



Two Drashos for Shevi'i Shel Pesach

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The Fragility of Faith

In describing the great anxiety experienced by B'nei Yisrael prior to the miracle of *kerias yam suf*, the Torah highlights two contradictory responses: first, an expression of heartfelt prayer; second, a critique of Moshe for having brought them out of Egypt to perish in the wilderness. The Ramban explains that the Torah refers to different groups of people. Those with a deep sense of faith cried out genuinely for divine salvation, while the less noble of spirit lashed out at Moshe in bitter condemnation. (See there for additional explanations as well.) However, the *ba'alei musar* suggest an approach which provides a penetrating insight into the human condition. According to their interpretation, the same people who were initially inspired by sincere faith to cry out to Hashem in prayer quickly lost faith and succumbed to doubt and frustration.

As explained by R. Chaim Shmuelevitz (*Sichas Mussar* 5732 #7), Man is a complex creature filled with competing and conflicting impulses, good and bad, which co-exist side by side locked in constant struggle. At times the nobler parts emerge; at other times the darker side dominates. This is why we all have the capacity both of being empathetic and callous, forgiving and vindictive, altruistic and self-centered. Few people are completely saints or demons.

Nowhere are the two faces of man more strikingly apparent than in the realm of faith. On the one hand, Man has an innate need to believe in G-d. In the recesses of his heart he knows that G-d exists, and he experiences His love, concern and guiding hand. At the same time, Man resents submitting to a higher authority and is tempted to flee from G-d and assert personal autonomy. Consequently, Man may oscillate between deep faith awareness on the one hand and intense religious skepticism on the other, yearning one moment for communion with

the Creator and, in the next, doubting His very existence.

The Torah's account of the Jews' conflicting reactions at the sea reflects this dialectic within the human spirit. Initially, B'nei Yisrael were seized with the impulse to turn to G-d in prayer which emerged from the inner wellsprings of faith embedded in the human psyche. But their faith did not sustain itself and crumbled moments later.

Like many things in life, *emuna* is a constant struggle. Even when we feel secure in our faith, we cannot become too complacent or smug – “*al taamin be'atzmecha ad yom moscha*.” Faith must be nurtured and reinforced for it to be sustained. Otherwise, it can be easily swept away by the cynicism of tomorrow. There are countless ways to strengthen our sense of *emuna*:

- Contemplating the magnificence of the world around us—the beauty of nature in all of its facets, the mystery of the human body with its incredible intricacies, etc.
- Detecting divine fingerprints in the events of world history, and specifically Jewish history—the survival of Am Yisrael throughout the millennia, the rebirth of the modern state of Israel as a national Jewish homeland, etc;
- Discerning the Ribono Shel Olam in personal history—in individual stories of Divine providence which affect the lives of ordinary people. As the saying goes, “coincidences are G-d's way of remaining anonymous.” Our challenge is to remove the mask of anonymity from “*olam*” (hidden) and see everything as an expression of Hashem's existence which permeates the world.
- Probing the profundity of *dvar Hashem* by engaging regularly in rigorous Talmud Torah.
- External performance of mitzvos can also reinforce

inner faith, as the Sefer HaChinuch teaches “*Acharei hapeulos nimshachin halevavos*.” Matzah is referred to as “*lachma de'mehemmus*”—symbolizing the trust displayed by B'nei Yisrael when they left with mere morsels of matzah and without substantial provisions for their journey into the wilderness, as highlighted in the prophecy given to Yirmiyahu (2:2) “*lechtaich acharai bamidbar be'ertz lo zeru'aa*” and alluded to in Ahava Rabba—“*ba'avur avoseinu shebatchu becha*.”

In the crisis situation just before of *kerias yam suf*, Hashem told Moshe to cease praying and instruct B'nei Yisrael to engage in a concrete demonstration of faith—“*Vayomer Hashem el Moshe ma titz ak elai daber el b'nei Yisroel ve'yis'au*” (Shemos 14:15). This demonstrative act of faith—“taking the plunge”—made the miracle of *kerias yam suf* possible [See Rashi there].

