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Pesach

Spiritual Freedom

Rabbi Yeboshua says: ... in Nissan we were redeemed [from Mitzrayim] and in Nissan we will be redeemed (Rosh Hashana 11a)

The special energy of the month of Nissan and, more specifically, the holiday of Pesach is freedom. As we say in the prayers, Pesach is *z'man cheroteinu* (time of our freedom). Our national freedom though is not the entire picture. On the night of Pesach, Chazal demand of every individual to personally view himself as if he actually left Mitzrayim.¹ In light of the fact that we are not presently enslaved however, how are we to relate to this obligation?

To place our freedom in proper perspective, the Gemara tells us to contrast it with the past slavery by starting the *seder* with our history of bondage.² There is a disagreement between Rav and Shmuel about exactly how to relate the story of slavery. As the Gemara says:³

Start with shame and end with praise. What is shame? Rav says [to start relating the story from] "in the beginning our forefathers were idol worshippers"⁴ and Shmuel says [to start relating the story from] "we were slaves [in Egypt]".

The Maharal⁵ explains that both Rav and Shmuel agree that the exodus from Mitzrayim had an aspect of both physical and spiritual freedom. They only differ in which of these freedoms to emphasize on the night of the *seder*. Shmuel holds that since physical freedom is more tangible, we should begin the *seder* from when we were physically enslaved in Egypt. Rav on the other hand maintains that since spiritual freedom is more primary we should begin from when we were spiritually enslaved to worshipping idols. Based on this we can say that in addition to the physical freedom it is also the spiritual freedom that is demanded of us to personally relive on Pesach.⁶

The Mitzrayim Within

With the above in mind, it is incumbent upon us to delve into the nature of spiritual slavery. Names in Judaism always express essence.⁷ Therefore by studying the depth behind names we are able to get an understanding of the spiritual nature of the person, object etc. bearing that name. The root of the name Mitzrayim is "*meitzar*" (constraints).⁸ Rav Dessler⁹ explains that just like the physical Mitzrayim constricted us physically, our inner Mitzrayim namely the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination), constricts and enslaves us spiritually. Based on this idea the commentaries suggest that though the story of coming out of Mitzrayim is obviously true on a literal physical level, it is also an allusion to a person's own individual freedom from his spiritual exile.¹⁰ In this parallel Pharaoh represents the evil inclination,¹¹ Moshe Rabbeinu represents the good inclination, while the Jewish people represent the soul that is essentially exiled from its spiritual source. Building on this theme the Siftei Chaim¹²

¹ Pesachim 116a

² Maharsha to Pesachim 116a

³ Pesachim 116a

⁴ According to the Rambam (Hilchot Chametz u'matzah 7:4) this is referring to the times of Terach (Avraham's father) whereas the Rashbeitz holds it is referring to Mitzrayim; the Rokeach says it's referring to both.

⁵ Maharal, Gevurot Hashem, 52

⁶ Lev David of the Chida, Perek 30; Chesed L'Avraham, ma'ayan sheni, nahar 57; Ma'amar Hachochma of the Ramchal; See Michtav M'Eliyahu II p.17

⁷ See Yoma 83b; Michtav M'Eliyahu II p.17

⁸ For an example of this see Tehilim 118:5

⁹ See Michtav M'Eliyahu II p. 17; see also Alshich to Devarim 26:8

¹⁰ See Alshich to Devarim 26:8; See Ohr Hachaim to Devarim 26:8; Michtav M'Eliyahu II p.17; Michtav M'Eliyahu III p.293; See also Michtav M'Eliyahu II 45-46; Siftei Chaim, Shemot p. 146

¹¹ Rambam, Igrot Mussar; See also Mesilat Yesharim perek sheini

¹² Siftei Chaim, Shemot p. 146

explains that if we delve deeper into how Pharaoh enslaved the Jewish people, we will have a better understanding of how to overcome our evil inclination. Let's look at a few lessons we can learn about the battle with the yetzer hara from the story of the exodus.

