

# Freedom To... Not Freedom From: Pesach and the Road to Redemption

A recent survey<sup>1</sup> taken as the holiday of Pesach approached, showed that 99 percent of a sample of assimilated Jews were planning to participate in Passover activities, 82 percent reported that they would eat matza, and 72 percent said they would tell over the story of the Exodus from Egypt. A possible reason for the popularity of this holiday may be because it is the holiday that celebrates freedom, commemorating the day of our national redemption from Egypt — the day we were freed from slavery.

We cannot celebrate fully, however, until we have asked ourselves the following questions: What is it about Pesach that is so fundamental to Jewish existence? How does the freedom we attained in Egypt define us as Jews? What powerful idea lies within this historical event that compels us to recall the story of our redemption from Egypt on a daily basis and to retell it in depth year after year?

In order to understand what lies at the core of our existence, we must study the opening chapters of Sefer Shemot, in which the Jewish people emerge as a nation for the first time. Unlike Sefer Bereishit, Shemot does



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not focus on the individuals, but rather on the nation as a whole. In the first two chapters we are told about the suffering of a nation that Pharaoh referred to as “*am bnei Yisrael*” — the nation of the children of Israel (Shemot 1:9). When Moshe is born in the second chapter, he and his parents remain nameless, de-emphasizing the individuals and focusing fully on the beleaguered nation.

The climax of these opening chapters occurs at the end of the second chapter, when the Torah states that Hashem heard their suffering, and that he would now intervene:

וישמע א-לקים את נאקתם ויזכר א-לקים את בריתו את אברהם את יצחק ואת יעקב. וירא א-לקים את בני ישראל וידע א-לקים.

*And G-d heard their moaning and G-d remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And G-d saw the children of Israel and G-d knew.*

**Shemot 2:24-25**

Hashem’s plan had been set in motion,

and thus begins the story of our redemption.

From the start, when Hashem first appeared to Moshe at the burning bush and relayed to him his mission, He told Moshe (Shemot 3:12), “בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את” — “הא-לקים על ההר הזה” — “when you take this nation out of Egypt they will serve me on this mountain.”

The underlying purpose of the redemption and the meaning of the freedom we were about to attain is clearly defined. Hashem is granting our freedom from our Egyptian taskmasters for the purpose of becoming *avadim* (servants) to Him. Our freedom was conditional, and the Jewish slaves had to learn this before they could merit redemption.

With this in mind, Hashem gave them the mitzvah of korban Pesach to teach them how to serve Hashem. Through this mitzvah, Bnei Yisrael could demonstrate their devotion

to Hashem while simultaneously denouncing the idolatry that they worshiped in Egypt, the sheep. Hashem (Shemot 12:3) commanded Bnei Yisrael to “take for yourselves a sheep,” “ויקחו להם איש שה לבית אבות” echoing the command to

One of the ways we answer the child’s Mah Nishtana questions is by saying: מתחילה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו ועכשיו קרבנו המקום לעבודתו, originally, our forefathers were idol worshippers and now the Omnipresent has brought us closer to His service. How does that answer relate to the story of the Exodus? R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai (Chida) in *Simchat HaRegel* explains based on the principle found in the Gemara, *Yevamot* 66b, הקדש מפקיע מידי שעבוד. On a literal level, this means that when something is consecrated, all existing liens on the item are removed. Chida offers another level of interpretation: consecration can take us out of bondage. We were supposed to be enslaved for 400 years, but because we were brought closer to His service, our slavery was truncated. When we were transformed into servants of God, it removed our shackles of bondage.

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Avraham at *Brit Bein Habetarim* (the Covenant of the Pieces), where Avraham was told (Breishit 15:9) *k’cha li*, take for me. Avraham, the first person to recognize Hashem and serve Him, and the first one to call God his Master, his *Adon*<sup>2</sup> demonstrated his devotion by “taking” an animal, thus entering a covenant with G-d. During this covenant, G-d told Avraham of the future enslavement in Egypt and subsequent redemption which would be sealed with a covenant with Him. It is significant to note that his future descendants, who G-d told Avraham about then, would similarly “take” an animal as the first step toward entering their own covenant with G-d. It is also noteworthy to point out that when Moshe relays to the Jews Hashem’s instructions pertaining to *korban Pesach*, he adds the word *mishchu* and tells them:

ויקרא משה לכל זקני ישראל ויאמר אלהם משכו וקחו לכם צאן למשפחותיכם ושחטו הפסח.

