

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

VAYAKHEL-P'KUDEI HACHODESH '81

Let us attempt to find a common theme linking Parshat HaChodesh and our Parshiot this Shabbat.

The special maftir Torah portion read this Shabbat discusses the mitzva of the Korban Pesach in all its details (Sh'mot 12:1-20). Rav Soloveitchik sees in this institution one of the central means through which we demonstrate our freedom on Pesach (Festival of Freedom, pp. 35-46). In the Rav's view, there are two aspects to slavery: one, physical servitude - a political juridic dimension, and two, a restrictive slave personality - a mindset of bondage and subjugation. A person may enjoy all the physical benefits of choice and autonomy and yet exhibit, in his behavior, a peculiar manner of thinking and feeling - of acting in a distinct fashion resembling more an EVED than a BEN CHORIN.

The Rav analyzes this personalistic type of slavery by examining the various limitations imposed upon the slave in halacha. One of them is a slave's inability to marry (Bava Kama 88a). Why should this be so? "To marry means to cut down the barriers that separate individuals from each other... Marriage is supposed to precipitate the transition from an

individual to a communal existence... Only people who ... are capable of thinking in terms of others... only they are able to ... surge toward another person, extend their concerns and create a covenantal community. The slave is in fear of his life... and that fright extinguishes every moral feeling within his person... He protects himself; he cannot think about others or be concerned with them." In a word, a servile and cringing mentality is so radically self-absorbed that the marriage norm as an ethical and existential value is completely alien to him. Hence, the covenant of marriage cannot be realized.

When the Jew, however, engages in the mitzva of the Korban Pesach, he demonstrates a commitment to family and fellowship. The Pesach is a symbol of freedom "because freedom expresses itself in the realm of bayit, of community, of being together" (see Sh'mot 12:3). This sacrifice is unique because it is predicated on the concept of chavura - community which is completely non-existent regarding the other Biblical offerings (Sh'lammim, Chatat, Olah and Asham). Because the Pesach is that offering around which one displays chesed and tzedaka - of sharing, it becomes the perfect counterpoint to the slave's self-preoccupation. Even better, it is principally within this healthy family laboratory, as defined by Pesach, that the Jewish marriage

ethos is nurtured and inspired.

Can we now find in our Parshiyot a theme which resonates with a message similar to that of the Korban Pesach? Indeed so.

When the Torah characterizes the people who willingly donated toward the construction of the Mishkan, the text states (35:21): "And every person whose heart inspired him - came, and everyone whose spirit motivated him - brought Gd's portion ..."

The Ohr HaChayim HaKadosh flags the obvious redundancy of N'SA'O LIBO - "whose heart inspired him", and NADVO RUCHO - "whose spirit motivated him", and offers a very telling distinction. The NADVA RUCHO describes a person who willingly contributes but only what he can afford. The N'SA'O LIBO, however, portrays a very different type of donor. It speaks of an individual whose heart is possessed of an innate goodness that makes it impossible for him to be other than overflowing in his generosity. He gives far beyond his financial capacity. And because his giving is a reflection of his heart - TUVIYOT LIBO, in the words of the Ohr HaChayim - the deeds of a N'SA'O LIBO translate into much more than a generous monetary contribution. It becomes a matter of deeply ingrained and innate goodness. It is as much - if not more - about the time and energy - the

genuine devotion to the sacred task at hand - that elevate his Mishkan offering to a notch above the rest.

There is something in the Jewish DNA which predisposes us toward charity and generosity (see Yevamot 79a). We almost can't help ourselves when it comes to showing compassion and empathy for others, especially the unfortunates in our society. The Rav often spoke about how the Egyptian exile molded the moral quality of the Jewish people for all time. (Reflections of the Rav I, pp. 189-192) He distinguished between two words which, while employed interchangeably, are not synonymous: MERACHEM and RACHAMAN. A MERACHEM describes a person who performs many charitable acts. However, such acts of kindness are not necessarily consistent. A MERACHEM often hesitates and deliberates whether to perform the noble deed. In short, "he feels no dominant compulsion to do so."

A RACHAMAN, on the other hand, speaks not to the deed as such, but rather to an attribute. Such a person only has one choice - to act compassionately. "His attitude flows naturally from his personality. He does not hesitate; he is not self-conscious. He cannot act otherwise; he is able only to love, and is unaware of any other alternative." For good reason, we have been described

ideally as RACHMANIM B'NEI RACHMANIM, a people where compassion and kindness run through the very fabric of our being. Of course, a person is not born a RACHAMAN, but "the halacha directs him to act with compassion and gradually transforms him into one who responds spontaneously with RACHAMIM." Over time, the NADVA RUCHO metamorphosizes into a N'SA'O LIBO. And the downtrodden Israelite under Egyptian tyranny becomes the liberated Jew of the Korban Pesach!

The festival of Pesach is a time of profound gratitude to HaShem for having bestowed upon us the capacity to love and share, to be generous and compassionate - to be a Jew of N'SA'O LIBO and Pesach. In our daily prayers, we recite: "Happy are we, how good is our portion, how lovely our fate, how beautiful our heritage!" And at the Pesach Seder, we declare in the Haggada: "It is our duty to thank ... and to acclaim the One who did all these miracles for our ancestors and for us. He took us from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to festivity, and from deep darkness to great light, and from bondage to redemption!"

In that spirit, ours is the obligation to concretize that gratitude in deeds of CHESED and RACHAMIM to all! 🙌