Fruitless Labor

The Jewish people were not enslaved the moment they entered Mitzrayim. In fact the process of becoming Pharaoh's slaves was a gradual thought-out process that took time. Our first goal is to study that process. The kind of work that *Pharaoh* made the Jewish people do is referred to in the Torah as "*avodat perech*" (back breaking labor).¹³ The Ba'al Haturim¹⁴ explains the word as a combination of the words "*peh*" (mouth) and "*ra'ch*" (soft). Pharaoh "smooth-talked" the Jewish people into working for him by promising them money for their work.¹⁵ He furthermore tricked them by telling them that they are building cities in which they can live. However, in reality there was no money and no magnificent cities to live in. Chazal tell us that instead of giving them productive work, Pharaoh gave them work that yielded no results, by making them build on quick sand.¹⁶ Though to the naked eye the buildings looked firm and indestructible, it was only a matter of time until they would all come crashing down. This is the ploy that the Yetzer hara uses on us as well. He convinces us that we must continue to construct destructible structures by making us believe there is permanence to them. He makes us think houses, cars, luxuries, and fame is what we should spend all our time planning to acquire. However, we know that these worldly accomplishments are transient and fleeting. To invest one's time on them is exactly like building on quicksand. The only worthwhile accomplishments are spiritually related ones, as only they will last and carry us through to the next world. Just like Pharaoh's financial promises were only a ploy to physically enslave the Jewish people, so too the yetzer hara's promises are only a ploy to spiritually enslave the *neschama*

Temporary Victory

Following the storyline, Moshe Rabbeinu, representing the yetzer tov (good inclination), came and announced that the time for the redemption had come. The *pasuk* tells us further that the elders of Israel all believed in Moshe with full faith.¹⁷ However when it came to confronting Pharaoh none of the elders accompanied Moshe and Aharon.¹⁸ They had such a mentality of "*this is what life is and what it will always be*" that they were afraid of even suggesting to Pharaoh to free them. Similarly, when a person is caught in the bonds of the *Yetzer hara*, the hold on him is so tight that he feels too intimidated to confront his *Yetzer hara* and his desires. He feels as though he can never change and sadly begins to make due with his spiritual shortcomings. What is the way to overcome this?

Following with the story, *Moshe* and *Aharon* then confronted *Pharaoh* and asked him to let the Jewish people leave for a three-day journey in the desert so that they can bring sacrifices to *Hashem*.¹⁹ Of course they did not come back, and *Moshe* certainly never intended to either. So why did he only ask for a three day journey? *Rav Dessler* explains²⁰ that when *B'nei Yisrael* were still in the clutches of *Mitzrayim*, there was no way for them to accept that they were about to leave and never come back—not just because *Pharaoh* would not agree, but because they themselves weren't ready for it. They weren't ready to leave everything behind and go to a desert with their women and children. This is why Moshe Rabbeinu asked for only a three-day journey. Only once *B'nei Yisrael* knew that they would only be leaving on a **temporary** journey, were they able to gather the courage to leave.

Rav Dessler expands on this idea and suggests that this is true regarding confronting one's yetzer hara as well. When a person is used to a certain behavior, no matter how destructive it is, he cannot let go of it while it still has a hold on him. He identifies that behavior as being a part of him, and by destroying it, feels as though he is effectively destroying himself. Initially it is too painful for a person to leave the Yetzer hara behind completely, it would be much easier to say, *I will not speak lashon hara for the next three hours* than to say *I will never do it again*. By

¹³ Shemot 1:14

¹⁴ Ba'al Haturim to Shemot 1:14 based on Sotah 11

¹⁵ See Da'at Zekeinim to Shemot 1:13

¹⁶ Shemot Rabbah 1:10: Sotah 13a; Rambam Hilchot Avadim

¹⁷ See Shemot 4:31

¹⁸ See Rashi to Shemot 5:1

¹⁹ Shemot 5:3

²⁰ Michtav M'Eliyahu III p.293; See also Michtav M'Eliyahu II 45-46; See Shabat Shiurim of Rav Mordechai Miller zsl on Parshat Beshalach

leaving the way open to do the act in the future, this tactic makes the challenge at hand a lot easier to handle.²¹ This is the way to overcome the initial fear of confronting one's Yetzer hara.

