YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Parashat Beshalach – Tu BiShvat**

**The Almond Tree**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**I**

The almond tree, which during this very time of the year dons its white apparel, its "kittel," heralds the impending New Year, the New Year for trees. It represents its fellow trees, proclaiming the spring before its time:

The almond tree rushes to blossom before the other trees. (Radak, Yirmeyahu 1:12)

The period during which trees generally blossom is the month of Nisan:

One who goes out during the days of Nisan, and sees trees blossoming, recites…. (Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayyim 226:1)

And the Mishna Berura explains:

During the days of Nisan – This is the usual situation, for it is ordinarily then that in the warm countries the trees blossom. (Mishna Berura 226:1)

If, then, the almond tree is alacritous, and its flowering precedes Nisan by two months, this is no empty matter.

**II**

And the Lord said to him, What is in your hand? And he said, A rod. (Shemot 4:2)

At that moment, a random object that Moshe holds in his hand as he tends Yitro's sheep turns into a powerful instrument of critical importance in the course of the redemption. With it, Moshe performs signs before the people so that they believe in him. And with it, he smites Pharaoh and his people in Egypt and at the sea, and the Amalekites in Refidim. A close examination of the verses reveals that Moshe's hand holding the rod (mateh) is itself the strong hand and outstretched (netuya) arm, with which God took Israel out of Egypt.

In several places the outstretched hand finds expression in Moshe's rod: in the signs (Shemot 4), and in the plagues of hail, locusts and darkness. In other instances, it finds expression in Aharon's rod: in the wonders (Shemot 6:10), and in the plagues of blood, frogs, and lice. But these two rods are in fact but one rod, serving at times in the hand of Aharon, and at times in the hand of Moshe.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**III**

What is the source of this rod’s great power? Of what is it made? As long as it is smooth and bare, nobody can know what it is. But once it brings forth buds and blossoms, its secret is revealed:

And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moshe went into the tent of the Testimony; and, behold, the rod of Aharon for the house of Levi had sprouted, and brought forth buds, and blossomed, and yielded almonds. (Bamidbar 17:23)

This indicates that it was a rod of an almond tree.

**IV**

Indeed, like an almond tree, which rushes ahead to blossom and herald the spring before it actually arrives, the rod of Moshe is similarly always in a rush. All of its governance of the people of Israel is in haste, in a hurry, unnatural. Miraculous governance. And the whole essence of a miracle is skipping the intermediate stages, jumping ahead of the schedule, ahead of natural development.

The world has seen the collapse of great nations such as Egypt; it has even seen the crumbling of nations greater than Egypt. What is left in the world of the great empires of the Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, or Romans, each of which once dominated the world? Our world has also known national struggles of liberation. Wars of independence. The common denominator of them all is the fact that they involved processes. Processes of decades or even centuries. Israel's redemption from Egypt was totally different. Egypt's collapse was so swift, so sharp; a collapse from which there was no recovery for hundreds of years, and all this took place in but a single year!

On the other hand, there was Israel's rebirth. Slaves who were the sons of slaves, devoid of their own culture, became, in an exceedingly short time, the world's standard bearers of the belief in one God, the bearers of the tidings of equality, love of the stranger, and other noble values that were previously unknown in the world. In a matter of days they overturned their culture and values. In fifty days, a people who had sunk down to the forty-ninth level of Egypt's impurity became fit for the Shekhina to rest upon them.

Such a revolution has no parallel in the history of the world. The processes of liberation in the world, the changes in humanity's religious and social perceptions, are natural processes. Ongoing processes. History is not in a rush. The first human liberation - religious, spiritual, political and social liberation – was the exodus from Egypt. And it took place all at once, and from the very outset at full height. In haste. This necessitated a miraculous step, the governance of a rod, the rod of an almond tree.

This is true even in inanimate nature. The sea knows times of rising and falling tides. In the natural course of the world ocean beds have become revealed and turned into dry land; dry land has been inundated and turned into seas. That the sea should split all at once, and immediately thereafter the waters should flood the dry land that had been created, without any prior signs of what was to happen, happened only at the Sea of Suf. And there, too, by the power of the rod of Moshe, the rod of the almond tree.

…Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it, the bread of affliction; for you came forth out of the land of Egypt in haste…. (Devarim 16:3)

"This Paschal lamb that we eat, for what reason? Because God passed over" (from the Pesach Haggada). A redemption of passing over, of jumping, of skipping.

**V**

This haste, for what reason? Why was it necessary to reduce the exile in Egypt from four hundred years to two hundred and ten? Why couldn't the redemption be brought about without the rod, by way of a natural and ordinary process that God planted in the world? Why did the redemption have to arrive with a sudden leap, with passing over, and not in a more moderate and routine manner?

