



Shavuot

A Closure to Pesach

Many *sefarim* refer to Shavuot as being a closure to Pesach. Following the liberation from the long bondage in Egypt, the Israelites were instructed to count 49 days of *Sefirat HaOmer*, during which they were to refine their character traits to enable them to receive the Torah. Indeed, when G-d commissioned Moshe to liberate the Israelites from enslavement, He said, “When you take the nation out of Egypt, you shall worship G-d on this very mountain.”

Many of the *mitzvot* we do are designated as a memorial to the Exodus from Egypt. Every Friday night in the *kiddush*, we say that Shabbat commemorates the Exodus. All the festivals relate to the Exodus, as do the daily *Tzitzit* and *Tefillin*, *Pidyon HaBen*, and *Birkat HaMazon*. I had often wondered why there was a constant need to remember the Exodus. It is more than an Independence Day. The latter is celebrated by a parade, fireworks, picnics and patriotic speeches. Whoever heard of a seven-day independence celebration, for which one must clean the house thoroughly, virtually sterilize the kitchen, avoid *chametz* and eat *matzah* for a whole week?

The answer came from a patient of mine newly recovered from a long history of drug addiction. I could not allow him to return to New York, because he was certain to contact his

drug-addicted buddies and relapse, so I prevailed on him to remain in Pittsburgh for an extended period of time.

As it drew closer to Pesach, he asked permission to return to New York to attend his father’s Seder. When he returned to Pittsburgh after Pesach, he related that when his father began reciting the Haggadah, “*Avadim hayinu leParo beMitzrayim*” – We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, he interrupted him, saying, “*Abba*, can you say that *you* yourself were ever a slave? Your ancestors were slaves to Pharaoh, but you personally were not a slave. I can tell you what it means to be a slave. All those years I was addicted to drugs, I was a slave. I had no freedom. I had to do whatever the drugs demanded. I did things I never thought I was capable of doing, but I had no choice. Drugs were a cruel taskmaster, but today I am free.”

When he related this to me, it became clear why we must constantly refer to the Exodus. Just as one can be a slave to a despotic ruler like Pharaoh, one can be a slave to alcohol or drugs, to gambling, food, sex, shopping, spending, hoarding, texting or anything else. When a person loses one’s freedom to choose, one is a slave.

Referring to the Ten Commandments, the Torah says they were, “*chorut al haLuchot*” – inscribed on the tablets. Inasmuch as there are no vowel markings in the Torah, this phrase

can also be read as “*cherut al haLuchot*” which means “freedom on the tablets.” Inspired by this, I wrote a commentary on the Haggadah, “From Bondage to Freedom.” The Haggadah can thus be a guide to true personal freedom.

A human being is a physical body and has many inborn traits, some of which can be very pressing. Without Torah, man is what science refers to as *homo sapiens*, a simian (baboon) with many bodily drives. A baboon does not have free choice and must do as its body demands. The Torah provides *cherut*, freedom of choice, which may frustrate the body’s demands. Hence freedom from a despotic taskmaster does not assure man true freedom.

A person may be subject to animalistic greed, anger, and many other bodily drives. These can be every bit as tyrannical as a cruel despot. Adopting the teachings of the Torah gives man true freedom. Pesach liberated the Israelites from enslavement to Pharaoh and Shavuot liberated them from the tyranny of their animal body.

Shavuot and Pesach are inextricably bound together.

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