Time for Introspection

The Midrash²² tells us that Moshe Rabeinu convinced Pharaoh to allow the Jewish people to rest on the day of Shabat. Following Moshe Rabeinu's plea to free the Jewish people however, Pharaoh not only took away this privilege but also increased their workload.²³ What can we learn about the inner battle between the forces of good and evil from the actions of Moshe Rabeinu and Pharaoh? The Gemara tells us that when a person repeats a transgression he gets so used to it that he no longer views it as a sin (Yoma 86b). Therefore, the Mesilat Yesharim²⁴ says that the first step in spiritual growth is to designate a time to contemplate one's actions in order to determine which areas need improvement. This time for introspection, also called *cheshbon hanefesh* (*[spiritual] accounting of the soul*), is meant to prevent sins from becoming instinctual habits.

Though ideally one is supposed to set aside time everyday for contemplation, Shabat is the most opportune time for it. How is this so? Just like on Shabat we can only enjoy what we prepared during the week, so too in the world to come we can only bask in the things we accomplished in this world. In this sense on Shabbat we get a glimpse of what our future *olam haba* will be like.²⁵ When a person feels good and happy on Shabbat, it is a sign that he has had a productive and creative week; if a person feels uneasy or despondent on Shabat, it is an allusion to the fact that he has not truly utilized his potential during the week. This is why Shabat is known as *m'ein olam haba*, (like the world to come).²⁶ Through experiencing Shabat correctly we are able to see if we are spiritually on the right track.

Perhaps now we can understand the lesson behind the clash between Moshe Rabeinu and Pharaoh over the day of Shabat. As mentioned above, time for introspection is the first step to spiritual freedom. For Moshe Rabeinu who is the representative of the good inclination, the institution of Shabat as the day of rest was the first step to freedom. On the other hand for Pharaoh who is the representative of the evil inclination, getting rid of the Shabat and increasing the workload was the perfect way to combat any thought of autonomy. In a practical sense our evil inclination uses the same tactic as Pharaoh through busying our own lives with trivial things to such a degree that we barely have time to ask if what we are doing is right or wrong.²⁷ He makes us live our lives through habit, doing today what we did yesterday, leaving us little opportunity for change. The challenge is to combat this onslaught through constant self evaluation and introspection. This is the main inner battle between good and evil.

Teshuva Ignited by Suffering

Pharaoh's refusal to let the people go was followed by a series of plagues that struck Egypt. More than once while under the influence of the plagues, Pharaoh agreed to change his ways and let the people go in exchange for relief from the catastrophes that were brought on Egypt. However, as soon as the plagues were taken away Pharaoh went back to his original stance of not freeing the Jewish people.²⁸ As the *pasuk* says:²⁹ *and Pharaoh saw that there was relief and he hardened his heart and didn't listen to them [Moshe and Aharon] as Hashem had said.* What does this teach us about our constant battle with the *yetzer hara*?

²¹ Perhaps this idea is similar to that of the reason why a man is allowed to be alone with his wife when she is nida. Since she will at some point be mutar to him again, psychologically it is easier for the man to control himself now from being with her. See Mishna Berura 27 to Orach Chaim 3:14; Also according to Rashi (who holds even *biya rishina* is not allowed until after the process of growing her nails etc) it can also be one explanation as to why the Torah allowed the *eshet yefat toar*. Knowing that she will be mutar to him later he can overcome his urge now. Then later after she goes through the process of growing her nails etc she will not look so attractive to him anymore and he will not marry her.. See Ohr Hachaim there who explains the reason according to those who hold *biya rishona* is mutar.

