “but” – we must know that as we journey throughout our life, we are able to listen to the voice of Hashem, and to the depth of our *neshamah*, which demands from us not to follow our simple passions, and that we utilize our life to its fullest; to be amongst those of whom it is said, “*Who will ascend the mountain of Hashem, and who will stand in His holy place?*” The soul in us is always demanding from us that we not remain paralyzed to one place, and that we should instead get moving and to rise from level to level. It demands from us to desire to closeness with Hashem.

But there are a few root perspectives which we need to begin our way with, which we need to take us throughout our journey in life. When we are missing the following perspectives, often it will lead to much failure in life, and then we will give up on reaching our purpose in life.

The First Key: Be Aware That Life Will Be Complicated

The very first perspective that we need to reflect about is this. When the Jewish people left Egypt and they were on their way to Eretz Yisrael, they faced many different tests and difficulties. This is the reality of life. There are many periods we will go through in our life. There are easy times, and there are times that are more complicated to traverse. There are also more extreme situations we go through, and when we go through those times, it seems impossible to get out of there.

But when we think about what life looks like from beginning until end, we can notice that the more a person matures and he is a thinker, the more he can reflect and then see the perspective which he needs to start with, and then we can arm ourselves with wisdom as we start our journey in life. The very first perspective we will need for the beginning part of our journey in life is, that if we want to take the true path of life, the path that will lead us towards Hashem, we must know that the path will always be long, and it will always consist of all kinds of situations. There is no such as an easy life.

The very first thing a person needs to be aware of, to start out with, is that life is complicated. There are all kinds of situations we will go through in life. When we are at least aware of this perspective, we already have the first key, because then we are preparing ourselves for what we are entering.

If a person is not prepared to work hard in life, though, he will immediately react angrily to these words, and he will feel, “*Of what purpose is all this avodah (work) about?*” and he will take a step back.

Hashem said to Moshe, “*I will be as I shall be, when I send you to them*”; Just as I with them in this predicament, so shall I be with them in their other predicaments.” Moshe said to Hashem, “Let it suffice for the predicament at its time.” Hashem agreed with Moshe [that we cannot prepare for all of our *tzaros* at once, and we must handle each of the *tzaros* separately when they come]. But although there are times where we need to have that perspective (and not worry so much about how we will handle our difficult times of life), we certainly need to reflect, at least a little, about how life looks like.

We need to understand that our life is always complex, and it does not always go easy for us. This is true about the physical side of life, but it is mainly true about the inner and spiritual parts of our life, such as applying ourselves to exertion in Torah study, doing the mitzvos, and desiring closeness to Hashem. There are times in our life which are easy, times which are a bit more complicated, and times which are very difficult. That is life.

Thus, when a person encounters situations in his life which he finds difficult, if he is aware to begin

with that these difficult situations were going to come, he will not find it so shocking; it will not feel so sudden to him, because he has been aware beforehand that it was going to come. He didn't expect life to always be easy, so he has saved himself from any uncomfortable surprises. He will be able to view these difficult situations as "a letter falling from Heaven" that the time has now come for him to go through a difficulty, because he has been aware all along that the difficulty will come. He remembers, not just intellectually but in his heart, that something like this was going to happen.

So the first perspective one needs to start life with is to be aware that life is complicated, and that it will entail all kinds of different situations and experiences, some of which are easy and some of which are hard. This is the first perspective one needs to start the journey of life with.

The Second Key: A Strong Will To Succeed

After one has become aware of the above perspective, and he has already gone through some difficult periods at times – and those difficult periods definitely come every once in a while – the next step is to make a deeper reflection: How, indeed, do we succeed throughout life? How do we pass through it successfully?

As soon as a person realizes that life contains all kinds of situations and that there are very hard times of our life, if he is a sensible and smart person, he will immediately wonder: "What do I need all of this for? How will I be able to get by all of this? It looks impossible. So why should I even begin?"

If this is his perspective, he is acting like those who did not merit to leave Egypt, who perished in the plague of darkness. Those people gave up from the start, as soon as they realized that a hard journey awaits them if they are to leave Egypt. They said to themselves, "Even if we succeed in escaping Egypt on the night of Pesach, the Egyptians will chase us, and we will starve in the desert because we will have nothing to eat, and we won't have enough clothing. We will all die in the desert. So what is the point of leaving Egypt?" The people who had this attitude then were the ones who died in the plague of darkness.

