

Bo

SERVANTS' SERVANTS OR HASHEM'S SERVANTS?

The dramatic end of Jewish enslavement in Egypt is described in *Parashas Bo*. We read a vivid account of the grand finale of the ten plagues, the Egyptians' punishment. Moshe *Rabbeinu* begins to instruct the people about their final days in Egypt. Freedom is so close, *Bnei Yisrael* can almost taste it. But as they stand at the crossroads between bondage and redemption, Hashem suddenly directs the Jews to perform two seemingly strange *mitzvos*. Upon further investigation, we will discover that these *mitzvos* are imbued with potent symbolism and strong relevant messages for us.

The prophet Yechezkel narrates this critical moment in history in the *pasuk*, "I passed by you and I saw you wallowing in your bloods and I said to you 'By your bloods you shall live.' I said to you 'By your bloods you shall live.'...and you [were] naked and unclothed."¹ Our Sages explain² that "unclothed" means stripped

¹ *Yechezkel* 16:6-7.

² *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemos* 195.

of *mitzvos*. Hashem initially determined that *Am Yisrael* was unworthy of being redeemed. Therefore, He “clothed” them, enabling them to earn the merit to live through the performance of two *mitzvos*. Note that the word “blood” in this *pasuk* is actually plural: “bloods,”³ referring to two *mitzvos* that involve blood. Our Sages define them as *korban Pesach* (Passover offering) and *bris milah* (circumcision); *Bnei Yisrael’s* implementation of these two “bloods” was the combined accomplishment that gave them life and sanctioned their salvation. Fittingly, these verses from Yechezkel are recited at both the *Pesach Seder* and at a *bris milah* ceremony, as we will soon explain.

Let us first understand on a simple level how these two different *mitzvos* were interrelated. The *mitzvah* of *korban Pesach* at the time of *Yetzi’as Mitzrayim* stipulated that each household slaughter a sheep or a goat and smear the blood on their doorposts and lintel. The Torah depicts this blood as a sign to Hashem to pass over the Jewish houses on the night of the final plague of death to the firstborn. The *Targum Yonasan* on the Torah specifies⁴ that since circumcision was a requirement for males to participate in the *korban Pesach*, both the blood of the *korban Pesach* and the blood from the *bris milah* were used on that fateful night. Further, regarding the placement of both bloods on the doorposts, Moshe told them “*Ushemartem es hadavar hazeh lechok lecha ulevanecha ad olam* (You shall observe this matter as a statute for you and for your children forever).”⁵ From this verse, we see that these *mitzvos* have eternal significance.

³ Rashi, Commentary on *Shemos* 12:6.

⁴ Commentary on *Shemos* 12:13.

⁵ *Shemos* 12:24.

Regarding these two *mitzvos*, Rabbi Pinchas Friedman asks⁶ two important questions. First, why did Hashem choose these two specific *mitzvos* involving blood to make us worthy of redemption? How did the combination of *korban Pesach* and *bris milah* prepare us for becoming Hashem's nation? Secondly, how exactly are these *mitzvos* a *chok* (statute) for us forever? Is there a single Jewish family today that spreads any kind of blood on the doorposts before *Pesach* each year? In what way are these *mitzvos* manifested eternally?

Emerging as a Servant

Let us initially address these questions with a teaching by the *Bnei Yissachar*,⁷ relating to the *halachos* (Jewish laws) of acquiring a non-Jewish slave. When a Jew purchases a non-Jewish slave, the slave must first immerse in a *mikveh* (ritual bath). He is required to undergo a quasi-conversion, on the level of an *eved Canaani* (Canaanite slave). Interestingly, the singular distinction between this process and a standard conversion to Judaism is that the immersion of the slave must be *leshem avdus* (for the sake of becoming a slave). This detail is decisive; if the potential slave would immerse with the intention of becoming a *ben chorin* (a free man), then he would become a free Jew! The motives of the convert actually determine his final status.

