

# Freedom Revisited

The central motif of Pesach is that of both remembering and experiencing *cheirus*, freedom. While every chag has the element in some measure of recreating and reenacting the events of the past, the necessity of firsthand experience is especially vivid in our retelling of the Pesach narrative (*Emek Beracha, Inyanei Haggadah*). This experience of freedom doesn't stop at the door of a general national feeling but demands to be experienced by each and every individual as conveyed in the paragraph that serves as the apex of the Seder:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו  
כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים.

*In every generation, each person is obligated to view himself as if he went out from Egypt.*

The immediacy of the experience is amplified by the language in the Rambam's version of the Haggadah: *k'ilu hu ata yatzah MiMitzrayim*, as though he was released *now* from the shackles of slavery (Rambam, *Chametz U'Matzah* 7:6).

In a literal sense, the obligation is to both deeply feel the sense of *shibud ligeulah*, slavery to freedom, that was experienced by our forefathers and to find avenues to recreate and embody those emotions. Yet there would seem to be an even further imperative. Namely, the time of Pesach reminds us to contemplate the nature of true freedom and encourages us to contemplate all of the ways in which we find ourselves trapped between servitude and redemption. We explore in which ways are we truly



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*b'nei chorin*, free people and in which ways we are still shackled to masters, some perhaps invisible, whose hold on us is no less palpable than the one that the Egyptians exerted over our forefathers. This point is underscored by many of the *ba'alei machshava* (Jewish thinkers) who differentiate between the words *chofesh* and *cheirus* — the former being free from a physical servitude (Shemos 21:2) and the latter relating either to a state of mind or to the idea of *cheirus l'*, freedom that leads to a more elevated and noble state. As many of the *meforshim* note (see *Sefer HaChinuch* no. 306), Exodus with its resulting freedoms is meaningful only in the context of acceptance of the Torah. Indeed the narrative of the desert with all of its dramatic highs and lows is really about a nation who were *chofshi* but who hadn't really become *bnei chorin* in the deeper psychological sense.<sup>1</sup> Pesach is the most propitious time to scrutinize our own life and to ask ourselves to just what degree we are free? To what degree can we say with confidence that we have emerged from slavery and are not full *bnei chorin*?

While there are many avenues which relate to this dynamic, let me suggest five areas to give thought to.

### 1. Freedom from Addiction

The Ibn Ezra (BaMidbar 6:7) posits that the root of the word *nazir* comes from the word *nezer*, crown. While there is an open question about whether the path chosen by the *nazir* is the ideal one, the *nazir* in a sense wears his *nezirus* like a crown with the accompanying regal feeling of a king who has risen above the all-consuming needs of the body. In a way, the *nazir* is the paradigm of the man who has exerted control over himself and his needs and has allowed for the emergence of complete *bechira chofshis*, free will. The necessity of this complete unassailable *bechira* is emphasized by the Rambam (*Teshuva* 5:1) and lies at the heart of why we bore a hole through the ear of the Jewish slave who chooses to continue his servitude (*Kiddushin* 22b). How can a person, who is supposed to be completely free — subservient only to G-d's word — willingly give up that freedom? Sadly, modern man lives with the constant challenge of this lack of absolute freedom. Internet addiction, substance addiction, and the incessant, almost addictive need to check one's smart phone are challenges that affects almost every family to some degree. In my position in the Yeshiva, a week doesn't go by in which a young man doesn't speak to

me about his challenges in functioning due to the fact that he spends six or seven hours a night watching Netflix. While the above is only anecdotal, it reflects a reality that no yeshiva, institution or family is untouched by. While our freedom of movement and communication has never been more advanced, the complete freedom of choice as described by the Rambam poses an enormous challenge for many in our communities.

## 2. Freedom of Perspective

The Gemara, *Pesachim* 115b, provides two different explanations as to why matzah is called *lechem oni*. According to one opinion it refers to *aniyus* — remembering our days of poverty and servitude, and according to a second opinion it refers to the redemption — *lechem she'onim alav devarim harbeh*, bread that is used for responding to a lot of ideas. The *meforshim* are puzzled as to why the same object is utilized for two opposite emotions — surely the Torah could have thought of a different expression for either servitude or freedom?

Perhaps the point is that we are given a choice as to which perspective we want to adapt in thinking about our national narrative. We could choose to focus on the poverty, the backbreaking labor and the humiliation or we could choose to sing a *shira chadasha*, a new song, about what was the ultimate conclusion of those dark chapters.

