

Parashat Bo 5771, 2011:

On This Very Day

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The phrase, “*b’etzem hayom hazeh*” (“on this very day”), appears three times in our *parasha*, and a total of seven times within *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (the Five Books of the Torah). Each time, Onkelos (35-120 CE), the universally recognized translator of the Torah into Aramaic, renders the expression as “*bichran yoma,*” which connotes a sense of exactitude and essentially means “on this day and on no other.” Let us briefly examine each of these cases.

We first encounter “*b’etzem hayom hazeh*” in the midst of the Noach narrative in *Sefer Bereishit* (7:13). In this instance, it refers to Noach and his entire family entering the Ark: “On this very day, Noah came, and Shem and Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, and Noah's wife and his sons' three wives with them, into the ark.” (This and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*.) The second time we find our expression, also in *Seer Bereishit*, is in the context of Avraham’s fulfillment of the commandment of *brit milah* (ritual circumcision): “And Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house and all those purchased with his money, every male of the people of Abraham's household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on that very day, as G-d had spoken with him.” (17:13)

Each of the three instances of “*b’etzem hayom hazeh*” in our *parasha* (*Sefer Shemot* 12:17, 41, and 51) refers to the Exodus (*Yitziat Mitzraim*), for example: “It came to pass on that very day, that the L-rd took the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with their legions.” (12:51)

Sefer Vayikra contains one example of our phrase, in reference to *Chag Hashavuot* (Shavuot): “And you shall designate on this very day a holy occasion it shall be for you; you shall not perform any work of labor. [This is] an eternal statute in all your dwelling places throughout your generations.” (23:21)

The final use of our expression within the Five Books of the Torah is found in *Sefer Devarim*, in the context of Hashem’s command to Moshe to ascend *Har Navo* so that he may see *Eretz Yisrael* before he dies:

And the L-rd spoke to Moses on that very day, saying, Go up this Mount Avarim [to] Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, that is facing Jericho, and see the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel as a possession, And die on the mountain upon which you are climbing and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. (32:48-50)

What concepts or ideas link each of these instances of “*b’etzem hayom hazeh*” together? I believe that in all cases, the Torah uses this phrase to prepare us for something dramatic and auspicious that is about to take place. Moreover, in my opinion, these words teach us that the protagonists’ impending actions will differentiate them from the rest of mankind. Let us see how each of these passages illustrate these ideas.

By entering the Ark, Noah and his family were irrevocably separated from the rest of humanity. Hashem’s goal was clear and manifest: Save mankind from complete

destruction. As a result of their having been chosen, Noach and his family became the progenitors of all future peoples – beyond question, a remarkable event of epic proportions. Thus, the two themes of drama and differentiation could not be more clearly demonstrated.

Avraham's fulfillment of G-d's commandment to ritually circumcise himself and all male members of his household was nothing less than a heroic act. By doing so, he created a permanent sign (*ot*) upon his flesh that vividly symbolized his otherness, both existentially and physically, from the rest of mankind. This *ot*, among other unique symbols of our faith, has unfortunately given rise to anti-Semitic slurs and attacks against our people. This was noted approximately 900 years ago in the 12th century midrashic work entitled the *Pesikta Zutarta (Lekach Tov) to Sefer Bereishit, Parashat Vayera*. Therein, the Midrash reconstructs the discussion that Avraham had with Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre regarding whether or not he should fulfill G-d's command regarding the *brit milah*. Eshkol took a pragmatic view of Avraham's potential action, focusing on the risk-benefit ratio, and asked him "What do you think you are doing? Don't you realize that you will make yourself reprehensible in the eyes of your enemies?" Avraham withstood this trial and refused to be dissuaded by Eshkol's so-called "practical advice." The great knight of faith loyally continued in his service to the Almighty, and blazed a path of *emunah* (faith) for each of us to follow.

When we return to our *parasha's* use of "*b'etzem hayom hazeh*," we find two different causative factors and explanations, as to why Hashem took us out of Egypt. Verses 12:17

and 12:51 point to our acceptance of the mitzvot of Pesach as the reason inherent in

Yitziat Mitzraim:

And you shall watch over the unleavened cakes, for on this very day I have taken your legions out of the land of Egypt, and you shall observe this day throughout your generations, [as] an everlasting statute. (12:17)

All the children of Israel did; as the L-rd had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did. It came to pass on that very day, that the L-rd took the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with their legions. (12:50-51)

In contrast, 12:41 seems to indicate that Hashem saved us from the grinding servitude and misery of Egypt independent of any act on our part. From this perspective, the Exodus was purely an act of divine grace: “It came to pass at the end of four hundred and thirty years, and it came to pass in that very day, that all the legions of the Lord went out of the land of Egypt.”

In either case, whether we merited our redemption, or it transpired solely as a result of G-d’s unending beneficence, the Exodus from Egypt was one of the greatest and most auspicious moments in human history. Moreover, it was one the crucial steps undertaken by Hashem to make us His *Am Hanivchar*, His chosen and unique nation.

Sefer Vayikra’s reference to “*b’etzem hayom hazeh*,” in the context of *Chag Hashavuot*, is a natural extension of the verses we have focused upon in our *parasha*. As my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) stressed on numerous occasions, *Yitziat Mitzraim* was a prerequisite for our people to become “a kingdom of princes and a holy nation” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:6). It was not, however, an end in and of itself. The movement toward holiness could be achieved exclusively through the Torah. Hence, the entire purpose of the Exodus was to enable us to receive the Torah – not surprisingly, the *raison d’etre* of Shavuot. When we received the Torah, we were

dramatically transformed into a new and sanctified nation that was eternally differentiated from the rest of mankind. Once again, “*b’etzem hayom hazeh*” signified a dramatic change in our status and stature.

In many ways, *Sefer Devarim* could not have used a more apt expression in reference to *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher, Moshe) than “*b’etzem hayom hazeh.*” Moshe’s prophecy was *sui generis*, one of a kind – and never to be repeated again. In *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 7:6, the Rambam (1135-1204) focuses upon four aspects of Moshe’s prophecy that made him unique:

1. Moshe received his prophecy while awake rather than through a dream or in a vision.
2. Moshe’s prophecy was direct and not via an angel.
3. Moshe spoke to Hashem, so to speak, the way a man speaks with a friend. He was never afraid.
4. Moshe was prepared for the prophetic experience at any time, as if he were an angel.

Moshe was the ultimate lawgiver of *klal Yisrael*, the Jewish people. He was the personification of spiritual genius and communion with Hashem. In sum, he was different in kind and degree from any other prophet who had ever, or would ever, live. This difference, and the impending dramatic moment of his *petirah* (death), is once again expressed in the phrase, “*b’etzem hayom hazeh.*”

None of us are a Noach, Avraham, or Moshe. In addition, we have not been *zocheh* (merited) to witness explicit wonders and miracles such as those that took place during *Yitziat Mitzraim*. Nonetheless, each of us has the potential to hear the immortal phrase, “*b’etzem hayom hazeh,*” and enter a life-transforming moment. Like Avraham of old,

may we have the strength to answer “*hineini*” (“here I am ready to serve You”) when the Almighty issues His dramatic call. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.