

PARSHAS TZAV

תש"פ

We have begun Chodesh Nissan and we are in a time of mixed feelings—complex emotions.

We are entering a time of simchah—Chag Hamatzos. But at the same time we are confronted by an overwhelming situation—here in Eretz Yisroel and the entire world. The community most affected is our frum community—in Israel, US, and UK. We live in tight knit communities and our lives revolve around communal activities of shuls and yeshivos and chessed. That being the case, our community is more susceptible than others for the virus to rapidly spread among us. As a consequence, our community is seriously hurt. We are reeling from the numbers of those who are getting stricken by the virus which are increasing daily. It has come to the point where we all know someone who is in serious condition. We don't know when Hashem will decide that this gezeirah min hashomayim will start to fade.

At the same time, we are preparing for Pesach which is supposed to be a joyous time. How do we put together these two opposite emotions of simchah and pachad?

I had a sheiloh last year—a day before erev Pesach, I received a call from a talmid of mine that a member of his family had been tragically killed in a very sudden manner. The family was beside itself with grief and very shaken up. So the following morning after I got rid of my chometz, I went to be menachem aveil. I was asked by the family, "How can we participate in a Pesach seder tonight after what we just went through? We are completely devastated! How do we approach Pesach with simchah?"

I answered that we have to appreciate what we are celebrating on Chag HaPesach.

We are celebrating the fact that Hashem chose us as His nation, elevated us and we have a unique relationship with Him. Every Jew should routinely confront the reality of our unique position in the world—that Hashem who created and runs the entire cosmos has chosen us to be His representatives in this world—to carry His message and achieve His goals. He has given us the opportunity to establish a close bond with Him.

"Elokeinu" mean "our G-d"—implying we have an exclusive relationship with Hashem. We have an obligation to Him, and He to us. It is a mutual relationship. He gave us free will to come as close to Him as we choose to. We celebrate the reality that we have been chosen from all the nations and we have the opportunity to establish that deep bond. If we integrate this awareness into our lives, it should elevate us beyond the here and now. It should fill us with such a feeling of simchah, it should drown out every other emotion we have.

Yes, there is a disease which is spreading like wildfire throughout our community. It is causing sickness and death to countless people. If Hashem in His mercy doesn't arrest this situation soon, in the coming weeks, I fear each of us will know of someone who was lost to the virus. It is frightening. But it is important for us—even in this terrifying period—to think about what Pesach means.

Pesach is zman cheirusaynu. Geuloh means redemption from a deep, powerful shibbud.

This shibbud, and the redemption from it, comes in all kinds of levels and forms.

The Rambam writes that sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim revolves around one

special symbol on Pesach night. In the times of the Beis Hamikdash, the seder revolved around the korban Pesach. Now, without a Beis Hamikdash, the center of the seder is matzah—which is a very different symbol. The Netziv gives a very straightforward reason for this. The korban Pesach is exclusively a symbol of geuloh. It represents the idea that Hashem shattered the avodah zora of Egypt, we separated ourselves from the culture of Egypt, and as a result, Hashem took us out of the shibbud of Egypt and took us as His people. We isolated ourselves from the Egyptians and Hashem took us out—goy mikerev goy. But we can only utilize this pure symbol of geuloh when we have the Beis Hamikdash and the Shechinah is in our midst.

Nowadays we focus on Matzah. Why? Matzah is a more complex symbol. We mention matzah two times during the seder. Once at the beginning—ho lachmoh anyoh, which according to the Rambam is only said in times of golus. And another at the end of maggid—matzah zu.

The first matzah symbolizes the food of slavery. The second matzah symbolizes a different matzah—the one that Klal Yisroel ate when they were suddenly taken out of Egypt and they barely had any time to prepare rations. The symbol of matzah of today is part-avdus and part-geuloh. We relate to this complex and difficult symbol very much today.

But there is another reason. What does the geuloh of Matzah mean? It is being free to become the Am Hashem even in the midst of an external shibbud of golus.

What is the difference between the slave and the free man? In Egypt the Jews as slaves ate matzah. The very next day, on the 15th of Nissan, the same Jew ate the same matzah, but there is a world of difference. They now ate it as free men not as slaves. The food doesn't change—the person changes. Other symbols of cheirus at the seder are exclusively ones of free men—drinking four cups of wine, reclining—these are things that slaves don't do and only noblemen do. But both the slave and free man eat matzah—it depends how you eat it. It is your attitude—this is the central theme of Pesach nowadays.

There is another important aspect of ho lachmoh anyoh. In the call to invite others to our seder as we hold up the bread of slavery, we see a contradiction. A slave doesn't have the capacity to give to another. He is completely occupied with doing the work of his master and pleasing his master. He has nothing of himself to give to others because he has no individual identity. There is no self. As such, it makes no sense for a slave to share with someone else. But in ho lachmoh anyoh, even as we raise the food of shibbud, at the same time we are aware that our ultimate master is Hashem. We get everything from Hashem—including our tzelem Elokim. Because I am aware of my tzelem Elokim and those of other people, I can see beyond myself and my needs and see other people's neshomos. Just like my neshomo is valuable to Hashem, other neshomos are also valuable, and I give of what Hashem has given me to share with others.

