

This week, we read about Moshe's confrontation with Pharaoh. We will discuss this throughout the week. The Rambam writes in a letter that even though everything recorded in this story is historically true, there are deeper meanings and allusions. One of them is that it describes the confrontation between the yetzer tov and yetzer horo.

The parsha begins with Hashem explaining to Moshe what the ultimate goal is. Hashem is introducing Himself as Y-K-V-K for the first time. This is not the Shem that the Ovos were familiar with. Rashi explains that this Shem signifies that Hashem keeps the promises He makes and will reward the righteous for their tzidkus. Although it is true that the Ovos knew of this Shem, and they certainly believed with full, deep emunoh that Hashem keeps His promises, it is also true that Hashem did not fulfill those promises to the Ovos in their lifetime. They did not see the great nation of Klal Yisroel brought to Eretz Yisroel. Hashem says that now He is taking out Klal Yisroel and fulfilling His commitment to the bris.

Hashem gives reward to the Ovos and to certain Jews who will merit it. Which Jews? As we know, only Shevet Levi and a minority of Jews were worthy of redemption because they didn't feel they belonged in Egypt.

The ten makkos were meant to teach the Egyptians a lesson and to teach Klal Yisroel lessons about the reality of the existence of Hashem. Moshe came to Pharaoh to speak in the Name of Hashem—to convey to him that an intelligent Power created the world and is in total control of the entire physical universe. Moreover, this Power makes distinctions between Klal Yisroel and the nations, and is directly involved in the events of human history.

The first lesson is to reveal the falsehood of avodo zoro. Hashem is the only independent power over the world. Those who were intelligent enough to see the truth and learn the lesson early on were able to avoid total destruction. Borod is a display of complete mastery over the forces of nature. Hashem brings two opposites which cannot naturally coexist and forces them together for His purposes.

But until they experienced that avodo zoro is totally false, they will not appreciate the final step which is gilui Shechinoh of makkas bechoros. So after eight makkos, we have makkos choshech. It has two functions. One is the total blotting out of the sun—which they worshipped—for three days. It was not a simple solar eclipse. It was a complete negation of the power of their deity.

At the same time, Hashem used these three days to quietly remove 80% of Klal Yisroel who were not worthy of redemption. These Jews—like so many from Jews today—were so caught up in the mentality and the culture of golus that they couldn't see beyond it. It is a very deep human problem—we engage in tremendous mental gymnastics to justify something that doesn't make sense. We look to the society around us to reinforce our lifestyle and our skewed priorities and we convince ourselves that we are perfectly normal and okay. Only 20% managed to see the truth and wanted to leave Egypt!

After they experienced all those makkos and were about to experience the gilui Shechinoh, Hashem said we have to first see if you are worthy. So He commanded bris miloh and korban Pesach. Neither of these commands are easy.

The first was to take the avodo zoro of their master—to whom you have been subservient to all your life—and slaughter it in public. Place its blood on your doorpost—as a bold statement for all to see your

rejection of avodo zoro. Break the control of your masters over you. Breaking away psychologically from your past slave mentality takes a lot of courage and inner strength.

Then there was bris miloh—for male adults it is a painful and dangerous procedure. But we are going back to the bris of Avrohom Ovinu—even if it is painful and dangerous. This is how we live and survive—through our blood.

Hashem told Moshe here at the beginning of the parsha that the 20% of Klal Yisroel who will walk before Me and survive the nisyonos of Egyptian culture and identity will be able to experience the fulfillment of the bris. Hashem said He took the crying and pain of Klal Yisroel from their servitude as a tefilloh for the geuloh.

Klal Yisroel still need to deserve redemption and it needs to take place on a few different levels. The four cups of wine at the Pesach seder reflect these four stages of geuloh which culminate in coming to Eretz Yisroel.

1) There is first the redemption from physical servitude: Backbreaking, crushing, physical labor will stunt normal psychological and spiritual growth as a human being. A slave to a master is not free to invest time and mental energy to develop himself.

