



FROM MITZRAYIM TO MOUNT SINAI: REFLECTIONS ON SHAVUOS AS THE CONCLUSION OF PESACH

In a famous passage in his *Commentary on the Torah* (Vayikra 23:36), the Ramban characterizes the Omer period as a kind of chol hamoed between Pesach and Shavuos. The latter, he contends, is Pesach's equivalent to Shemini Atzeres of Sukkos: just as Shemini Atzeres constitutes the eighth and concluding day of Sukkos, so too Shavuos represents the "eighth" and concluding day of Pesach:

וצוה בחג המצות שבעה ימים בקדושה
לפניהם ולאחריהם ... ומנה ממנו תשעה
וארבעים יום שבעה שבועות כימי עולם, וקדש
יום שמיני כשמיני של חג – והימים הספורים
בינתיים כחולו של מועד בין הראשון והשמיני

בחג, והוא יום מתן תורה שהראם בו את אשו
הגדולה ודבריו שמעו מתוך האש.

And with respect to Chag HaMatzos He commanded [that it be observed for] seven days, with the first and last [days] being holy ... And from [Chag Hamatzos] He counted forty-nine days — seven weeks like the [seven] days of the world — and sanctified the "eighth day," just like the eighth [day] of Chag [i.e. Sukkos]. And the days counted between them are akin to [a period of] chol hamoed between the first and "eighth day" of the festival, this being the day of Matan Torah on which He made them behold His great fire and His words they heard from amidst the fire.¹

In context, the statement appears as part of the Ramban's broader, kabbalistic theory that *Keneses Yisrael* is the "bas zug" of Shabbas, a status evoked by the eighth day of the *chagim*. Consistent with his declared policy regarding the esoteric component of Torah (see his *Introduction to Bereshis*), the Ramban scarcely elaborates on this thesis. Yet the specific implication vis-à-vis Pesach and Shavuos, I believe, is readily apparent. By linking these two *chagim*, the Ramban underscores the notion that the Ribono Shel Olam's taking us out of Egypt was, if not quite a mere prelude, only the opening

chapter of a process that culminated in Matan Torah. Our wondrous deliverance by His Hand from the suffocating shackles of Egypt—

וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סְבֻלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעַבְדוֹתָם וְגֹאֲלִתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים

I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements (Shemos 6:6)— was unquestionably an epic, history-making event in its own right. But its primary significance, for us and for Him, lies in its having initiated a personal relationship between the children of Israel and the Ribono Shel Olam: "לְקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם וְהָיִיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים" — "*And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God*" (Shemos 6:7). That relationship, of course, developed into an everlasting covenant at the foot of Har Chorev: "*beYom chasunaso*" (*Shir HaShirim* 3:11), *zo matan torah* — "*on the day of his wedding, this [refers to] the giving of the Torah*" (*Mishnah Taanis* 4:8). As historical events, therefore, yetzias Mitzrayim and Matan Torah bookended the Divine descent into the affairs of Bnei Yisrael as a result of which He and they became eternally bonded.² Hence, the celebration of Shavuot is a fitting coda to the festival of Pesach.³

And yet, this picture of continuity from Mitzrayim to Har Sinai requires further reflection. Was Matan Torah merely the culmination of that which preceded it? Did it simply cement the bond that began with yetzias Mitzrayim? The answer, I believe, is clearly not. Rather than merely intensify a relationship, Matan Torah added a wholly new, even discordant, dimension to it. Bnei

Yisrael's encounter with the Ribono Shel Olam at Har Sinai was of a radically different order than their experience with Him in Egypt. Yetzias Mitzrayim acquainted Bnei Yisrael with the Ribono Shel Olam as savior. They experience Him as a kind-of omnipotent guardian angel — capable of answering their cries, of alleviating their suffering, and of delivering their

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salvation. Mosheh's exhortation to Bnei Yisrael, delivered on the banks of the Yam Suf as the Egyptians bore down on them, captures well the nature of this nascent relationship:

... אֵל תִּירָאוּ הַתִּצַּבּוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת יְשׁוּעַת ה' אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם ...

Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the salvation which the Lord will do for you today.

Shemos 14:13

Naturally, Bnei Yisrael embrace the burgeoning bond with jubilation, breaking out in joyous paean to their all-powerful patron:

... עֲזִי וְזִמְרַת קוֹה וַיְהִי לִי לִישׁוּעָה ...

My strength and praise is the Lord; He has become my salvation ...

