

## They embittered their lives with hard work, with mortar and with bricks. (1:14)

The *Zohar HaKadosh* explains *chomer*, mortar, and *leveinim*, bricks, differently than the standard translation. *Chomer* is reference to *kal v'chomer* (light and heavy; a principle of determining *halachah*. It means that what applies in a less important – light – case will surely apply in a more important – heavy – one. The phrase has come to mean an inescapable conclusion). *Leveinim* refers to *libun halachah*, the process of thoroughly analyzing, clarifying and elucidating *halachah*. (The word *libun* means whitening or purification, symbolizing the effort expended to refine and clarify a *halachic* issue until it becomes clear, so that it is resolved.) In short, *chomer* and *le'veinim* are references to Torah study with exertion and toil – the way it should be.

*Horav Chaim Zev Finkel, zl (Mashgiach, Mir Yerushalayim)*, explains that, veritably, the decree that the Jewish People would be enslaved heralds back to the *Bris Bein HaBesarim*, Covenant of the Parts, during which Hashem informed Avraham *Avinu* of his descendants' destiny. The actual form of labor, however, was not delineated. Therefore, had *Klal Yisrael* expended every effort for Torah study, this would have been their *shibud*, enslavement. Since they did not, Hashem relegated them to hard physical labor. *Horav Avigdor HaLevi Nebentzhal, Shlita*, adds that, with regard to *Shevet Levi*, the *shibud* was, indeed, carried out through their unequivocal devotion to Torah study – even if it meant giving up their meager portions of food. (Pharaoh decreed that only those who labored physically were to receive rations. As a result, *Shevet Levi* survived on the charitable, heartfelt kindness of their brothers, who shared their inadequate portions with them.) Since they fulfilled the decree of *chomer* and *leveinim*, they were not subjected to *avodas perach*, crushing labor, which was the lot of the rest of the nation.

*Rav Nebentzhal* explains that the divergence considering the manner in which the *shibud* played itself out was again reflected in how *Eretz Yisrael* was apportioned to each *shevet*, tribe. *Rashi* (commentary to *Bereishis* 36:7) explains that Hashem bequeathed *Eretz Yisrael* to the Jews in reparation for the suffering they had endured in Egypt. *Eisav* refused to be a sojourner/stranger in a strange land, therefore he did not receive any portion in *Eretz Yisrael*. All the *shevatim* were included in the persecution and crushing emotional and physical labor of *shibud Mitzrayim*—all but one: *Shevet Levi*. As a result, all the *shevatim* received a portion in *Eretz Yisrael*; *Levi* did not receive a portion of land. Since their *shibud* was *ruchni*, spiritual in nature, they received a spiritual portion in *Eretz Yisrael*; they served in the *Bais HaMikdash*. Hashem is their portion.

To be sure, studying Torah, toiling in it, exerting oneself to understand and clarify its intricacies and minutiae, is not enslavement. To the *ben Torah*, no greater form of enjoyment and satisfaction exists. We do, however, derive from here that absorbing oneself totally in the sea of Torah, suffusing one's life with Torah study, can prevent, circumvent, decrees against him from being realized. Certainly, much of it depends on why and how one studies Torah. Under the right circumstances, it can be an extraordinary panacea for what might have been.

In a similar exposition, the *Maharil Diskin* explains how, *Va'timalei ha'aretz osam*; "The Land became filled with them," (1:7) was the springboard for the Egyptian *shibud*. Yaakov Avinu had originally sent Yehudah ahead of the family in order to establish a *yeshivah* from where Torah and *halachah* would spread out to the *shevatim*. Our Patriarch knew that, as long as we stayed committed to the *yeshivah* as our focal point, as long as Torah learning was our primary vocation and its tenets and lifestyle our way of life, we would not become a slave to the Egyptian taskmaster. As long as he remained subservient to Hashem, he would not be compelled to serve another master. The life of the spirit, however, was not what that generation sought. They wanted to be accepted by the Egyptians as one of their own. The theaters and sports complexes reserved for the Egyptian populace now became home to the Jews. When the land became filled with the Jews; when they rejected the guidance of their Patriarchal heritage, they became Egyptian slaves. This has sadly been the case throughout our history. Probably the only reason that they were not completely decimated then, as well as now, is due to the minority whose commitment to Torah remains unequivocal.

The *Maharam Schick*, *zl*, was one of the preeminent leaders of Hungarian Jewry. A *talmid muvhak*, primary disciple, of the *Chasam Sofer*, *zl*, he developed a relationship with his *rebbe* that inspired him throughout his life. Indeed, before his death, the *Maharam Schick* said that he remembered every Torah thought which he had heard from his revered *rebbe*.

Throughout his life, he was plagued with ill health, the result of a weak body. This, of course, had no effect on his spirit – his devotion to Torah study and its mastery were his beacons of strength. He developed a warm relationship with the *Yetev Lev*, father of the *Satmar Rebbe*, *zl*, and *Rav* of Sighet. The following episode took place when the *Yetev Lev* visited the *Maharam Schick* during his last illness, to which he ultimately succumbed.

The *Maharam* was in intense agony, pain racking his frail body. The *Yetev Lev* approached his friend's bed and held his hand for a few moments. Finally, the two long-time friends embraced and kissed, both acutely aware that this was probably the last time they would see one another. Suddenly, the *Maharam* moaned and said, "I am suffering overwhelming pain, and I wonder why. What did I do to deserve such intense pain? It must be the result of *bitul Torah*, wasting time that I should have spent studying Torah."

The *Sigheter Rav* left and decided to pay a visit to the *Maharam's yeshivah*. While there, he related the incident that had taken place at the home of their revered *Rebbe*: "Can you imagine that the *Maharam* attributed his agony to *bitul Torah*? He has always been the quintessential *masmid*, diligent student of Torah. His mouth does not cease from Torah. Nary a moment is wasted. What could he mean?"

The *Rav* thought for a moment, then commented, "Unless he is referring to the passage in the *Talmud Berachos 5a*, wherein *Chazal* say, 'If one sees himself plagued by *yissurim*, pain and misery, he should introspect and scrutinize his actions. If, after a complete scrutiny, he is still not

able to find anything wrong with his actions, then he should attribute his pain to *bitul Torah*.' Now you will understand the meaning of, *pishpeish v'lo matza*, 'he scrutinized and found nothing wrong with his actions.' The *Maharam* introspected and found nothing negative to which to attribute his misery! Therefore, he suggested that, perhaps it is for the sin of wasting time in which he could have been learning Torah!"