This might be the answer to the question posed by many rishonim as

to why the first mitzvah given after the Exodus is that of *kiddush hachodesh*, sanctification of the new moon.

The *ba'alei machshava* highlight the exceptional nature of this mitzvah in that *kiddush hachodesh* reflects man's ability to sanctify the moon, which in turn determines when bread becomes chametz, determines which day one is subject to *kares* for not fasting (on Yom Kippur) and a whole host of other critical halachos. According to the *Kedushas Levi*, the verse (Shemos 12:2) *rishon hu lachem*, it is a first for you, is essentially saying that Hashem, the “Rishon,” is given over to Bnei Yisroel through their ability to sanctify the moon. What a transformative mitzvah to begin the Jews' sojourn through the desert! Bnei Yisroel had the choice to view themselves as slaves still dealing with the reverberations of hundreds of years of slavery, or they could view themselves as regal *bnei melachim*, princes, as an *am segulah*, a treasured nation. Beginning the journey with the mitzvah of *kiddush hachodesh*, and all that it implies about the grandeur of man and specifically Am Yisroel as a *mamleches kohanim*, allowed Bnei Yisroel to frame their experiences in a psychologically healthy and productive fashion. We are given a choice how to view *yetzias Mitzraim* specifically, and Jewish history in its entirety, through the prism of the downtrodden “*aniyus*” or through the perspective of *geulah*.

In a real sense many are enslaved by the narrative of their lives — how one looks back on a difficult childhood, how one deals with suffering, with

setbacks — and they frame their lives through the prism of fatalistic negativity. To some degree there is a certain spirit of *cheirus* that comes with choosing to write a positive narrative of one's life. To genuinely feel that I have the ability to transform every incident that has ever befallen me, or will befall me, into opportunities for real growth and meaning. That is also a freedom of sorts.

## 3. Freedom from Feelings of Hopelessness

The *Beis HaLevi* (*Derasha* no. 2) and others discuss the fact that Bnei Yisroel had fallen to the 49th level of *tumah* (impurity) and as a result, the Exodus had to have happened immediately (see the beginning of the Rambam's Haggadah — *b'vehilu yazatzanu MiMitzrayim*, we left Egypt in a hurry). The Maharal in the beginning of *Netzach Yisroel* deals with the implicit question of why there was a necessity for Bnei Yisroel to have experienced the depths of exile before tasting redemption. The Maharal answers that by definition, *geulah* can only be fully realized (and appreciated) if it's an outgrowth of *galus*, exile. A full state of personal and national wholeness is only experienced if it comes on the heels of darker moments.

This concept of the Maharal is so significant for one who finds himself trapped by his own limitations and humanity and a feeling that true change is beyond their grasp.

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We always believe that there are brighter tomorrows and that change is always possible. Talmudic and Midrashic literature is full of statements of one who acquires the next world in a single moment or the effectiveness of sincere *teshuva*, even in the last moment of a person's life. The matzah that represents both poverty and redemption is a symbol that we are always finding ourselves on a certain continuum and that one stage, even a suffocatingly dark stage, does not have to represent a final chapter. There is a freedom in understanding that our personal journeys reflect a circuitous path and that change/*teshuva*/transformation are all possible over the course of a lifetime. We never have to feel that we are unable to move beyond our own perceived limitations.

#### 4. Freedom from Other Perceptions and Expectations of Ourselves

There is a beautiful comment of the Vilna Gaon (*Biur HaGra* to Mishlei 16:24) who makes a very profound observation. The Gemara in *Niddah* 30b, teaches that Man is taught in his mother's womb the amount of Torah that he specifically is capable of learning in his lifetime. Man's purpose, argues the Vilna Gaon, is to simply learn and accomplish that which is expected of him, based on his own abilities, skills and talents.<sup>2</sup> This point of knowing oneself and judging oneself based on no criteria other than an internal barometer is the major point of emphasis of many of the *ba'alei mussar* (see *Alei Shur* 1:36-38, 157-165). This is a trait best defined as *anochiyus*, loosely defined as individuality. The Gemara in *Berachos* 17a, famously records the statement of Rav Alexandri who said that Man is unable to fulfill the will of G-d due to the *s'or sheb'iasah*, the yeast in the dough. Rashi understands this statement that the yeast is a reference to the evil inclination and to haughtiness. Rav Kook in *Olas Ra'ayah* (pp. 244-245) understood the Gemara differently. Rav Kook felt that the yeast refers to anything external to ourselves; anything that is not genuine to our true nature that has the ability to corrupt and change us. The *avodah* (service) of Pesach, said Rav Kook, is *biur chametz*, eliminating all of the external factors in our life that are not true to ourselves and that are just reflections of lives that are not our own. Only then can a person taste *cheirus*.

