Why We Celebrate

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A collection of essays from many of the greatest *roshei yeshivah* and *rabbanim* of our generation, discussing Pesach, Sefiras Ha'Omer and Shavuos, and how we can properly prepare for them

A new and inspiring collection of insights on the Haggadah Shel Pesach

The Laws of Pesach and Sefiras Ha'Omer

Compiled by Rabbi Shlomie Dickman

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Why We Celebrate Pesach

ROSH CHODESH NISSAN

PESACH PEARLS

Harav Eli Mansour

Pesach: Achieving True Freedom

Chazal, in formulating the text of the Yom Tov prayer, referred to Pesach as זְמַן חֵירוּתֵנוּ — *our occasion of freedom*. The central theme of Pesach, then, is freedom.

Our tradition teaches that our holidays are not purely commemorative. We do not observe the holidays simply to commemorate events that took place long ago. Rather, the forces that brought about those events resurface each year on each holiday. This means that on Pesach we do not simply commemorate our attainment of freedom from the Egyptians, but rather we have the unique potential to achieve freedom ourselves. On Pesach, the spiritual forces that enable us to achieve freedom are available to us, empowering us to reach this goal.

We might ask, what freedom do we need to achieve? Perhaps if we were living in an oppressive dictatorship, we would relish the opportunity presented by this holiday for praying and working for our freedom. But, thank G-d, we live in a wonderful democracy where we are free to practice our religion, choose our careers, and so on. What kind of freedom should we be aspiring to achieve on Pesach?

This question is born out of a fundamentally mistaken definition of the term "freedom." To understand what חֵירוּת — *freedom* really means, we need to look in our Torah sources. And the Mishnah in *Pirkei Avos* tells us very clearly what חֵירוּת means: אֵין לְךָ בֶּן חוֹרִין אֶלָּא מִי שֶׁעוֹסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה — *The only one who*

is free is one who involves himself in Torah. Freedom, then, is realized by involving oneself in Torah.

At first glance, this definition seems very strange. Isn't Torah life the precise opposite of freedom? Is anything more restrictive than Torah law, which dictates what a person may and may not do, eat, speak, and so on, and imposes countless responsibilities upon us?

No society can properly function without a set of enforceable laws. Without a system of laws, chaos would prevail, and nobody would be safe or secure. A human being needs laws to save him from himself, from his own vices. Without laws, we would allow our basest instincts to overcome us and guide our behavior. Laws keep us civil and disciplined, and thus allow us to achieve constructive goals. A person whose life is structured by a framework of laws is truly free, because he is free from his own negative tendencies and vice. He is thus able to pursue and achieve meaningful goals. A person who lives without laws is not free at all, because he is a slave to himself.

Let us imagine two people trying to lose weight. One sees a delicious cupcake, and although he knows he should be keeping to a strict diet, he cannot resist and eats it. The second loves cupcakes just as much as the first, but resists, realizing that this is the best thing for him. Who is the free person — the one who eats without restriction, or the one with the strength and willpower to resist temptation? Clearly, the one with the power to do the right thing is the free man.

If laws are what make us free, then we readily understand why Torah life is the ultimate freedom. The Torah is the set of laws given by G-d Himself, Who knows better than anybody else what is best for us. No one is freer than one who

lives according to the Torah because he follows the rules that enable us to maximize our personal potential and lead the most meaningful life.

On Pesach, we were not taken from Egypt so we could do whatever we wanted. This would be nothing to celebrate. Rather, we were taken from Egypt to become G-d's people and receive His Torah. We achieved the ultimate חֵירוּת, and this is what we celebrate on Pesach.

And, as mentioned earlier, we do not merely celebrate past events, rather we try to tap into the special powers accessible during this period. Pesach is especially suited for overcoming addictions, tendencies, negative patterns of behavior, and other forms of "slavery" that we all experience. We all struggle with vices of one kind or another, and this is our opportunity to free ourselves so we can become the people we can and should be. Pesach is the time for us to focus on extricating ourselves from our enslavement to bad habits, so we can achieve the freedom to excel and reach lofty goals.

Matzah: The Bread of Faith

Towards the beginning of the Seder, before we begin reading the Maggid section, we break the middle matzah on the table. The Gemara in (*Pesachim* 115) explains that this is done because the Torah (*Devarim* 16:3) refers to *matzah* as לֶחֶם עָנִי — *poor man's bread*, and poor people generally eat scraps of bread, as opposed to whole loaves. In the Gemara's words, דַּרְכּוֹ שֶׁל עָנִי בִּפְרוּסָה — *a poor person is accustomed to pieces*, rather than loaves.