How can one verify the true intentions of a potential slave? Just before the *mikveh* immersion, the master asks the person to do something for him. If at the very moment of conversion, the

⁶ *Shevilei Pinchas*, p. 83.

⁷ *Nissan, Ma'amar 4, Drush 5*, section "*Al Derech HaDrush*".

person is behaving as the Jew's slave, his motivation is clearly *leshem avdus*.

While *halachos* of acquiring slaves might seem inapplicable to us, the details illustrate an important idea. *Yetzi'as Mitzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt) was a symbolic national immersion in a *mikveh*. Our redemption was a transformation process from which we were supposed to emerge as *avdei Hashem* (servants of G-d). Just like the slave who serves his master just before his conversion, so too we were instructed to actively serve Hashem at the moment of *Yetzi'as Mitzrayim*. Hashem gave *Bnei Yisrael* these *mitzvos* of blood, *korban Pesach* and *bris milah*, at precisely this time so they could demonstrate their loyalty to Hashem.

Our emancipation could have created a dangerous state of autonomy for us. We might have exploited our freedom to deteriorate into detached, uncommitted and eventually self-serving beings. Wanting to avoid that risk, Hashem gave us an opportunity to prove our pure intentions. *Korban Pesach* and *bris milah* granted us true freedom – the freedom to serve Hashem.

Interestingly, the *Bnei Yissachar* points out that *korban Pesach* and *bris milah* are the only two positive commandments for which *kares* (being cut off) is the punishment for failing to perform them. All other cases that result in *kares* involve actively violating a negative commandment such as eating on *Yom Kippur* or doing forbidden acts on *Shabbos*. Why is failing to perform *korban Pesach* and *bris milah* deserving of a harsh consequence like *kares*?

As we discussed earlier, these *mitzvos* represent our loyalty and commitment to the service of Hashem. Purposefully neglecting to do them represents a rejection of *avdus* (servitude) and all *mitzvos*. An extreme statement such as this certainly deserves a punishment like *kares*.

Returning to our original question: how does putting the blood of the *korban Pesach* and the blood of *bris milah* on the doorposts constitute a statute for us forever? The *Bnei Yissachar* elaborates that, while the specific practice might not remain with us forever, what the blood represented most certainly does. *Dam Pesach* (the blood of the Passover offering) and *dam milah* (the blood of circumcision) were the defining acts of service that determined our permanent status as *avdei Hashem*. These *mitzvos* were intentional acts of *avdus* to Hashem and established our lasting commitment to Him. It is not the details of these *mitzvos*, but rather our commitment expressed through them that is the eternal statute – our heritage from generation to generation.

Full Service, Please

One of our questions remains unanswered. Why did Hashem choose these *mitzvos* specifically to prove our loyalty? The *Sefas Emes* points out⁸ that *korban Pesach* and *bris milah* were both firsts. *Korban Pesach* was the first commandment that we fulfilled as a nation, and *bris milah* was the first commandment observed by Avraham *Avinu*, the first Jew. The first always establishes a precedent for the others that follow and represents the essence of a group. *Korban Pesach* and *bris milah* must, therefore, embody the essence of our *avodas Hashem* (service of G-d) – defined by Rabbi Friedman⁹ as *mesirus nefesh*.

Mesirus nefesh is a common term, but what does it really mean? Literally, “*mesirus nefesh*” translates as “giving over the soul.” Giving over your soul to something means making a statement of

⁸ *Shabbos HaGadol*, 1900.

⁹ *Shevilei Pinchas*, p. 86.

total commitment. Serving Hashem with *mesirus nefesh* means coming to the deep realization that serving Hashem is all that matters to us. It matters more than life, and from that realization stems the act of serving Hashem “*bechol nafshecha* (with all your soul)”¹⁰ – even if it means giving up that life – because we realize that our service of Hashem is more valuable than life. We also realize that service of Hashem matters more than the selfish aspects of our lives.