There is a deeper perspective in life, which can help us be successful throughout the journeys in our life. Success in life consists of a few factors, and the very first factor for success is: **to have a very, very, very strong *ratzon* (will) to succeed!**

The stronger a person's *ratzon* is, the more **inner strength** he will have. This is an integral part of one's *avodah* that is needed in order to pass through the obstacles of life. The weaker a person's *ratzon* is, the harder it will be for him to pass through life. When any person wants something badly, he has a much easier time getting to it. When he doesn't want it that much, it's much harder for him to persevere, because he isn't that motivated.

If a person really wants to live an inner and truthful life – on a permanent basis, and not just temporarily or when he's an aspiring teenager or adolescent, but because he really and truly wants to succeed – the very first thing he needs is to have a strong *ratzon*, to want to succeed, no matter what comes his way. We usually mention the words of the Vilna Gaon, "A stubborn person is successful." A person needs to have a very, very strong will to want to succeed in life, and all success is based upon this initial point. Understandably, it is not everything, but it is the basis.

But having a *ratzon* isn't enough. It is only in its potential form, and after we have developed a *ratzon* to succeed, the next part of our task is to **actualize its potential**. How do we actualize the potential of our *ratzon*? It is when we **decide, firmly, in our minds**, that when difficult times in our life come, **we will not turn away and try to run away from them.**

When difficult situations come, one must be prepared to do whatever it takes in order to succeed. He

must have a strong will to decide, and a firm, deep decision that he has made in his soul, that no matter what comes his way, he will not turn back. He must resolve firmly that he will not be like those who perished in the plague of darkness, who didn't want to leave Egypt because they were too afraid of what would happen, or like those who wished to return to Egypt.

In Summary

Thus, when difficult times come, a person can only pass them successfully if: (1) He has been aware from beforehand that these difficult times would eventually come, and (2) If he has a strong will to succeed and persevere through them, and he is willing to use all of his energies in order to get by these difficult times.

These are two strong powers in the soul which a person needs to arm himself with, in order to handle life properly.

(Understandably, along with the above, a person will also be greatly helped when he matures in his thinking and he is able to recognize better what life is about, and by learning about the powers in his soul. Then he will have *siyata d'shmaya* (assistance from Heaven) to guide himself properly throughout life, in a more precise manner, and as a result, he will meet up with much less difficulties, because the difficulties are mitigated when a person has a firmly developed soul. However, this particular point is a separate and expansive topic in and of itself.[\[1\]](#))

Even more so, however, a person needs to firmly decide in his mind, that he will do everything he can to succeed, even when difficult situations come his way. He must be prepared to keep fighting whatever obstacles are his path, and to keep wanting to succeed, succeed, and succeed!

The Third Key: Being Willing To Have Mesirus Nefesh (Self-Sacrifice)

Anyone who is a bit sensible knows, however, that the above two abilities will still not be enough for a person, and they will not help a person at all, if a person just remains with these two abilities alone.

Life is not only complicated, it presents us with situations that test us beyond our natural capabilities. That is the way Hashem has made the world. We always mention the words of Chazal, "The evil inclination gets stronger (or renewed) every day, and if not for Hashem's help, it would be impossible for a person to overcome."[\[2\]](#) Even when a person has a very strong *ratzon* to succeed and he has firmly decided that he will try to persevere no matter what situation comes his way, and he's ready to keep continuing forward - he really does not have the natural strength to continue forward.

As a simple example, in this week's *parshah*, when the Jews came to the edge of the sea, and they were being pursued by the Egyptian army, they were trapped, and it was impossible for them to continue forward. Continuing forward would mean drowning in the sea. There was only one way for them to continue: to be like a Nachshon ben Aminadav - who was ready to take the plunge.

The *parshah* is not just recording history for us. It is the story of our own life as well, and of how we can succeed in our own life. Any person who has succeeded in his life, at some point, has to be like a Nachshon ben Aminadav. There is no other way to traverse life!

As a person goes through life, there are some times that are a bit difficult, times that are a bit complicating, and sometimes a person moves forward, and sometimes he takes a step back. Chazal say that when the Jewish people came to the sea, they began to turn back, and this was in order to confuse Pharaoh. But the deeper understanding of this is because that is how life usually looks like: sometimes a person will move forward, and sometimes a person will turn around. When that is the way his life looks like, though, he won't get very far, because he is basically staying in his place,

moving forward a little bit, then moving back, then moving a bit forward [so he will really get anywhere].

But those who succeed in their life are those who have truly merited to acquire Torah, holiness, and closeness with Hashem, who realize the meaning of “*And as for me, closeness to Hashem is good*” – and they could have only merited spiritual success like this because they have reached the step described in our *parshah*, by the splitting of the sea, which comes after having a strong *ratzon* and being willing to persevere. The Egyptians are pursuing them, and by all means, it is naturally impossible to escape the situation, and they are utterly trapped – and the only way out is to be like Nachshon ben Aminadav, and to jump into the sea!