The Gemara's comment also has a deeper meaning. Elsewhere, the Gemara (*Nedarim* 41a), teaches, אֵין עָנִי אֶלָּא בְּדַעָה — *the true poor person is one who is impoverished in terms*

of knowledge. In this sense of the term "poor," we are all paupers. We all lack knowledge. We see so many things in the world that make no sense to us — good, innocent people who suffer, evil people who prosper, and countless strange events that defy our understanding.

The challenge of *emunah* is to recognize just how little we understand. If a person walks into a show forty-five minutes after it started, he will be unable to follow the plot, and will think that nothing makes sense. We all come into this world well into the story, millennia after G-d created the world, and we see and know very little of what has happened, what happens, and what will happen. Our knowledge is very limited, we see everything from a very narrow viewpoint, and so we don't understand. Once we recognize this, we can trust and feel confident that G-d runs the world in His perfect wisdom, and everything occurs precisely the way it should, even though we do not understand how this could be.

This is the deeper meaning of the Gemara's comment, דַּרְכּוֹ שֶׁל עָנִי בִּפְרוּסָה. We are "poor," very limited in our knowledge, and so we see only a פְּרוּסָה, a piece, of the story. The events we witness and experience are only a very small piece of the large puzzle, of G-d's master plan, and this is why we do not understand why things happen as they do. We therefore break the matzah, keep one piece on the table, and hide the second piece. We remind ourselves that we see only a small portion of what is going on, and the other portion is hidden from our view. That hidden piece is brought back only at the end of the Seder, symbolizing the fact that at the end of our exile, at the time of Mashiach, everything will become clear. Then we will finally access all the hidden information that we are now missing, and we will fully understand everything.

Until then, we need to strengthen our *emunah* and firmly trust that Hashem is in full control and has only our best interests in mind.

A young child does not understand why his mother holds him down to allow the doctor to give him a shot and cause him pain. Years later, however, when the child realizes that the shot saved him from a dozen or so fatal diseases, he thanks his mother. In our current state, we are blind, like ignorant children, and we do not understand the reason for the pain we sometimes have to endure. Pesach reminds us that the day will come when we will have the knowledge we currently lack, and then everything will be perfectly clear.

The *Zohar* calls matzah לַחְמָא דְּהֵימְנוּתָא — *the bread of faith*. The experience of Pesach is intended to bolster our *emunah*, to remind us that there is so much that we do not know, and to trust that we are always in G-d's hands, and everything He does for us is always only for the best.

Our Response to the Wicked Son

The Haggadah famously speaks of four different types of sons, instructing us how to fulfill to each of them the obligation of סִיפּוּר יְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם — *telling the story of the Exodus from Mitzrayim*. The wicked son, the Haggadah says, asks the question, מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם — *What is this service to you?* He looks at the mitzvos observed at the Seder and asks his parents what this is all about, why they are bothering with these special observances. The Haggadah instructs us to respond by citing the verse (*Shemos* 13:8), בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם — *It is because of this that Hashem acted for me when I left Egypt*.

This verse seems very difficult to understand, and it seems even more difficult to understand how this answers the wicked son's question. As the commentators note, the verse seems to say that G-d took Klal Yisrael out of Egypt so that we can perform the mitzvos of Pesach. This appears to be the opposite of the actual sequence of events. We would have thought that after the Exodus, G-d commanded us to perform the mitzvos of Pesach in order to remember this seminal event. But this verse seems to be saying that to the contrary, G-d took us out of Egypt so we can perform the Pesach sacrifice, eat matzah and *maror*, and so on.

How could that be? How could the purpose of the Exodus be to perform mitzvos that commemorate the Exodus? And what does this have to do with the wicked son?

The Beis Halevi, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik of Brisk, explains that the wicked son questions the relevance of the Pesach sacrifice when its primary purpose is no longer necessary. The ancient Egyptians regarded the sheep as a deity of sorts, as they worshipped the zodiacal sign of Aries, which is symbolized by a sheep. The Pesach sacrifice was required as a public rejection of Egyptian paganism, and a statement of belief in monotheism. The wicked son claims that this statement was necessary only in the ancient world, when paganism was rampant and many people believed in the worship of anmals. But once the world no longer followed such foolish beliefs, there should no longer be any reason to observe this mitzvah. The wicked son thus asks, "What is this service to you?" — meaning, how is it relevant now? Why should we still be required to observe this ritual?

The answer to this question is that the Torah in fact preceded the world's creation. Even though many mitzvos

have reasons that we understand, there are also other reasons that are inaccessible to us. And therefore, even if the reason for a certain mitzvah (as we understand it) no longer applies, we are nevertheless bound by that mitzvah, because all mitzvos are eternally relevant, binding, and applicable. The proof is that even the Patriarchs observed the mitzvos of Pesach, despite the fact that the Exodus had not happened yet. This demonstrates that the mitzvos are significant and relevant irrespective of their apparent reasons, because they preceded even the world's creation, and are therefore not contingent on any particular time or place.

