Dvar Torah Outline

Dayenu: Fifteen Stages of Redemption and the Meaning of Egypt's Wealth

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman examines the Maharal's explanation of the fifteen benefits celebrated in Dayenu: liberation from Egyptian domination, elevation beyond the natural order, and attachment to God through holiness. A central discussion explores whether the wealth taken from Egypt should be understood simply as unpaid wages or, more broadly, as the positive outcome of Israel's labor and suffering. The progression reveals redemption as more than escape: it establishes Israel's independent existence, spiritual stature, and relationship with God.

I

The First Five Benefits: Emerging from Egyptian Domination

A. *The Maharal's three-part framework*

- The fifteen benefits in Dayenu divide into **three groups of five**:
  - Release from Egyptian domination.
  - Additional benefits that elevate Israel beyond its initial liberation.
  - Holy, divine gifts that establish attachment to God.
- The first five remain primarily connected to the Exodus itself, although each adds something beyond the preceding benefit.

B. *The ascending order of the first five*

1. **Leaving Egypt:** freedom from another nation's authority.
2. **Judgments against the Egyptians:** liberation accompanied by the punishment of Israel's oppressors.
3. **Judgments against their gods:** defeat extending beyond Egypt's people to the powers and beliefs they represented.
4. **The death of their firstborn:** a blow to Egypt's essential strength.
5. **Receiving Egyptian wealth:** departure accompanied by a positive gain, rather than freedom alone.

C. *Why judging Egypt's gods is a greater defeat*

- Rabbi Shulman explains that a people's gods represent its beliefs and ideals on a more abstract plane.
- Defeating those gods therefore strikes at something deeper than Egypt's physical population or political power.

- It exposes the failure of what the Egyptians themselves regarded as ultimate.

D. *Why the firstborn represent Egypt's core*

- Rabbi Shulman cites the Midrash identifying Egypt's heavenly representative with the designation **"firstborn."**
- Such a designation describes the power it embodies, rather than functioning as an ordinary personal name.
- In the Maharal's framework:
  - The first represents the thing itself in its primary form.
  - What follows is secondary.
- The death of the firstborn thus signifies an attack on Egypt's **essential identity and strength**, not merely another peripheral loss.

II

Egypt's Wealth: Wages or the Positive Fruit of Labor?

5:01

A. *Why wealth belongs within the first group*

- Receiving wealth goes beyond the immediate requirements of leaving Egypt.
- Nevertheless, the Maharal connects it to the Exodus because it is the **reward for Israel's labor**.
- Unlike the splitting of the sea, it is not wholly separate from the experience of servitude and liberation.

B. *The straightforward interpretation: compensation for unpaid work*

- The discussion raises the account of **Geviha ben Pesisa**, who answered an Egyptian claim against the Jews in Alexander's court.
- His response was that Egypt owed compensation for generations of Israelite labor.
- On this reading, the wealth taken from Egypt was simply payment of an outstanding debt.

C. *Rabbi Shulman questions whether that legal argument settles the issue*

- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes the narrative's presentation:
  - Geviha himself approaches the sages with a proposed answer.
  - If unsuccessful, they could disassociate themselves from his argument.
- Rabbi Shulman therefore suggests that this may have been a useful rebuttal in that setting, rather than the sages' definitive explanation of the wealth.
- A participant offers the alternative reading that Geviha was merely a convenient representative for an argument the sages accepted.
- Rabbi Shulman maintains that the account does not require that conclusion.

D. *The divine promise suggests a broader significance*

- God had already promised Abraham that Israel would leave with wealth: **Genesis 15:14:** "וְגַם אֶת־הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָּן אָנֹכִי וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵצְאוּ בִּרְכֻשׁ גָּדוֹל:" ("But I will also judge the nation they will serve, and afterward they will leave with great wealth.")
- Rabbi Shulman suggests that this promise need not be reduced to a straightforward exchange of labor for money.
- Israel's difficult experience had to produce something positive; its challenges and trials were not purposeless.

E. *An alternative understanding of "reward for their labor"*

- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes between:
  - **External compensation:** receiving something in exchange for time and effort.
  - **The fruit of one's labor:** receiving a benefit that emerges from what the work itself accomplished.
- Applied to Egypt:
  - Redemption ends the servitude.
  - It also brings forth whatever positive result or refinement was achieved through that experience.
- The physical wealth can represent that positive outcome.
- This explains why receiving wealth remains connected to the Exodus: both freedom and the benefit emerging from the labor belong to the completion of the Egyptian experience.