There is a frightening mishnah in Pirkei Ovos which describes the situation we are currently in. The mishnah explains why dever comes to the world—to carry out misos that beis din cannot carry out. It enforces Hashem's middas hadin. It also comes to punish for sins related to agriculture—not giving away the produce that grows on my property that Hashem commanded me to give away. One example is not making my field hefer on Shemittah. The seventh year is the

time when Hashem reclaims His ownership over the land. It is not our property anymore. I can work and keep what I grow for six years. But not for the seventh. But if a person doesn't want to make his field hefer, if he wants to hold on to what he erroneously believes is his, then a plague comes to the world. The same is true with matnos aniyim. He feels it all comes from his hard work and his effort, and he is entitled to keep all of it. This is why a plague comes.

If I understand that my neshomo and the next person's neshomo are from Hashem and it has infinite value, and that everything I have is from Hashem, then I realize that I have to share what I have been given to others. So I invite others to my seder. I will feed them until they are fully satiated—just like any member of my household. This is how we begin the seder with matzah—a matzah of shibbud and cheirus all at the same time. It is a simple but complex food. It all depends on the attitude of the person eating it. The fanciest foods do not make you a free man nor does simple food make you a slave.

We start with matzah and we end with matzah. We celebrate what it means for a Jew to be a free man. Hashem has created us for His kovod and separated us from all goyim. He elevated us from a low culture and low lifestyle and gave us an opportunity to be much greater by giving us a Torah. Hashem is inviting us into His palace to become a superior human being. But He is doing it for a purpose—to be an example to the world of what a human being can achieve and to give honor to the Creator.

This is why we start the haggadah with g'nus and conclude with shevach. We have to appreciate where we would be today without geuloh from Egypt and without becoming Hashem's nation. Where would we be today? Nowhere.

Shmuel says that we begin with avodim hoyinu. Rav says we begin with mitchila ovday avodo zoro. We pasken both Rav and Shmuel. We start by saying avodim hoyinu and recognize that our ancestors worshipped avodo zoro—just like everybody else at the time. Terach was a primitive, idol worshipping man.

The Rambam writes in Moreh Nevuchim that we can appreciate what Torah brought to civilization when we look at those isolated places in the world where Torah has not made an impact. The Rambam in Mishnah Torah says the reason why Hashem allowed Christianity and Islam to dominate the world was to give the pagan nations a bridge-religion. The pagan world was not capable of making the leap from idol worship to Torah directly. So Hashem facilitated the rise of these religions to replace pagan concepts with ideas of the Torah that they could digest, to familiarize the world with these ideas. But the world before was primitive. The nations who were never exposed to Torah have no moral values and no human dignity. This is what we would have been without the Torah. No approach to living with the highest ideals and morals that we are living with now.

But we had to go through the furnace of Egypt to purify us and make us worthy—avodim hoyinu. And it was a shibbud specifically to Pharaoh in Egypt. This was a culture of deep moral corruption and savage brutality.

We were there a long time and we became attracted to this culture. We stopped bris miloh to be able to join in. The more Klal Yisroel integrated, the more they became a threat to the native population and became targets for shibbud. We made it easy for Pharaoh to enslave Klal Yisroel. He manipulated our desire to integrate and be accepted as

Egyptians to get us to volunteer for the national service. The patriotic citizens would surely want to join Pharaoh himself in the effort. All joined except for Shevet Levi who were busy learning Torah and had enough self-respect to not want to join this corrupt society. Pharaoh started selectively giving exemptions—but only to native Egyptians. Slowly but surely, only Klal Yisroel remained enslaved. This is how it happened—we virtually made ourselves slaves—as the Netziv explains the phrase “avodim hoyinu”. We became slaves to Pharaoh because we became entranced and enchanted by this Egyptian culture.

It was our doing. Hashem had to pull us out—it took a year of ten makkos to purify us and get that low, brutal culture out of us. We become the Am Hashem—going from the bottom to the top. Interestingly, Hashem waited till the last minute—before the corruption was irreversible.

Pesach celebrates the fact that had it not been for Hashem's geuloh from Egypt, we would have remained a low-level group of people, being meshubod to that whole mentality and culture. If you want an example from today, go see how the unwashed Arab masses live in modern-day Egypt and the Middle East generally.

So as we approach Pesach, the simchah is incredible. The simchah is that Hashem took us from avodo zoro and avdus, from a corrupt, depraved culture, to become the Am Hashem. We have to create this awareness in our minds on the Seder night, and apply it to our lives. It isn't just something that happened to our great grandparents. I so much identify with Jewish history and feel that I personally am an extension of Jewish history. Hashem did all this for me—for my neshomo in my generation to enable us to become elevated above all the nations of the world—not just for my ancestors. If Hashem was able to take us out of Egypt 3500 years ago, He can take us out of our culture of depravity today. But we have to want to leave it behind us. Hashem gave us the opportunity, but not everyone in Egypt wanted to leave and they didn't make it.

In every generation we have to see ourselves as newly liberated from the horrible shibbud of Egypt and it should overwhelm us with gratitude when we realize what was achieved. We re-experience that radical transformation, and among all our tzoros, we are filled with simchah.

We are going through a rough time in world history and in Jewish history.

We need to take all the precautions in the most extreme way. Our community is the most exposed to the danger because of the nature of our society—revolving around yeshivos and shuls on a daily basis. We live in tight-knit communities, and closing these communities goes against our whole lifestyle.

But as we move to Pesach and the chag of geuloh, in the midst of all the tragedy and all the trauma we are experiencing, we have to remember the simchah we have. By realizing how low a point Hashem took us from and how far up we have been brought—what we could have been without the geuloh should fill us with overwhelming simchah. He lifted us up and made us the Am Hashem to connect to the Melech Malchei HaMelochim, He gave us a Torah and put us above the entire creation.

This is the simchah of Pesach, and may we be zocheh to a geuloh sheleimoh.