

PESACH 5778

After Purim, we start preparing in two ways for Pesach: the technical preparations of what's involved in doing the mitzvos of the Yom Tov, and to learn and understand the concepts of Pesach.

What is the message which Pesach sends to every one of us?

In Parshas Bo, Hashem tells Moshe that the story of yetzias mitzrayim is a story that must be told for all generations to come. It is about the ten makkos and how Hashem played around with Egypt, how He carried out the precise judgment on Egypt.

It is to know Who Hashem is.

We discussed in the past that there are four descriptions of geuloh and four cups of wine to correspond to them. The fourth cup, over which we say Hallel, is the culmination of yetzias mitzrayim—it signifies that we became the nation of Hashem. We don't stop at the stages of mere physical or psychological emancipation from physical slavery. We go beyond that to then become spiritually free and become Hashem's chosen nation.

In Parshas Beshalach, Klal Yisroel sang the shiroh at Yam Suf. Klal Yisroel sing about the unbelievable nes, but it ends with building the Beis Hamikdosh and Hashem reigning over the world forever. Why? It is because there is a deeper goal to leaving Egypt. If we are obligated to a human being we can't be obligated to Hashem. Freedom from slavery is a prerequisite. It has to free us to become fully servants of Hashem with no other authority interfering in our lives.

In Dayeinu, we start with the miracles of yetzias mitzrayim, but the climax—the culmination of everything we went through—is coming to Har Sinai, getting the Torah, coming to Eretz Yisroel, and building the Beis Hamikdosh.

The purpose of leaving the slavery of Egypt is to be Hashem's nation through accepting ol malchus shomayim. Where in the globe are we able to fulfill that yoke in the most complete way? In Eretz Yisroel with a Beis Hamikdosh.

Why is it impossible to be a slave to another human being and at the same time be a member of Hashem's people?

We read in Parshas Mishpotim that an eved ivri who wants to stay with his master till yovel must be taken to Beis Din to have his ear pierced. Why? To remind him what he was supposed to have heard at Har Sinai—we are Hashem's slaves and not slaves to human beings. They are limited and finite. Being an eved Hashem means connecting yourself to the limitless potential of the neshomo—there is nothing else of value in our life besides fulfilling the will of Hashem.

Kabbolas ol malchus shomayim recognizes implicitly that Hashem is the ultimate force in this world. These were the lessons are we supposed to get from yetzias mitzrayim—Hashem is in complete and utter absolute control over this world and what happens in this world.

We exchanged the malchus of Pharaoh with the malchus of Hashem.

The Ramban is very clear—kabbolas ol malchus shomayim means recognizing Hashem alone controls the world and runs it with an ultra-precise din and cheshbon. We learned this from the ten makkos—how all of nature is subject to Hashem and that there is no power in avodo zoro. And how each Egyptian was punished with total justice for everything he did to a Jew.

The Rambam, in confronting the concept of kabbolas ol malchus shomayim, looked at the content of kriyas shema and its brochos.

We lead into shema with a brocho accepting Hashem as the cause of all nature and all reality. But there is another dimension to it. The second brocho of ahavoh rabboh or ahavas olam talks about devoting ourselves to learning Torah with simcha and ahavoh. This is also a lead up to kabbolas ol malchus shomayim.

The Rambam tells us that in the first sentence of kriyas shema we declare that there is no other force and power besides Hashem. Achdus Haborei. Then we move on to ahavas Hashem and limud Torah. What are these concepts doing there? Apparently they are also part of kabbolas ol. We were taken out of Egypt for the purpose of becoming Hashem's people. The Yad Hashem doesn't exist only in our recognition of the facts that Hashem runs the world. We also are connected deeply with Hashem on a personal, emotional level. Our identity is bound up with our relationship with Hashem. His Torah preoccupies us in all hours of the day.