F. *An important qualification about the Maharal's wording*

- Rabbi Shulman explicitly cautions that the Maharal does **not** develop a detailed theory here.
- His point is not to prove that the Maharal rejects literal compensation.
- Rather, the phrase "reward for their labor" does not, by itself, establish a calculation of unpaid wages.
- Rabbi Shulman also invokes the Talmud's attention to God's use of **"please"** when instructing Israel to request valuables: **Exodus 11:2:** "דַּבֶּר־נָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וְיִשְׁאֲלוּ אִישׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רְעוּתָהּ כְּלֵי־כֶסֶף וּכְלֵי זָהָב:" ("Please speak in the people's hearing, and let each man request from his neighbor, and each woman from her neighbor, articles of silver and articles of gold.")
- The special request and Israel's reluctance indicate that the matter involves more than an ordinary collection of wages.

III

The Middle Five: Benefits Beyond Basic Liberation

17:27

A. *A new category of divine generosity*

- The next five benefits are not simply components of escaping Egypt.
- Each constitutes a distinct additional elevation.

- The Maharal stresses that one could have been granted without the next.

B. *Was the splitting of the sea unnecessary?*

- A participant raises the principle, associated with Maimonides, that God does not perform unnecessary miracles.
- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes between:
  - **The need within the situation:** once Israel was trapped by the sea with Egypt pursuing, rescue required a miracle.
  - **The creation of that situation:** God did not have to harden Pharaoh's heart and bring Egypt into pursuit.
- The encounter was arranged to display God's power and elevate Israel, not merely to solve an unavoidable problem.

C. *The five successive additions*

1. **Splitting the sea**
   - A new benefit beyond the original liberation from Egypt.
2. **Bringing Israel through on dry ground**
   - Splitting the waters did not itself require that the seabed become dry.
   - Dry passage was an additional kindness.
3. **Drowning the Egyptians**
   - Once Israel had escaped, its immediate need for rescue had been met.
   - Egypt's destruction added another dimension to the salvation.
4. **Providing Israel's needs for forty years**
   - Israel could theoretically have obtained provisions through its own effort.
   - God's provision spared the nation that burden.
5. **Giving the manna**
   - The manna was not merely convenient food.
   - Even through their own efforts, the people could not have obtained food of comparable quality.

IV

The Final Five and the Three Stages of Redemption

20:00

A. *The final gifts establish attachment to God*

- The last five benefits belong to the realm of **divine holiness**:
  - Shabbat.
  - Being brought before Mount Sinai.
  - Receiving the Torah.
  - Entering the holy Land of Israel.
  - The building of the Temple.

- These gifts do more than improve Israel's circumstances.
- Through them, Israel becomes attached to God.

B. *First stage: acquiring independent existence*

- The Maharal compares Israel under Egyptian rule to **a fetus contained within its mother**.
- Israel did not yet possess an independent national existence.
- Leaving Egypt was therefore analogous to birth:
  - Emergence from another power's control.
  - Passage from darkness into light.
  - The beginning of existence as a nation in its own right.

C. *Second stage: elevation beyond the natural order*

- Once Israel exists independently, it is elevated above the ordinary powers of the physical world.
- The splitting of the sea begins this stage:
  - A natural force gives way before Israel.
  - This reveals a holy dimension of Israel that transcends ordinary nature.
- The miracle is therefore not only a rescue; it expresses Israel's spiritual stature.

D. *Third stage: attachment through holiness*

- The final five gifts bring the progression to its highest category: closeness to God.
- The overall movement is:
  - **Freedom from subordination.**
  - **Elevation beyond nature.**
  - **Attachment to God through holy gifts.**
- Rabbi Shulman concludes at the point where the Maharal begins developing the significance of the sea's yielding before Israel.

V

In Summary

- **Dayenu's fifteen benefits form three groups:** liberation from Egypt, elevation beyond nature, and attachment to God.
- **The first five progressively dismantle Egyptian domination**, reaching its beliefs, essential strength, and hold over Israel's labor.
- **Egypt's wealth need not mean only unpaid wages:** Rabbi Shulman suggests that it can represent the positive fruit of Israel's difficult experience, while cautioning against attributing a fully developed explanation to the Maharal.

- **The middle five are distinct additional gifts**, each providing something beyond what the preceding benefit required.
- **The final five reveal redemption's ultimate purpose:** not merely independence or miraculous protection, but a life of holiness and closeness to God.