²² Shemot Rabbah 1:28

²³ See Shemot Rabbah 5:18 and Shemot 5:7

²⁴ Mesilat Yesharim perek sheini

²⁵ Imrei Pinchas Shaar Hashabat 67; Reishit Chochma, Shaar Hakedosha 2:21 & Shaar Ha'ahava 6:65; see S'fat Emet, Beshalach 5652 s.v. b'pasuk; Ohr Hachaim to Shemot 31:16

²⁶ See zemer "Ma Yedidot" based on Berachot 57b

²⁷ Mesilat Yesharim perek sheini

²⁸ This happened following the plagues of frogs (Shemot 8:4-11), wild animals (Shemot 8:24-28), hail (Shemot 9:27-35), and locusts (Shemot 10:16-20).

²⁹ Shemot 8:11

Often, the thing that motivates a person to contemplate changing his ways is the destructive results of his actions. It can be anything from financial loss to deteriorating health, from loss of relationships to lack of life fulfillment; when a person is facing the negative outcome of his own doings it is much easier to decide to change. In times of hardship it is rather simple to attribute one's suffering to his sins and therefore turn to Hashem in repentance. However, as soon as the troubles begin to go away, the yetzer hara pulls the person back to his old ways. At times, the *yetzer hara* even convinces him to attribute his previous sufferings to outside factors that had nothing to do with his wrongdoings. This process mirrors that of Pharaoh's reaction to the plagues. While under the duress of the plagues, Pharaoh decided time and time again that he would no longer go back to his stubborn policy of not letting the Jewish people go. However, as soon as relief was in sight he went back to being the same old Pharaoh.

How can we avoid falling for this ploy of the yetzer hara? When faced with a burning desire to go back to our old ways, we must remind and to a certain extent even relive the experience of having to deal with the previous negative outcomes of our poor decisions in the past before deciding what to do. As *chazal* tell us:³⁰ *who is a wise man? He who sees [in the present] the consequences of his actions.* Through reliving the past regrets we can avoid making the same mistakes once again.

Not Wasting a Second

Following the ten plagues, Pharaoh finally agreed to let the Jewish people go. His clasp on them had recognizably loosened, and he had no choice but to admit defeat. The Torah tells us however that the Jewish people left in haste.³¹ This too teaches us that once a person gets clarity in realizing that he shouldn't be in a certain place or shouldn't do a certain action he should run away from it right away. We see an example of this regarding Yosef during his ordeal with Potiphar's wife. She grabbed his garment and he ran out leaving the torn garment in Potiphar's wife's hands.³² She later used the garment as proof to falsely accuse Yosef of trying to seduce her.³³ The obvious question here is why didn't Yosef grab his garment before heading out? He certainly could've overpowered her and taken his garment back! Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz answers³⁴ that the reason why Yosef ran away as fast as he could was because even that one extra moment it would take to grab his garment back would give the *Yetzer hara* one more opportunity to make him sin. For Yosef it was worth the risk of being sent to prison for twelve years as a result of the false accusation rather than face an extra test of the *Yetzer hara*.³⁵

We can also learn this idea from *chametz* and *matzah*. The words *chametz* and *matzah* share the same letter except that *chametz* has the letter *chet* while *matzah* has the letter *hei*. The difference between the shape of the letter *chet* and the letter *hei* is just a blot of ink.³⁶ That blot of ink is indicative of the time that makes something become *chametz* (by leaving the dough for eighteen minutes to rise). On *Pesach* we are told to eat *matzah* and get rid of *chametz*. This may hint to the idea of being fervent in running away from our *Yetzer hara* without wasting even one second; especially because one can never know if that second can be the one to push a person to the point of no return. As the commentators point out that the Jewish people were on the 49th level of impurity and had *Hashem* not rushed them out, they would have reached the fiftieth level of impurity from which one can never climb out of.³⁷ This is one lesson we can learn from the commandment to eat matzah on *Pesach*.

