

Derasha – Pesach 5762/ 2002

Many people think of pesach as a universal holiday celebrating freedom from oppression.

- There are interfaith sedarim
- People invite non Jewish co-workers and friends to attend and celebrate the seder
- Amnesty international describes Pesach as celebrating the emancipation of the Jewish people and says “this ancient holiday finds modern day parallels in the work of Amnesty international

In truth, since last pesach freedom has become something the whole world doesn't take for granted:

- Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> taught America the great value of freedom and inspired our nation to launch operation Enduring Freedom
- For the last 18 months Israeli's have been paralyzed by terror lacking the freedom to walk down the street, take the kids to play in the park or take the normal route to work.

Freedom is indeed a precious commodity that the world universally is putting greater value on now more than ever.

The question for us however, is if the freedom America is fighting for is the same that we celebrate on Pesach. Is there something uniquely Jewish about the freedom we commemorate today?

Pirkei Avos 6:2

[ב] אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי: בְּכֹל יוֹם יוֹם בַּת קוֹל יוֹצֵאת מִהַר חוֹרֵב, וּמְכַרְזֵת וְאוֹמֵרֶת: „אֹי לָהֶם לְבָרִיזוֹת, מַעֲלָבוֹנָה שֶׁל תּוֹרָה!“ שְׂכַל מִי שְׂאִינוּ עוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה נִקְרָא נִזּוּף, שְׂנֹאֵמֵר: „גַּם זֶהֱבָא בְּאֵף חֲזִיר, אִשָּׁה יָפָה וְסָרְתָ טַעַם.“ וְאוֹמֵר: „וְהִלַּחַת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הַמָּה וְהַמְּכַתֵּב מִכְתָּב אֱלֹהִים הוּא חֲרוֹת עַל הַלְּחַת.“<sup>2</sup> אַל תִּקְרָא „חֲרוֹת“ אֲלָא „חֲרוֹת.“ שְׂאִין לָךְ בֶּן חֲרִין אֲלָא מִי שְׂעוֹסֵק בַּתְּלַמוֹד תּוֹרָה. וְכֹל מִי שְׂעוֹסֵק בַּתְּלַמוֹד תּוֹרָה הֲרִי זֶה מַתְעַלֶּה, שְׂנֹאֵמֵר: „וּמִנְחָלֵיאל נַחְלִיאַל וּמִנְחָלֵיאל בְּמוֹת.“<sup>3</sup>

[2] Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Every single day a heavenly voice emanates from Mount Horeb, proclaiming and saying, 'Woe to them, to the people, because of [their] insult to the Torah!' For whoever does not occupy himself with the Torah is called, 'Rebuked,' as it is said: 'Like a golden ring in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman who turns away from good judgment.'<sup>1</sup> And it says: 'The Tablets are God's handiwork and the script was God's script charus (engraved) on the Tablets.'<sup>2</sup> Do not read 'charus' (engraved) but 'cherus' (freedom), for you can have no freer man than one who engages in the study of the Torah. And anyone who engages in the study of the Torah becomes elevated, as it is said: 'From Mattanah to Nachaliel, and from Nachaliel to Bamos.'<sup>3</sup>

Torah provides freedom – that's the most ridiculous proposition. It is exactly the opposite – The laws of Torah constrict and restrict us. They limit

our freedom and dictate an oppressive lifestyle. They tell me what I can eat, what I can say, what I can wear, how I spend my time etc. How can the mishna say that observance of Torah frees us?

The answer lies in the definition of freedom and its contrast with liberty. Liberty is the ability to perform the actions I desire at my discretion. After all, with life and liberty comes the pursuit of happiness. If I lead a life of liberty I lack hindrance and restraint. True there is a social contract I must subscribe to, but beyond it I have the liberty to do as I please.

Freedom means something much greater, much more significant. Freedom gives us the ability to define ourselves, to choose our identities and to make existential choices. Freedom means the objectivity necessary to really make choices and that can only be provided by discipline, and sovereignty over oneself. The moment we lack self control we lack freedom.

One can have freedom without liberty and liberty without freedom.

In 1978 in a dark cell deep within the Christopol prison in the Soviet Union, Yosef Mendelovich had freedom although he didn't have liberty. On erev pesach he formed a candle out of hoarded bits of string and droplets of oil and stray slivers of wax. He lit the candle and searched for chometz. He had saved tiny bits of mustard which were used for bitter herbs. A saved onion bulb in water had produced a humble bit of greenery that were karpas and wine was made of raisins soaked with water. The hagaddah was recited from memory and that night deep in solitary confinement, Yosef Mendelovich was a free man.

However, you can have the opposite as well:

An addict to drugs, alcohol, shopping, materialism, work, has liberty, the physical ability to do what they want, but they lack freedom. The addiction is a foreign influence that paralyzes and leaves no freedom. Addictions are ruthless taskmasters. Freedom is the ability to choose our own identity and take control of our destiny.

Pesach, the holiday of freedom beyond liberty is much more than a Jewish Independence day.

The Haggadah says:

**עֲבָדִים** הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִשָּׁם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה.  
וְאֵלּוּ לֹא הוֹצֵא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ  
מִמִּצְרַיִם, הָרִי אָנוּ וּבְנֵינוּ וּבְנֵי בְנֵינוּ מִשְׁעָבָדִים  
הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם.

Why the change from avadim ha'yinu to m'shubadim hayinu? Is it really true that we would still be enslaved in Egypt. There are cycles of history where empires rise and fall, nations are born and die. Do we really think that thousands of years later we would still be enslaved in Egypt?

The Beis Ha'Levi answers that true through the years of history we would have achieved liberty but not freedom. We would no longer be in bondage and slaves to physical labor. We would however, remain slaves to a foreign culture, influenced strongly by the expectations, fads and addictions of that society – Egyptian, American or other.

So, how does Hashem free us from this spiritual bondage? Ain lecha ben chorine elah mi she'oseik ba'Torah. Ironically, it is the structure and system of Torah that provides us true freedom.

Immanuel Kant, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century German philosopher, considered the most influential thinker of modern times, describes freedom as obedience. For Kant freedom is obedience to law as conceived by the reason of man. For us the greatest freedom is obedience to law as dictated by the omnipotent perfect creator of all existence – Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

Commitment to Torah observance although rigorous and difficult provides us with the control and discipline to truly be free.

One who can't give up cheeseburgers is a slave to the cheeseburger. One who can't guard their tongue from lashon ha'rah is addicted to and is a slave to negative speech. One who can't compromise on materialistic values in the face of a relationship with Hashem is a slave to materialism.

On erev pesach when getting haircut kid refused to stay and had to come back because he needed a certain style. He was willing to miss a celebration of freedom because he was a slave to the hairstyle that his culture mandated he have.

When kids graduate school and perceive freedom they usually party in a way that lacks seder. Yet, we mark freedom with seder. Because to us it is seder, order – discipline and control that are at the root and source of the freedom we celebrate.

I'lu lo hotzih ha'kadosh baruch hu-

Had Hashem not freed us from foreign culture, addiction and values we like much of the world around us would be searching desperately for meaning and purpose. Liberty is a universal value, but our gift of freedom is unique to us. The freedom we celebrate sets us apart and empowers us with the greatest gift, the objectivity to chose.

Chayav adom lir'os es atzmo k'ilu hu yatza mi'mitzrayim. Pesach is not about marking a historical event of the past. It is about experiencing it in the present. On pesach our avodah, our goal is to achieve true freedom by leaving our own mitzrayim. Searching for the chametz of foreign culture, obliterating the effects of negative addictions and committing ourselves to true cheirus – the observance of Torah.