



# Insights on the Moadim

FROM THE TORAH OF RAV YAAKOV WEINBERG זצ"ל

## PESACH AND THE VALUE OF FREEDOM

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Yomim Tovim do not simply mark events that took place in the past, and their observance is not just a means of commemorating these events to memorialize them. Yomim Tovim are actually much more profound in their impact, and much more demanding in the mental and emotional work that they require of us. They are designed as transformative experiences; through each Yom Tov we gain new perspectives on life, along with the character traits and modes of behavior that go along with these perspectives.

A brief look at the Yomim Tovim bears out the truth of this observation. Shavuot is a transformative experience – Hashem gives us the Torah and we unconditionally accept it. Rosh Hashanah is a transformative experience – Hashem draws near to us and judges us, and we are fundamentally changed by undergoing this process. Yom Kippur is a transformative experience – we repent and Hashem provides atonement and purifies us from our sins. Succot is a transformative experience – we internalize the sheer joy of living in Hashem's presence and under His protection. The Rabbinic Yomim Tovim, Chanukah and Purim, are also transformative experiences, as we have explained at length elsewhere. All of these Yomim Tovim are designed to leave an imprint upon us and to affect our behavior in the future.

What is the defining experience of Pesach? In what way is Pesach supposed to transform us?

Chazal, as well as the tefillos that we say, define the significance of Pesach as zman cheiruseinu, the time of our freedom. This does not mean that we simply commemorate the fact that the Jews achieved freedom from Pharaoh thousands of years ago, for, as we have explained, Yomim Tovim in their essence are not commemorations. Rather, it means that the transforming experience of Pesach is the experience of achieving freedom. We observe Pesach, tell the story of the departure from Egypt and perform the other mitzvos of Pesach, in order that we, ourselves, can achieve a greater experience of freedom. Freedom is not just the absence of slavery; it is a way of living that involves a mindset and a way of acting and reacting to life. Through Pesach we attain

a greater capacity for freedom for ourselves, just as our forefathers attained freedom for themselves when they left Egypt.

This implies that freedom is a value that we should aspire to, and that is essential to a truly Torah life. This is true, provided that "freedom" is understood correctly. The difficulty for us is that the society that we live in has an altogether different view of what "freedom" is, a view that is antithetical to Torah, and that is false even in its own terms.

The generally accepted view in our society is that freedom means "I can do whatever I want to." But this is a false concept, a misunderstanding of the human condition. A person can never be free to do whatever he wants; he cannot, for example, take away someone else's money or trespass on his property. A person is always restrained by his own physical needs, as well as by community needs when they are codified into law. Moreover, a person is limited by his physical and intellectual endowments; relatively few people can become Olympic athletes or members of Mensa.

A person is not free to be tall or short, to be handsome or ugly. The most one can say for the societal view is that the idea of freedom is that people should have the least restrictions possible, but that is hardly a rigorous definition.

Judaism's conception of freedom is altogether different. It teaches that one can become truly free only through the Torah. Why is this so? Does not the Torah promulgate restrictions? How is that compatible with freedom, and to such an extent that the only way to be free is through the Torah?

The answer is that freedom does not mean "I can do whatever I want to." Instead, it is defined by having choices that are meaningful, and by bearing the responsibility for choosing between them. Ultimately, this implies that to be truly free, one must have concepts of purpose and of values to give significance to his choices. Let us elaborate.

"Choices that are meaningful" means that there must be

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significant differences between the choices. A choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee is not meaningful because there is hardly any difference between the two. Even a slave can choose between two types of bread offered by his master. He is not considered free on account of having that choice, because that choice is inconsequential. It can barely even be called a "choice"; it can perhaps more accurately be termed an act of following a whim or a desire. "Choice" and "freedom" imply that there is a real difference between the options, and that the person must engage in a mental act of choosing between them.

