

SHABBOS HAGADOL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*Dedicated in memory of Yisroel Ben Yehia Harun, z"l
May the learning of this parshah sheet be an aliyah for his Neshamah*

"God spoke to him from the Appointed Tent, saying ." (Vayikra 1:1)

Pesach is next week, b"H, making this Shabbos, Shabbos HaGadol, and this week, the final preparations for the most difficult holiday of the year to get right. For, during the week of Pesach, even a crumb of chometz is too much, and unlike with respect to other forbidden foods, it cannot be nullified in any amount. That's a lot of cleaning, especially if your family is like mine, not so careful about where we take chometz during the rest of the year.

The first thing they tell you when it comes to cleaning for Pesach is, it is not Spring Cleaning, meaning that you don't have to go over the top when ridding your spread of bread. Which sounds great, until you recall that chometz during Pesach is forbidden even as kol dehu-in a teensy amount. Time to break out in a whole new cold sweat.

I remember one year when, just as I was about to go to shul Erev Pesach, I found a single soup nut tucked away in the corner of our living room. That was after a VERY thorough cleaning, which makes you wonder, "What else did we miss?" Fortunately, I bleach the floor for that purpose, so that crumbs of chometz can be rendered inedible in any case.

The same kind of hysteria occurs at the other end as well, during the baking of matzos. The baking of kosher matzos requires a well-trained, well-oiled team of people who know how to get that flour and water from the dough stage to the completely baked stage without any suspicion of it becoming chometz along the way. Watching them, they make it seem as if they are having fun, but it is frantic fun.

There is a certain relief once the holiday begins, assuming that you have done a good job getting ready for it. But, if you plan to go out during Pesach, you have to be super careful about where you go, where you sit, and where you eat, even if bringing your own food. It could be that you set upon your kosher l'Pesach barbeque picnic exactly where another family set up their chometz one just days before.

That's why it is always a good idea to have some kosher l'Pesach Ritalin. Just kidding. But sometimes, it feels like it might be necessary just to calm down during the holiday and to overcome

chometz paranoia.

Then there is the problem of the cooking. How many women complain about being trapped in their kitchens during the week of Pesach, either cooking or washing dishes? Between not being able to order in (some people won't even buy fresh food products during the week of Pesach), and catching up on friends and entertaining extra guests, it is possible for the kitchen to become a home-away-from-home for seven days for many housewives, making Pesach feel more like a holiday of slavery than of freedom.

Is this just another example of one of those Torah oxymorons, when what seems to be is the complete opposite of what is supposed to be?

Maybe we do it to ourselves somewhat. For example, if we led more austere lives the rest of the year, and were more careful about chometz in the house, Pesach cleaning would be a cinch. And, for that matter, if we split up Spring cleaning amongst the rest of the months, perhaps that would also be easier at this time of year.

As for the cooking, forget about the guests. Eat simpler. Personally, I can eat matzah and butter the entire week, though I'll pay for it after Pesach when I get the bill in calories and gained fat. And, when you go on trips, try and go to places that chometz is not going to be an issue, and when you rent a car, make sure it was cleaned for Pesach, as they do here in Eretz Yisroel.

In other words, learn a message from the matzah: when it comes to Pesach, simplify. As the Maharal explains, poor man's bread is free man's bread, because it represents a tenuous connection to the physical world. It is our desire for a physically comfortable life that truly enslaves us, as we pursue must-haves, always at the cost of some kind of spirituality. It is a sacrifice we all have to make at some point or another, but it only becomes a meaningful sacrifice if the end result will be enhanced spirituality.

As the Haggadah points out, the Jewish people came down to Egypt only to sojourn, and survived quite nicely as long as that was all they did. But, the moment they stayed longer, that is when their Jewish world fell apart, and the gentile world imposed itself on them, eventually resulting in torturous slavery.

It was the same in Spain much later on. We had to be there, and the fruits that grew out of the Jewish people while there, spiritually and physically, were proof of that. However, once again, we stayed longer than we should have, and the result was the undoing of a lot of the good that had been accomplished. Many of the holy works that emerged from that period have survived, but there were many deaths, many conversions, and imposed exile, once again.

It was no different later in Europe as well. Anyone who lived according to Torah ideals should have also lived with reality that life in Europe had to come to an end at some time. And, given Europe's long history of terrible anti-Semitism, it could have been safely assumed that when the time to go

would come, it would not be, as one of the greatest anti-Semites of all time said:

Why did you flee secretly and leave without telling me? I would have gladly sent you away, with songs and drums and lyre. (Bereishis 31:27)

Right.

Anyhow, it is the sad and tragic story of the Jewish people, a pattern that has repeated itself countless times over and over again. We simply stay too long, something that you can only appreciate when you really have to be somewhere else, and you really want to be there, as soon as you can. No child comes to sojourn at his friend's birthday party. He hopes to move in, for good.

