

## **Hewing Tablets: Shavuoth & The Geulah**

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### **Rise & Fall**

As we come to the end of S'phirath HaOmer and are rapidly approaching Shavuoth, we are no doubt reminded of the popular midrash that in the Galuth Missrayim our people had descended to the 49th out of 50th levels of impurity and that over the seven weeks from Pesah to Shavuoth the B'nei Yisrael were daily purified from one level of impurity until, at the end of 49 days, we merited to receive the Torah at Sinai in purity (Zohar Hadash, Parashath Yithro - cf. Yehezqel 20:1-12 and Sh'moth 6:2-13). However, we quickly descended into the depths of impurity at Sinai with the worship of the golden calf.

Mosheh Rabenu, informed by HaShem about the idolatrous betrayal being perpetrated below at the base of the mountain, descended with the tablets on which the Torah had been inscribed "by the finger of God" - a phrase which is understood by the Rambam in the Moreh Nevukhim (1:66) as referring to a miracle of the Asereth HaDibroth "naturally" occurring somehow in the face of the stones. And it is at this moment – upon seeing for himself the calf and the dancing – that he commits an act of rage that was sanctioned by God Himself (b.Bava Bathra 14b): he throws down the tablets, shattering them on the ground. This act possesses great symbolism: the point to which we had risen just days prior we had now fallen from. The g'ulah just performed had been undone (as is evidenced by HaShem's expressed will to Mosheh that in return for our wickedness He would have liked to destroy us - Sh'moth 32:10) and the covenant of the Torah had also been undone. Our people stood once again in a helpless place of galuth and impurity.

So what was the solution? How did we move on from that point in our national history? The Torah tells us that God told Moshe, “Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones and ascend to me up the mountain, and make for yourself an ark of wood (*p'sal lekha shnei luhoth avanim karishonim wa-aleh elai ha-hara, wa-asitha lekha*

*aron ess*)” (Devarim 10:1). Then He says further in the following pasuq, “And I will write upon the tablets the statements which were on the first tablets which you broke, and place them within the ark (*wa-ekhtov al ha-luhoth eth ha-d'varim asher hayu al ha-luhoth ha-rishonim asher shibarta, wa-samtam ba-aron*)” (Ibid. 10:2). These two pasuqim show us that the national relationship between us and HaQadosh Barukh Hu took on new form and that the dramatic interaction between Mosheh and the Sh'khinah at Har Sinai is meant to illustrate this new reality to us.

### **Before & After**

While many aspects of the relationship remained the same even after the second giving of the Torah, some things changed:

In the first giving of the Torah it says that God "descended" to us (Sh'moth 19:11,18) in the second giving of the Torah Mosheh was told to ascend the mountain to God (Devarim 10:1). [Mosheh was certainly commanded to ascend Har Sinai before this (Sh'moth 19:20,24), but in that case it was to receive the tablets and to confirm the brith with HaShem. In the second instance, Mosheh was not only bringing tablets he had made, but was also going to present the case of the people to HaShem in order to obtain divine mercy (Sh'moth 32:30-34; Devarim 9:25-29, 10:1-5)]

The first tablets were carved and inscribed by God Himself (Sh'moth 31:18, 32:16), the second set were the work of Mosheh - with only the original Asereth HaDibroth being replaced by HaShem (Devarim 10:1,3). Mosheh was also instructed to build a wooden ark in which to keep the tablets he had made (Devarim 10:1) – a requirement not previously stipulated.

Additionally, the process of g'ulah also changed.

Whereas when the B'nei Yisrael were taken out of Missrayim, many signs and explicit miracles (*nissim niglaim*) were performed openly on our behalf, but when we entered Erets Yisrael the divine assistance that the B'nei Yisrael received was in the form of Divine Providence (*hashgahah pratith*)

and hidden (or, implicit) miracles (*nissim nistarim*). We fought our own wars, the Mana ceased and we began to engage in agriculture, the well from which we and our animals drank ceased, and the responsibility for dispossessing the non-Jewish nations in the land was placed firmly in our hands (which we failed to do, as the repeated accounts of assimilation recorded in Sepher Shoftim demonstrate).

So what is the lesson? The events of the exodus from Missrayim, the giving of the Torah, and the sin of the golden calf teach us that a g'ulah that is gained through Divine fiat without any effort from us results in a g'ulah that does not last. As we learn from basic common sense that what a person gains with little or no personal effort he does not care for or appreciate the same way as that which he gains through hard work and personal determination, so also a national redemption that is freely given and is not accomplished in large part by us will not endure - "Wealth from thin air will decrease, but that which is gathered by hand will increase" (Mishlei 13,11).

### **Start & Finish**

So why, then, were we brought out of Missrayim, purified, brought to the foot of Har Sinai, and gifted with the holy Torah? Knowing that it would not last because it was not earned, why would HaQadosh Barukh Hu do all of this freely on our behalf? So that when we did eventually fall, we would know what perfection is like and so that we would know that such a state is possible. Thus, having tasted of the spiritual delights of paradise, we would be driven to whatever is necessary to return to where we once were and to regain the precious blessings that were lost.