Cutting All Ties

Even though the Jewish people now left *Mitzrayim*, it was still not the end of the matter. Any trouble on the way could have easily triggered their desire to return to *Mitzrayim*. As mentioned before, they only asked to leave for a three-day journey because the Jewish people themselves weren't yet ready to leave *Mitzrayim* altogether. However once they had left the influence of *Mitzrayim* it was time to take the second step in gaining freedom by cutting off all possibilities of return. As the *pasuk* says:³⁸ *And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out, G-d did not lead them*

³⁰ Tamid 32; See also Avot 2:13

³¹ Shemot 12:39; The only reason they waited until the morning was because that's what Hashem wanted them to do.

³² Bereishit 39:11-12

³³ Bereishit 39:13-18

³⁴ Sichot Mussar, M'amar 21; See also Ramban there who gives a different answer to the same question

³⁵ See Bava Batra 50b regarding putting oneself in a place of test; See Vehigadeta of Rav Ya'akov Galinsky zsl, Bereishit p.529

³⁶ See Shlah, Pesachim, Matza Ashira, drush shlishi; Alshich

³⁷ Chesed L'Avraham ma'ayan sheni ayin hakore nahar nun vav; Bnei Yisaschar

³⁸ Shemot 13:17

through the land of Plishtim, because it was close, for G-d said lest the people will reconsider when they see war and will return to Egypt. The longer route made it much harder for them to go back to *Mitzrayim* upon facing further battles against their enemies.³⁹

This is precisely the next step in fighting the *yetzer hara* as well. Following the temporary journey away from one's destructive behavior, when one feels like he's ready to take the next step, he should break away from his old habit completely and make it impossible for himself to go back to it. This stage prevents one from going back to his old ways upon facing challenges along the new path he has chosen to take.⁴⁰

One Final Test

After the Jewish people finally left *Mitzrayim* and thought they were free of all the horrors of Egypt, Pharaoh and his army came running after them. This is the typical *Yetzer hara*. Precisely when a person thinks he is free from the temptations of his old tendencies, it comes running after him. Perhaps we can understand the reason for this based on the *tefillah* that we say in *ma'ariv*: *remove the satan (the yetzer hara)*⁴¹ *from before us and from behind us*. The first part of the *tefillah* namely *remove the satan from before us* is understood; the *yetzer hara* is standing before us and preventing us from taking the proper path we are supposed to take. We therefore ask Hashem to help us overcome the obstacles that are preventing us from doing Hashem's will. However the second part of the *tefillah* is hard to understand. Why do we pray to Hashem to remove the *yetzer hara* from behind us? The imagery of the *yetzer hara* being behind us implies that we have already overcome and surpassed him. What then is the purpose of requesting from Hashem to remove the *yetzer hara* from behind us?

The Gemara⁴² says that when a person regrets doing a *mitzvah* it is as though he didn't do it. It therefore follows that after a person has fulfilled a *mitzvah* it is still possible for him to lose the *mitzvah* through regret. This is the *yetzer hara*'s last resort to win the battle. It is for this reason that we see many examples of people facing great challenges following the fulfillment of a great deed. In fact at times it seems as though it is the great deed itself that resulted in the challenges that followed. All this is the *yetzer hara*'s last ploy to make the person regret his great deed and thereby lose it altogether.

We see many examples of this throughout the Torah. The chapter that follows the narrative of *akeidat Yitzchak*, is the death of Sarah. Chazal⁴³ tell us that while Avraham Avinu was about to slaughter Yitzchak, the satan showed a vision of what was taking place to Sarah. Out of the shock of losing her only child, Sarah's soul left her and she died. This is a perfect example of a great deed that seemingly led to a tragic result. At that point it would have been very easy for Avraham Avinu to regret what he did and lose all the merit that came from passing this difficult test. However, Avraham Avinu stood strong. The commentaries⁴⁴ point out that the letter "*chaf*" in the word "*v'livkotah*" (and to cry for her) is written smaller than the rest of the letters to tell us that he didn't mourn excessively. There was no mourning out of regret rather only the kind of mourning that is expected of a husband to do for his wife. Avraham Avinu not only passed the first test but also the second test of not regretting what he did.

