

Pesach Message True Freedom

I remember it well. The year was 1974, on Tisha B'Av. As a young boy of ten years old, I was taken by my late father Z"L and older brother, during the late afternoon to a mass rally outside the Soviet Embassy. We were demonstrating and petitioning the Soviet Government to release the Jews who had been incarcerated in Soviet prisons, in the Gulag and Siberia. Protesting that these, our fellow Jews who had been refused exit visas to leave the USSR, be permitted to leave, and travel to Israel.

I recollect it well. I was on the shoulders of my older brother Kenneth; about 5000 people had turned up for the event. And I recall joining in with the refrain, can you imagine all those many people crying out; "What do we want? - Freedom. When do we want it? - Now!" I cannot forget it because we felt at that time united with Jews the world over to protest a terrible injustice against our people.

That word freedom, I think is the spotlight of the Yom Tov of Pesach. In our prayers we declare that Pesach is "*Zeman Cheruteinu*". The Time of our Freedom. Is that not after all what we celebrate on Pesach, the liberation of the Israelites from the bondage and slavery of Egypt?

The focal point of the Seder night is the Haggadah. We are instructed in the Torah to relate the story of the Exodus to our children, as if we too are reliving the story of our ancestors' redemption. The Mishneh in Pesachim says that there are two aspects to this ruling. Firstly. We start the Haggadah speaking disparagingly of the *B'nai Yisrael*. Secondly. We conclude with praise. The recapitulation of the Exodus story is to bring us

to a greater acknowledgement and appreciation of the Almighty, and that it was He in his kindness who took us out of the land of Egypt and we give thanks to G-d for that.

There is an argument in The Talmud as to where or how we should start speaking disparagingly. According to *Rav* we should start from the words; “At the beginning our forefathers were idol worshippers, and now G-d has brought us near to His service.” *Shmuel* suggests we should start the recital from the words; “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and G-d brought us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.”

The Definitive Halachah is that in fact we use both passages to fulfil the dictum of the Mishneh that we should start the story disparagingly. We begin with “We were slaves to Pharaoh”, and then later in the Haggadah, we mention the view of *Rav* where we say “At the beginning our forefathers were idol worshippers....” The big question is; what’s the big problem? What difference does it make from where we start the story of the Haggadah? And surely according to the view of *Rav*, going back so far in time to Terach the father of Abraham is superfluous to the essential story of the redemption, why therefore revert so far in our history to relate the story of the Exodus?

The *Maharal* from Prague answers that in fact these two Sages of the Talmud were debating the real meaning of slavery and freedom. There are two types of slavery. Firstly there is the physical slavery, personified by the bondage in Egypt which is the view of Shmuel-We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Then there is the spiritual slavery. This idea ties in with *Rav* who says we must recite the fact that our forefathers were really idol worshippers, enslaved to the dominant culture of the time. And just as there were two forms of slavery so there are two types of freedom. One is to be released from the shackles and bondage of a gruelling physical slavery that persecuted the Children of

Israel, and prevented each and every individual from running away. The second is a spiritual freedom, liberating ourselves from a spiritual slavery that threatens to take away who we really are and submerge us in the idolatrous society of the time.

We recite in the Haggadah that “In every generation, each person is duty bound to look at oneself as if one has experienced the Exodus from Egypt.” Not only do we sit around at the Seder table recounting the story of what happened all those years ago to our ancestors, but we relive the event. We ingest the Matzah, and consume freedom. We taste the bitter herbs, and absorb the bitterness of slavery.

We live in a tolerant country where, Thank G-d we have been given the liberty to practise our religion in the way that we choose. We are physically (in this country at least) free to do what we please. But the message of *Rav* at the Seder table strikes a chord. He says that we should begin our recitation recounting the spiritual slavery. How free are we really, when many are enchained to their own addictions and desires and unable to emancipate themselves from their own restrictions & limitations?

So at the Seder this year let us examine the story of the Exodus and make sense of what it really means to us. The words of the Soviet Jewry Demonstration still reverberate in my ears. “What do we want?-freedom. When do we want it?-Now!”