This is why the Haggadah tells us to respond to the wicked son by citing the verse, בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם — *It is because of this that Hashem acted for me when I left Egypt*. This verse teaches us the very point with which we are to respond to this challenge — that the mitzvos of Pesach are not dependent upon any particular time and place. Hashem brought the redemption so that we can fulfill the mitzvos; He did not command these mitzvos because the Exodus happened. The mitzvos stand independent of any reason or rationale and are binding in every day and age. This is our response to the wicked son, and this is one of the vitally important lessons of Pesach that we are to emphasize to ourselves and to our children on this special night.

THE 2ND OF NISSAN

THE POWER OF THE SEDER NIGHT

HARAV MOSHE TUVIA LIEFF

It is well known that *Leil HaSeder* — the night of the Seder — is a unique and distinct time. Even so, I believe many people fail to comprehend just how special this night really is. This night is the crown of the entire year.

The *Zohar* (*Bo* pg. 40b) states:

כָּל בַּר נָשׁ דְּאִשְׁתָּעֵי בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם — *Every person who relates the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim*

וּבְהַהוּא סִפּוּר חָדֵי בְּחֶדְוָה — *and rejoices while reciting it,*

זַמִּין אִיהוּ לְמֶחְדֵּי בְּשְׁכִינְתָּא לְעַלְמָא דְּאָתֵי — *he will rejoice together with the Shechinah in Olam Haba.*

Can there be any greater reward that that? To rejoice with the *Shechinah* — that is what the world was created for! But there is more. The *Zohar* continues:

קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא חָדֵי בְּהַהוּא סִפּוּר וכו' — *Hashem rejoices when hearing it being recited, etc.*

בֵּיה שַׁעֲתָא כָּנִישׁ קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא לְכָל פַּמַלְיָא דִּילֵיהּ — *At that time, Hashem gathers His group of malachim,*

וְאָמַר לוֹן זִילוּ וְשָׁמְעוּ סִפּוּרָא דִּשְׁבָחָא דִּילִי דְּקָא מְשַׁתָּעוּ בְּנֵי וְחֶדְוָן בְּפוּרְקָנִי — *and tells them, "Come, listen as My children are extolling My virtues and rejoicing in My redemption."*

In other words: who is at your Seder, watching your production? The Ribono Shel Olam Himself! The *malachim,* too, are part of your audience. They are all there, listening to and enjoying your fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim*.

But then the *Zohar* say something truly astounding:

דֵּין אִתּוֹסַף לֵיה חֵילָא וּגְבוּרְתָּא לְעֵילָא — *Then, there is an increase of power and strength Above.*

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהַהוּא סִפּוּרָא יְהָבִי חֵילָא לְמָאֲרֵיהוֹן — *Klal Yisrael, in the sippur, gives strength to its Master*

כְּמַלְכָּא דְּאִתּוֹסַף חֵילָא וּגְבוּרְתָּא כַּד מְשַׁבְּחִין גְּבוּרְתֵּיה — *as a king who gains power and strength as he is praised by his people.*

It's hard for us to grasp this concept, but the *Zohar* is saying that, based on the quality of your Seder, based on how you rejoice and celebrate while reciting the Haggadah, there is an equal degree of *hischazkus* of Hakadosh Baruch Hu Himself, *kiveyachol*. Of course, the true nature of such an idea is beyond our understanding, but it is clear that our actions on Seder night have a profound impact Above. That's the power of the Seder. And what a reward there is to receive! A person can merit being together and *b'simchah* with the *Shechinah* itself!

People have no idea what they are really accomplishing at the Seder. I heard a *mashal* for this:

When a donkey is working at a wheat mill, turning the stone around and around, he isn't satisfied. In his basic understanding of the world, he isn't going anywhere. Now, carrying a load from place to place — *there's* an accomplishment! After all, he has successfully moved something from Point A to Point B. But what's the point of walking around and around turning a wheel?

The donkey doesn't see that he's grinding wheat, and cannot understand that he's creating wealth for his owner. His owner will go on to sell the flour the donkey produces, make money, and feed his family. Compared to simply moving a burden from place to place, this is a significantly greater accomplishment! But the donkey knows nothing about it.

The Seder is the same idea. We cannot understand the effect it is having; we do not grasp how our actions cause a tremendous impact in *Shamayim*.