Shemos 15:2

The experience at Har Sinai, however, is altogether different. A salient illustration of this is the divergent roles of the *anan* (cloud) and *eish* (fire) in the course of the respective

events. Both yetzias Mitzrayim and Matan Torah feature the fire and cloud that represent the physical manifestation of the Ribono Shel Olam's earthly presence. But whereas in Egypt Hashem descends upon Bnei Yisrael "in a pillar of cloud to guide them along the path" and "in a pillar of fire to illuminate [the way] for them" (*Shemos* 13:21), at Har Sinai that fire and cloud herald a rather different purpose:

... הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי בָּא אֵלַיךָ בְּעָב הָעָנָן בְּעֵבֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֲמִיךָ ...

Behold I come to you in a thick cloud so that the people may hear as I speak with you ...

Shemos 19:9

Hashem descends upon Bnei Yisrael in a hazy mist in order to command them. Rather than bask in the benefits of Hashem's *anan*, Bnei Yisrael hear His voice emanating from it, summoning them to serve and submit to Him. The fire, too, shrouded in simmering smoke — "וְהָר סִינֵי עָשָׁן" כְּלוּ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יֵרֵד עָלָיו ה' בְּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עָשָׁנוּ — "*And Mount Sinai was smoky in its entirety, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; and the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently*" (*Shemos* 19:18)

— offers them little illumination. As Mosheh later recounts, it too serves as a portentous medium for the Divine command:

מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁמִיעָךְ אֶת קוֹל לְיִסְרָךְ וְעַל הָאָרֶץ הִרְאָךְ אֶת אִשׁוֹ הַגְּדוֹלָה וְדַבְרֵי שְׁמֵעֶתָ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ.

From the heavens He made His voice heard to you [so as] to instruct you; and upon the earth He made you see His great fire; and his words you heard from amidst the fire.

Devarim 4:36

Small wonder that, for their part, Bnei

Yisrael react this time not with *shirah* but with appropriate dread:

וְעֵתָהּ לָמָּה נָמוּת כִּי תֵאָכְלֵנוּ הָאֵשׁ הַגְּדֹלָה
הַזֹּאת אִם יִסְפִּים אֲנַחְנוּ לְשִׁמְעֵ אֶת קוֹל ה'
אֱלֹהֵינוּ עוֹד וְנָמָּתָנּוּ.

Let us not die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die.

Devarim 5:22

From amidst the *choshekh anan ve-arafel* at Sinai, the sublime benefactor Bnei Yisrael encountered in Egypt introduces Himself as imposing taskmaster. Their savior and redeemer is now their master and commander.⁴

Pesach and Shavuot therefore accentuate two distinct facets of our relationship with HaKadosh Barukh Hu. *Zman Cheruseinu* revolves around what the Ribono Shel Olam does **for** us; *Zman Matan Toraseinu*, around what He demands **from** us. And yet, as the Ramban reminds us, the two *chagim* are inextricably linked. These two experiences — of redemption on the one hand, and submission on the other — are deeply intertwined. First, our relationship with the Ribono Shel Olam as redeemer and savior is a medium for quintessential service of Him. Prospectively, turning to Him for succor; retrospectively, thanking Him for what He provides — these are not simply a boon for us but our fundamental duty to Him. In codifying the mitzvah to “serve Hashem” copiously expressed in the Torah — “*veAvadetem es Hashem Elokeichem*” - “You shall serve God, your Lord” (Shemos 23:25); “*veOso saavod*” - “You shall serve Him” (Devarim 6:13), etc. — the Rambam takes his cue from various *midrashim* (*Hilkhos Tefilah* 1:1):

מצות עשה להתפלל בכל יום, שנאמר
“ועבדתם את ה' אלקיכם” - מפי השמועה
למדו שעבודה זו היא תפלה, שנאמר “ולעבדו

בכל לבבכם.” אמרו חכמים אי זו היא עבודה
שבלב - זו תפלה.

It is a positive Torah commandment to pray every day, as [Exodus 23:25] states: “You shall serve God, your Lord.” Tradition teaches us that this service is prayer, as [Deuteronomy 11:13] states: “And serve Him with all your heart”; and our Sages said: Which is this service of the heart? This is prayer.

