

Pesach: The Festival of Liberty and Love

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Pesach is the time during which we commemorate and celebrate our physical redemption from the bondage of slavery. The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzva 306) contends that the Torah links the Yom Tov of Pesach with that of Shavuot, through the mitzva of *sefirat ha'omer*, to highlight the connection between our physical and spiritual redemption. The Chinuch asserts that the primary goal and intention of our physical liberation was to ultimately achieve spiritual redemption through receiving and observing the Torah.

One difficulty with this thesis is that if the goal of the Exodus was indeed only a means to the end of achieving spiritual salvation, why did Hashem separate these events by seven weeks, only connecting them through the mitzva of *sefirat ha'omer*? Would it not have been more appropriate to receive the Torah immediately after we left Egypt?

It is possible to suggest that at this point in history, the Jewish people weren't spiritually worthy of *Matan Torah*, and therefore needed time to prepare themselves. This idea has its roots in the many Midrashim that speak of the lowly spiritual level of the Jewish people at this point in history. This window of time enabled the nation to undergo the spiritual transformation necessary to receive the Torah.

Working within this line of reasoning, I would like to suggest that it was crucial that the Jewish people achieve physical freedom prior to receiving the Torah because this provided the emotional and psychological backdrop for the ideal service of Hashem – *avodah m'ahavah* (service out of love). The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (1:3) teaches that one should not serve Hashem for the sake of reward. The Mishna states:

Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving reward. | אל תהיו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב על מנת לקבל פרס.

The Rambam, in his commentary on that Mishna, explains that the Mishna is teaching that one should serve Hashem *m'ahavah* - out of love, and not for the sake of reward.⁵ In *Hilchot Teshuva* (10:1-2), he expounds upon this idea and writes that serving Hashem for any ulterior motive, even spiritual reward, taints the pristine nature of one's actions. The Rambam writes:

⁵ It should be noted that not all of the Rishonim agree with the Rambam on this issue. See R. Yitzchak Blau's article "Purity of Motivation and Desiring the World to Come" in the *Torah u-Madda Journal* (vol. 14 2006-7) for a comprehensive analysis of this matter.

A person should not say: "I will fulfill the mitzvot of the Torah and occupy myself with its wisdom to receive all the blessings which are contained within it or in order to merit life of the World to Come ... It is not fitting to serve God in this manner. A person whose service is motivated by these factors is considered one who serves out of fear. This person is not on the level of the prophets or of the sages ... Those who serve [God] out of love, occupy themselves in Torah and mitzvot and walk in the paths of wisdom for no ulterior motive: not because of fear that evil will occur, nor in order to acquire benefit. Rather, one does what is true because it is true and, and ultimately good will come because of it ... When one will love God in the proper manner, one will immediately perform all the mitzvot motivated by love.

אל יאמר אדם הרניני עושה מצות התורה ועוסק בחכמתה כדי שאקבל כל הברכות הכתובות בה או כדי שאזכה לחיי העולם הבא ... אין ראוי לעבוד את ה' על הדרך הזה, שהעובד על דרך זה הוא עובד מיראה ואינה מעלת הנביאים ולא מעלת החכמים ... העובד מאהבה עוסק בתורה ובמצות והולך בנתיבות החכמה לא מפני דבר בעולם ולא מפני יראת הרעה ולא כדי לירש הטובה אלא עושה האמת מפני שהוא אמת וסוף הטובה לבא בגללה ... ובזמן שיאהוב אדם את ה' אהבה הראויה מיד יעשה כל המצות מאהבה.

Based on the Rambam's emphasis on the importance of serving Hashem *m'ahavah*, it follows that it was critical for the Jewish people to achieve physical freedom prior to receiving the Torah. A slave understands only reward and punishment; he does not have the experience of making his own choices. The ability to choose for one's self is a prerequisite to choosing to serve Hashem out of one's own volition and desire. It was necessary for the Jewish People to experience the freedom to make their own choices and move beyond the framework of reward and punishment so that they could receive the Torah *m'ahavah*.⁶

While we all agree that it is critical to serve Hashem *m'ahavah*, we sometimes undermine this goal when employing certain educational techniques that focus on reward and punishment in *avodat* Hashem. I recently visited a Yeshiva that started a daily *vatikin* (sunrise) minyan. The minyan was failing due to a lack of attendance, and a sign was posted on the bulletin board to encourage students to attend. The sign cited two sources that stress the value of getting up at the crack of dawn to recite the *Shema* and *daven*, and had part of the quotations emphasized in bold. The sign read:

It is ideal to recite [the Shema] before sunrise ... and one who can do this has great reward. (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 58:1)
He is promised a portion to the World to Come and will not be harmed that day
 (Mishna Brura ad loc.)

