

FREEDOM AND SPEECH, THE ESSENCE OF PESACH

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Our Sages offered several reasons why the holiday of Pesach is so named. One explanation is that Pesach is a contraction of the two words "Peh Sach," "the mouth converses." Indeed, we find that there is an emphasis on communication unique to Pesach: the Torah instructs us to tell our children about the departure from Egypt and children ask the Four questions. Why this emphasis on speech come Pesach? (See II:2 for more on this topic.)

Rav Yitzchak Hutner zt"l said that at the time of creation, being given the ability to reason and choose distinguished mankind from the rest of living creatures. The freedom of choice is an elevation from acting based on need and instinct, and only man has "freedom of choice." That which clearly indicates the existence of this freedom is the power of speech. Only man is able to speak, to clearly express thoughts. This ability is truly a power.

Rav Hutner points out that we find the power of speech described in a unique way. The Rambam (Maimonides) termed the section of his Mishneh Torah dealing with those laws concerning utterances (vows, promises, oaths, etc.) Sefer HaFla'ah - The Book of Amazement. The word "Peleh" ("Wonder" or "marvel," to which HaFla'ah is related) is used in other contexts to refer to speech. Why this term? The answer is based on an understanding of the word "Peleh" offered by the Rema - Rav Moshe Isserless. In his explanation of the blessing one recites after having used the bathroom, the Rema writes that the root Peleh signifies a connection between the physical and the spiritual. We thank G-d for giving us a functional body which can achieve lofty spiritual accomplishment. This act of G-d is described using a variant of the word "Peleh." The power of speech, Rav Hutner says, is a power which unites the physical and the spiritual. Consequently, the Rambam chose the term "Peleh" to describe those physical utterances which have a legal (and spiritual) effect, to describe acts of speech.

Our existence on this earth, our creation, was so that we could serve G-d. G-d did not give inanimate objects commandments, nor did He command vegetation, animals and other wildlife. These other creations are lacking a power that we have: speech. Speech elevates us above the other creations. It is a power that we must use to meet our purpose for existence: to serve G-d. Hence, speech, a physical trait of man, is a power to be used for spiritual pursuit. In addition, as mentioned above, speech is related to our freedom of choice. We can choose whether spiritual pursuit will be our goal. We can choose whether we will use our speech for proper purposes or for those that G-d condemns. The ability to choose one's course can be aptly termed "freedom." We have the freedom

to serve G-d or reject Him. We have the freedom to use the special power that G-d gave us, speech, in His service or against Him. Speech is the embodiment of the unity between physical and spiritual. It is the conduit for taking our earthly actions to a higher plane.

Why do we sing praises of G-d upon the downfall of our enemies? When we see the world operate, we often see bad things happen to good people, and wicked people prosper. Why does that happen? Our sight is limited, and only G-d knows the whole picture and context. When we see good people suffer, we are viewing events as they appear to us, as a natural turn of events. However, when we see the evil suffer, we witness divine retribution. We see G-d's justice and we may understand why this punishment occurred. At this time, the physical destruction of a people is synonymous with a heavenly sense of justice that we clearly understand. We have a physical, earthly occurrence which is simultaneously a heavenly, spiritually significant experience as well. When we have a convergence of spiritual and physical, we must take note, and we do so by using this very convergence that exists in our bodies - speech. We sing a song. We use our physical power of speech to sing spiritual thanks to G-d for His goodness. We thank G-d for a newfound freedom that He has granted with the organ that represents freedom - our mouth.

Until the nation of Israel was freed from Egypt, we were enslaved, forced to serve human masters. We had no choice over our destiny. Other people dictated all our actions. Then came our salvation. G-d redeemed us. We were now free, physically and spiritually. We were free from the back breaking Egyptian labor. We were free to serve G-d. We were free from the Egyptian idolatry that permeated the entire nation, to the extent that it almost caused our destruction. We were free to serve G-d. On Pesach, G-d gave us our freedom again. Our physical freedom came with our spiritual freedom. And we commemorate this freedom in the most appropriate manner, in a way which demonstrates we recognize the totality of the freedom, in a way which demonstrates that we recognize the responsibility of the freedom: with our mouths, with songs, with , with stories, with speech. Pesach couldn't be a more appropriate name.