

From Bondage to Bonding

The Navi Ezekiel (16:6) recounts Jewish history and proclaims:

וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמִּיךָ חַיִּי וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמִּיךָ חַיִּי
And I said to you in your blood you shall live, I said to you, in your blood you shall live.

At first glance this is most paradoxical. Though the spilling of blood most often has destructive and negative connotations and consequences, here it is the medium for our very survival and thriving. Our Rabbis (*Mechilta, Bo, Masechta D’Pishcha 5*) inform us that when the prophet refers to two sets of blood, he is referring to the two mitzvos of bris milah and korban Pesach that we performed on the night of our Exodus from Egypt. Why specifically were these two mitzvos selected?

One could answer that they reflect the two different sanctifications that we underwent that night. Milah represents the personal individual *kedusha* (sanctity) that each Jew possesses. Korban Pesach represents the communal and national *kedusha* that envelopes the Jewish people. Similarly, at the miraculous deliverance at Yam Suf, the Jews sang (Shemos 15:2) “this is My G-D and I will beautify Him, the G-D of my father and I will exalt Him.” The first phrase expresses the personal individual rapport that each Jew has with Hashem. Rashi, citing the *Mechilta* notes that the second phrase connotes that I am not the source of the sanctity; rather the sanctity was established for me since the days of



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my forefathers.

The Maharal in his commentary *Gur Aryeh*, Shmos (12:6), notes that these two bloods and mitzvos represent the new acceptance of *avdus*, servitude, that the Jewish nation accepted on the night of their liberation. An *eved* (servant) needs a physical sign, a manifestation of his being an *eved*. The Nazis, y”s, in their cruelty, branded a number on the arms of their Jewish slaves, as a farmer brands his cattle, showing complete ownership and control. Hashem ordained a physical demonstration of our being His servants by demanding that we circumcise. In the second blessing of Birkas Hamazon we thank Hashem for “Your covenant which you sealed in our flesh.” This was and is a sign of our *avdus*.

Moreover, the *eved* needs an action, a service, that is performed exclusively for his master. Carrying a towel and slippers to the bathhouse might not be exhaustive labor, but it is indicative of a service performed on behalf of a master. Hashem, in His infinite kindness and sensitivity, gave us the service, the *avodah* of the korban Pesach to reflect our acceptance of servitude. Thus, the Torah, referring to the korban Pesach and its observance by future generations when they

enter the Land of Israel states, Shmos (13:5) “you shall perform this service in this month.”

On the night of our liberation in Egypt, we accepted His mastery, and became His *avodim*. This is clearly stated by Pharoh himself. The *Yalkut Shimoni*, Psalms (872), on the opening verse of Hallel, “Give praise you servants of Hashem,” teaches that Pharoh declared, “behold you are free men, you are now servants of Hashem.” Pharoh continued, “until now you were my slaves, now you are free, you are henceforth slaves of Hashem, you are to extol Hashem for you are His slaves.” Thus the two opening paragraphs of Hallel are in chronological order. The first paragraph states, “give praise you servants of Hashem,” and this is followed in the next chapter by “when Israel went out of Egypt.”

This transition of servitude from man to G-D, from Pharoh to Hashem, was already stated by Hashem as the *raison d’etre* of leaving Egypt. At the burning bush, Hashem tells Moshe:

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזוֹה לָךְ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנֹכִי
שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן
אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה.
שמות ג:יב

He said, I will be with you, just this will

be the sign that I have sent you, when you bring the people out of Egypt, you shall become the servants of G-D on this mountain.

Shemos 3:12

Note the verb *ta-avdun* — to serve, to become His *avodim*. Indeed, the Ibn Ezra Shmos (3:2), notes that the first encounter between Hashem and Moshe was at the *sneh*, the bush. He postulates that the very name Sinai is derived from *sneh*, as the revelation at Sinai is the fulfillment of *ta-avdun*, accepting his sovereignty, as mandated at the *sneh*.

On each of the *Shalosh Regalim*, we recite as the preamble to our Amida, “*Ata b’chartanu*” — you have chosen us. The Gra teaches that the first three phrases express the themes of the three festivals. *Ata b’chartanu* — you have chosen us from all peoples — is the essence of Pesach. Hashem promised Yaakov on his descent to Egypt:

אֲנֹכִי אֶרְדָּה עִמָּךְ מִצְרַיִם וְאֲנֹכִי אֶעֱלֶךָ גַם עִלָּה.
בראשית מו:ד

I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up.

Bereishis 46:4

This is understood by the *Beis Halevi* that Hashem will only alter the laws of nature — the ten plagues and *Kriyas Yam Suf* — for the deliverance of the Jewish people. *Ata b’chartanu*, He chose us to be His ambassadors.

The second phrase *ahavta osanu* — You have loved us — is referring to Shavuot. Hashem shows His love for His people by giving us His Torah. Note, every morning and evening before the Shma, we recite a beracha expressing the special connection between the Jewish people and Torah. The morning beracha concludes, “who chooses His people Israel with love,” and the evening beracha ends with, “who loves His people Israel.” Torah is an expression of G-D’s love for His nation. While the mitzvos are called commandments, which could be understood as obligatory burdens, when one realizes that they emanate from His abundant love, one appreciates the privilege of serving Him, independent of all the benefits that accrue to man from that service.

V’ratzisa banu — You found favor in us — refers to Sukkos. The term *ritzui* is found most often in the Torah to note His forgiveness and acceptance of our *korbonos*. Here too, He accepted our repentance and regret for the sin of the Golden Calf and responded in kind with the *Ananei Hakavod* — Clouds of Glory — the essence of our celebration of Sukkos.

