We start the Haggadah talking about the lowly state in which we found ourselves at the beginning of the process of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Why do we say עבדים היה לפתח and not the more concise עבד פנוי במצרים, we were Pharaoh’s slaves? After all, in Tehillim, we are called אבדי חמש, so the parallel would be אבדי פנוי. Is there a major difference between the two phrases?

If we continue moving backward in history, the real beginning of the geula was the moment G-d appeared to Moshe by the sneh, the burning bush, where He told him to return to Egypt and lead the Jews out.

The question is asked why the sneh was deemed the most appropriate vehicle for this initial conversation? A lowly burning bush doesn’t seem to be the glamorous mechanism we would have envisioned.

Rav Soloveichik suggests that there is a fundamental difference between עבדים היה לפתח במצרים and עבד פנוי. Hayinu leParoh, we were to Pharaoh, means a social reality, an external physical state in which we found ourselves. We were subjugated to servitude, but it didn’t go to our core.

Avdei Paroh, servants of Pharaoh, on the other hand, would have meant an identification, an internal connection between us and Pharaoh, between us and his ideals and values. That was not the case. As the Midrash tells us, we didn’t change our names, clothing, etc. On the outside, it might not have been noticeable but G-d knew we were Avadim leParoh and not Avdei Paroh.

What was the sneh? A bush on fire yet its inside stayed whole. It was not consumed. It was only burning externally. Moshe had his doubts about the Jewish people. Did they really deserve to be saved? What merits did they have? G-d appears to Moshe in the form of the sneh, as if to say these people are pure and perfect on the inside. It’s just the outside that’s on fire. Go redeem My people.

When we finally did leave Mitzrayim, we became Avdei Hashem, not just avadim hayinu leHashem. We identified with His values, became shaped by His mitzvot, and matured through His dictates. Let us continue to allow the Torah to define who we are, to inspire our core inner self, and may we all be zoche to a true holiday of geula veYeshua – redemption and salvation.

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