

# BREAK FREE!

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

The *Shem MiShmuel*, a Chassidic Rebbe and scholar, offers a beautiful insight into an apparent contradiction in the Haggadah. The *Haggadah* says, "Had the Holy One, Blessed be He, not taken our forefathers out of Egypt, then we and our children and our children's children would remain subservient to Pharaoh in Egypt."

First of all, the Pharaohs are long gone, so it is unlikely that the Jewish people would have remained as servants in Egypt even had the Exodus never occurred. But in addition, if we do not wish to set this passage aside as simple hyperbole, then it appears to contradict a central element of traditional Jewish thought: that the entire world was created for *Torah*, to permit us to pursue spirituality and to come close to G-d.

Without *Torah*, the world would lack all purpose. So according to the *Medrash*, G-d created the world with a condition in mind: "if Israel does not accept my *Torah*, then I will return [all of creation] to 'tohu vavohu,'" referring to the initial state ("without form and void") mentioned at the beginning of Genesis. So had He never removed us from Egypt, then the *Torah* would never have been given, and the world would have quite literally come to an end!

If so, then both Pharaoh and Egypt would have ceased to exist, along with the Jews.

So the *Shem MiShmuel* offers an answer based (quite appropriately) on Chassidic thought. He explains that 'tohu vavohu' is not simply the absence of anything, but is rather is a creation of its own, a pre-developed state. Had Israel not accepted the Torah, then the world would have returned to 'tohu vavohu' in order to emerge again, but not as a place for Torah. That world, explains the Shem MiShmuel, would be a "bad" world, as it were, dominated by the physical, without opportunities for spiritual development, or approaches to the ultimate good found in G-d and Torah. So although human souls would exist in that world, they would have no opportunity for growth or self-perfection. This is precisely the environment that Pharaoh sought to create for the Jews in Egypt, oppressing them with physical work and leaving them no time for other pursuits. So although those forces might appear in different garb, they would still dominate the Jews today had we not left Egypt. This is what the Haggadah means, that "we and our children and our children's children would remain subservient to Pharaoh in Egypt."

Besides the fascinating outlook on the *Haggadah* and our world, the *Shem MiShmuel's* explanation should help us to appreciate and focus upon the opportunities that we have. We are not so

overwhelmed with physical work that we have no time for the spiritual. We can and must find opportunities to pursue the eternal, even in our busy lives.

*Pesach* is an especially good time for growth and change. "In each generation, every person is obligated to see himself as if he went out from Egypt, as it says [in the *Torah*], 'you shall tell it to your sons on that day, saying "because of what HaShem did for me during my departure from Egypt.'" Not only our forefathers did the Holy One, Blessed be He, redeem from Egypt, but even us He redeemed with them." Our Sages taught: *Pesach* offers us the opportunity to break free of whatever bonds have held us until now, and to grow beyond all limitations.

May we all take advantage of opportunities for growth, those that we find on *Pesach*, and those offered every day of the year!

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