ומצוה מן המובחר לקרותה כוותיקין ... ומי שיכול לכוין לעשות כן שכרו מרובה מאד (שו"ע אור"ח נח:א)
 ומובטח שהוא בן עולם הבא ולא יזוק כל אותו היום. (משנה ברורה שם ס"ק ח)

⁶ One source that seems to run contrary to my explanation of why we attained our physical freedom before receiving the Torah is the Gemara in *Shabbat* (88a) that tells that Hashem raised *Har Sinai* above the entire nation and coerced the Jewish People to accept the Torah. The simple reading of the Gemara implies that the Torah was accepted out of fear and anxiety and not out of love and devotion. It should be noted, however, that the *Meshech Chochmah* (Shemot 19:17) interprets the Gemara as saying that the prophetic revelation was so great that the Jews had no choice but to accept the Torah. My analysis is consistent with this interpretation of the Gemara.

I was disturbed by the choice of which parts of the quotations were emphasized in bold. The Shulchan Aruch is teaching that this is the ideal time to *daven*, but by bolding the part about the reward, one loses sight of the inherent value of praying at this time.

Even if one thinks a reference to reward is a good way to “sell” this mitzva, highlighting the second half of the quotation from the Mishna Brura, which speaks of an immediately tangible reward in this world, and not the part about the spiritual reward of *Olam Habah*, again seems to miss the point of *avodat Hashem*. I recognize that people often respond better to immediate physical stimuli than to lofty ideals, but I ask myself if this is how we should be educating our students.⁷

My reservation to educate towards rewards is not limited only to the fact that it undercuts the concept of *ahavat Hashem*, although that alone should be a cause of concern. It stems primarily from a belief that if we want to successfully educate towards a life committed to Torah observance, we must instill and imbue our students with a genuine sense of *ahavat Hashem*. *Ahavat Hashem* should not be perceived or experienced just as a specific mitzva, rather it is one of the central motivating factors in the performance of all mitzvot. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (5:19) teaches:

Any love that depends on a specific cause, when the cause is gone, | כל אהבה שהיא תלויה בדבר בטל
the love is gone. | דבר בטלה אהבה

If we want our children and students to internalize the eternal beauty of a Torah lifestyle, we must educate them towards recognizing and appreciating that beauty. If a child or student is always looking for instant gratification in today's world, they are much more likely to find it outside the Beit Midrash, regardless of the spiritual or physical “rewards” the Torah has to offer. Cultivating a genuine appreciation and love of religion that comes from having a meaningful and loving relationship with God enables healthy and sincere *avodat Hashem*.

The Pesach season is one in which we celebrate our independence and autonomy. Many have pointed out that one of the central differences between a slave and a free person is the right and responsibility of self-determination. The opportunity of freedom brings with it the challenge of taking responsibility for our actions. This responsibility requires us to take stock of our spiritual shortcomings and work toward rectifying them. I believe that one root cause of these shortcomings lies in a lack of a palpable *ahavat Hashem*.

There is a common custom to recite *Shir Hashirim* after the Pesach seder. Based on the above analysis, I would like to suggest that the reason we read *Shir Hashirim*, a *megillah* that speaks so vividly about the mutual love between Hashem and the Jewish People, is to highlight that the liberty attained on Pesach, can and should bring one to higher heights in the love of the *Ribono Shel Olam*. May we be blessed with the desire and ability to cultivate this type of relationship with Hashem as we internalize the liberty of Pesach in anticipation of Shavuot.

⁷ It should be noted that while the Rambam states unequivocally that serving Hashem *m'ahavah* is the ideal form of service, he recognizes that it is unrealistic to expect every member of society to conduct themselves in this manner, and as such encourages one to serve Hashem regardless of their motives. This is based on the principle mentioned in the Gemara in *Pesachim* (50b) that *mitoch shelo lishma bah lishmah* – serving Hashem for ulterior motives will bring one to serve Him for ideal reasons. At the same time, I wonder if students should be trained to respond to reward and punishment as opposed to serving Hashem *m'ahavah*.