

Escaping the Sunken Place: Text Study

Yehudah Webster

While most people of the world are certainly physically free, many of us find ourselves in a continuous state of mental slavery, subject to the oppressive socialisation of our surroundings. Through Torah text study of the Israelite journey from physical and mental captivity to freedom, we will grapple with what's needed of us today for liberation.

“The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.” - Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*

The Realities of Slave Mentality

Exodus 14:11-12 & 16:3; Numbers 11:4-6 & 14:2-4

(Ex 14:11-12) “What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt... it is better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

(Ex 16:3) and the people of Israel said to them (Aaron and Moshe), “Would that we had died by the hand of Adonai in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

(Num 11: 4-6) Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

(Num 14:2-4) And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is Adonai bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

Midrash Tanchuma

“Then Moses **caused** Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds”(Ex 15:22) - Moses had to drag them away from there, against their desire. Why? When the Israelites left Egypt, Pharaoh pursued them with his massive army, with horses and chariots adorned and decorated with jewels and precious stones. When they entered the sea and God submerged and drowned them, the jewels flowed in the water and washed up on the sea shore. Israel went down to the water daily and would take the jewels. They didn't want to leave. When Moses saw this, he forced them to depart.”

“The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom.” — Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Questions:

- 1.) What's the connecting thread or theme between these passages?
- 2.) Why do you think the Israelites would rather return to Egypt or never have left at all, remembering only their meals and not their suffering?
- 3.) Why do you think the recently freed Israelites would concern themselves with Egyptian jewels and precious stones while a land “flowing with milk and honey” awaits them?
- 4.) Would you trade your physical and/or mental freedom for material luxury?
Would you give up your material luxury for physical and/or mental freedom?
What's the difference?

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Exodus 10:1,13:17-18 & Mekhilta

(Ex 10:1-2) Then Adonai said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons’ sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am Adonai.”

(Ex 13:17-18) Now when Pharaoh let the people go, Adonai did not lead them by way of the land of the Phillistines, although it was nearer; for Adonai said, “The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.” So Adonai led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds...

The Mekhilta puts it in the following way: (unknown section)

"HaShem did not bring the people to Israel on the direct route. Instead, He took them through the desert. HaShem said 'If I bring them to the Land of Israel now, everyone will immediately involve himself with their field or vineyard and they will pay no attention to Torah! Instead, I will take them through the wilderness. They will eat the manna and drink water from the miraculous well (that HaShem provided by hitting the rock 17:5) and the Torah will become absorbed within their body.'"

Numbers 14:21-23 & 31-33

“But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of Adonai, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it....But your children, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.”

Questions:

- 1.) **Pharaoh's heart is hardened a total of 10 times.** Why doesn't HaShem just free the Israelites and have them inherit the promised land? Why harden pharaoh's heart, go through the trouble of 10 plagues, and then split a sea?!
- 2.) Why do you think HaShem presumes the people will "have a change of heart" and "return to Egypt," the land of their affliction instead of fighting for their freedom?
- 3.) Why does HaShem lead the people a "roundabout way?"
- 4.) Taking into consideration all of these passages, what is the strategy of escaping the sunken place? **Most importantly did it work?**
- 5.) Taking into consideration all of these passages, what is the role of **faith** and **generational patience** in escaping the sunken place?