Consider the following example: co-workers at your office are gossiping about someone. On one hand, it’s important to you to be socially accepted by your colleagues. On the other hand, you know that this kind of conversation is forbidden by the Torah. An internal conflict ensues: “*This is so inappropriate, so I am going to stay silent. But it’s not like me to act this way, and everyone will think I am so uptight and self-righteous. I’m really embarrassed and uncomfortable... but my serving Hashem is worth more to me than my ego and reputation.*” Your emotional need to feel accepted and your desire to develop closeness to Hashem are at odds. But if you deeply and truly feel that closeness to Hashem is the highest value for you, it will win out. You are expressing your *mesirus nefesh* – your total commitment.

There are really two kinds of *mesirus nefesh*. Rabbi Friedman notes that most of the Torah reading on the second day of *Rosh Hashanah* is the story of *Akeidas Yitzchak* (the binding of Isaac). This powerful account underscores a fundamental principle of *mesirus nefesh*, our total commitment bringing us to a willingness to give up our souls for Hashem. Yitzchak *Avinu* overcame his natural survival instincts and was ready to give his life for Hashem. The *Akeidah* represents the first type of *mesirus nefesh*, our

¹⁰ *Devarim* 6:5

commitment to serve Hashem, even when it means choosing Hashem's service over our physical lives. This concept might seem abstract to us, since we can observe *mitzvos* freely in the modern world. However, generations of our persecuted ancestors achieved this level time and again, when they sacrificed their very lives for adhering to Hashem's Torah.

This same Torah section concludes with the entire lineage of Rivkah *Immeinu*, a detailed listing of generations of idol worshippers.¹¹ Rivkah *Immeinu* is mentioned with all of her dishonorable forebears because she exemplifies another type of *mesirus nefesh*. She was raised in a society of *resha'im* (evil-doers) and pagans. Rivkah was certainly subject to extraordinary societal pressure and familial influences. Despite her surroundings, Rivkah *Immeinu* saw the *emes* (the truth), and she committed herself fully to it. This kind of *mesirus nefesh* exemplifies dedication to Hashem despite external circumstances – physical, mental or emotional.

Rising above our external and internal realities has practical relevance to us, because it means surrendering our selfish desires for the sake of our relationship with Hashem. We might feel pressure, a strong need to be socially accepted, as discussed earlier in the workplace scenario; but like Rivkah *Immeinu*, hopefully we recognize that fulfilling that need is just not as important to us as serving Hashem.

Our mission on *Rosh Hashanah* is to coronate Hashem and to renew our loyalty to the King. The Torah reading on *Rosh Hashanah* is meant to inspire us and remind us of our priorities as we start a new year. We read about both Yitzchak *Avinu* and Rivkah *Immeinu*, the role models of both kinds of *mesirus nefesh*. Yitzchak represents life-risking *mesirus nefesh*. On *Rosh Hashanah*,

¹¹ See Rashi's Commentary on *Bereishis* 22:23.

we try to internalize our willingness to surrender even our very lives to Hashem. We ask ourselves, “*Is living by the Torah more valuable to me than my physical life?*” Rivkah represents the *mesirus nefesh* of overcoming opposing forces. We pray to overcome obstacles and influences and ask ourselves, “*Is Hashem more important to me than my selfish desires, impulses and dreams? Would I forgo my favorite ice cream, a thousand dollars, even a career – for the most valuable thing in the world?*”

In light of this understanding, we appreciate why Hashem chose *korban Pesach* and *bris milah* as the *mitzvos* to inaugurate us into full, deep service of Hashem. *Dam Pesach* and *dam milah*, these two “first” *mitzvos*, are also the paradigms for the two types of *mesirus nefesh*. The *mesirus nefesh* demonstrated in *Akeidas Yitzchak* is also represented by *korban Pesach*. *Korban Pesach* was a life-risking *mitzvah*. Since sheep and goats were Egyptian deities, *korban Pesach* meant the blatant slaughter of their gods! Moshe *Rabbeinu* himself told Pharaoh that the Jews would perform their service of G-d outside of Egypt, “for will we slaughter the abomination [idol worship] of Egypt in front of their eyes and they not stone us?”¹² Bringing the *korban Pesach* made the same statement as *Yitzchak Avinu’s mesirus nefesh*: the Jews were willing to risk their lives in order to remain committed to Hashem.