Ezra HaSofer, Nehemyah, and the rest of the Men of the Great Assembly understood the path of true redemption very well. They returned from the Galuth Bavel to Erets Yisrael, strove to return our people to the land of their inheritance, built up the walls of Yerushalayim, rebuilt the Beth HaMiqdash, instituted a plan of systematic learning and teaching of Torah, and resurrected a semblance of the Davidic monarchy - all while enduring incredible opposition from the non-Jewish nations around us - "With one hand doing the work and one hand grasping a weapon" (Nehemiah 4:11, see also y.Shevi'ith 42b-43a). These men certainly experienced *nissim nistarim* and *hashgahah*

*pratith* throughout the process, but the efforts exerted and the measures taken were their own, and they understood that this was the method that Heaven intended.

However, it was never intended that our people would finish the process of redemption, only that we would go through the process of striving toward that end. In fact, it is impossible that we could do so. **Rather, when we return to the Torah as a Nation, HaShem promises to bring about the ultimate stage of redemption** (Bamidbar Rabah 7:10 on Devarim 30:1-6). This is why we are told to “Circumcise ***yourselves*** to HaShem and ***remove [from yourselves]*** the orlah of your heart” (Yermiyah 4,4; Devarim 10,16) and in the age to come it is promised “And HaShem your God will circumcise your heart” (Devarim 30:6).

Also, just as Mosheh Rabenu was told to place the tablets into the ark, so we are also commanded to place the words of Torah “upon your heart” (Devarim 6:6; see also Shir HaShirim 8:6) and “in your mouth” (Y’hoshua 1:8) - through our efforts – but in the future, God will “place [His] Torah within them, and upon their hearts [He] will write it” (Yermiyah 31:32; Yeshayah 59:21). Thus we see that although HaShem will ultimately perfect our efforts, we are nevertheless expected strive for it in practical ways until that time (cf. Pirkei Avoth 2:15-16).

### **Then & Now**

Currently, there are three basic approaches to the concept of g’ulah: Secular Zionist, Religious Zionist (Dati-Leumi), and Haredi. Each of these three approaches can be evaluated in light of Mosheh Rabenu's symbolic and prophetic actions of hewing the second set of tablets mentioned above.

Secular Zionism understood well that the Jewish people are required to exert effort in order to obtain the redemption that was promised, however they did not understand that although they fashioned the tablets, they are not the law-givers. Rather, the Torah only and always comes from HaShem. Thus, they dispensed with the majority of Torah and halakhah, failing to place the tablets within the "ark" of their hearts, minds, and lives.

Ultimately, their plans for a g'ulah without Torah failed to come to fruition.

The Haredi world, on the other hand, understands well that the Torah only and always comes from HaShem, and they understand that in the end HaShem will perfect us, but they are apparently unaware of (or are simply unwilling to acknowledge) what is practically required of them as members of the Jewish nation. Instead they act as if everything will miraculously transpire as it did when we left Missrayim, with no national effort made toward the redemption. Thus, they continue to wait and to do nothing; failing before they have begun.

Religious Zionism (at least in theory) is the practical implementation of the entire concept. We understand that we must practically work toward the g'ulah, that the Torah and halakhah are from HaShem, and that ultimately God will bring our efforts to their intended perfection. Thus, the Dati-Leumi world seeks to uphold the truth of Torah while working practically toward the redemption, and praying daily for our final success and perfection to come.

## **In & Out**

Today, the majority of the Jewish people lives in Erets Yisrael and thousands more arrive every year. And while we are certainly in the process of g'ulah, overall we are still walking the path of a Judaism that is decidedly focused on the galuth and its corresponding realities. We have to go beyond those misswoth that apply outside of the land and make a concerted effort for excellence in halakhoth outside of Orah Hayim. It is upon us to revive and return to the misswoth *and* their accompanying minhagim that apply specifically to Erets Yisrael as recorded in our Torah sources. The misswoth that apply even outside of Erets Yisrael have become entrenched in customs that correspond to a galuth reality and that reality is merely being transplanted to the land. When our people makes a national effort to live as Jews in Erets Yisrael, following the ancient customs and shedding the developments, labels, and innovations of the countries where

we once resided, then all of our misswoth will become, as it were, “specific” to the land and they will provide the zekhuth to effect greater levels of g’ulah. However, the change must first take place on the level of the mind.

Removing the intellectual and emotional barriers that have formed in the minds of the Jewish people is no small task, but it lies at the very foundation of the nation's future. It is a change that requires an effect in many areas and many aspects of Jewish life. From a return to the purity of the Hebrew language and its proper pronunciation to a practical study and implementation of the t’philloth, berakhoth, and minhagim which are found in the Talmudh Yerushalmi (which were in use *before* there were such divisions as “Ashkenazi,” “Sepharadi,” or “Teimani”) to an awareness that setting up a nation-state, a Sanhedrin, and building a Beth HaMiqdash are misswoth aseh min ha-Torah and the halakhic responsibility for their construction lies squarely with us, the Jewish people. It means admitting that we are no longer who we used to be or where we used to be. It means looking into our souls and envisioning the spiritual levels that have been lost and practically striving for them with all of our strength.

“Thus says HaShem, Stand on the ways and see, and ask for the eternal paths (i.e. the paths of righteousness walked by our ancestors – RaDaQ), where the good way is, and walk on it. In doing so you will find serenity for your souls” (Yermiyah 6:16).