

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

SEFER VAYIKRA & PESACH 5779

Is there a way to explain why the beginning of Sefer Vayikra often serves as the Biblical backdrop for the festival of Pesach?

Another question: The Exodus from Egypt is denominated as our "redemption from bondage". At the Seder, prior to the second glass of wine, we bless Gd by thanking Him AL GE'ULATEINU..., for our redemption... If we are describing a state of freedom, why not employ the more precise term, "emancipation" rather than "redemption". Put differently, what exactly does redemption mean in this context?

And a final question: Why did our celebration of the Exodus begin even before we actually left Egypt? Wouldn't it have made more sense to schedule the first Seder, with its rich symbolism and expressions of praise (Hallel) and gratitude, after our departure, perhaps after the Egyptian forces were destroyed at the Red Sea?

When the Torah discusses the institution of Yovel, the Jubilee Year, the word, GE'ULA, in its various grammatical forms, is frequently employed (see Vayikra 25:24). Ramban explains that redemption in

this setting means returning the land and the indentured servant to their former status, the land to its original titleholder and the slave to a freeman. Much like redeeming a pawn returns the pawned item to its rightful owner, the ethic of redemption describes a process whereby something or someone is restored to its/his true reality.

Our faith believes in man's inherent goodness, "that a divine spark inhabits every human being." However, that belief should not blind us to the latent demonic in man. Civilized, dignified man can descend and become a brute, a beast whose naked animality can precipitate evils of unimaginable cruelty. The redemption of man then, essentially describes that action whereby man is purged of his earthy vulgarities and villainous tendencies, and this, in an attempt to reveal and establish man's true essence as a human being created in Gd's image.

How, though, does this redemptive process unfold? What is the crucial and central ethic that allows for redemption to occur? Rav Soloveitchik has often remarked that the religious life is a sacrificial life. And, he continues, it is only via this sacrificial gesture that man can truly be redeemed. What this means is that man is enjoined to reign in his pleasure-seeking nature, that he

sacrifice aspects of his brutish make-up and demonstrate that he is more. Man and animal have much in common: they eat, copulate, seek dominance, etc. What distinguishes man as a godly being is his ability to restrain these natural and powerful urges and subject them to a higher ethical order. For Jews, to give but a few examples, this translates into kashrut which bridles gluttony, taharat hamishpacha disciplining sex, and Shabbat and holidays, a check on the abuses of power. In fact, the entire Torah and all subsequent rabbinic legislation serves this one exalted goal.

In a word, the moment man courageously places his animality under the strictures of a great moral code, he redeems himself. He discloses and resurrects his true reality and reclaims his mission as Gd's partner in the redemption of the world.

The answers to our question should now be clear. Sefer Vayikra, which introduces us to the sacrificial order, serves to remind the Jew of this powerful truth: With the holiday of Pesach, the great gift of freedom must be framed in terms of man's ability to redeem himself from a slave mentality which may have little to do with his physical incarceration. Even while imprisoned in Egypt, the Jew can still aspire to and restore his status as a godly human being. And

this, so long as he remembers the very first commandment given to the entire assembly of Israel: the mitzva of the Korban Pesach. If "a religious life is a sacrificial life" then the Jew needed to be informed at the very birth of his People that the path to true national and individual redemption is via the sacrifice.

Even a cursory survey of our contemporary culture tells us that much of what passes for acceptable behavior is in desperate need of redemption. In an age where parents are portrayed as buffoons, and promiscuity and profanity are paraded as the new honesty, and in a climate where the young are enticed to give vent to their baser passions without restriction and where virtue is just another instrumental strategy to impress others, we must - more than ever - act upon this ethic of redemption and prove, if only to ourselves, that we can be more than some sophisticated, intelligent animal.

Pesach comes to elevate and inspire us to the greatness that resides within. All we have to do is redeem and release its power to transform us.