There is a similar turn of events with regards to Yosef Hatzadik. Following his passing the test of refusing to give in to Potiphar's wife's request to be with him, he was put in jail for twelve years.⁴⁵ The one who caused him to go to jail was Potiphar's wife. It was her way of taking revenge on him for not giving in to her desires. Yosef had twelve years to think about how if he had given in to her he wouldn't be in the situation he is now. And yet he did not regret it and at the end his very stay in prison led to his becoming the second in power to Pharaoh.

This is the final battle with the *Yetzer Hara*. Even when it seems like the *mitzvoth* that we did resulted in more bad than good, we must remind ourselves to remain strong in our *emunah* and not regret the good that we have done. This is perhaps one of the reasons why we pray for Hashem to remove the *yetzer hara* from behind us. Though it is true that the imagery of the *yetzer hara* being behind us implies that we have already passed him; we still ask Hashem to help us stand strong against the *yetzer hara* that attacks from behind and tries to make us regret the *mitzvoth* that we did.

³⁹ See Rashi to Shemot 13:17

⁴⁰ Michtav M'Eliyahu III p.293; See also Michtav M'Eliyahu II 45-46; See also Shabat Shiurim of Rav Mordechai Miller zsl on Parshat Beshalach

⁴¹ As the Gemara says (Bava Batra 16?) that the satan, the *yetzer hara* and the *malach hamavet* are one and the same.

⁴² Kidushin 40b see Rashi there *dibur hamatchil* "b'tohel"

⁴³ See Rashi to Bereshit 23:2 who brings the *Tanchuma* (end of Vayera) and *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 72

⁴⁴ See Ba'al Haturim to Bereishit 23:2; See also Rav Hirsch

⁴⁵ See Siftei Chachamim to Rashi Bereishit 40:23

What is the way to combat this final assault of the yetzer hara? Let's continue with the story of the exodus. The Jewish people were now stuck in the desert with nowhere to go, *Pharaoh* chasing them from one end and the sea staring them in the eyes on the other. What did they do? The *Torah* tells us that there were those who didn't pass this difficult test and began to question their previous decision of leaving Mitzrayim. As the *pasuk* says:⁴⁶ *They told Moshe: were there no graves in Egypt that you took us to the desert to die? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt?* On the other hand there was the response of Nachshon ben Aminadav who rather than regretting what they had done, continued on by surging into the sea.⁴⁷ Inspired by the fact that he was fulfilling Hashem's will, he demonstrated his *emunah* by going into the sea up to his neck until the sea split.⁴⁸ This is the proper response to the final attack of the yetzer hara. Even when it seems as though bad things are resulting from following the Torah, we must strengthen our *emunah* in the providence of Hashem and pass the final test of not regretting the good that we did.

Every Individual's Story

The narrative of *yetzias Mitzrayim* is not just about slavery and miracles; it is the personal story of every individual. In one way or another every person is spiritually enslaved. From laziness to pride, from laxity in keeping *mitzvos* to giving in to our desires, we all have spiritual weaknesses we struggle with. Pesach, being *zman cheruteinu* (the time of our freedom), is the auspicious time to overcome our spiritual weaknesses and leave the bondage of our inner Mitzrayim.⁴⁹ Through introspection and proper utilization of the spiritual opportunities of this time we defeat the pharaoh within and leave behind our internal Mitzrayim. This is one way we can literally fulfill the requirement of seeing ourselves as if we left Mitzrayim. May we all merit making the most of this most auspicious time and thereby merit seeing the ultimate redemption speedily in our days.

⁴⁶ Shemot 14:11

⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that throughout their journey in the desert there was always the camp (the *erev rav* who now represented the yetzer hara) that suggested going back to Egypt when faced with challenges such as lack of water and food.

⁴⁸ Sotah 37b

⁴⁹ See Michtav M'Eliyahu II p.17