*And Moshe called to the elders of Israel and he said to them: Draw forth and buy for yourselves sheep for your families so that you can slaughter the Pesach offering.*

**Shemot 12:21**

Rashi, quoting the *Mechilta*, explains that Moshe is instructing Bnei Yisrael to withdraw from idolatry and take on the mitzvah of the sheep:

משכו ידיכם מאלילים וקחו לכם צאן של מצוה.

*Remove your hands from idolatry and buy for yourselves sheep to perform a mitzvah.*

**Rashi, Shemot 12:6<sup>3</sup>**

Abandoning their idolatrous beliefs and changing their loyalties by devoting themselves to G-d was a prerequisite for redemption.

To further prove their newfound dedication to G-d, after designating the sheep, Bnei Yisrael were told to slaughter it and smear its blood on the doorposts and doorframes of their homes as a sign:

והיה הדם לכם לאות על הבתים אשר אתם שם וראיתי את הדם ופסחתי עליכם ולא יהיה בכם נגף למשחית בהכתי בארץ מצרים.  
*And the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses that you are in. And I will see the blood and pass over them ...*

**Shemot 12:13**

Many commentaries agree<sup>4</sup> that the sign was both for the Jews and for G-d. They explain that Bnei Yisrael would see the blood and understand the significance of their public renunciation of Egyptian gods and their newfound belief in G-d, while at the same time, G-d would see the blood as a sign of their devotion and servitude to Him. The *Mechilta* (Shemot 7:48) suggests that the blood that G-d sees on the doorposts harkens us back to *akeidat Yitzchak* and “reminds” G-d of the blood of the ram that Avraham offered in place of Yitzchak, which symbolized the dedication and sacrifice to his master, his *Adon*. Only after Bnei Yisrael followed in Avraham’s footsteps, demonstrating their devotion to G-d and their willingness to serve Him through the mitzvah of *korban Pesach*, did they merit their redemption.

That devotion to G-d and the willingness to serve Him is the underlying meaning of *yetziat Mitzrayim*. Through the redemption from Egypt we learn the underlying goal of Judaism — to serve G-d. We learn that freedom does not mean freedom from all work and responsibility, but rather freedom from serving human masters in order to serve G-d.

We are commanded to eat matzah, poor man's bread, to remind us that we did not bring about our own redemption, but rather, we left as slaves, solely through the Hand of G-d.

The Rambam<sup>5</sup> uses this idea to explain why we have an obligation to remember the Exodus from Egypt on a daily basis, in our prayers, in mezuzot, and in tefillin. The story of the redemption from Egypt reminds us to serve Hashem and undertake the yoke of mitzvot. The more constant reminders we have, the more we realize that serving G-d is the ultimate purpose of our daily existence.

Rav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch (to Shemot 13:16) elaborates on this idea and explains why G-d commanded us to place the story of *yetziat Mitzrayim* that is found inside tefillin on our arms and between our eyes.<sup>6</sup> Our arms represent our actions, and the space between our eyes represents our thoughts. We must constantly remember our obligation to serve G-d with both our actions and with our minds, with both our physical and

spiritual beings.

Rav Kook, in *Olat Ra'ayah* (Vol. I, pg. 39), expands on this concept and explains the significance of re-experiencing *yetziat Mitzrayim* every year — *b'chol dor vador*. *Yetziat Mitzrayim* was not an isolated historic event that occurred years ago, he writes, but it is a task confronting every individual in every generation, representing the triumph of the spiritual over the physical. The same way that Bnei Yisrael abandoned the physical *avodah* of Egypt in order to embrace the spiritual *avodah* of G-d, we too must enable our spiritual *avodah* to triumph in our physical surroundings.

In the Haggada, when the wicked son asks, "*Mah ha'avodah hazot lachem?*" — What is this service to you? — our response to him is "*ba'avur zeh asah*

*Hashem li b'tzeiti MiMitzrayim* — it is because of this that G-d took me out of Egypt." *Zeh* — these, are the mitzvot of korban Pesach, matzah and maror. If you were there, we tell the *Rasha*, you would not have accepted these mitzvot and, therefore, you would not have been redeemed. Only through the performance of the combination of these mitzvot were we worthy of being redeemed.

The korban Pesach represents our freedom from Egypt, marked by the renunciation of that which the Egyptians worshipped, while the matzah acts as a reminder, not only that we were *avadim*, but that we left, not through our own strength but through the "Hand of Hashem," with the ultimate goal of becoming *avadim* to Hashem. It is for this reason that among the presentation of the commandments obligated on Pesach, the same verse states two seemingly disjointed ideas:

זכור את היום הזה אשר יצאתם ממצרים  
מבית עבדים כי בחזק יד הוציא ה' אתכם מזה  
ולא יאכל חמץ.