And God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moshe, Moshe…. (Shemot 3:4)

Why so? This may be likened to a person who is bearing a great burden, and cries out: So-and-so, So-and-so, my kinsman, remove this burden from me. (Shemot Rabba 2)

Unique among the names that are doubled in the Torah, Moshe's name is doubled without a stop between them. God, as it were, is pushed for time. The burden of Israel's exile is too heavy for Him to carry. He can no longer bear it. The call to Moshe is a hasty call. And so too, the redemption must come quickly. To remove the burden weighing down upon God.

This matza that we eat, for what reason? Because the dough of our fathers did not have time to become leavened before the King of the king of kings revealed Himself to them and redeemed them. (From the Pesach Haggada)

Those seeking a more profound understanding of the matter explain that Israel in the exile in Egypt had sunk down to the forty-ninth level of impurity. Another moment, God forbid, and they would have sunk to the lowest level, the fiftieth level, a level from which there is no longer the possibility of escape to a world of holiness and Torah. Before their dough had a chance to leaven, i.e., before they sank completely in the impurity of Egypt, in the leaven, the King of the king of kings revealed Himself to them and redeemed them.

And you shall eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover. (Shemot 12:11)

Special heavenly intervention was necessary, miraculous intervention by way of Moshe's rod, with earlier than usual blossoming, like the blossoming of an almond tree, in order to prevent Israel's total assimilation in the exile in Egypt.

**VI**

Haste, however, exacts a price. Redemption that develops so quickly, in an unnatural manner, skipping over the intermediate stages and without effort, is likely to wither and wilt with similar speed. Like Yona's castor oil plant, which came up in a night, and perished in a night. This is the way of the world: something that comes by way of moderation, not in a miraculous manner – its grip on the world is more stable. A people for whom fifty days sufficed to leave the impurity of Egypt and arrive at Mount Sinai – forty days was enough for them to slide back to the sin of the golden calf.

Only a people whose liberation was so sudden, and for which they lifted not a finger, could suddenly be deterred from the struggle that would be forced upon them when they entered their ancestral land. This land was the land of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. They, the patriarchs, lived there under natural and hidden providence. With the sweat of their brows. Without a rod.

**VII**

After all, the almond, the first tree to blossom, is also the first tree to lose its flowers. It is the first tree to don its white apparel, but it is also the first tree to stand bare and naked when its blossoms fall.

This almond – from the time that it blossoms until its fruit blossom, twenty-one days pass. (Kohelet Rabba 12, 7)

So too Moshe's rod of an almond tree, which redeemed Israel in haste and aided in the rapid growth of Moshe as their leader, led with similar haste to Moshe's fading as a leader, to the fact that he would not bring them into the Land of Israel. Thus, it was because of that same almond tree that the land was sanctified only for its time, and not for the future; that Israel's entry into the land was temporary and not everlasting.

And Moshe lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice. (Bamidbar 20:11)

And the punishment:

Because you did not believe in Me… therefore you shall not bring this congregation in to the land which I have given them. (Bamidbar 20:12)

Moshe forgot for a moment that he was no longer dealing with the hasty exodus from Egypt, but with the entry into the Land of Israel. A land where there is no place for the rod. A land where water wears down stones; and even though this process is slow and timeless, this is the only way to draw forth water from a stone. Later, he would learn from Rabbi Akiva that the Torah belongs even to people who are unable to grow as quickly as and to the stature of Moshe:

He [Rabbi Akiva] was forty years old and he had never studied anything. Once he was standing at a well. He said: Who hollowed out this stone? They said to him: [It was] the water, which drips upon it every day… He immediately applied an a fortiori argument to himself…. (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, chap. 5).

But when Moshe stood with his rod at the mouth of the well, he was in a rush. He was not given the opportunity to give his fruit, to enter the Land of Israel, and he was sentenced to die in the wilderness. To die on the seventh of Adar, twenty-one days after the almond tree blossomed. With the wilting of the almond blossoms, Moshe too ascended to heaven.

**VIII**

We began with the disgrace of the almond tree: quick to grow and quick to wither. We began also with the reproach of the rod: quick to bring salvation and quick to sin. Let us conclude with praise. Let us demonstrate that even the disgrace is only superficial; in truth it is praise.

One aspect of the almond tree is Moshe's rod. It rushed to bring the redemption of Israel, but in its haste, it also brought its collapse, at Mei-Meriva. Just as the almond tree flowers before all the other trees, it is also quick to wither before them, like one who is quick to understand, but is also quick to forget. Now let us deal with the positive aspect of this trait, with the hope that is sounded by the almond tree, the rod.