Dam milah, says Rabbi Friedman, represents the *mesirus nefesh* of Rivkah. *Bris milah* is the only *mitzvah* in the Torah which entails pain. *Bris milah* demonstrates that our commitment to Hashem outweighs the external physical desire for personal comfort. When a baby boy begins his life’s journey with the *mitzvah* of *milah*, he learns a lesson about being a Jew: our highest value is not our own comfort, but our commitment to Hashem. Life is not about our

¹² *Shemos* 8:22.

egos or about allowing societal pressure to determine what we want to eat, how we want to dress, or how we want to speak. Our focus is not on our physical or emotional satisfaction. Instead, we say at the *bris* ceremony: “*Keshem shenichnas labris, kein yikaneis leTorah ulechupah, ulema’asim tovim* (just as he enters the covenant of circumcision, so shall he enter Torah and the marriage canopy and good deeds).” With the *mesirus nefesh* of Rivkah, this child entered into a covenant with G-d despite external forces. This baby is showing his commitment to Hashem at the expense of his own physical comfort. Our prayer is that he maintains this approach through every stage of his life.

Recall again the *pasuk* recited at both a *bris milah* ceremony and the *Pesach Seder*: “I passed by you and I saw you wallowing in your bloods and I said to you ‘By your bloods you shall live.’ I said to you ‘By your bloods you shall live.’”¹³ We should now hear our mission in the verse’s echo: “With the *mesirus nefesh* of *korban Pesach*, you shall live. With the *mesirus nefesh* of *bris milah*, you shall live.” The power of our commitment and self-sacrifice is emphasized in the *Midrash*’s explanation of the repetition of “By your bloods you shall live.” The two identical phrases allude to two exiles, past and present. Our *avdus* performed with *mesirus nefesh* gave us life and redeemed us from our first national exile in Egypt. So too, *mesirus nefesh* will give us eternal life and redeem us from our final exile.

The Heart’s Doorposts

We now understand that *dam Pesach* and *dam milah* teach us about our life’s purpose: to be *avdei Hashem* (servants of G-d) with

¹³ *Yechezkel* 16:6.

total commitment and self-sacrifice. The Slonimer Rebbe interprets¹⁴ *dam Pesach* and *dam milah* as symbols of two critical values that permeate every Jewish household. He explains that *Pesach* represents the value of *emunah*. That night of the first *Pesach*, the Jewish people clearly witnessed Hashem's Hand differentiating between Jew and Egyptian during *makas bechoros* (plague of the firstborn). In addition, as we saw Rabbi Friedman explain earlier, *Korban Pesach* was a supreme act of *emunah*. Their unwavering belief in Hashem vanquished any logical course of action in a life-threatening situation. *Am Yisrael* risked their lives and defied the Egyptians by slaughtering their gods, simply because Hashem had commanded them to do so.

If *Korban Pesach* represents *emunah*, says the Slonimer Rebbe, *bris milah* represents the value of *kedushah* (sanctity). According to Rabbi Friedman, we can understand why. The essence of *bris milah* is actually sanctifying our physicality itself for *avodas Hashem*. The act of circumcision represents a commitment to use what Hashem has given us not to satisfy ourselves, but to create a relationship with Him.

The night of *Yetzi'as Mitzrayim* was the night *Am Yisrael* was born. What began as a downtrodden, bedraggled group of slaves was transformed into Hashem's holy people. What was the catalyst for our metamorphosis? How did we show our readiness to serve Hashem with complete devotion? The entrance of each Jewish home was painted with the signs of *emunah* and *kedushah*, to show that they were prepared to live according to these values. It is significant that the *dam*, the blood, was the symbol for both of those values. It demonstrated that they were willing to defy their physical selves, to "spill their own blood," for these values. They

¹⁴ *Nesivos Shalom, Shemos*, p. 88.

were willing to suppress their natural physical desires for the sake of *emunah* and *kedushah* because those values were so clear to them.