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Sforno, commenting on the pasuk “*Vayomer Hashem el Moshe ma titz ak elai*” (“And Hashem said to Moses why are you crying out to me?”) explains that Moshe was crying because he was unnerved by the people's biting comments of “*hamibli ein kevarim bemitzrayim lekachtanu lamus bamiabar*.” Convinced that the people had lost all faith, Moshe feared when the moment of truth would arrive, they would refuse to set foot in the sea. Whereupon Hashem reprimanded Moshe and said: “Moshe, do not cry! There is no cause for concern. You are mistaken in your assessment! Don't underestimate the faith of the B'nei Yisrael! Though they may not sound like believers, they still believe in their heart of hearts.

“*Daber el B'nei Yisrael ve yisa 'u*” – Instruct them to journey – because I assure you, Moshe, that at the critical moment they will move forward.”

As carriers of the spiritual genes of the Avos, we are *ma'aminim b'nei ma'aminim*. Faith remains something intrinsic to the Jewish psyche. Even when a Jew questions the Ribono Shel Olam, he still remains a believer at heart. While faith may be easily lost, we, as Jews, can readily retrieve it – “*Ve'tzadik be'emunaso yichyeh*.”

Free Speech

Kerias yam suf represented a climax and culmination to *Yetzias Mitzraim*. Prior to this miracle, the redemption was incomplete. The four expressions of *geula*—*vehotzaisi*, *vehitzalti*, *ve'ga'alti*, *ve'lakachti*—imply that the process of redemption consisted of distinct phases. While “*vehotzaisi*” and “*vehitzalti*” may have already been attained on the 15th of Nisan with *yetzias Mitzraim*, the “*ve'ga'alti*” phase was not realized until *kerias yam suf*.

In what sense does the *geula* of *kerias yam suf* complement the earlier phases in the process of redemption? On a most basic level, it is easy to see why redemption was incomplete until after *kerias yam suf*. Once Pharaoh decided to reverse his decision to let the people go, with the Egyptians intent on recovering their valuables, and with the Egyptian chariots in hot pursuit, there could be no true liberation. Although they were no longer mixing mortar and bricks under the whip of Egyptian taskmasters, B'nei Yisrael clearly still felt besieged.

On a spiritual level, too, the miracles of *kerias yam suf* brought the redemption to a whole new level by introducing an added dimension of Divine revelation and *hashgacha pratis*. As we mention in the Hagada, the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians at the sea were five times as many as those visited upon them in Mitzrayim. Furthermore, *kerias yam suf* raised Klal Yisrael to a new spiritual plane. Chazal tell us: “*ra'asa shifcha al hayam ma shelo ra'ah yechezkel ben buzi*”—Even the simplest Jew palpably sensed the shechina. Moreover, while at *yetzias Mitzraim* the Jews became *avdei Hashem* (servants of G-d), *kerias yam suf* endowed them with the title of *banim lamakom* (children of G-d), as we emphasize repeatedly in the bracha of *Emes Ve'emuna*, recited after the evening Shema—“*verau vanav gevuraso malchuscha ra'u vanecha boke'a yam lifnei Moshe*.”

Kerias yam suf also served as a culmination to the process of redemption on a sublime, esoteric level. According to the Zohar, Pesach symbolizes not only the redemption of the Jewish people, but also the redemption of speech itself. The Egyptian bondage

enslaved not only the Jews' physical selves but also their inner creative spirit—one which is synonymous with the power of speech. Speech is, after all, an expression of one's very humanity (*nefesh chaya = ruach memalela*). The harrowing ordeal of slavery stripped B'nei Yisrael's speech of all vitality, spontaneity, spirituality and holiness. The words that emanated from the mouths of the Hebrew slaves lacked the primordial spark of life – the *nefesh chaya* that distinguishes Mankind from the animal kingdom. Their words were flat and listless... lacking sophistication, dignity and holiness.