And, when his mother comes to get him, it is often with an outstretched arm, just like God had to do to the Jewish people. And, considering that four-fifths didn't want to leave Egypt and died in the Plague of Darkness instead, and the one-fifth that did leave died in the desert because they rejected Israel, we can assume, as the Emek Davar says, that the strong arm God used was not against the Egyptians to force them to let the Jewish go, but rather, against the Jewish people to get them to want to leave!

God said to Moshe, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh. Through a strong hand he will send them away, and through a strong hand he will drive them out of his land!" (Shemos 6:1)

And, you know why he'll have to? Because, in spite of his hatred for them, and the way he abused them, and took advantage of their loyalty, and oppressed them, and even bathed in the blood of their babies, still, after all is said and done, and God finally came to free them, the vast majority of the Jewish people said no. And, had it not been for the promise that God made to free Avraham's descendants, He would have just said, "Fine! Suit yourselves! All of you will stay in Egypt but good, being buried there after dying in the Plague of Darkness."

But, the Seder Table is made up of far more than just matzah. There is plenty of fine tableware and fine foods, for those who can afford it. The message of the matzah has to compete with the message of the materialism that adorns most Seder tables, which says: You can enjoy the physical pleasures of this world, if you can justify it with some mitzvah. And people do, which is why they minimize the importance of longing for redemption and life in Eretz Yisroel.

Indeed, so much of the Seder Table resembles an Egyptian lifestyle, or in modern day terms, a Western lifestyle than it does a people that believes this world is only a corridor, not the main event. In fact, verily as I write, I do so on my MacBook Pro, while drinking vanilla coffee and eating a cookie or two. As a people, we like our physical pleasures.

Enter the matzah. The matzah is to the Seder Table what a harness is to a wild stallion. It is there to bridle the materialistic part of our lives, to channel it properly, to push back make-believe

rationalizations justify to soothe consciences that should not be soothed. It says, "We're only here to sojourn. Don't settle down too much that when the call comes to leave, you can't, or won't." It says, "Don't forget your destiny. Don't forget your history, or those who did."

We have to recall that exile and redemption begin in the mind, and end with the body. We defeat enemies with sword, not ideas, or so it seems. However, if you trace back every victory or defeat, you will find that it began with an idea, either the right one or the wrong one, but an idea nonetheless.

True, in actuality, metal swords piece skin better than ideas do. However, they do little to change society as much, or to save men from the sword, as ideas. Whatever happens in the physical is just the end result of ingenuity, or the lack of it, and that includes exile and redemption as well.

That is why the very difference between a golah, someone who is in exile, and geulah, redemption, is a mere Aleph. However, it is an Aleph that stands for God, and by extension, man's Godly soul as well. It is the same Aleph that the very existence of Amalek causes to be missing from Kisei, God's throne:

He has said, "Because the hand is upon the Throne of God; it is a war for God with Amalek in each generation." (Shemos 17:16)

Why is "throne" written Chof-Samech and not Chof-Samech-Aleph? And why is God's Name divided in half? The Holy One, Blessed is He, swears that neither His Name nor His throne will be whole until the name of Amalek is completely eradicated. (Rashi)

And, the same Aleph that transforms vayikar into vayikra in last week's parshah, distinguishing the Jewish people from the nations of the world:

And He called-vayikra-to Moshe, and God spoke to him from the Appointed Tent. (Vayikra 1:1)

A "calling" preceded all statements and commandments. It is an expression of love, an expression that the Ministering Angels use, as it says, "One called to the other" (Yeshayahu 6:3). However, to the gentile prophets He revealed Himself with an expression of happenstance and uncleanness, as it says, "God chanced (vayikar) upon Bilaam" (Bamidbar 23:4, 16). (Rashi)

In other words, if you look into a Sefer Torah at the very first word of last week's parshah you will see the word "And He called" spelled: Vav-Yud- Kuf-Raish-Aleph, as it ought to be, except that the Aleph is written smaller. Thus, the first four letters-Vav-Yud-Kuf-Raish-stand out on their own almost as an independent word-vayikar-which means: He chanced upon.

This, tradition tells us, is to make a distinction between the way God relates to the Jewish People

and the rest of the world. The relationship between God and the Jewish people is meant to be continuous, ongoing, and if not through direct prophecy, then at least through Divine Providence. God never tires of being in touch with His children, the Children of Israel.

In a very real sense, the simple matzah is the simple Aleph. As the Maharal explains, the simplicity of the matzah is similar to that of the World-to-Come, the world of the soul, of the Aleph. Added to the rest of the Seder Table, it transforms the temporal aspect of the materialism from the level of vayikar into the level of vayikra, from the level of golah to the level of geulah, from the level Dalet-Mem-blood-to the level of Aleph-Dalet-Mem-Adam. That is the essence of true freedom, which is why the gematria of adam is equal to geulah.

Hence, in the end, the Seder Table is an analogy for all of life. It is a message about true freedom, no matter how big or small your house is, and how much cleaning you have to do, or how many guests you choose to entertain the week of Pesach. For, the Aleph is independent of all that, and when mastered, it gives a Jew the wherewithal to make the best spiritual situation out of any physical situation, and no one can be freer than that.

Chag Kosher v'Samayach, Pinchas Winston

Text

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