When living by our values requires a difficult or unnatural course of action, that's when we proclaim our true commitment to them. At the birth of the Jewish nation, the Jews said: *We're ready! We're ready for that level of commitment to emunah and kedushah.*

Regarding the *korban Pesach*, the *pasuk* reads, "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are."¹⁵ Rashi explains the seemingly superfluous words "for you" to mean: "It shall be a sign for you and not a sign for others. From here [we learn] that they only put the blood on the inside."¹⁶ This presents a difficulty: how exactly did *Bnei Yisrael* openly display their commitment to *emunah* and *kedushah* if the blood wasn't even visible on the outside?

The Slonimer Rebbe offers a telling insight. In this context, he understands this "sign" as an internal sign. The dedication and self-sacrifice for the values of *emunah* and *kedushah* are cultivated in the deepest part of our souls. *Dam Pesach* and *dam milah* did not need to be visible to others, because they weren't on display to impress the Egyptians or anyone else. Commitments and sacrifices that are imperceptible to the outside world are the ones that matter the most, because they are a sign for **us**. They are the bloods on the doorposts of our hearts. They are the eternal sign for Hashem's chosen people.

¹⁵ *Shemos* 12:13.

¹⁶ Commentary to *Shemos* 12:13.

Definition of an *Eved Hashem*

We now understand how *dam Pesach* and *dam milah* are a “*chok ad olam*,” an eternal statute, for the generations. They represent the appreciation of how *avodas Hashem* is the most important thing in the world, so much so that we willingly choose it over our me-centered desires and even over life itself. They show the understanding of the values of *emunah* and *kedushah* and the internal decision to live by those values, no matter the temptation. An eternal commitment means that it applies to our generation as well. How can we carry the sign of the *dam Pesach* and *dam milah* on the doorposts of our hearts? Let us explore how this commitment could manifest practically in our lives.

First we need to expand our definition of *avdei Hashem*. Based on statements of our Sages and *Sha'arei Teshuvah* by Rabbeinu Yonah, Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Lugasi defines¹⁷ an *eved* as a person who is *kol kulo* (entirely) for his master; every fiber of his being is dedicated to his master. There are no limitations on what he is willing to do for him. Once he places boundaries on his service, he can no longer be defined as an *eved*. Furthermore, if he serves his master for the wrong reasons, he is also disqualified. When a servant's behavior is inspired by personal motives or outside influences, he is not intrinsically an *eved*. Only a servant who obeys the will of his master without being motivated by what he gets out of the servitude and without limits of the servitude is a true *eved*, because he is *kol kulo* for his master.

Therefore, Rabbi Lugasi explains, an *eved Hashem* does *mitzvos* because they are Hashem's Will. Therefore, Rabbi Lugasi explains, an *eved Hashem* does *mitzvos* because they are Hashem's Will. He is motivated to do them simply because Hashem said that they

¹⁷ *BaYam Derech, Shemos*, vol. 2. p. 67.

reflect *emes*. Often, however, we either place personal limitations on our *mitzvos* or have extrinsic motivations for doing *mitzvos*. Sometimes we do *mitzvos* because of societal expectations or in order to quiet our conscience.

It is enough to listen to our internal dialogue when we make choices every day: “Of course I buy clothing according to the Jewish code of *tzni’us* (modesty). That’s what all my friends wear. They would look at me strangely if I wore anything different!” or perhaps, “Of course I’m going to daven *Mincha* – even when I’m alone and no one will ever know if I did or didn’t. I would feel guilty if I didn’t daven!”

