D’Var Va’era

By Roslyn Bryan

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. God heard their cries and sent Moses to deliver them from slavery. And God spoke unto Moses saying, “ I am the Lord. And I have **heard the groaning** of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in **bondage**; and I have remembered My covenant. Wherefore say unto the children of Israel: “ I am the Lord. I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt and I will rescue you from their bondage and I will take you as my people and I will be your God**, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God who takes you out from under the burden of Egypt**, And I will bring you to the land that I raised My hand in pledge to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inheritance. I am the Lord.” ( Exodus 6:2, 5-8 )

Now, you would expect the first response from a people burdened by slavery, and given the promise of deliverance, to be: **Relief**; Excitement; **Gratitude**. Instead, we are told in verse 9, “And Moses told this to the Israelites; but they did not listen to him, because **their spirit was broken and because the labour was harsh**.” The Hertz Commentary’s commentary on this verse is “ The people were **utterly crushed** by their disappointment, and they paid no heed to fresh promises of redemption.”

Their redemption was close, but they could not see it. Their redeemer spoke, but they could not hear him. How can slavery crush a person’s spirit to the point where they are unable to hear promises of deliverance? And what needed to happen so that the Israelites **could hear**? **And believe** in their redemption?

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it:

“If you want to improve people’s spiritual situation, first improve their physical situation. In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides tells us that The Torah has two aims: the well-being of the soul and well-being of the body. The well-being of the soul is something inward and spiritual, but the well-being of the body requires a strong society and economy, where there is the rule of law, division of labour and the promotion of trade. We have bodily well-being when all our physical needs are supplied, but none of us can do this on our own. We specialise and exchange. That is why we need a good, strong, just society.

Alleviating poverty, curing disease, ensuring the rule of law and respect for human rights: these are spiritual tasks no less than prayer and Torah study. To be sure, the latter are higher, but the former are prior. People cannot hear God’s message if their spirit is broken and their labour harsh.”

Not only did God deliver the Israelites from slavery and harsh labour. God also provided for their future. In chapter 12 we read “ And the Israelites had done according to Moses’s word, and they had asked of the Egyptians ornaments of silver and ornaments of gold and cloaks. And the Lord had granted the people favour in the eyes of the Egyptians, who lent to them, and they despoiled Egypt. “

What did the possession of gold and silver do for the Israelites? Besides making it possible to build a golden calf. Having gold and silver meant that they could invest in infrastructure and trade when establishing their society. It gave them a sense of financial independence. Even before they entered the land, God provided a means for them to invest in their future.

Taking away someone’s financial independence can be very crushing to the spirit. And it is even more so, when it is done to a group of newly redeemed slaves. Are there negative long-term effects when people are subjected to harsh labours and broken spirits? Yes, and Haiti is a good example.

After a slave revolt, Haiti became the first country in the New World to abolish slavery, the world’s first black-led republic and the first independent Caribbean state. It was the first country to write a constitution giving equal rights to every man, woman and child. Today, Haiti should be a beacon of hope to all who aspire to freedom and equality for all. Sadly, it is today the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

The external debt of Haiti is one of the main factors that has caused the country’s persistent poverty. After the slaves declared themselves free and the country independent in 1804, France ( in 1825 with warships at the ready ) demanded that the newly formed country pay the French government and French slaveholders 150 million francs, the modern equivalent of 21 billion US dollars for the loss of its slaves and its slave colony. This independence debt was financed by French banks and the American Citibank. It caused a lot of hardship and was finally paid off in 1947. In addition to the payment, France required that Haiti discount its exported goods to them by 50%. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiti\_indemnity\_controversy)

Since then, Haiti has experienced three decades of American occupation, multiple corrupt regimes, natural disasters, environmental devastation, and the scourge of HIV. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19548810>)

France, when granting Haiti sovereignty, shrewdly ensured that they would be financially shackled to their master for generations, reducing their ability to invest in infrastructure, education, health, trade – all important factors when building a nation. France understood that:

Having no money takes away a person’s power to decide or plan for his or her own future.

In Canada, except for the odd news report, people do not experience slavery. But we do have people whose spirits are crushed under the burden of homelessness, poverty, domestic violence and addictions. People who cope with extreme adversity daily.

According to the Street Health report, almost one third of the sample reported that lack of self respect, feelings of worthlessness and lack of control over one’s life comprised the hardest part of trying to stay healthy when you are homeless. Greater than one in four people ( 26.8%) had considered suicide in the past year. 7.8% attempted suicide in the same period. Only one half of the sample reported knowing anyone who could help them if they were to have an emotional crisis which they were unable to handle on their own.

The sad fact is that once a person becomes homeless and jobless, it is very difficult to climb one’s way back up to financial independence. They need help to help themselves.

The organization, Up With Women, does just that. It provides highly skilled senior leaders, university professors, career, and coaching experts, who help women and youth maximize their personal and career potential; and build a sustainable pathway out of poverty. All coaches are trained to understand the specific challenges women face in deep poverty and homelessness.

Maimonides tells us that spiritual achievement is higher than material achievement, but we must take care of the physical first because, “a person suffering from great hunger, thirst, heat or cold, cannot grasp an idea even if it is communicated by others, much less can he arrive at it by his own reasoning.” In other words, if we lack basic physical needs, there is no way we can reach spiritual heights. When people’s spirits are broken by harsh labour they cannot listen to a Moses. If you want to improve people’s spiritual situation, first improve their physical conditions.

Ariel Fisher, an Orthodox rabbi, recently wrote in The Times Of Israel:

“The Jewish people were ultimately redeemed from their slavery in Egypt. It is impossible, however for there to be a redemption for the millions of Africans who were sold into slavery and whose memories, traditions and histories were lost forever. What does it mean for us to live in a world in which we cannot redeem these slaves? What can be done to correct this horrible injustice, whose repercussions still impact the lives of millions of people today? What does it mean for us to live in a world where there is still slavery and human trafficking? As we begin the book of Exodus, the book of redemption of slavery, it behooves us to think about the countless slaves who have not and cannot be redeemed.”

We cannot redeem these slaves. However, by supporting organizations like Up With Women or MHI. And by putting on programs like Klez Night that lift the spirits of those in need, and help relieve their hunger, we can sow seeds of hope into a hurting world. Let us help them hear the call of their deliverance. How close is their redemption? We do not know. But while they wait for their redemption, we have a choice: We can act like France and turn a blind eye to others’ suffering. Or, we can act like Egypt and bless the weary souls with gold, silver, and clothing. Hearts are aching. We can help them HEAR.