2) Then there is redemption of the unique self and sense of identity: There is a difference in quality between a free human being and a slave—beyond what he spends his time doing and how hard he works. A slave has no sense of achievement and accomplishment from any of his efforts. They belong to his master and he takes no satisfaction from it. In addition, he is completely dispensable. His work is replaceable with another slave. Nothing he does in life is uniquely his. No room for the individual.

A very important idea of the Torah is the infinite value of every individual. Chazal tell us every human being is precious because he is created with a tzelem Elokim. Murder is morally abhorrent because it shows a total disregard to the infinite value of a human being—who is endowed with a tzelem Elokim.

The major problem of leftist socialism is their eliminating the value of an individual. They divide human society exclusively in terms of large, opposing classes of people. They don't care about who you are as an individual. You only have value in terms of how you fit into the larger group.

In technological societies, everything is reduced to numbers and mass production—the value of the individual and his unique contribution gets reduced. The origin of this outlook was Migdal Bovel—when a person fell off and died, it was no big deal—he was replaceable. But if a brick or a tool fell down and broke, it was a tragedy because the work that was invested in it was lost. The Netziv explains that the evil of this society lies in the fact that they were unified by one language and one purpose. The absolute conformity of an entire society put to work to achieving this single goal, completely crushed the individuality of everyone in it.

Each one of us has an individual bris with Hashem. The posuk in Parshas Re'eh says we are an Am Kodosh from earlier generations, yet Hashem chose us today as well. Rashi explains that although we inherit our kedushas Yisroel from our parents, there is an extra dimension of kedushas Yisroel that we develop with our own effort. Each one of us charts out a unique path of avodas Hashem with his individual

personality.

I once heard a beautiful pshat from my Rebbe regarding the first Rashi in Sefer Shemos.

Klal Yisroel are compared to the stars—each Jew is a star in his own right. The night sky is full of stars—untold numbers—when there are no other obscuring lights. Hashem has the ability to count every star and give it a name. The issur of counting Jews by number is that it robs them of their individuality—their special kedushas Yisroel. Human beings don't have the capacity to preserve the individuality of a person once he is assigned a number. Only Hashem can count the multitude of stars and give each one a unique name.

A slave has no individuality—he just exists for his master. Geuloh means we can express our individuality. But in modern times, expressing individuality somehow means sporting a weird haircut and wearing pre-ripped designer clothes. What about his inner self? Does he have a unique character and personality? Or is he just imitating what everyone else around him admires?

3) Once we are individuals, we need another stage of geuloh—getting out of the corruption of Egyptian culture. Hashem pulled us out of all that tumoh in two ways. 1) Zeroa Netuyoh—Hashem showed us that He alone is running history and coordinating everything that happens to us down to its finest detail. 2) Shefotim Gedolim—there is accountability for everything we do. There is no such thing as just coasting in life and remaining static. There is a cheshbon for every word and every action because it has an impact. Either it elevates us and develops us or it degrades us. We are not children who live in a world of make-believe where nothing serious really happens. The things we do as adults, the things we say, have real consequences—immediate and long-term consequences—on ourselves and on others around us. If I am going to be an individual and create myself, Hashem wants us to realize that He took us out of Egypt. And He did it with a din vecheshbon.

4) Then there is the final step—After we realize that we are individuals who are responsible for our words and actions, we need to realize another thing. Hashem has chosen every single one of us to be His people. Each Jew is an individual child of Hashem—as if there are no other children. We have our own exclusive relationship with Hashem and each has his own derech avodah.

Hashem invested us with tremendous opportunities and privileges. What did we do with them? Take those opportunities and use them to build this unique keshet with Him.

When Hashem started the process of geuloh, He did this with a specific goal in mind. It wasn't just to give this enslaved people freedom. Otherwise, the whole dialogue between Moshe and Pharaoh for the next two parshiyos doesn't make any sense. Hashem's seal is truth. Why is Moshe playing this game with Pharaoh making him believe that they are only leaving temporarily? Why doesn't he just inform Pharaoh of the truth straight away: Hashem is taking His people out!