At the end of *sefer Vayikra*, it is written that a Jewish slave of a *ger toshav* (a Noahide non-Jew living in Israel) is redeemed in the *Yovel* (Jubilee) year. Note the reason given in the verse: “because the Children of Israel are *avadim* to Me; they are My *avadim* that I brought out from the land of Egypt.”¹⁸ Our Sages address¹⁹ the apparent redundancy of “the Children of Israel are *avadim* to Me; they are My *avadim*.” The explanation in the Gemara is as follows: “My *avadim* – and not *avadim* to *avadim*.” This idea clarifies the distinction between different kinds of *avdus*. Those who perform *mitzvos* for external incentives are *avadim* to *avadim*; they serve society or themselves. “My *avadim*” are “*avadim* to Me;” true *avadim* of Hashem serve limitlessly, and they recognize that their service reflects truth.

How often we waver between being *avadim* to Hashem and being *avadim* to other forces! Our motivations are often so complex that we struggle to identify them. Elevating ourselves to be *avdei Hashem* requires some soul searching. Important questions can help us direct a self analysis. *Why am I doing this mitzvah? To*

¹⁸ *Vayikra* 25:55.

¹⁹ *Bava Metzria* 10a.

appease my family? To make a good impression? To boost my ego or quiet my conscience? Or am I doing this just to meet the community's expectations of me? Am I performing mitzvos because 'I have to'? Do I wait for when I have finished fulfilling the mitzvos, so then I can relax and pursue my own agenda? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, we need to re-evaluate whom we are serving.

One might be misled to consider motivations somewhat irrelevant. *If it's so important that I perform these mitzvos, why should the reasons matter?* Furthermore, societal pressure might be a positive thing, if it inspires people to make the right choices! To address this difficulty, we need to expand on the issues mentioned above about an *eved* limiting his service or serving with external motives. Upon further investigation, we see that these two problems are interrelated. External motivations, by definition, actually create boundaries on our *mitzvos* observance. Someone who keeps the Torah for a superficial reason will only keep enough Torah to meet that purpose alone. He will fulfill the minimum. If he feels obligated to conform to societal expectations, he will do only what is necessary to make a good impression. If he is bound to appease his own conscience, he will do just enough to feel good about himself – and nothing more. His service to Hashem is limited and he will not strive to improve his *avodah* (service).

Rabbi Daniel Ochayon comments²⁰ that this was precisely *Am Yisrael's* problem in Egypt. They maintained their basic Jewish identity by preserving their language, their names and their dress. While it was considered a merit for them, these exterior details were not enough to merit being redeemed as the nation of *avdei Hashem*. *Avodah* is all about learning and growing out of dedication to Hashem. It requires the soul-searching work of constantly

²⁰ *Ohr Daniel, Shemos*, p. 156.

redefining ourselves, not simply maintaining a level of external status quo.

This, says Rabbi Ochayon, is the difference between an animal and a person. An animal is a creature that is born physically small and grows bigger, but its structure doesn't change. A baby elephant grows up and becomes an adult elephant – but a bigger elephant is still an elephant. A person, by contrast, has the ability to change and to grow – to constantly redefine himself and redirect his life. If we are no different from one year to the next, then we are just like elephants. If our service to Hashem is stagnant, keeping the *mitzvos* status quo and no more, it means we have been limited by outside influences. We have neglected our potential for closeness with Hashem. The gift of life is an opportunity to grow. When we ask for life on *Rosh Hashanah* and hear about the lives of Yitzchak *Avinu* and Rivkah *Immeinu*, we strive to be inspired by these models of spiritual growth. Hashem wants us to live a uniquely human life of growth.

Our Diamonds

After 120 years of life, Hashem will look at how close we got to Him through our *mitzvos*. He will examine not just what *mitzvos* we did, but how we did them, how they changed us, and how they reflected *avdus* to Hashem. Rabbi Yaakov Hillel comments²¹ that it's easy to be overly focused on the external details of our performance of *mitzvos*. We often concentrate on the *chumros* and *biddurim* (stringencies and enhancements) – for example, upholding the most *machmir* (stringent) *keashrus* standards or buying the most *mehudar* (beautiful) esrog. While these have value, our

²¹ *Ascending the Path*, vol. 1, p. 187.

internal *avodah* is more valuable. Refining our motivations and changing our *middos* is challenging. Although it is not simple, dedicating our lives and our actions solely to Hashem is what will be taken into account after 120 years.