At the other side of the sea, the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai awaited them, which they would reach 50 days after leaving Egypt. In order to get to the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai, they first had to go through the difficult periods of life, and eventually, to a point where they could naturally escape.

When most people arrive at such a period in their life, it seems impossible to get out of the situation, so they despair. Others are more spiritual, so they will *daven*. Indeed, Chazal say that even if a sword is upon one’s neck, he should not despair from Hashem’s mercy, and he should pray to be saved. It would seem, then, that when we are trapped in a difficult situation and there is no natural way to escape it, the *avodah* upon us then is to utilize our power of *tefillah*. However, when we came to the sea, Hashem said to Moshe, “Now is not the time to pray. Speak to the children of Yisrael and tell them to journey [into the sea].” We were told not to *daven*!

It is surely part of our *avodah* to *daven*, and we know that *tefillah* is one of the three pillars of the world. But when we are in a situation where it is naturally impossible to get out of, *davening* will not help us; it would be like *davening* for a miracle, which is pointless, and forbidden. When we came to the sea, what was our *avodah*, then? It was upon us at that point to reach a very deep place in the soul, which goes deeper than *tefillah*. Nachshon ben Aminadav activated this deep place in the soul: he was ready to have *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice). When you have *mesirus nefesh* over something, of this it can truly be applied the statement of our Sages, “I toiled, and I found.”^[3]

What Prevents Us From Exercising Mesirus Nefesh?

Most people are too busy with their various pursuits, so they have not yet penetrated deeply into their souls to reach this place in themselves [of *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem’s will]. There are a few people who search for the inner world, for true Torah, for true *ruchniyus* and for closeness to Hashem, but even amongst those few, how many of them have reached this place in their souls [of *mesirus nefesh*]? There are very few who have reached this desired place, which they need to get to.

And what is holding them back? Surely there are many reasons that are getting in their way, in addition to the reason being mentioned here. But one of the reasons is definitely because of the reason that we are describing here. The reason that prevents people from accessing their deep place of *mesirus nefesh* is because they feel like they have come to the edge of the sea, as the Jewish people came to when they were pursued by the Egyptians, and they feel like it is impossible for them to get out of their situation.

A person sees that he has reached a place where he cannot escape from, where he is trapped. He tries to move a little bit forward, but he essentially remains in his place, and it seems to him as if he can’t go on any longer. If he truly feels that he has reached a point in which Egyptians are chasing him and that they are coming to kill him, then he will feel no choice but to plunge ahead; he has no other option. But if Egyptians are not chasing him, then he merely feels trapped, he feels like he is still stuck in Egypt, which is *Mitzrayim*, from the word “*meitzar*”, “confines”, because he feels

confined to where he is. He will remain trapped in his human limitations, and that is where he will remain for his entire life.

To bring out this point clearer, in the first scenario mentioned above, where a person is actually being pursued by enemies who want to kill him – such as what happened to those who went through the Holocaust – he will know that the only thing he can do is to be willing to have *mesirus nefesh*, and to be prepared to die *al kiddush Hashem*. But in the second scenario, where the problem is not with enemies pursuing us, but with a sea that lies in front of us, which is impossible to cross safely – there, the test is not “*Mitzrayim*” in the sense that we feel confined to Egypt. It is rather a “*meitzar yam*”, “trapped by sea” – we feel trapped because we see how utterly limited we are and that we cannot get further than where we are right now.

What should a person do, when he realizes that he is trapped and limited, and that he cannot get any further? Either he will sink into despair, as some Jews did then, who thought they would all perish in the desert. He will remain where he is and he will indeed “die” there. Or he will look and see others who are successful in life. But this is not always helpful to him, because he knows that some people have very lofty *neshamos*, or they have a lot of *zechus avos* (merits of their ancestors), and other reasons, of how they enjoy a lot of spiritual success in life.

But the truthful, deep approach to life is, that those who truly succeed in life are the ones who have traversed the confusing “garden maze” of life; they are found on top of the puzzle. When they reached a point where they could not go any further, they did not give up and decide that this where their growth ends. They are instead aware that this is the evil hold of Egypt trying to trap them and prevent them from getting any further. They realize that the ‘limitations’ they face *is not due to their own limitations* – and so they are willing to give of their entire souls for Hashem.

Avoiding Complacency

When we reflect deeply about the reality of life, and of the inner task which awaits our souls, we should understand that there is a vast difference between those who have not yet become complacent where they are and they are continuing to grow higher, with those who have decided that they can’t grow any further from where they are.