Sadly many people have no real sense of *anochiyus*. They have no real sense of who they are, what Hashem



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expects of them and what are their unique abilities and potential contributions. One's life and sense of self are often shaped by a myriad of external factors that have nothing to do with genuine personal growth and more to do with the general expectations and standards of the world at large. *Cheirus* begins with this elusive search for *anochiyus*.

## 5. Freedom through Torah and through Meaning

The Mishna in *Avos* 6:3 states:

אין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתלמוד תורה.

*The only free man is one who engages in Talmud Torah.*

Many interpretations are offered including that of Rav Hirsch and the *Tiferes Yisroel* who stress that spiritual ambition, as symbolized by Talmud Torah, frees a person from the necessity of becoming one with the culture of the street and brings one to a somewhat more exalted state of being. While Rav Hirsch is undoubtedly correct in his assertion,

The connection with spiritually ambitious pursuits, be it Talmud Torah or the building of Mishkan, frames our freedom in such a way that elevates rather than diminishes the individual.

I believe that the point is broader. The Gemara both in *Kiddushin* 30b, and *Sukkah* 52b, describe the necessity of one who is under the “thumb” of the evil inclination to drag the *yetzer hara* to the *beis medrash* (study hall). Additionally, the Ramban (introduction to Shmos) in commenting on the fact that Sefer Shmos is referred to as *Sefer HaGeula* (the book of redemption) said that the redemption from Mitzrayim was not complete until the Mishkan was built. The idea of all of these sources and many others seems to be one and the same, namely that the connection with spiritually ambitious pursuits, be it Talmud Torah or the building of Mishkan, frames our freedom in such a way that elevates rather than diminishes the individual. A person who is connected to Torah and *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars), a person whose life feels imbued with genuine meaning and a sense of *hashra'as HaShechinah* (Divine presence) as reflected by the Mishkan, is simply a different person with a different outlook and a different set of priorities. His ambitions, values, decisions and yearnings all reflect the spiritual center that resides in one's core.

I remember hearing a story in which Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky was asked for advice about how to navigate the tricky landscape of dealing with *mechutanim* who might have drastically different expectations about the upcoming wedding. Rav Yaakov answered with a smile on his face that he had only one policy — namely to never get upset about anything that truly doesn't matter. Focus only on the happiness of the *chassan* and *kallah* said Rav Yaakov, focus only on that which is fundamental and don't allow your

life to become derailed by smallness. I always thought that this story was a beautiful reflection of the aforementioned Mishna — freedom in its truest sense of the word is only fully possible in the context of a Torah life that is able to meaningfully cultivate and shape values and priorities.

Let me conclude with an idea from the *Chidushei HaRim*. He comments on the first of the four languages of *geulah*, “*v'hotzeisi eschem mitachas sivlos Mitzrayim*, I will take you out from under the oppression (*sivlos*) of Egypt (Shemos 6:6). The word *sivlos* is used because Hashem will redeem those who can be *sovel*, tolerate the Egyptians. He will free those who may not even realize that they are enslaved. According to the *Chidushei HaRim*, that is the first step of freedom — recognizing that one is not completely free. Once we have that full recognition, we can set a course for ourselves, sometimes only internally driven and at times with the help of others, to seek a meaningful path of traversing the landscape between slavery and redemption.

This should be a true *zman cheiruseinu* for us and for all of Klal Yisroel. We should merit to not only relive the time in our past in which the powerful hand of Hashem was revealed, but also continue to experience and work towards genuine and deeply realized freedom in our own lives.

### Notes

1. Ibn Ezra, Shemos 14:13, Ramban BaMidbar 11:1. See as well, the works of Viktor Frankl and Erich Fromm who deal with these issues at length.
2. See the *Ohr Sameach* at the beginning of *Hilchos Talmud Torah* for an important point that dovetails with the Vilna Gaon.