

Drasha for Yom Tov Sheni, Rabbi James Proops

Chag Sameach to all. The intention is that this will be read some time on the second day of Yom Tov. I know that for a number of people this is a relatively new concept or something which, since spending Yom Tovim in Israel, you hoped to confine to the distant memory. That being said however, I sincerely hope that you are all enjoying the second day of Yom Tov so far and are making the most of the extra opportunity to be away from our phones, emails and zoom, and whatever songs and *divrei Torah* you may have missed in the first seder you were able to slip in to the second.

I'd like us to think about freedom. Freedom is of course one of the overarching themes of *Pesach* and one that we will have most likely been discussed at our sedarim over the past two nights. *Pesach* is the celebration, remembrance and sanctification of our freedom. Yet, not for the first time in our history, we are being tasked with rejoicing in our emancipation, while at the same time experiencing a distinct lack of real freedom. For the first time in so many of our lives we are being told where we can and can not go, that we may not visit our loved ones and of course we are prevented from practising our Judaism in the way that is expected and desired. The fact that we are being restricted for our own health and the wellbeing of society, while making our new reality more palatable, does not change the fact that for the first time we are all feeling distinctly unfree.

It could be argued that our current circumstances of isolation, quarantine and social distancing make it harder to celebrate our freedom as we are not able to experience it right now. Conversely one could say that now more than ever we can analyse the notion of freedom from a whole new perspective of appreciation. I would however like to explore the subject of freedom from the perspective of our ancestors in the *midbar* and how that can help us as we struggle through our own experiences of house-arrest.

The *Torah* reading for today is not in its entirety concerned with *Pesach*, but rather we read a comprehensive description of the *chaggim* and the Hebrew calendar. Taken from *parashat Emor* (Vayikra 23) the *perek* begins by listing *Pesach* as the first festival of the calendar, proceeds with a detailed account of the *Omer* (the ceremony which started on the second day of the *chag*) and continues to list the dates of *Shavuot*, *Rosh Hashana*, *Yom Kippur* and

Sukkot. If we look carefully at the text of the *perek* we notice that each of the *chaggim* listed are introduced with the well known *pasuk* "וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר - And God spoke to Moshe saying" with one exception, that of *Shavuot*. We are taught by *Chazal* that the paragraph dealing with *Shavuot* is not introduced with that phrase because the counting of the Omer has already been introduced with those very words and *Shavuot* is really the culmination of the *Omer*. This therefore leads us to conclude that the counting of the *Omer*, which begins today is the crucial link between these two festivals, *Zman Cheiruteinu*, The Time of Our Freedom, and *Zman matan Torateinu*, The Time of the Giving of the Torah.

Why is the connection between the two so important and why does the counting from one to the other take on such significance?

Dayan Moshe Swift zt'l, of London and LA, quotes an unnamed 'great man' who said, "The greatest curse in life is to have everything to live with, but nothing to live for". When the *Bnei Yisrael* left Egypt, despite leaving behind a life of servitude, they departed as wealthy people in a prosperous position. We are told that they were given riches of gold and silver by their former tormentors as they made their way out of Egypt. The *medrash* states that the Egyptians were so desperate for *Bnei Yisrael* to leave that they piled on the gifts as an encouragement for them to go quickly. However despite leaving with wealth, they still lacked a life of meaning and purpose. "Everything to live with, but nothing yet to live for."

It was of course *Kabbalat HaTorah* that would ultimately provide *Bnei Yisrael* with their purpose, but until they reached that point there was something sorely missing from their lives. Despite being granted their freedom from enslavement and freedom from captivity, without a firm direction of purpose they were not yet able to utilize their newfound freedom. It is for this reason that they were instructed to count each day from when they left Egypt until they merited to receive the *Torah*. From the outset it was clear that they were expected to make the most of their freedom and they were to count each passing day until they reached their destination. It is crucial that we take note of the fact that each individual is instructed to count, rather than to rely on the Kohanim or the Rabbonim. Each one of us must realize that we, each individual, must strive towards a purpose. We must count the days

until we are able to realize our goals and potential, not letting one pass by unaccounted for.

While we sit in our homes unable to visit family, go to our favourite restaurants or socialize, we long for our freedom. We can't wait until we can get out and restart our normal lives again.

The question is, is that what we will do? Will we just pick up from where we left off and continue in the same way, as if nothing has happened? Or will we, having reflected on our current predicament, make positive changes to how we live our lives? Will we search out meaning and purpose and fill our days with the quest to actualize our goals?

Upon achieving freedom once again, we will be afforded the opportunity to choose the direction in which we are headed. The message of the *Omer* is clear. We must make every day count as we climb the ladder of our potential. Freedom is only worth what one makes of it.

As we sit confined to our homes we are provided with the incredible opportunity to reflect, contemplate and make plans. Plans for what we can take from this ordeal. Plans for how we will allow this episode in history to affect us. Plans for how we can attempt to ensure that we never waste another day of freedom. For some, it will be the resolution to spend more time with the people who until now we didn't realize we didn't see enough. For others, it will be a new appreciation of what it means to be able to daven in a minyan rather than take it for granted, as so many of us have until now. Whether it is through a resurgence in our learning, involving ourselves in more acts of chessed or a renewed commitment to expressing our *hakarat hatov* to those around us, we must all pledge to ensure that we emerge from our confinement like our ancestors before us, determined to grow, improve and strive towards our potential.

With these intentions set firmly in our sights, may they serve as the impetus for the Ribono Shel Olam to end this calamitous time and bring us out once again from the darkness to the light, from isolation to freedom. Wishing you all a Chag Kasher v'Sameach and I look forward to seeing you all in person soon.