The term *avdus*, which means slavery or servitude, is most often understood in a derogatory sense. Being a slave to Pharoh was demeaning and stripped the slaves of their human dignity and self-worth.

Being an *eved Hashem* is a privilege. To literally serve the Creator and Master of the universe gives meaning, purpose and fulfillment to every action. Not only the specific mitzvos that one performs — Shabbos, tefilin, and *taharas hamishpacha*, religious activities that connect mortal man with the Immortal Being — but all of one’s activities, eating and sleeping, become important and noteworthy as they are channeled to His service. I eat well to have a healthy body to serve Hashem. I sleep sufficiently to have a healthy body to serve Hashem. Even the placing of my right shoe before my left shoe, which can seem so inconsequential, has significance for now and for the future. Thus, what appear to be mundane activities are all elevated in His service, thereby infusing all of one’s life experiences with meaning. The Rambam (*Dei’os* 3:3) summarizes this idea by quoting the verse:

בְּכֹל דְרָכֶיךָ דַּעְהוּ וְהוּא יִישֵׁר אַרְחֶיךָ.
משלי ג:ו

In all your ways know Him, and He will straighten your paths.

Mishlei 3:6

Moreover, in a world with over seven billion people walking the face of this earth, one could certainly sense a feeling of worthlessness, depression and insignificance, a mere speck in the vast universe. What comes to mind is the cry of the Psalmist (8:5):

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מה אנוש כי תזכרנו, ובו אדם כי תפקדנו.
What is frail man that You should remember him, and the son of man that you should be mindful of him?

In addition, years after one dies, who remembers him? Even those who might carry his name, his total life experiences, his *shmiras mitzvos* and *avodas hakodesh*, his ups and downs, his successes and failures, aren't they here today and gone tomorrow? The answer is a definite **no!** By being an *eved* of Hashem, as He is immortal, one's service of Him, one's activities directed toward Him, one's Torah and mitzvos, are elevated literally and live on forever.

The Chofetz Chaim zt"l in *Sheim Olam* (11) teaches that we recite daily in *Kedusha*, '*Nekadeish*' — "we shall sanctify Your name in this world, just as they the angels sanctify it in Heaven above." This is to be understood literally. As the angels on High do His requests and bidding, so is man to do in this world. All of man's actions are recorded as found in Malachi (3:16):

אז נדברו יראי ה' איש את רעהו, ויקשב
ה' וישמע ויקתב ספר זכרון לפניו ליראי ה'
ולחשבי שמו.

It was inscribed before Him in a book of remembrance of those who fear Hashem and meditate upon His name.

Moreover, the *Zohar* teaches that the angel Gavriel proclaims nightly the activities of man, literally understanding, Koheleth (10:20), "some winged creature may publicize the matter," it is noted for all eternity. If one only realized the incredible privilege of this service of Hashem, they would strive to do all their activities in the best way possible, with a joyous countenance reflecting the Psalmist (100:2):

עבדו את ה' בשמחה, באו לפניו ברננה.
Serve Hashem with gladness, come before Him with joyous song.

There is a rather challenging Gemorah, *Brachos* (4b), that provides us with flight data of the angels. Michael flies non-stop. That is to say, when sent on a mission, he is able to reach his destination in one flight. The angel Gavriel requires a stop-over and arrives at his destination after but one stop. Eliyahu must stop three times prior to performing his mission, and the angel of death must stop seven times before executing his mission. What might we learn from the flight pattern of the Heavenly beings?

The Chofetz Chaim zt"l learns a most powerful message. Take note and learn from the angels. Each one conducts himself in accordance with their unique individual potential. Eliyahu can reach his destination, wherever it may be, after three stop-overs. He could however take a few more rest stops, but doing so would delay his mission by a few moments. Similarly, if Gavriel would travel at Eliyahu's pace it would delay his service even momentarily. The message is: note how exact the angels are to actualize their *full* potential in their service of Hashem. They represent total commitment to their mission, and absolute loyalty to their Divine dispatcher.

Man too is put in this world with a mission of *sheirus* — service — as each individual looks differently one from another, thinks differently than anyone else, and hence has a unique mission to accomplish that nobody else can perform. The model we acknowledge twice daily in our recitation of *Kedusha* is: may we emulate the angels. May we perform

our mission in the best way possible, maximizing our potential for service and *kiddush Hashem*.

Shavuot is the celebration of our fulfilling *ta-avdun*, accepting upon ourselves liberating servitude. While slavery conjures up in our minds the idea of humans owned and treated as property by another, to be a slave or servant of Hashem is the greatest accolade that can describe an individual. Hashem refers to Moshe, as in Bamidbar (12:7), *avdi Moshe*, My servant Moshe. In the closing chapter of the Torah, Devorim (34:5), "so Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there". Moreover Hashem refers to His nation as servants:

כי לי בני ישראל עבדים, עבדי הם אשר
הוצאתי אותם מארץ מצרים, אני ה' אלוקיכם.
ויקרא כה:נה

For the children of Israel are servants to Me, they are my servants whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt. I am G-D your Lord.

Vayikra 25:55

The *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shemos* (286) in introducing the Ten Commandments teaches on the verse, "I am your G-D," that it was most personal as G-D was speaking to each individual, not just collectively to the fledgling nation. Moreover, each individual understood the Commandments based on their ability to comprehend. A personalized revelation to each individual. Similarly, may we accept upon ourselves this forthcoming Shavuot a personalized privilege to strive to be an *eved* of Hashem using our own unique traits.