

True Liberation

RABBI DANIEL LECOUNT

החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה.

This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.¹

THE FIRST MITZVAH we were commanded by G-d as a people, even before the Exodus from Egypt, was to set our own calendar.

We do not begin to calculate this calendar from the creation of the world. We begin after the Exodus from Egypt. We begin the year's calendar not on the first of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, but on the first of Nissan, which can be called the "Rosh Hashanah for the redemption of the nation."

This leaves us with the following question: What makes this mitzvah unique among all others? Why is this the first mitzvah that the Jewish people were commanded? What does the Torah want us to learn from this?

To answer this question, we must introduce a concept highlighted by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook. In R. Kook's words:

ההבדל שבין העבד ובן החורין, איננו רק הבדל מעמדי, מה שבמקרה זה הוא משועבד לאחר, וזה הוא בלתי משועבד. אנו יכולים למצוא עבד משכיל שרוחו הוא מלא חירות, ולהפך, בן חורין שרוחו היא רוח של עבד.

The difference between a slave and a free man is not only one of class, which in this case is [one person being] enslaved to another [person] who is not enslaved. [Because in reality], we can find a slave who is enlightened whose spirit is full of freedom, and vice versa, [we can find] a free man whose soul is the soul of a slave.²

1. Shemot 12:2.

2. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Maamarei Ha-Rayah*, p. 158.

DANIEL LECOUNT, along with his wife Rut, are Shlichim and Judaic Studies teachers at Netivot HaTorah Day School. Rabbi Lecount and his family live in Thornhill.

According to R. Kook, there can be two types of slavery: The first and most common kind of slavery is “physical slavery.” This is when a person is not allowed to live, go, or work where they want. They are treated as an object and not as a human being.

However, there is an additional form of slavery – “spiritual slavery.” This is a situation in which a person is *spiritually* held captive, either voluntarily or unconsciously by another, whose freedom of choice has been taken away. The “master” of this situation may be social norms, habits, or fear of free-thinking.

The conventional definition of slavery is “the deprivation of liberty of one individual by another.” In the past, the division between free lords and deprived slaves was manifested primarily on a social level, in which a superior stratum of citizens were dominant over other people in lower classes of society.

Within this model, the freeman is someone who belongs to this “ruling class” and the slave belongs to the lower class of enslaved people. R. Kook pointed out, such a definition, which is fundamentally social or political, is imprecise. It is possible to find someone who is *physically* a slave but whose spirit is full of freedom, and vice versa. One can find a “free man” whose spirit is that of a slave. According to the conventional definition of slavery and freedom, being a member of the “free camp” does not guarantee freedom.

The more accurate determination of freedom takes place on the spiritual plane. “Inner-spiritual” freedom is infinitely more important than “outer freedom.” Spiritual freedom means being loyal to oneself. People who act out of social pressures or imitation are essentially living in the “spirit of slaves.” Freedom is not only measured by external conditions but also by the degree one is able to be loyal or true to oneself. A person who conforms to society’s expectations of them is not entirely free to be themselves. Instead of the individual determining their own choices and identity, the social image or expectation of them determines their identity and behavior patterns. This is not a free person. An individual who does things that are impressed upon them from external forces that are not natural to them isn’t free.

This explains why we, the Jewish people, were commanded to sanctify the month as the first mitzvah following the Exodus from Egypt. It is well known that the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years. This slavery included both their bodies and their spirits. What can be done to free someone who has been bound for centuries in spiritual and physical bonds? To this, the Torah responds: “חדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה – This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.”

In light of R. Kook’s definition of slavery and freedom discussed above, a slave and a free man differ in a profound and unique way in regard to time. Slaves do not have any time of their own, and they cannot control their time. This is why a slave is exempt from time-bound commandment – “*mitzvot aseh shi-hazman grama.*” A free man is one who controls his own time.

A closer examination of these differences reveals that a slave is considered a slave even in his free time (or idle time), and possibly even when he is released. Whereas, a free man is considered free even when he is physically controlled by another.

There is a commandment in Parashat Bo:

ועבדת את העבודה הזאת בחודש הזה.

*You shall do this work in this month.*³

What is this work about? What makes it special? We can answer by saying that in the preceding chapter, the Torah explained what the Passover sacrifice entailed without describing it. When Israel entered the Promised Land, the above verse describes the work they had to do for the Passover sacrifice. I believe another message the Torah is trying to convey here is that it does not specify what the work is because it wants us to learn that true freedom is freedom from enslaving physical work. However, that freedom leads to another kind of work. It is this work that leads to true liberty.

Freedom comes with responsibility. Righteousness comes with obligations. While slaves are exempt from responsibility, freemen are responsible for their families, their communities, and the world as a whole.

Keeping the commandments teaches us self-control, the control of passions, or at least the choice to follow this path. Therefore, the Passover sacrifice that expresses this “work” is a symbol of freedom. But there is a condition: the Passover sacrifice can only be celebrated by a person who has been circumcised, because a foreigner does not belong to the Jewish people and cannot perform “this work.”

זאת חקת הפסח כל בן נכר לא יאכל בו

*This is the law of the Passover offering: No foreigner shall eat of it.*⁴

Jews observing Passover are supposed to return to this concept of freedom every year and renew within themselves an inner-spiritual freedom cleansed of all the external pressures from without. This is true freedom. Liberation from the yoke of Egypt and inner mental slavery from the masters (Egypt). According to this explanation, freedom is expressed in the first stage of Israeli nationalism, namely the birth of the State of Israel, and in the second stage, is doing the work of הזאת את העבודה הזאת.

Ramban states:

וטעם החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים, שימנו אותו ישראל חדש הראשון, וממנו ימנו כל החדשים וכו' כדי שיהיה זה זיכרון בנס הגדול, כי בכל עת שנזכיר החדשים יהיה הנס נזכר.

The rationale for the commandment to sanctify the months of the year is in order for the Jewish people to count the first month. And from this month, we count the entire year's months, etc. So

3. Shemot 13:5.

4. Shemot 12:43.

that we [establish] a remembrance of the great miracle [of the Exodus from Egypt]. For whenever we remember the month, we also remember the miracle [of the Exodus].⁵

According to Ramban, we must remember the miracle of the Exodus, at every step of our lives. Perhaps this is because, as we explained, we will always remember that work is always in front of us, and at the core of this work is freedom. A freedom which only comes from the inner-spiritual freedom to be ourselves.

5. Ramban on Shemot 12:2.