



by HARAV AHRON LOPIANSKY

Slavery and Drudgery

Pesach, is the Yom Tov when we were redeemed from slavery, from the grueling work in Mitzrayim. One would expect then, that the Yom Tov of *geulah* would somehow emphasize *menuchah*, respite from toil. Yet the Arizal, quoted by the *Mishnah Berurah* (460:7), reveals that “the sweat emanating from the effort of baking matzah is an atonement for severe *aveiros*.” While it’s true that we are taught concerning all *mitzvot*, “*L’fum tzaara agra* – In proportion to the difficulty is the reward” (*Avos* 5:23), this is always understood as referring to an incidental difficulty, i.e., to a person who has encountered a particular challenge in doing a *mitzvah*. But those difficulties are not of necessity built into the *mitzvah*. Not so when it comes to the *mitzvah* of matzah, where the assumption is that it’s always laborious, and the labor is part of the essence of the *mitzvah*.

In truth, we need not look for obscure hints in *Halachah* or *Aggadah*. Everyone preparing for Pesach well knows how arduous the process is. Even in today’s day and age, when we have appliances that make Pesach cleaning and preparation easier, it is still strenuous. How do we understand this strange commemoration of being freed from *avodah kashah* by celebrating a Yom Tov that requires so much physical work?

We note this same paradox when we’re told that *Klal Yisrael* are Hashem’s servants, because He “redeemed them from Mitzrayim” (*Vayikra* 25:42; see also *Ramban, Shemos* 20:2). This also sounds very strange; almost

as if we gained no freedom, only an exchange of masters?!

But our premise is wrong. Superficially, we think freedom and idleness are synonymous. That is absolutely false. The *passuk* says, “*Adam l’amal yulad* – Man was born to toil” (*Iyov* 5:7). If we look around us with open eyes, we readily notice that there is no person more depressed than the one who has nothing to engage in, even – and perhaps especially – if that person has a steady income. In that case, his needs are amply taken care of, and he has no challenges or goals to achieve. He will then be profoundly unhappy and not find any pleasure in his existence.

So, what does define toil that destroys the person? What is it that marks slavery as the ultimate curse? Let us take a careful look at *Halachah*. A person is prohibited to work his slave “*b’farech*” (*Vayikra* 25:43). ‘*Parech*’ is defined as “a work which breaks or destroys the person” (*Rashi, Shemos* 1:3). What would constitute that type of work? Is it measured in kilograms lifted? Distance pushed? Neither. The halachic definition for *parech* is an entirely different one: “Work that has no limit, nor any purpose” (*Rambam, Avadim* 1:6). Thus, never-ending, easy work, or making a coffee nobody wants or needs, is halachically defined as *parech*.

If we contemplate these points, we realize the following: A person is born to achieve and accomplish; that is the very essence of life. Not having anything to achieve is tantamount to not living. But even worse is expending effort and energy that does not accomplish anything. That is the curse of slavery. For even that



which one achieves is for the other, never for oneself.

This elucidates another example of *perach*, as defined by Chazal. The Gemara (*Sotah* 11b) describes the *avodas perach* decreed on *Bnei Yisrael*, as being “men’s jobs for women, and women’s job for men.” This raises the obvious issue: Which indeed is more difficult, working in the field or managing the house and its affairs? The answer is that we are not talking about how hard is the labor per se. That is not the issue. The determinant of *perach* is the lack of a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Men and women can perform each other’s work if need be, but emotionally, the opposite gender’s tasks are merely chores to be done with, rather than accomplishments to be proud of that lead to feeling fulfilled.

Mitzrayim was the ultimate house of slavery. We put every effort and every drop of sweat and blood into the work we performed there, but none of it achieved anything for us. When Hashem redeemed us, it could not possibly be to free us for a life of leisure and relaxation. That is not life. Rather, Hashem wanted us to take all the effort we had learned to expend and use it to create purpose and meaning in our lives. Being a servant of Hashem does not mean we are doing something Hashem needs, so to speak. Indeed, He needs nothing from us. We are developing

ourselves to the ultimate degree of achievement and accomplishment, by bringing out that which is Divine in us. That is what is meant by being a servant to Hashem.

This understanding should dictate how we need to shape our attitude towards the difficulties and the labor associated with this Yom Tov. They are not external difficulties weighing down the *mitzvah*; they are the very celebration of Pesach. As we work hard to prepare for Yom Tov and do what we have to do, we should contemplate that the difficulty is not in the work, but rather in the purpose. We need to feel how fortunate we are that we’re able to invest ourselves totally in a *mitzvah*. The sweat that comes from our brow while engaged in this *mitzvah* means we’re able to realize every bit of our potential. Just as a wealthy man would feel frustrated if part of his resources were lying idle in the bank with nowhere to invest, so too, we need to feel that having human resources that have not been brought out is a great frustration. Pesach, which demands every bit of our effort and toil, should bring great joy to us; the joy of our freedom to take every bit of ourselves and realize it to its fullest potential. ■

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