This notion of prayer as service of God is intuitively understandable regarding the recitation of praise and the expression of gratitude. The designation is far less obvious, though, with respect to supplication and petition, where the worshipper’s concern is his own personal cares. And yet as Halakhah conceives it, the core of *tefillah* is *bakashah* (petition). Chazal, in fact, felt compelled to justify the necessity of including *divrei shevach* at all:

יכול יהא תובע צרכיו ויוצא לו? כבר פירש
שלמה (מלכים א' ח) “לשמוע אל הרנה ואל
התפלה” — “רנה” זו קילוסו של הקדוש ברוך
הוא, ו’תפלה’, לצרכיו של אדם.

Perhaps one could [merely] seek [assistance for] his needs and take leave? Shlomo addressed [this] (*Melachim* 1 ch. 8): “to listen to the *rinah* and to the *tefilah*.” *Rinah* refers to praise of Hakadosh Barukh Hu; and *tefilah* — to [seeking assistance for] one’s personal needs.

Devarim Rabbah 2:1

Strikingly, the *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim* 106:2) indicates that *bedieved* the verbalization of petition alone — to the neglect of *divrei shevach vehodaah* — suffices to fulfill the biblical commandment. Even if that opinion is rejected, there is no question that the essence of *avodah shebalev* is supplication: “*tzilusa rachamei hi*” - “prayer is the plea for compassion” (*Berachos* 26a).

Leaning upon Him as *ozer moshia umagen* (aide, savior and protector) — relishing Him as *podeh umatzil* (redeemer and savior) — is a central component of our submission to Him.⁵ Pesach is an essential realization of Shavuot.

Second, and perhaps most significant, the converse is equally true: Shavuot is the ultimate culmination of *Zman Cheruseinu*. “אני עבדך בן אמתך; פתחת למוסרי” — “I am your servant son of your maidservant; you have released my bonds” (*Tehilim* 117:17).⁶ Submission to the Ribono Shel Olam is itself profoundly redemptive. Torah and mitzvos provide the Jew with a perpetual Divine mission; they transform his life into a stage for sublime service, performed before “*hamagbihi lasheves; hamashpili liros*” — “[He] who dwells on high, who stoops low to see” (*Tehilim* 113:5-6). The Jew who hears Hakadosh Barukh Hu’s enthralling voice guiding him at every turn, beckoning him at every moment, feels a pervasive sense of transcendent purpose. It is with an eye toward this capacity to ennoble that Chazal aver: “*Ratzah HaKadosh Barukh Hu lezakos es Yisrael; lefikhakh hirbah lahem torah u-mitzvos*” — “HaKadosh Barukh Hu desired to benefit Israel; therefore he gave them many laws and commandments.” (*Mishnah Makos* 3:17). The awareness that he serves not just a higher end but the Highest, provides the Jew with a central peace, and brings him an abiding sense of self-realization. In surrendering himself to His will, he finds himself truly liberated:

“והלוחות מעשה אלקים המה והמכתב מכתב אלקים הוא חרות על הלוחות” (שמות לב:טו) — אל תקרא חרות אלא חירות, שאין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתלמוד תורה.
“And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of

God, graven upon the tablets" (*Exodus 32:16*). Read not charus [graven] but cheirus [freedom]. For there is no free man but one who involves himself with the study of Torah.

Avos 6:2

Hence, Shavuot is the perfect conclusion to Pesach.⁷

As we complete the extended holiday season with the celebration of Chag haShavuot, may we recommit ourselves to *nosein haTorah* and His service with a sense of unfettered exhilaration.

Endnotes

1. The Ramban proceeds to note that his suggestion explains well the term "Atzeres," which Chazal used for Shavuot: ולכך יקראו רבותינו ז"ל בכל מקום חג השבועות עצרת, כי הוא כיום שמיני של חג שקראו הכתוב כן.

The precise nature of Shemini Atzeres as the eighth day of Sukkos — as opposed to a contiguous independent holiday — is complex. The Ramban in the continuation of this paragraph in the *Commentary* specifically notes the Gemara's statement (*Chagiga 17a*) that for certain purposes it constitutes a *regel bifnei atzmo* — presumably, in order to justify his description of it as a **companion** to Sukkos.

2. I refer here not only to the formal legal covenant established but to the experiential and emotional bond forged by these formative historical experiences. These find distinct expression in Neviim. Compare, for example, the words of Yechezkel (*Yechezkel 16:60*): "I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth" — to those of Yirmiyahu (*Yirmiyahu 2:2*): זכרתי לך חסד נעוריהך אהבת: "I remember for you the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride; How you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown."