But the truth is that it wasn't that simple. The truth is that we took a temporary vacation from slavery to Pharaoh. Only if we will decide to exchange the servitude to Pharaoh for servitude to Hashem, then we won't go back to Egypt. Everything was conditional. If we accept the burden of Torah and mitzvos and agree to forge a personal bris with Hashem, then there is geuloh from Egypt—not freedom for its own sake.

But what often gets lost is that every Jew has infinite value because he is chosen as an individual to make a personal keshet with Hashem.

Earlier we discussed the beginning of the Parsha with the four stages of geuloh. Hashem told Moshe to tell Klal Yisroel who He is and what the end-goal will be. The Yerushalmi says these four levels of geuloh are the reason we have four cups of wine at the Pesach seder. The result of

all four brings us to a possible fifth cup which Poskim discuss. But we don't have a fifth cup. No-one here does that. Why not? Because the posuk in Tehillim states clearly that we are only being given the land of Canaan in order to be able to fulfill in the best possible way—the will of Hashem. There is no other purpose for receiving Eretz Yisroel. We don't deserve Eretz Yisroel unless we use it to maximize our Torah and mitzvos.

In fact, this was the ultimate purpose of geulas Mitzrayim—as we say in Oz Yoshir. The hashro'ash haShechinoh on Har Habayis is the culmination of everything. This is why in Dayeinu, the last phrase is about thanking Hashem for a Beis Hamikdash with hashro'as haShechinoh.

So these four expressions of geuloh are not just in order to be freed from slavery. It is to become the Am Hashem. Making us Hashem's nation happens by receiving Torah and mitzvos and accepting its burden upon ourselves willingly.

Once this acceptance is made, Hashem will be our G-d. What does this mean? Look in Parshas Yisro and you will see two steps. First is to obey the mitzvos. First and foremost, we listen and carry out the will of Hashem. A bris is a pact between two parties. If we fulfill our conditions, Hashem will fulfill His obligations. Then, as a consequence, we will become His treasured nation among all the nations. Hashem will protect us and keep us at the center of His concerns. This is what it means that Hashem is our G-d.

Klal Yisroel is a small nation—insignificant in terms of numbers. But Hashem arranged it that we are always the center of the entire universe. For reasons that are not explicable from a natural perspective, the Jews are at the center of His entire creation. This is what Chazal meant when they say Hashem only is concerned with the daled amos of Halacha. The Rambam says Hashem runs the entire universe around the needs of tzaddikim and responds to the dynamic nature of our relationship with him. The Nefesh Hachayim explains that the very life-energy of the world that keeps the universe in existence was put in the hands of Klal Yisroel.

How Hashem deals with us depends on how we deal with Him. Hashem is giving us a Torah and making a bris with us. Keeping or defying the bris directly determines what happens to us.

We spoke last week about what it means to be a Jewish goy, and the difference between being assimilated and being a mamleches kohanim ve'goy kodosh. It is a question of self-identity. How do you identify yourself? By what you do for a living? By how wealthy you are and how many luxuries you enjoy? What kind of social circle you belong to? Tragically, this is how most Orthodox Jews define themselves—and Hashem is not at the center of their lives. Hashem is not the first consideration in the decisions they make and the priorities they have. Hashem is on the periphery—an afterthought.

As much as that problem exists outside the beis midrash, it exists within the beis midrash. When people decide when and where they will daven, how much thought is given as to which minyan will their tefillos be better accepted? How many bnei Torah think about which environment is best conducive to kavono and true avodah shebilev? Where is Hashem in our cheshbonos that we make in our davening and our learning? Someone once asked the Kotzker Rebbe: "where is Hashem?" He answered: "wherever we let Him in. And the problem is we don't let Him in."

So why did Hashem take Klal Yisroel out of Egypt? Was it to win more Nobel Prizes than anyone else? No. It is to understand that our whole existence and what we are about is our relationship with Hashem. People make many calculations, but the center of all of them has to be about Hashem.

