

PESACH

תש"פ

We are approaching Pesach with a worldwide catastrophe in progress. It is taking lives and destroying the economy in an unprecedented manner. It is the first catastrophe that has spanned the globe since the mabul.

This catastrophe has hit our own community very hard in a world-wide manner. Throughout Jewish history, we have endured many tragedies, but they were localized. When one community was in trouble, another part of the tzibur was completely spared. This is true of the world generally - there have always been places of refuge during war and diseases. Something as world-wide as this hasn't been seen since the mabul.

The gemara tells us that times of calamity call for introspection. As we approach Pesach, we should look to the lessons of Pesach to see what we are supposed to internalize at this particular time to respond to our current situation.

We begin the haggdoh with ho lachmoh anyoh which contains three central themes.

Matzoh itself has many symbols. One of them is "lechem oni." Chazal say that one of the meanings of lechem oni is that we recite the haggdoh focusing on the matzoh. That is why we leave the matzoh exposed for Maggid. We cover it when we lift the cup to say shiroh. The reason for this is that at this point of history matzoh is the main symbol of the night. Matzoh is a dual symbol. It is mentioned at the beginning and at the end of the haggdoh. In the beginning, it is lechem oni. Here lechem oni means the matzoh that we ate in Egypt. At the end, it is the food our ancestors ate at the beginning of their journey, when they were redeemed from slavery.

When there was a bais hamikdosh, the korban pesach was the central theme of maggid. The korban pesach is a sign of geuloh. The time of the bais hamikdosh, with all of the gilui shechinoh, is a time of geuloh. In our times, matzoh is central because it symbolizes the lessons we need to learn specifically in golus.

Matzoh is a simple, filling bread. It is cheap and it keeps slaves working for a long time. Klal Yisroel ate matzoh during the period of slavery in Egypt. But then when they were rushing out of Egypt after the geuloh, they grabbed the dough and couldn't wait for it to rise.

The entire night before, Jews were secluded in their homes, not daring to venture outside while death roamed outside. The next day, they immediately had to leave. They weren't prepared. They needed to throw some provisions in their haste. This is the matzoh of geuloh.

The difference between the free man and the slave is not what he eats. They can eat the same food. The difference is in the person eating it. We ate matzoh as slaves and the next day we ate matzoh as free men.

They became free from Pharaoh. But it doesn't mean that they were free to do whatever they wanted. We repeat over and over that Klal Yisroel were trading one form of avdus for another. They were avdei Pharaoh and now that Hashem took us out of Egypt, we are avdei Hashem. No human being is totally free. There is always a need for a human being to submit to a superior power for security and stability in his life. We changed from being subjects to Pharaoh to being subjects to Hashem.

Imagine the scene. Klal Yisroel were sitting in their homes with their shoes and walking sticks ready for travel. But, they are just sitting

tight in their homes. All night they hear the screams of terror and pandemonium outside. Pharaoh is yelling for Moshe to take the Jews out of Egypt. But we say no. We are waiting for Hashem to take us out. We have no clue what's happening. At daybreak we are told suddenly we are leaving. That's it. We are on the way to accepting the Torah and become a mamleches kohanim and a goy kodosh. The people have now changed. Their core identity has been transformed, but they are still eating the same food.

This Pesach we are making modest, scaled-down sedarim in our home. None of the large lavish feasts that we are used to. We are going to be secluded with immediate family - not connecting with extended family, neighbors, and community as we have in the past. There is a very deep lesson being taught. Sometimes we celebrate Pesach in a way that misses the point. We get distracted with the externals. This year we are free to focus on what's really happening. We are becoming transformed from avdus to human beings into avdus to Hashem. It's an entirely new identity. Perhaps in our current situation we can now focus better on what is important in life and what we should be striving for.

We can more deeply appreciate where we would have been had Hashem not taken us out. We would have been primitive, simple people with no morality or spirituality. We would have no impact on the world and it would be much less civilized as a result.

The Rambam says if you want to appreciate what the Torah has done to civilize the world, go to the deepest jungles of Africa - to where Torah has not made any impact. See what kind of primitive societies would have dominated the world till today if not for the Torah. It is only Klal Yisroel accepting the Torah and the ideals of the Torah permeating the world that made all the difference.

But we eat the same food that our forefathers ate in Egypt.

But perhaps the most important theme is in a single important statement in ho lachmoh anyoh - we invite all needy people to join us in our meal. The Torah stresses middos tovos as a central part of the Torah.

The Moreh Nevuchim says there are two reasons people develop middos tovos. One is social utility - if I take care of you when you are in need, it increases the chances of you taking care of me when I am in need. This is the basis of stable societies. But there is another motivation. The Rambam says there is a mitzvah of ve'holachtoh b'derachav - walking in the ways of Hashem. This is the Derech Hashem. Hashem chose Avrohom to found Klal Yisroel because Avrohom was committed to inculcating the middos of Hashem of chesed and emes in his children after him. This is the heritage of Avrohom. We pursue middos tovos to follow Hashem and connect to Him.