There are people who are ardent sports fans who think about their favorite sport, or favorite team, or favorite players, and know all the trivial stupid details of everything about them. Nowadays we have ardent coffee enthusiasts. They think about coffee all the time! All the different types and strains from different parts of the world, where they come from and how they are processed and brewed just right to yield a uniquely perfect aroma and flavor. They are totally preoccupied with it and its details. It defines who they are.

If you want to know what defines a person, you wake him up from a deep sleep and ask him about it—he will be able answer you right away without hesitation. He never stops thinking about it day or night—even in his sleep. How do we get to this level of connection to Hashem? By making limud Torah the central part of our existence—spending day and night thinking about all the intricate ideas and details of the Torah.

Some people are citizens of a country by default—they live somewhere and have a passport of that country, they pay taxes and vote in elections, as a totally pragmatic part of living. But no extra thought is devoted to what the country stands for and what its core values and philosophies are, no feelings of patriotism or sense of belonging and identity.

Other people spend a lot of time on defining what their country stands for and why they feel connected to it in a deep way. They are even willing to die for it. Love of Hashem means preoccupation with Him and it goes down to the core of our being. It is not just a technicality—you have a passport. No, you are immersed in all the details and you are familiar with all the ins and outs. It's where you belong.

So Torah translates into ahavas Hashem because this is how our relationship with Hashem gets embedded into our very essence. We are always preoccupied with it. It brings Hashem's will into our mind in a continuous ongoing way.

Chazal say a free man—ben chorin—is only someone who is preoccupied—oseik—with Torah. What is the connection between the two?

Being a free man—ben chorin—means you exercise your free will.

Rabbeinu Yona says free will—bechiroh—is not a given. A person can go through life on autopilot and is pushed from station to station quite passively. The life of a Torah Jew is thinking about your life and being in control of what you do—minute by minute. It is conscious living in every aspect of life—not just grabbing what passes in front of you like an animal. There is mitzvah or aveiroh involved in every aspect of life, and the Torah forces us to constantly decide what is the proper thing to do in every situation. It gives you tremendous control and discipline over yourself.

Learning Torah means Torah is on your mind all day and you bring it to bear whenever a question comes before you. You don't act spontaneously to further your self-interests. It doesn't matter what we do during the day. We have a Torah which guides us through our lives with the attitudes and ideals of the Torah, and we do not to run our lives on instinct and greed.

Being a Ben Torah means having Torah on your mind at all times. This will only come naturally and easily to you when you have been immersed in Torah during a certain critical period of time of your life when you are forming and shaping your personality.

At a time when you are deciding what is core to your identity and what is peripheral to your life, preoccupation in Torah puts your life on a path that will take you through the rest of life. When you are immersed in Torah while you make those important decisions, you have set the future of your life trajectory according to the Torah and its values. You won't just be acting responsively to external influences and stimuli.

A Ben Torah exercises free-will over every part of his life and stops running on autopilot—but only because he has Torah on his mind. It will only happen naturally 30 years from now if you had Torah on your mind when you were formulating your identity and your life goals—out of a state of deep immersion in Torah.

Klal Yisroel came out of Egypt from bitter slavery of 83 years. Why?

Not just to be free. It is to become Hashem's nation devoted to His service.

How do you put that into practice in your life? Through ahavas Hashem. Love means your mind is preoccupied with it. Many people love money and it preoccupies them throughout the day. A Jew's identity is being a member of Hashem's nation. Hashem makes this very clear right before Ma'amad Har Sinai. Our whole way of going through our day and looking at life, is with an elevated, more spiritual approach to life. This only happens through being preoccupied by Torah and operating within the context of Torah.

This is the whole purpose of yetzias mitzrayim. Our lives are controlled through Torah, and being connected to Hashem means being preoccupied with Torah.

Pesach is an overwhelming Yom Tov with tremendous concepts that we need to internalize. The whole point of leaving Egypt and becoming free from Pharaoh's slavery, the whole point of our existence, is to be a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh.

There is no way to be a free man—a ben chorin—unless one is preoccupied with Torah.