Rabbi Hillel illustrates this concept by contrasting the purchase of glass with the purchase of diamonds. When buying glass panes, increasing the size of them by several square feet does not make a tremendous difference in the price. When purchasing diamonds, however, even the tiniest variation in the weight can increase the price by thousands of dollars.²² The exterior details of *mitzvos* are just glass, but the internal motivations for our *mitzvos* are our diamonds! They are so precious; even the smallest increase in the level of our commitment and self-sacrifice can make a tremendous difference in value of a *mitzvah*.

Now we understand more deeply why we were redeemed in the merit of *Pesach* and *milah*. They were the expressions of our commitment to be *avdei Hashem* and not just *avadim* to *avadim*. These two bloods were signs of *emunah* and *kedushah* on the inside, in the heart: *Bnei Yisrael* were pledging to live a growth-oriented life. Through *Pesach* and *milah*, we redefined our essence. With this commitment and this re-definition, we were ready for the purpose of leaving Egypt: to become the nation of G-d. We were ready to live as *avadim* to Hashem.²³

²² While the *mashal* used in *Ascending the Path* is about a size increase, a diamond professional would likely have contrasted an increase in clarity of glass with an increase in clarity of diamonds, as clarity makes a much more significant difference in the value of a diamond than weight does. Quality impacts value more than quantity, both in diamonds and in *avodas Hashem*, and this is precisely Rav Hillel's point.

²³ *Vayikra* 25:55.

Hashem's Palace

In light of our discussion, we know that the ultimate purpose of our redemption from Egypt was to serve Hashem by receiving the Torah and inheriting *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel). Then, one might ask the following question: why do we celebrate this milestone on the night of *Pesach* and not on the date on which we entered *Eretz Yisrael*? Wasn't *Pesach* night just the beginning?

Rabbi Shalom Schwadron relates the following story:²⁴ There once was an oppressed slave who worked in terrible conditions. One night he escaped to pursue a better life for himself. At first, he was all alone in the dark of night. Without food or shelter, he didn't know where to go. He wandered from place to place, and eventually landed in the king's palace. There he built a new life as a servant of the king. If this person would celebrate his improved circumstances, which anniversary would be more meaningful? Would he commemorate the night he escaped or the night he became the king's servant? It's unlikely that he would celebrate that fearful night of his escape, when he began roaming about the unknown world. The date of the momentous occasion when he began his service of the king – that would be a day of celebration.

So why do we commemorate the day we left Egypt, even though we were heading out “into the desert, in an unsowed land?”²⁵ *Pesach* is not Jewish National Emancipation Day. *Pesach* commemorates the birth of the Jewish people, the day we became servants to the King. Hashem's palace is not a physical space. An *eved Hashem* can live anywhere, not just in *Eretz Yisrael*. When we became *avdei Hashem* by doing *korban Pesach* and *bris milah*, we entered Hashem's palace. That is what we celebrate.

²⁴ *Lev Shalom, Shemos*, p. 140.

²⁵ *Yirmiyahu* 2:2.

Every day we have opportunities to leave Egypt. We can free ourselves from being *avadim* to *avadim*, whether it is to society or to our own selves. We can rededicate and redefine ourselves as *avdei Hashem*. We can come to the intellectual and emotional conclusion that serving Hashem is the only thing that matters in life, more important to us than our physical lives or personal desires, and we can commit to live by to that understanding. This process takes effort. We need to put the blood on the doorposts of our hearts, showing that deep down we are committed to live according to what we know is real, no matter what happens. We pray that Hashem give us the strength to put in that effort. May we be *zocheh* (privileged) as a nation and individually, to truly live as *avadim* of Hashem.