*Remember today that Hashem took you out of Egypt from the house of slavery ...*



and don't eat chametz.

### Shemot 13:3

What is the connection between the eating of chametz and G-d taking us out? Though chametz and matzah are made up of basically the same ingredients, chametz is different from matzah in that it is full of hot air, thus representing our ego. On Pesach there is no room for ego. We are commanded to eat matzah, poor man's bread, to remind us that we did not brag about our own redemption, but

Why do we recite Pesach, matzah and maror in that order? Maror represents the difficult times that preceded the redemption represented by Pesach and matzah. Why don't we mention maror first? R. Yaakov of Lisa (1760-1832), *Ma'aseh Nissim*, explains that if we mentioned maror first, it would give us the impression that the main aspect of our redemption is our freedom from being servants. In reality, however, the main aspect of our redemption is becoming servants of God. If Pharaoh would have voluntarily freed us and allowed us to remain noble citizens in Egypt, we would have missed the main purpose of our redemption — to become servants of God. Therefore, when we fulfill the mitzvot of the night, we mention maror last.

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rather, we left as slaves, solely through the Hand of G-d.

The eating of matzah together with the korban Pesach connects the aspects of *avdut* and *cheirut*, slavery and freedom, demonstrating the underlying purpose of our *cheirut* — serving Hashem. The punishment for one who transgresses this mitzvah and eats chametz on Pesach is *kareit*, being cut off from the Jewish people, because by eating chametz, one refuses to acknowledge the role of G-d in one's freedom and the obligation of *avodat Hashem*, thus denying the underlying purpose of the Jewish people.

The Netziv (Introduction to Sefer Shemot) refers to the Book of Shemot as the "Second Book," since it is essentially a continuation of the Book of Bereishit. The story of the creation of the world concludes only once the purpose of creation has been fulfilled, which occurred when Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah in Sefer Shemot. The world is thus incomplete until the goal of *avodat Hashem* has been achieved.

Similarly, Reb Leible Eiger<sup>7</sup> explains why it is that an egg is used as a remembrance of the korban chagigah. Why not meat? An egg can be compared to the Jews at the time of *yetziat Mitzrayim*. An egg is not the finished product, but rather a stage of its evolution to its ultimate purpose. So too, the Jews leaving Egypt were not complete until they reached Har Sinai and received the Torah. The purpose of their redemption was to serve Hashem through Torah and mitzvot.

What does all this mean to us in practical terms? It urges us to view the holiday of Pesach not just as an independence day, celebrating freedom from slavery, but rather as

a day celebrating our freedom to embrace G-d. On Pesach we have the opportunity to express our deepest values and mission — a life of serving *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

In this light, we understand that the greatest freedom is reserved for those who toil in service of G-d, specifically in the area of Torah learning. The Mishna (Avot 6:2) says "Ein l'cha ben chorin ela mi she'osek batorah," — the only free person is one who toils in Torah. The most profound freedom is not the breaking away from bondage but of bonding to one's greatest purpose and destiny.

### Notes

1. [http://www.interfaithfamily.com/files/pdf/2014\\_Passover\\_Easter\\_Survey\\_Report.pdf](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/files/pdf/2014_Passover_Easter_Survey_Report.pdf).
2. *Brachos* 7b, "Rav Yochanan stated in the name of Rav Shimon bar Yochai: 'From the day the Holy One Blessed be He created the world, there was no person who called Him *Adon* (Master) until Avraham came and did so.'"
3. The same idea is presented in *Shemot Rabbah* 16:2. The *Mechilta*, the source that Rashi quotes, uses a slightly different wording, stating "משכו ידיכם מעבודה זרה וקחו והידבקו במצוות," remove your hands from idolatry and take and cling to mitzvot. The Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:41, explains further that the slaughtering of the sheep, an act that had previously been punishable by death, would instead now be the key to their salvation.
4. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni on 12:13.
5. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin* 6:13 and *Hilchot Mezuzah* 4:25.
6. Shemot 13:9. This is similar to the *L'shem Yichud* prayer focusing one's intent before fulfilling the mitzvah of tefillin which states that the tefillin are placed on the arm and on the head so that all of one's senses and actions are directed towards service of Hashem.
7. This was told to my husband by his great-uncle Nachum Genachowskii, a talmid of the Chofetz Chaim.