Once someone came to my door and asked if I can give him some advice—without walking into the house. I ask him: what is the issue

you want to talk about? He tells me that he is learning in a local beis midrash and he just received an amazing fellowship for a career path promising money, kovod, etc. He discussed it with his chavrusoh who suggested discussing it with me. So just standing there in my doorway, I told him one simple piece of advice: always ask yourself if this decision you're about to make will lead to getting you a bigger portion in olom haboh or a smaller one. Once you determine that question, the correct decision becomes obvious. This fellow turned around and dropped out of sight. Years later I was in England and this fellow came up to me to tell me I saved his life. He said I gave him a whole new perspective in living life.

When you make any decision in life, what is the basis for that decision? Is your relationship with Hashem in the center? Or are there other factors that take precedence? The fact that Hashem chose us and we are His nation means our whole existence is being the Am Hashem.

How many of us who are sitting in learning actually stop and think about how precious and rare is this opportunity we were given to just relate to Hashem by learning all day and being involved in avodas Hashem. How many people use tefilloh as avodas Hashem? So even the lomdei Torah can be disconnected.

Of course, you first latch on to the Torah and the result will be getting a closeness to Hashem. But we have to decide to let Him in eventually. It is a zechus to live in our generation where avodas Hashem is so available to us—it is a tremendous opportunity. It is a unique period of our long and bitter history in golus. We need to take our bris with Hashem with utmost seriousness. This is our nisayon. It is different than the nisyonos of previous doros who were under tremendous pressure to assimilate openly and throw off yiddishkeit entirely. Now it is a more subtle form of becoming Jewish goyim—just as it was for Klal Yisroel in Egypt. What defines us is not our profession and not our standard of living. What defines us is our bris and our unique relationship with Hashem.

Every one of us can define this relationship uniquely for himself. What does that mean?

Rav Avrohom ben HoRambam in his sefer Hamaspik says there is a certain minimum of hakoras hatov required by everyone because everyone alive has received from Hashem more than they deserve. So there is a minimum debt of gratitude we all need to pay, and that is by keeping Shulchan Aruch. If we are given life, if we are given a body, and we are given time to live on His earth, we owe it to Hashem not to waste our lives or use our bodies and use our time in ways

that Hashem does not approve. We have to keep halacha as the bare minimum to not be kofer tov. One who takes without repaying is a rosho.

But then Hashem gave us something extra—Hashem told us that we are precious to Him. He made an exclusive bris and an opportunity to have a personal, individualized relationship with Him. How? We can use Torah and mitzvos as a means of serving Hashem. Not just doing perfunctory acts to fulfill our obligations and then move on to the next thing.

The Rambam in Sefer Hamitzvos explains the mitzvah of avodas Hashem. It is a specific mitzvah to daven, but it is also a general obligation to take every mitzvah and use it as a form of avodas Hashem. We must use mitzvos as a conscious expression of the connection between us and Hashem.

Then, based on Chazal, the Rambam says this applies to learning Torah as well. People can learn Torah for all sorts of reasons. Maybe because everyone is doing it—because it's the fashionable thing to do in frum circles nowadays. Maybe because it is fascinating and intellectually stimulating. Or, limud HaTorah can be a form of avodas Hashem.

Everyone has the same minimum of avodas Hashem. Without a basic level of shemiras Torah and mitzvos, you are labeled a rosho for being kofer tov. But then we can go the next step as individuals and think deeper—there is a way to forge our own unique path in dikduk bemitzvos and limud haTorah in order to bring us closer. It is a separate mitzvah to use them as a way to connect our own hearts to Hashem in the deepest way possible.

One may not see that connection immediately, but over time, as you deepen your own experience, it happens in the end.

When we talk about Yetzias Mitzrayim, we are actually revealing the fact that Hashem wants us all to be free individuals who can use our actions and our mitzvos, our tefillos and our limud HaTorah to connect to Hashem. If we take that step towards Him, He comes closer to us.

But there first had to be 10 makkos with a gilui Shechinoh to shake Klal Yisroel out of their false beliefs and realize the truth about the universe; to confront the Creator of the universe and appreciate Who is making this offer to them. We don't have open nissim nowadays—there is no gilui Shechinoh. But we have Torah and mitzvos. And when we use them in the right way, they help us join to that bris and that connection that was originally made at Yetzias Mitzrayim.