

As is the *Pesach* tradition, let's begin with questions.

The prevalent *minhag* amongst *Klal Yisrael* is that in each *Shemona Esre* throughout the entire *Chag*, we insert the descriptive phrase of labeling *Pesach* as *Zman Cheiruteinu* – the time of our freedom. However, the *Chok Yaakov*, in his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Siman* 490) opines that on the last days of *Yom Tov*, the phrase *Zman Simchateinu* - time of our happiness (similar to *Sukkot*) should be inserted into *Kiddush* and *Shemona Esre* instead. Why the change?

The *Chok Yaakov* offers his own approach to the liturgical change but I'd like to offer a different theory.

A second question - One of the upbeat songs sung near the conclusion of the *seder* is "Who Knows One?". It's fun and gets everyone involved but, in all honesty, seems a bit childish. What could be the message of this crowd favorite song?

Though the *Mishna* makes no mention of it, the *gemara* (*Pesachim* 118a), mentions the opinion of *Rabbi Tarfon* and other *Tannaim* that there is an idea of a 5th cup of wine at the *seder*. The most well-known reason behind why we are specifically commanded to drink 4 cups at the *seder* is because each cup corresponds to the 4 different languages of *geula*, redemption, that *Hashem* uses when He speaks to Moshe at the beginning of Parshat Vaera (6:6-7). Many commentaries discuss the possibility of the 5th cup correlating to the word *V'heveiti* (and I will bring – *pasuk* 8) which discusses *Hashem* bringing *Am Yisrael* into *Eretz Yisrael*.

However, the *Netziv*, (*Shemot* 6:7) explains that the first four cups of wine parallel the four expressions of redemption while the fifth cup parallels the expression, "*veyadatem et Hashem*", and you will know *Hashem*. The *Netziv* explains that this phrase highlights some type of special and unique knowledge of *Hashem*. Perhaps *Hashem* was telling *Bnei Yisrael* that after the exodus each person will gain a greater clarity and understanding of *Him*.

For those of you who know me well, you know that I very much enjoy swimming and running. Over the first days of *Yom Tov*, I finished reading the book Swim, Bike, Bonk. It's a story of a travel writer who enjoys many outdoor activities and hears about the Ironman triathlon, the most prestigious triathlon in the world. Each competitor must swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles and then run a marathon (26.2) in under 17 hours. It takes months of preparation. It is grueling and a real test of physical fitness and emotional mettle (a special shout out to YICC member Josh Kahn who has completed two Ironman races). At the end of the book, the author, Will McGough, addresses the question of – what did I gain from this whole experience? Did it change me? Am I any different of a person after having achieved such a lofty goal I set for myself?

Major events and moments must move us. They must transform us and cause us to change and improve – even slightly. We often say that stories, movies or events are inspirational – but if we're no different afterwards, then they might not have really been.

The *Netziv* is saying that the goal of *Yetziat Mitzraim* was “And you will know *Hashem*”. It was not just that Hashem was going to “do all the work” by taking *Am Yisrael* out of Egypt physically but He wanted them to change religiously.

With this idea, I believe we can address both questions.

Word association games are very powerful. You can tell a lot about a person by what first comes to their mind when a certain word is stated. Let’s say a person is asked what comes to his/her mind when they hear/see the #18. If after hearing #18, a person says President Ulysses S. Grant, you know they love history, while if they say Darryl Strawberry (my favorite baseball player growing up), you know they love sports. If they say 18 is *Chai* – all the better. The goal of “Who Knows One” is after a long evening of thinking about *Hashem*, praising Him, speaking about His love for the Jewish people and retelling the story of our departure from *Mitzrayim*, we should reach a new level – a level where we begin associating arbitrary numbers with *Hashem*, His *Torah* and Jewish life.

Lastly, this might be the thinking of the *Chok Yaakov*. The long *Chag* should transform us from simply seeing this holiday as a time of our freedom and now a time of our happiness. We should have grown over the last week where we more intimately feel true *simcha* because we have strengthened our relationship with *Hashem*. We’re different people and therefore more genuinely feel His presence. This feeling and realization bring us greater *simcha* and the *Chok Yaakov*’s thinking is that we declare it during the final days of *Pesach*.

May these final days bring us an elevated sense of *simcha* – a *simcha* attained through our renewed and invigorated connection to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

I always find the following to be one of the most intriguing questions to discuss over *Pesach*: The *mishna* in *Pirkei Avot* (6:2) teaches that “only someone who is involved in *Torah* is truly free”. This seems to be difficult, as a life committed to *Torah* and *Mitzvot* comes with many restrictions and prohibitions – that which is usually not associated with freedom. What is the *mishna* teaching? How is a person living with a fidelity to *Hashem*’s laws the real free person?

In Hebrew, the usual term to describe freedom, liberty, and emancipation is *chofesh*. When the *Torah* (*Shemot* 21:2) wants to describe a slave going free after six years it uses the word *chofshi*. In modern Hebrew, a vacation is called *chofesh*. *Pesach* should have been defined as *Zman Chofsheinu*, yet *Chazal* chose a different term – *Zman Cheiruteinu*. What is the difference between *chofesh* and *cheirut*?

Rav Shimson Raphael Hirsch posits that there are really two different types of freedom. There is *chofesh* and *cheirus*. *Chofesh* is a freedom defined by the absence of slavery or subjugation. This freedom is characterized by the rejection of the negative.

Cheirus represents an internal state of freedom. I know who I am and I choose to live a life that expresses my truest identity. With *cheirus*, I am in touch with my core being. My life becomes an expression of my core values. It’s a positive freedom.

How does *Torah* - with all of its rituals, demands, instructions and details – bring *cheirus*?

As an example, let’s use the example of a nutritionist. When a nutritionist tells me what to eat and what not to eat, he/she is not trying to limit my life; they are trying to optimize my health and well-being, so I can maximize my days, feel better, operate on the highest level of energy and execute my goals and ambitions freely.

The *Torah* gives us a “diet” so we can operate at our maximum level of energy. *Hashem* knows our blood type, and gives us a diet so that our souls, minds and bodies can be aligned.

Rabbi YY Jacobson imagines what if a fish asked to be free to tour the world and be taken out of the water. Imagine a violin would request - I want to be free, please untie the cords so I can fly freely as well. Imagine if a leaf would say to you: I want to be free, please tear me off the tree. And finally, imagine a human limb saying I want to be free, sever me from the dictatorship of the brain running my organism, so I can be free at last.

Each of their “limitations” actually allow them to fulfill their mission. They might not be free in the way Western Civilization defines it but they are most definitely primed to live a life where their “best self” is actualized.

He concluded with another great comparison. Imagine a group of kids are playing football on the roof of a building or on a roof of a school. What if the roof didn’t have a fence! Without a fence, no one could have any fun. Everyone is scared of every wrong move. If I run too fast, I could fall.

The *Torah's* mitzvot – it's positive and negative commandments as well as its high expectations – are there for one reason. They are here so life can be truly exciting and fulfilling. The limitations of Judaism are here to help us navigate life in the healthiest and best way possible.

The *Torah's* rules and regulations are the vehicle which we all can be our best selves and enjoy real freedom – one defined as *cheirus* not *chofesh*.