**IX**

Therefore, behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when it shall no more be said, As the Lord lives, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; but, As the Lord lives, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands into which He had driven them…. (Yirmeyahu 16:14-15)

The redemption from Egypt will be secondary to the future redemption. The redemption of "because in haste you went out of the land of Egypt" is secondary to that about which it is stated: "For you shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight" (Yeshayahu 52:12). And the redemption which shone for Israel suddenly is secondary to that which will shimmer and appear little by little, like the morning star which was seen in the Arbel Valley, like the future redemption.

**X**

And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like Moshe. (Devarim 34:10

I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren like you. (Devarim 18:18)

How so? The Pesikta Rabbati (and in its wake the Abravanel in his introduction to the book of Yirmeyahu) explains: "Really like Moshe – there arose not. Like the glass of Moshe's prophecy – there arose, and he was Yirmeyahu." There are many similarities between Moshe and Yirmeyahu; we will deal with one of them.

Moshe's consecration for prophecy was by way of a rod of the almond tree. So too Yirmeyahu's consecration for prophecy:

Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying, What do you see, Yirmeyahu? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well; for I will hasten My word to perform it. (Yirmeyahu 1:11-12)

Unlike Israel's redemption from Egypt, we are not dealing here with the rapid blossoming of an almond tree, but with it its rapid withering. With quick destruction:

And the Lord hastened (va-yishkod) in regard to the evil, and He brought it upon us. (Daniel 9:14)

This is the warning that opens Yirmeyahu's prophecy of doom. Israel will, in the future, finish its fruit with the same speed with which it grew. Calamity will come upon Israel with the rod of an almond tree, with haste.

We have explained the haste in the redemption of Israel, but what is the haste in its calamity?

**XI**

There are two sides to the rapid growth and withering of an almond tree. One can say that just as it is the first tree to produce its fruit, so too it is the first to lose it, twenty-one days after it first blossoms. The gain is erased by the loss, just like the rod of Moshe, which withered before he had a chance to cross the Jordan. On the other hand, one can say that just as it is the first tree to lose its fruit, it is also the first to produce it, so that the loss is erased by the gain. And this is the rod of Yirmeyahu.

When you shall beget children, and children's children, and you shall have remained long in the land. (Devarim 4:25)

He gave them a vague intimation that they would be exiled from it at the end of 852 years, according to the numerical value of the word ve-noshantem, but He sent them into exile earlier, at the end of 850 years. He did this two years earlier than the numerical value of ve-noshantem, in order that the prophecy should not be fulfilled in them "that you shall utterly perish" (v. 26). This is the meaning of what is said: "And the Lord hastened in regard to the evil, and He brought it upon us, for the Lord our God is righteous" (Daniel 9:14), i.e., He acted charitably with us, in that He brought it [the evil] two years before its assigned time. (Rashi, Devarim 4:25, in the name of the Gemara in Sanhedrin)

"For I will hasten My word to perform it" (Yirmeyahu 1:12) – this is what God says to Yirmeyahu. Just as the almond tree is quick to wither, so will the Temple and all the inhabitants of the land fall in the calamity that is swiftly coming upon them. The calamity will come in haste. God, as it were, is in a rush. Because if He does not punish them before the assigned time arrives, the verse: "You shall utterly perish" will, God forbid, be fulfilled in them.

What this means is that the rod of the almond tree that is quick to bring calamity, Yirmeyahu's rod, will bring the redemption that will follow it. In other words, the almond tree's hasty withering is what brings its rapid renewal of growth in the heart of winter and cold, even when the sun and light hide their faces.

We mentioned earlier Rabbi Akiva's taking issue as he stood at the well with the erosion of stones by way of a rod, the hasty drawing forth of water from the stone, which ultimately led to sin. And we mentioned his identification with the wearing down of the stones by way of the water itself, a slow but fundamental erosion. As for Yirmeyahu's rod, which expresses withering that brings renewed growth in its wake, he adopted a different position:

Once again they were coming up to Jerusalem together, and just as they came to Mount Scopus they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They began to weep, but Rabbi Akiva seemed merry. They said to him: Why are you merry?… He said to them: Therefore am I merry… Scripture linked the [later] prophecy of Zekharya with the [earlier] prophecy of Uriya. In the [earlier] prophecy [in the days] of Uriya it is written: "Therefore shall Zion for your sake be ploughed as a field, etc." In Zekharya it is written: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, There shall yet old men and old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem." So long as Uriya's [threatening] prophecy had not had its fulfilment, I had misgivings lest Zekharya's prophecy might not be fulfilled; now that Uriya's prophecy has been [literally] fulfilled, it is quite certain that Zekharya's prophecy will also find its literal fulfilment. They said to him: Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!" (Makkot 24b)

The rod of calamity that becomes a support for the redemption in the hands of the elders of Jerusalem is the renewed blossoming of the almond tree, which swiftly withers, but speedily and in our time will blossom once again.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Compare primarily *Shemot* 7:19 to 17:5. And see also *Yechezkel* 37:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)