One could suggest that it is specifically this latter element that underpins Chazal's emphasis on the personal and unmediated nature of the Ribono Shel Olam's involvement in the two events. [The medrash concerning yetzias Mitzrayim is well known from its inclusion in the Haggadah; less familiar, perhaps, are the nearly identical words regarding Matan Torah found in *Avos deRabi Nasan* (Nuscha Beis Perek Aleph): "Mosheh kibeil torah miSinai lo miPi malakh, veLo miPi saraf ela miPi melekh malkhei haMelakhim haKadosh Barukh Hu".]

3. The *Sefer HaChinukh* (Mitzvah 306) emphasizes an additional point in explicating the connection between yetzias Mitzrayim and Matan Torah: The sole reason God acted to extract Bnei Yisrael from Mitzrayim was so that they could receive His Torah. This idea finds ample expression in Chazal; see, for example, *Sifra Shemini 12:4*.

4. The contrasting nature of Bnei Yisrael's encounter with Hashem in the two episodes affords us a potential solution to a difficulty raised by R. Mosheh of Coucy (among others), in his introduction to *Sefer Mitzvos Gadol* (*Mitzvos Asei*). Commenting on the continuation of the verse cited above (*Shemos 19:9*) — הנה אנכי בא אליך בעב הענן — בעבור ישמע הקום בדברי עמך וגם בך יאמינו לעולם — "Behold I come to you in a thick cloud so that the people may hear as I speak with you **and they will have faith in you too ever after**" — the Smag asks:

ולמה הוצרך לזה? והלא כבר כתוב על הים, ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו?

We can suggest that the *emunah* in Mosheh the Jewish people possessed at Yam Suf concerned his role as a messenger of the Ribono Shel Olam's salvation. They had yet to place stock in him as an authoritative bearer of His eternal normative command.

5. The nature of petition as *avodah* may derive from its role in demonstrating and reinforcing certain basic *emunos ve-deos* — regarding, for instance, the Ribono Shel Olam's omnipotence and mercy — or from its experiential impact in cultivating a sense of personal dependence and reliance upon

Him. For a discussion of this issue, see the disquisition of the Maharal in *Nesivos Olam* (*Nesiv HaAvodah*, Ch. 3).

6. I interpret the second clause — "pitachta leMoserai" — as stating the impact and effect of the first ("ani avdecha ben amasecha"), such that *avdus leHashem* is the means by which Hashem has released the Psalmist from his bonds. This is the understanding of many *mefarshim* including, for example, R. Yitzchak Arama in *Akedas Yitzchak* (*Shaar 98*):

שהחירות והחפשיית האמתיים אינם רק ההשתעבד אל מי שיאות לו שעבוד טבעי ושכלי ... וזה הענין הוא עצמו מה שאמר דוד ... באומר "אנא ה' כי אני עבדך אני עבדך בן אמתך פתחת למוסרי" — ירצה: הנה באמת בהיותי משועבד ונכנע לפניך ... בזה פתחת למוסרי להיותי משוחרר ובן חורין אצל הכל.

There are, however, two other common interpretations. Some — e.g. the Maharal in *Gevuros Hashem* (ch. 74) — understand "pitachta leMoserai" as stating not the consequence but the **cause** of the *avdus leHashem*: the reason the Psalmist is an *eved leHashem* is because He released him from prior bondage. Still others interpret the Psalmist's intent to be: I choose to remain your servant **despite** the fact that you freed me. See, for example, the introduction to *Teshuvos Oneg Yom Tov*.

7. I subsequently found a powerful articulation of this basic idea in a *derashah* written for Shavuot by R. Azariah Figo, the towering talmudist of 17th-century Italy and author of the classic halakhic work *Gidulei Terumah*. The conclusion of the relevant section reads (*Binah LeIttim, drush 44*):

מעתה, היום טוב המקודש הזה זמן מתן תורתנו הוא מתחלף מחג המצות שעבר. כי אז יצאנו לחירות משעבוד הגוף, ועליו אנו אומרים "זמן חירותנו". אך עדיין לא באנו לכלל החפשיית האמתית (אל) [של] הנפש, כי לא קבלנו עול תורה ומצוה. אבל עתה בחג הזה, על ידי מתן תורה — בהיותנו נכנסים בעבודת השתעבדות [ל]מלכותו יתברך והיותנו עבדים לו — קנינו החירות העצמי והגמור.

In the course of describing Matan Torah as the *telos* of yetzias Mitzrayim (see note 3), the *Sefer HaChinukh* too hints to this theme by adding: "והיא תכלית הטובה שלהם".



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