Moshe on Har Sinai asked for two things from Hashem. He wanted to know tzaddik verah lo and rosho vetov lo. Why is it that evil prospers and good suffers? He was told that we have no understanding of this.

Then he asked to know the derech Hashem in order to connect to Hashem on a deeper level. We internalize Hashem's middos and this makes us closer to Hashem. Moshe wanted to know what those middos were in order to experience Hashem and connect to Him more closely.

There are two reasons for middos tovos. One has nothing to do with changing who the person is at the core. If we were to be stranded on a desert island, with no social fabric, we would have no incentive to

develop middos. The human being would become a savage. But we as Jews approach middos as a way of transforming a human being to be higher and aspire to greatness.

A slave cannot give anything. He only wants to please his master. That is his utility. But a Jew knows he has a tzelem Elokim and he recognizes the tzelem Elokim and the infinite value of other human beings. So he is moved to give of himself selflessly to another human being. So while I am a free man, I don't do chesed just because of social utility. I want to connect to Hashem and do what pleases Hashem. Only a free man has such a capacity. A slave is completely preoccupied with fulfilling his master's wishes. This is the basis of tzedokoh. We are free men today. We share our meal with others.

We are going through a very difficult time.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos elaborated upon by Avos deRabbi Nosson asks: Why do plagues come to the world? One of them is not keeping Shmittah. Avos deRabbi Nosson says matnos aniyim is another factor. What is the connection?

It is the attitude towards the money one makes.

A farmer works hard to grow his crops and develop his field, but on the seventh year, he has to give it all up and let anyone come in and take the food.

To bring to our terms: Imagine a real estate developer who has a number of apartment buildings and he collects the standard rent. But he realizes that these apartment building aren't really his. They belong to Hashem. So every seven years he lets his tenants live there rent-free for a year. Could we do that? There is no greater expression of a Jew relinquishing control over his property than keeping Shmittah. Matnos aniyim are similar. A farmer is harvesting his long awaited produce at the end of the yearly growing season. But wait - he has to let some poor people come in and take leket, shikchoh and peah. It's not yours - Hashem enabled you to grow it and you have to give some of it away. Sometimes the human ego gets a little too strong and wants to keep it all for himself. So Hashem brings a plague to put people's ego in check and teach a little humility.

As we see today, plagues are very subtle. It is an invisible enemy. You can't see the danger like other forces of nature. Everyone is powerless because it is a silent killer. It flattens the human ego. Even though scientists and politicians think they are in control - you can see the essential helplessness in their response to this crisis.

The idea of chesed is to reveal the neshomo of the human being. We are all avdei Hashem and we are all in it together. When people's egos get too large, Hashem teaches us a little humility. Once Hashem has done that and we are all in some form of isolation, we can stop and

focus on this key event of Jewish history.

Yetzias Mitzrayim is so central to yiddishkeit that we constantly mention it every day and in every Kiddush on Shabbos and Yom Tov.

The Ramban comments on the question of the chochom. The Torah is so serious - horrible punishments and penalties. What is the reason for these mishpotim? What happened in our history that is so critical that Hashem made the consequences of violating these mitzvos so extreme? Planting kilayim deserves malkos? Driving on Shabbos deserves s'kiloh? Why?

The Ramban says we tell the chochom about yetzias Mitzrayim. Hashem made a bris with us and transformed our entire identity. We carry Hashem's message to the world and represent Him as a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh. If a Jew violates a mitzvah and says he isn't interested, he is turning his back on his very identity. The mishpotim refers to the punishments. When you violate mitzvos, you violate your whole identity which was created on Pesach.

When we left Egypt, we ceased being slaves to human beings and our taivos and our egos and became a completely different type of person.

Today we are here in golus - regardless of where on the globe Jews may be living today. We are still under a severe shibud. The geuloh hasn't come. As free as we are and as much as we recognize we are avdei Hashem, we are still enslaved to a culture and its social norms and its taivos. We are only bnei chorin when we involve ourselves in Torah and establish an identity as a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh. Then we become free.

We are here today as partial slaves. This is why matzoh is such a key symbol in our time. Moror is a pure symbol of avdus and the korbon pesach is a pure symbol of geuloh. But matzoh is part of both.

The final theme of ho lachmoh anyoh is the yearning for Moshiach. Why do we look forward to Moshiach and geuloh? To be free from trouble and worries? What is so special about the bais hamikdosh? The Rambam explains that in geuloh we are free from all distractions to achieve our ultimate purpose in life - to connect to Hashem through limud haTorah and avodas Hashem.

We have so many pressures and distractions today - even as we understand our unique position as the Am Hashem. We look forward to the day that we are freed from all these distractions to serve Hashem in a complete and total way.

May we be zoche to a proper Pesach this year and serve Hashem in the best way possible - and be zoche to the real geuloh serving Hashem in the bais hamikdosh with a korban Pesach in Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh.