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**תשפ"ה Pesach**

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## תשפ"ה Pesach

The Festival of Pesach is, by far, Judaism's most celebrated holiday. In terms of popularity, it trumps even Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the "High Holidays." The theme of freedom that we celebrate on Pesach resonates so deeply within us that Pesach has become a holiday that we *want* to celebrate. As American Jews, who experience freedom as few other Jews have in the past, we surely have an obligation to thank Hashem and to celebrate the incredible gift of freedom that we enjoy here in this country.

In that regard, our Sages ask a penetrating question:

If a person was in jail for many years, and, at some point, a gracious individual took up his cause and on September 1<sup>st</sup> freed him from jail, it would be appropriate that going forward on every subsequent September 1st, the anniversary of his freedom, he throw a festive party to which he would invite his benefactor and his family and close friends to celebrate his freedom. At the party, he would thank and laud his benefactor for the freedom that he enjoys so much. But what, if after several years of freedom, our subject found himself back in jail? Would it make sense for him to continue celebrating September 1<sup>st</sup> with a festive party? Why would he celebrate when he is no longer free!

Yet isn't that exactly what we are doing when we annually celebrate Pesach? True, we were freed from Egyptian slavery on the 15th of Nissan thousands of years ago, but our freedom has been stripped away from us. We are in exile once again in a world dominated by western civilization's morals and values. Antisemitism is intensifying and hatred for the Land of Israel and what it stands for increases daily. Moreover, we don't live in Israel with the Holy Temple service as the Torah intended, which was the purpose of our freedom. In a very significant way, we are again influenced by, and serve, the "gods" of the society in which we live. From a spiritual perspective, aren't we just like the freed prisoner who is back in jail?

Our Sages answer.

When Hashem freed us from Egyptian slavery, He didn't just set us free and say, "Okay, you are now free; you're on your own, have a nice life." He freed us from Egypt for an exalted purpose: to be His special nation - His ambassadors to the world. This created an eternal relationship with us. Returning to our prisoner analogy, what if, when redeeming the prisoner, the benefactor told him, "I am adopting you like a son, and we are forever connected. From now on, whenever you are in trouble you can count on me to take care of you." Wouldn't he continue to celebrate the anniversary of his freedom despite the circumstances since that marked the beginning of his

relationship with this great benefactor? The freedom he experienced on that September 1<sup>st</sup> gives him great hope and promise that he will once again be redeemed from this jail sentence as well.

This is indeed what we celebrate on Pesach. Not just that we were set free some 3,300 years ago, but, rather, that Hashem chose the Jewish people to be His nation and created an eternal relationship with us. As such, He promised us that He would look after us and protect us. We have an everlasting relationship with Him that cannot be severed. That we are Hashem's nation is also the guaranty that Hashem will ultimately redeem us from this exile as well. So, the Passover Seder not only celebrates the freedom from Egypt, it also portends hope for the future redemption, for Hashem promised us then that He would redeem us in the future.

This is the verse that we say twice daily in the Shema (Numbers 15:41):

מֵאֵי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם לֵהֱיוֹת לְכֶם  
לְאֱלֹהִים אֲנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

*I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of Egypt to be a G-d unto you; I am Hashem your G-d.*

It was for the express purpose of being our G-d and us being Hashem's nation that He took us out. Another verse says (Leviticus 25:54)

נה) כִּי לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים עַבְדֵי הֵם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ  
מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְדֹד אֱלֹקֵיכֶם

*For the Jewish people are My servants, they are My servants whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt – I am Hashem your G-d.*

This verse states clearly that Hashem took us out of Egyptian servitude to be His servants. Indeed, some commentaries explain that the servitude in Egypt was intended as a training ground for our role as Hashem's servants. This prompts a question. Isn't Pesach about *freedom*? Yet, according to this verse we're not free at all! We are still servants- Hashem's servants. All that we did was to swap servitude to Pharoah for servitude to Hashem; so, where's the "freedom?"

As Americans, we find the concept of slavery offensive and inappropriate. How can one human being usurp the rights and freedoms of another and steal him entirely for his own selfish needs and desires? A slave cannot do things for himself because he must dedicate all his talents and energies to fulfill his master's agenda. A greater injustice lies in his inability to fulfill his own purpose in the world. What about *his* life's goals and aspirations? How does one have the right to prevent someone else from

pursuing and realizing his personal mission in life; the matters that he feels are his purpose in life?

Yet, when we think about the concept of being a “slave” (better, a servant) to Hashem, these arguments don’t apply. Being a servant to Hashem is the secret to being truly liberated. That seems counter-intuitive. How could that be?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi informs us in Ethics of the Fathers (6:2):

ב) אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ בֶּן לֵוִי, וְאָמַר וְהַלַּחַת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הֵמָּה  
וְהַמְּכַתֵּב מִכְתָּב אֱלֹהִים הוּא חֲרוּת עַל הַלַּחַת, אֵל תִּקְרָא חֲרוּת אֶלָּא חֲרוּת,  
נְשִׂאִין לָהּ בֶּן חוֹרִין אֶלָּא מִי שְׂעוּסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה

*Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says, “There is no free person in the world except one who learns the Torah.”*

Not only is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi telling us a remarkable fact, viz, that people who keep the Torah are free people, he is also saying that they are the *only* free people in the world! Yet it seems that there is no more restricted a person in the world than a Torah observant Jew. If he is hungry, can he just step into the closest McDonalds and pick up a hamburger? On a beautiful Saturday morning, can he throw his clubs in the trunk and head out for a few rounds of golf? The list of things a Torah observant Jew *cannot* do seems endless. How are we to understand this seemingly audacious statement?

The *Chassam Sofer* (d. 1839) provides an insight into this teaching.

We must know that when the Sages say something, they have perceived the matter's deepest depths; our inability to understand the meaning of their words stems solely from our inability to fathom the great depths of their thinking. Yet the definitions they give are spot-on, identifying the essence of the matter.

Ethics of the Fathers says (4:1):

א) בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קיט), מכל מלמדי השכלתי כי עדותיך שיחה לי. איזהו גבור, הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז), טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר. איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו, שנאמר (תהלים קכח), יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך. אשריך, בעולם הזה. וטוב לך, לעולם הבא. איזהו מכבד, המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר (שמואל א ב), כי מכבדי אכבד ובזי יקלו.

*Ben Azai says: Who is wise? One who learns from every person... Who is mighty? One who overcomes his own evil inclination... Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his lot... Who is respected? One who respects others...*

The Sages are not concerned with a person's external acquisitions, how much information he has memorized, how many pounds he can bench press, how much money he has, or how many times his name appears in the papers. Our Sages are



laser focused on the person himself - *his essence* - who he is. In that light, let's examine each of the four categories.

Who is wise? The one who values wisdom and understands that it alone is the world's most precious commodity, demonstrating it by gleaning knowledge from any source, even from the simplest of people.

Who is mighty? The one who can overcome his burning urge to lash back at the person who has just embarrassed him, or the one who can keep a juicy piece of gossip about his biggest enemy to himself. A truly mighty person can control his most formidable opponent, *himself*, namely, his own evil inclination.

Who is wealthy? One who in his mind lacks nothing because he is perfectly happy with what he has. One who has a million dollars but wishes he had another million, is, in his mind, poor (!) by a million dollars!

Who is respected? One who understands the importance and value of each person, and, because of this, treats all others with the utmost respect because they are very special. This person, who personifies respect, is therefore a most respected person.

When our Sages speak about freedom, they do not mean who can go to the most places or do the most things without restrictions. They are talking about the person's essence.

From this perspective, the person who resists giving in to his hunger and does *not* stop into the first McDonalds to buy a burger is really exercising his freedom from his body's dictates. Someone who can overcome his natural urges based on a conscious decision of what is the best course of action to follow under the circumstance, is truly a free person. The one who gives in to his every whim and urge is the biggest slave in the world. He is the indentured slave to his urges and desires. This notion is quite counterintuitive but a moment's thought will yield how precisely accurate it is.

A customer at Starbucks ordered his coffee beans ground fine but the barista ground them medium by mistake. The customer would not accept the grounds saying that his coffee won't taste as good, so he had them grind another bag of beans to his exact liking. Is this freedom? He must have his coffee *exactly* as he wants, and, if not, he can't drink it. He is not free to say, "No problem! It will be fine, I can handle it."

This is why the person who has a divine detailed system of what is correct and what is not and makes an intellectual choice in favor of what is objectively correct, is the only free person in the world. Such a person controls and overrides his urges and desires rather than being governed by them.

There is a deeper level to this concept. Maimonides writes in the Laws of Divorce (2:20)

רמב"ם יד החזקה הלכות גירושין פרק ב

**מי שהדין נותן שכופין אותו לגרש את אשתו ולא רצה לגרש בית דין של ישראל בכל מקום ובכל זמן מכין אותו עד שיאמר "רוצה אני" ויכתוב הגט והוא גט כשר וכן אם הכוהו גוים ואמרו לו עשה מה שישראל אומרין לך ולחצו אותו ישראל ביד הגוים עד שיגרש הרי זה כשר ואם הגוים מעצמן אנסוהו עד שכתב הואיל והדין נותן שיכתוב הרי זה גט פסול ולמה לא בטל גט זה שהרי הוא אנוס בין ביד גוים בין ביד ישראל שאין אומרין אנוס אלא למי שנלחץ ונדחק לעשות דבר שאינו מחוייב מן התורה לעשותו כגון מי שהוכה עד שמכר או נתן אבל מי שתקפו יצרו הרע לבטל מצוה או לעשות עבירה והוכה עד שעשה דבר שחייב לעשותו או עד שנתרחק מדבר שאסור לעשותו אין זה אנוס ממנו אלא הוא אנוס עצמו בדעתו הרעה לפיכך זה שאינו רוצה לגרש מאחר שהוא רוצה להיות מישראל רוצה הוא לעשות כל המצות ולהתרחק מן העבירות ויצרו הוא שתקפו וכיון שהוכה עד שתשש יצרו ואמר רוצה אני כבר גרש לרצונו לא היה הדין נותן שכופין אותו לגרש וטעו בית דין של ישראל או שהיו הדיוטות ואנסוהו עד שגרש הרי זה גט פסול הואיל וישראל אנסוהו יגמור ויגרש ואם הגוים אנסוהו לגרש שלא כדין אינו גט אע"פ שאמר בגוים רוצה אני ואמר לישראל כתבו: וחתמו הואיל ואין הדין מחייבו להוציא והגוים אנסוהו אינו גט**

*Someone who is obligated by the Torah to give his wife a divorce document but refuses to do so, the Jewish court beats him until he says, "Okay! I want to give the divorce!" This divorce document is kosher ... Why is this divorce document not invalid being that it was forced upon him, the Torah mandating that it be voluntarily given? Because someone who is in the grips of his*

*evil inclination to transgress a law in the Torah but was hit until he did what he was supposed to do by law, ... really wants to be part of the Jewish nation and fulfill all the commandments, but he is in the grips of his evil inclination. Beating him weakens the evil inclination's grip on him so that when he says, "I want to give it!" this declaration reflects his true desire and is sincere.*

Maimonides has taught us a profound lesson. Every Jew's true essence is to want to do Hashem's will, the Torah. What prevents him from doing so? The evil inclination, which holds him hostage. Hitting the person subdues the evil inclination enough for the person's true self to come out.

This concept is expressed most clearly in the prayer of Rabbi Alexandri as recorded in the Talmud, Tractate Berachos 17a.

ורבי אלכסנדרי בתר דמצלי אמר הכי רבון העולמים גלוי וידוע לפניך  
שרצוננו לעשות רצונך ומי מעבב שאור שבעיסה ושעבוד מלכיות יהי רצון  
מלפניך שתצילנו מידם ונשוב לעשות חוקי רצונך בלבב שלם

*After finishing his Amida, Rabbi Alexandrai would say, "Master of the Universe, it is clear and revealed to You that our true desire is to fulfill Your desire. What is stopping us? The leaven in the dough (the materialistic part of us) and the kingdom we live in (societal influence). Please save us from them so we may fulfill Your desire as You wish us to.*

Would that we appreciate that our true self is our soul, not our body, it would be much easier to understand why the only free person is one who does what his *soul* wants him to do. Yet he may not always be aware of what his soul wants because his evil inclination has him in his grips, either “the leaven in the dough,” or the strong influence of the ambient society. If he could only shake off those external influences and isolate his true self, the right thing is exactly what **he** wants to do.

As Rabbi Alexandri said, our true goal is to do Hashem’s will. If the only desire of a servant is to fulfill his master’s will, then, his servitude is not slavery at all. *Aux contraire*; through his “slavery” he fulfils his every desire and aspiration. And to think that we get to be the servants of the King of all Kings, Hashem! What a privilege!

This is how it should be with every Jew. Since, deep down, our true desire is to fulfill Hashem’s wishes, we should feel that learning Torah and performing mitzvot is the greatest privilege. This is what we really want to do! Unfortunately, as the Rambam and Rav Alexandri say, the earthy body, which has its own selfish lusts and desires, gets in our way and blocks us from doing what we really want to do for Hashem.

There is another layer of depth to this. Since each of us has a unique mission or “job” that our Master, Hashem, has put us here to do, and the context in which we are to accomplish that

mission is the framework of the Torah and mitzvot, it is only through serving Hashem that we will be able to realize our true purpose in this world. Since each person is different and has his own specific challenges in performing the Torah's mitzvot, his success at this is the fabric of his mission in this world. He is serving Hashem in a way that no person in the past ever has and no person in the future ever will. There is no one who can provide Hashem with the unique service that he is providing. Hence, instead of service to Hashem preventing him from fulfilling his mission in the world, it is actually the *only way* that he can fulfill it. In this way a Torah observant Jew is the only truly free person in the world.

There is yet another way to understand how performing Hashem's mitzvot is really serving our own selves.

Consider the following. What is the difference between the following two people?

Sanford is a gifted CPA who works for a prestigious accounting firm. When he arrives to work every day, it is to a list of problems that have accumulated and need to be resolved. He has distinguished himself as an excellent problem solver, and he can usually figure out the solution to any problem within a few hours. His bosses have come to rely on his unique skill and very often, daily, burden him with many challenging matters. This puts extreme pressure on him, but he has learned to live with

the pressure. What upsets him most is that he must often stay late in order to finish his work, and this cuts significantly into his family time. He misses some of his children's important lifecycle events, and often he isn't even there to help them with their math homework. He feels trapped, but what can he do? His bosses are relying on him to resolve important matters for their biggest clients.

James is a servant who receives a gentle knock on his door at precisely 7:30 am every day and is handed a list of chores that need to be completed by the end of the day. He keeps himself busy tending to his chores, none of which is too strenuous, and gets an hour for lunch. He never has to work past 6:00 pm and has no worries or pressures. He can eat a leisurely dinner with his family and help his kids with their homework.

Obviously, Sanford has it much harder than James! He has more pressure, and his family also suffers because of his job. He is subject to the scrutiny of his bosses who expect superior results from him. Although many would envy Sanford's job, in this context, who is the bigger slave, Sanford or James? So why does everyone want to be a Sanford and not a James?

The answer is that at the end of the day, when Sanford leaves work, he is many hundreds of dollars richer than he was when he woke up in the morning. He is the beneficiary of all his hard work, so it is worth it for him to put himself out for it. His

family also benefits in many ways from the abundant money that he earns through his hard work. When James goes to bed at night, however, he is the same penniless person he was when he woke up. He has no benefit whatsoever from all his work, as it all goes to his master. At the end of the day, he has absolutely nothing to show for himself from all the work that he did that day.

This world works in the same way. We strive to amass wealth, thinking that we will be the beneficiaries of our labor. When we pass away, however, none of it comes with us. All of our efforts were for others, much like with James. The only proceeds from our labors that we *can* take with us, because they truly belong to us even when we leave this world, are the Torah that we learned and the Mitzvot that we have performed. These are the **only** things that accompany us to the world to come. All material goods remain here for others to enjoy. So, serving Hashem by doing the mitzvot, which allows us to keep our earnings, is really serving ourselves. It is the only way that we keep the benefits of our own labors, like free people. The “Sanfords” are people who do the Torah and Mitzvot, who are working for themselves and taking the fruits of their labors with them.

There is yet another simple way to explain how serving Hashem is not really slavery.



Our Sages teach us, עבד מלך מלך – *the servant of the king, is himself a king.*

To be a servant to Hashem is the greatest honor possible. It is an absolute privilege to be able to fulfill the wishes of none other than Hashem, King and Master of this amazing world. The greatest praise Hashem could bestow upon Moshe was "משה" *Moshe my servant.* This was Moshe's claim to fame. He was worthy of being Hashem's servant!

In the same sense, we do not consider it a task and a chore to serve Hashem. Rather, it is a privilege.

At the seder we will recite in the Haggadah:

בְּכֹל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיֵּיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֹצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם

*In every generation, a person must view himself as if he personally left Egypt.*

Quite a tall order! How, growing up here in "America the free," can we possibly feel as if we were enslaved and then went free? What possibly constitutes the framework for the slavery? If, however, we define freedom as the Sages do, which means an individual's freedom to do what, deep down, in his soul's innermost recesses, he really wants to do—the Torah and mitzvot—we surely could feel the excitement of the freedom from the dictates of our whims and urges and the freedom from societal pressures. As our souls grow in Torah and Mitzvot and

truly become more and more free, we can use Pesach as the time to do a reckoning of where we are on our journey, celebrating and thanking Hashem for the true freedom for which He took us out of Egypt to enjoy.