One who is truly free carries the responsibility for the consequences of his actions. A slave is not responsible for what he does because someone else is making the choices for him; if a slave does not comply with the commands of his master or overseer, he is whipped. A free man, no matter what he does, is responsible for his actions and their consequences, because he chooses them. If he decides to steal and take drugs, he is responsible for the consequences; if he decides to lead an upright and honest life, he is again responsible for the consequences. Any time we shield a person from the consequences of his actions, we are actually depriving him of his freedom.

A person can be truly free only if he possesses concepts of purpose and of values. Otherwise, a person would inevitably follow the path of least resistance, or choose whatever brings him personal pleasure. One who does so is not partaking in an act of choosing and is not truly free. Only if one can place a value on the option that is less pleasurable or more difficult, does he have a real choice between two options. For example, one who values his schooling can choose between going to school and playing ball all day. One who values his health can choose between eating the delicious but fatty food and refraining from eating it. Without these values, no one would choose the less pleasurable option. There would be no real choice.

Most people who "do whatever they want to" are not truly free, because they are not choosing in any meaningful sense. "Whatever they want" is either the most pleasurable option, or the easiest choice. Often, they are just following the herd, doing whatever people in their social group are doing, or they are following the lead of advertising or of the media. They do not spend the time and effort to develop the values and criteria by which to decide between the options. In addition, it is genuinely hard to make decisions. People experience responsibility as a burden, and as one that they would much rather not carry. They naturally prefer to live their lives at the more superficial level of whim and desire – unless they come to appreciate the value of freedom.

Now we can understand the teaching of our tradition that one can be truly free only through the Torah. This is because one's choices can have true significance, and they can possess

consequences that are actually meaningful, only if one accepts and knows the Torah. Previously, we gave the example of one who chooses whether to eat or not eat fatty food. While that can be considered "choice" to some extent, it is ultimately only a trivial choice. What difference does it make if he becomes fat and unhealthy; after seventy years he will be dead regardless! Once he is dead, what significance is there to the fact that he was unhealthy while alive? Health has meaning only if it is connected to some higher value, if, for example, it enables one to perform deeds that have inherent value. The Torah reveals what these inherent values are, and it thereby gives meaning to innately neutral matters such as maintaining one's health and pursuing a livelihood. This, in turn, gives meaning to one's choices and makes freedom a reality.

To put it another way, one can have freedom only if life has a purpose. For without a purpose, there cannot be any values – what, then, can one choose between? There is no meaning to choices; one is left either choosing between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, or simply following the more pleasurable or more convenient. As we have explained, these constitute neither "choice" nor freedom. By contrast, if life has a purpose, one can assess whether a given option helps achieve his purpose or prevents it, whether his purpose gives the option value or not, and decide accordingly. This is freedom. This is what the Torah makes possible and demands of man.

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Hashem desires that we be free, that we act as free men. He does not want the service of automatons, but of real men, freely using their powers of choice to serve Him. He wants people to make decisions in their lives and not

live superficially. He wants us to sit, think and learn from the Torah what is right and what is wrong; He wants us to understand the options and evaluate them by Torah standards, and to decide based upon this evaluation. He does not want us to make life decisions by following desire or whim; He wants us to seek guidance from the Torah, to assess how the guidance applies to each of us personally and to decide accordingly. He wants us to be responsible for our decisions. In short, He wants us to value freedom and to live as free men through the Torah. Only in this manner can we relate to Him.

Pesach is the time when our forefathers were freed from the slavery of Egypt, and it is also the time when we too can achieve our personal freedom. It is the time when we can throw off the shackles in our lives – whether these shackles are a desire for petty matters that divert us from seeking our true purpose, whether they are a fear of assuming responsibility for ourselves, or whether they are nothing more than simple laziness. Hashem designed Pesach as a time in which this can be accomplished, and He demands of us that we do our part. He expects that through Pesach we learn to truly value freedom and that we develop the traits and modes of behavior that make it a reality. In this way Pesach can truly become the time of our freedom.