Yetzias Mitzraim changed all of that. Not only did it redeem the people—it also lifted their speech out of bondage. It is perhaps for this reason that Pesach, more than any other holiday, places great emphasis on storytelling and dialogue. The mitzvah of *sipur Yetzias Mitzraim* obligates us to engage in extended narrative. Even one who is alone at the seder must engage himself, as it were, in conversation, asking and answering his own *ma nishtana*. Interestingly,

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the word “Pesach” (which literally means “pass over” or “pity”) can be broken down into two separate words—“*Peh sach*”—the mouth that speaks. And it is surely no coincidence that the first few pages of *Mesechta Pesachim* focus on the importance of using refined language. The connection between Pesach and speech highlights the fact that speech itself was enslaved in Egypt. The Exodus released these sparks of speech from exile as well.

We can now appreciate the significance of *shevi'i shel Pesach* and its role in the process of *geula*. The miracle of *kerias yam suf* allowed for the full liberation of speech itself. After experiencing the miracle, B'nei Yisrael suddenly discovered the ability to express gratitude to Hashem with an outpouring of eloquent song. Filled with passion, depth, richness and sanctity, *Az Yashir* serves as a model of how exalted speech can be.

But it could not emerge until now. It was impossible to contemplate “self expression” under the taxing burdens of bricks and mortar. Only at this juncture—“*az*”—when the redemption was

complete—“*yashir Moshe uV'nei Yisrael*.”

To take this thought one step further—why was the exile in Mitzraim synonymous with the exile of speech? Why is the Exodus meant to reflect not only the redemption of the Jewish people but also the celebration of speech as well? Perhaps the answer lies in a pasuk in Yeshaya (43) (also found in the haftara to parshas Vayikra): “*Am zu yatzarti Li tehilasi yesapeiru*”—“This nation I have created for me; they shall sing my praises.” Yeshayahu Hanavi, speaking in name of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, makes an incredibly bold assertion about the purpose and existence of the Jewish people in this world. The Jews' mission in life can be summed up in two words: “*tehilasi yesapeiru*”—to proclaim loudly and clearly the praises of the Ribono Shel Olam. Not only are we the people of the book, we are the people of the “word” – the people of the song.

We know that speech is the expression of one's very humanity. What we say reflects who we are within—our thoughts, our personalities, and our inner selves. There is a beautiful homiletical interpretation of the expression “*ma hu omer*” which appears in the Hagada in connection with three of the four sons—“*chacham ma hu omer, rasha ma hu omer, tam ma hu omer*”: “*Mah hu – omer*”—what he is, he says”. The *chacham's* wisdom can be detected in his words, as can the *rasha's* wickedness and the *tam's* simplicity.

Our mission in the world, as Jews, is to sing to Hashem because that is what reflects our inner consciousness. At our core, we are in love with Hashem, we are at one with Him. He is at the center of our existence. This became our identity as a result of *Yetzias Mitzraim*. By redeeming us from Egypt and making us His chosen nation, Hashem forever transformed the Jewish psyche. From that instant, our *neshamos* became linked to the Ribono Shel Olam Himself. It is this inner essence—the imprint of the Jewish *neshama*—that ought to be reflected in our speech.

Pesach provides a golden opportunity to reflect on the Torah perspective of “free speech” and how it differs radically from the secular notion of “free speech”. Pesach offers us an opportunity to consider ways to liberate our own speech from its personal bondage – on Shabbos, Yom Tov, at shul or home—wherever we may find ourselves—so that it reflects the essence of an *am segula*—“*Barchi nafshi es Hashem... ashira Lashem bechayay...*”.

May we witness the fulfillment of the great yearning that we express in the concluding bracha over the second *kos* at the seder—“*venodeh lecha shir chadash al geulseinu ve'al pedus nafsheinu*”—to sing to Hakadosh Baruch Hu the new song of *geula* – *bimheira veyameinu*, amen. ■