There are people who exert themselves in Torah study and in fulfilling the mitzvos properly, but they think that their life ends there, and that they can’t go any further from their current level. They might add on more Torah study to their lives, more mitzvos, more acts of chessed, and more davening. But their attitude towards life is that they cannot go further anymore; they don’t see a need to deepen their way of living.

The Torah is called an “endless sea”, and the *mitzvos* that one can perform in his life are many, and there is no end to how much one can keep adding onto his external amount of Torah learning and performance of mitzvos. But even if a person is always adding on more Torah and mitzvos to his life, he might still have a very complacent attitude towards his life, and deep down he thinks that he cannot do any more than this. He thinks that this is where his life ends, and that he is confined there – just as some of the Jewish people felt trapped in the desert and hopeless from the Egyptians chasing after them: they felt truly confined.

But there are individuals who have a burning desire in their souls to achieve more and more spiritual growth. They are not content with staying in the same place their entire lives. They do not want to remain confined to where they are. They are aware that “*Return, Yisrael, until Hashem your G-d*” doesn’t just mean to get “until” Hashem, but to go beyond the “until” – they want to integrate their whole being with the Torah and with Hashem. They cannot have any inner peace until they feel that

they have gotten close to Hashem.

When one has reached a point in his life where he feels like he has reached his limit and that he can't get any further from where he is, and that several days are going by where he feels like he can't get past his current level, he feels officially limited, that he has reached all that he can reach. When he reaches this situation, he needs to understand that he is at his own personal "splitting of the sea". He is trapped in the desert, and the only thing he can do is to be willing to give his soul for Hashem; to have *mesirus nefesh*.

This resembles what Moshe said to Hashem, when he said, "If not, erase me from Your book which You have written"; it resembles Nachshon ben Aminadav, who jumped into the sea. Understandably, a person can reach this only on his own level. But this is the way an inner life looks like.

Anyone who has traversed through the points of their life where they had reached their natural limitations are those who have passed through the "garden maze" of life, so they see it from above. They are willing to give up their souls *al kiddush Hashem* at some point in their life. That point of transition is essentially the stage of leaving Egypt - and to reach Har Sinai, where Hashem revealed His presence, at the giving of the Torah.

In Conclusion

In these *parshiyos*, and in this week's *parshah* especially, we learn about the barometer that measures the true greatness of a person: the difference between those who remain stagnant and complacent on their current level of Torah learning and character improvement, with those who have penetrated deeply into their souls, who have "left Egypt", who have entered into the endless path of spiritual growth - which is the way towards Hashem, Who is infinite.

"Leaving Egypt", without "crossing the *Yam Suf*", is a path that will confine a person to where he is, where he will not want to go any further. But when a person "leaves Egypt" and he also wants to "cross the *Yam Suf*", he sees that although the sea appears to have a *sof* (and end), since he is willing to cross it out of *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem, he reaches the *Ein Sof* (the Infinite) of Hashem; to the revelation of Hashem's Presence at Har Sinai, which lies at the other side of the *Yam Suf*.

Anyone who truly wants to succeed spiritually, to live an inner kind of life, needs to traverse this path [to first wish to leave "Egypt", and to be willing to overcome the obstacles along the way that are in between "leaving Egypt" and the "splitting of the sea", and finally, to be willing to take the plunge at the "splitting of the sea", when it seems that he has reached his natural limits].

Understandably, one cannot begin his journey in life with the point of *mesirus nefesh*. We find that Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya was able to do that, when he repented after a lifetime of sin^[4], but he was coming from the most depraved levels of impurity, so that's a different discussion. The more "straightforward" approach for us to take is to first "leave Egypt" - a stage which lasted seven days, until we came to the sea - where we then need to utilize the depth of our *bechirah* (free will), to decide to be like Nachshon ben Aminadav, to jump into the sea, where we merit to have the sea split before us; which reveals the "straight line"^[5] that leads towards the revelation of Hashem's Presence at Har Sinai.

^[1] Editor's Note: Refer to the Rav's **Getting To Know Your Soul** and to the Rav's series on *middos*,

which includes ***Fixing Your Earth, Fixing Your Water, Fixing Your Wind***, and ***Fixing Your Fire***. The Rav also discusses many aspects of the soul in the series of ***Tefillah, The Weekly Shmuess***, and ***Getting To Know Your 70 Forces of the Soul***.

[2] Sukkah 52a

[3] Megillah 6b

[4] Avodah Zarah 17a

[5] In terms of the *sefarim hakedoshim*, the concept of the “straight line” is known as the “*kav*”

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