The *Mishnah Berurah* quotes the Shelah's requirement that one does not recline while reciting the Haggadah. The reason for this is that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is standing above you at this time, and a student must not lounge before his *rebbi* out of fear and respect. This is based on the above-mentioned *Zohar*: Hashem Himself is there as the audience of our Seder, so we must conduct ourselves with fear and trepidation. We must realize that, at the Seder, we are performing right in front of Hashem.

Like the *Kohen Gadol*

Hashem's participation in the Seder seems like such an incredible concept! One might wonder: Who am I to merit an audience comprised of the Ribono Shel Olam and His *malachim*?

Listen to this:

The Maharal discusses the reason for wearing a *kittel* at the Seder. On Yom Kippur, when we are being judged, we can understand the need to appear pure as an angel, but why wear a *kittel* at the Seder?

The Maharal explains: "We wear white garments on Pesach night during the *avodah* of the Seder for the same reason the *kohen gadol* wore white during his *avodah* in the *Kodesh Kadashim* on Yom Kippur. He is attaining the highest possible spiritual level — the מַדְרֵגָה עֶלְיוֹנָה of Yom Kippur."

The Maharal is suggesting that one may reach the highest levels of *avodah* on Seder night — comparable, even, to the

kohen gadol on Yom Kippur! If this is so, it's no wonder that the Ribono Shel Olam and the *malachim* attend the Seder.

In the same spirit, perhaps we can now understand why we wash our hands before eating *Karpas*. The *sefarim* give different reasons why we do so, since we generally do not wash our hands in this manner the rest of the year. However, Reb Yissachar Dov from Belz explains that the action of washing one's hands before *Karpas* echoes what was done in the Beis Hamikdash, where there was *kiddush yadayim v'raglayim* (washing the hands and feet) before serving Hashem. On Yom Kippur, the *kohen gadol* performed this action five times to lend an extra level of *taharah* to his *avodah*. Therefore, the Seder, which represents the same potential *taharah* as the service of the *kohen gadol* on Yom Kippur, involves washing one's hands an extra time as well.

That is the unimaginable power of *Leil HaSeder*. On this night, we are dressed in white like the *kohen gadol* doing *avodah* on Yom Kippur, with Hashem and the *malachim* in attendance! We must make the most of it!

A Time of Joy

Regarding the Yamim Tovim of Shavuos and Sukkos, the Torah specifically obligates us in the *mitzvah* of וְשָׂמַחְתָּ — *and you should rejoice*. Many *sefarim* ask why the Torah doesn't mention וְשָׂמַחְתָּ explicitly regarding Pesach, as well.

Perhaps, given what we have learned, the reason is that a person is already so naturally *b'simchah* on Pesach that there is no need for a distinct commandment. On Pesach, we fulfill a myriad of *mitzvos*, we have the Ribono Shel Olam as our guest, and even the *malachim* are listening to us discuss *Yetzias Mitzrayim*. How could a person *not* be *b'simchah*? There is no need for the Torah to command us to be happy.

A Time to Pray

During the Seder, we are given a very opportune time to *daven*. All the barriers have fallen. The Ribono Shel Olam, *kiveyachol,* is standing over us. The *Pamalya Shel Ma'alah* (the Heavenly Court) has assembled around us to hear what we have to say. What better time could there possibly be to *daven* our hearts out for all our needs?

Many people have a *minhag* to eat an egg at the very beginning of *Shulchan Orech*. The Maharil writes that this custom stems from the fact that the Aramaic word for an egg, בֵּיעָא, is similar to בְּעָא, which means "to pray." We eat the egg to remind ourselves that it's time for בֵּיעָא and בְּעָא — it's time to eat an egg, and it's time to *daven*. The power of *tefillah* is so great at the Seder that we built in a reminder to help us naturally move from rejoicing to *davening*.

The Purim-Pesach Connection

When Haman convinced Achashveirosh to decree destruction upon Klal Yisrael, Esther and Mordechai instituted a three-day fast, which ran into the first day of Pesach. That year Klal Yisrael didn't have a Seder — no matzah, no *maror*, no *arba kosos*.

On the surface, it seems totally unnecessary to lose all those mitzvos. The decree was not meant to be imposed for nearly another year, which means that the potential extermination of the Jewish people wouldn't take place for many months. What was the rush? Couldn't the Jews have waited until Yom Kippur and done then a full and complete *teshuvah*? How could it possibly be helpful to avoid the Pesach mitzvos that year?

Reb Elyah Guttmacher, the *tzaddik* from Griedetz, offers a beautiful *pshat*: He explains that what *davening* Yom Kippur cannot accomplish, *davening* the night of Pesach can achieve instead. The *gezeirah* of death had already been signed and sealed, so Yom Kippur no longer held the power to change it. But *tefillah* on the first night of Pesach, a time eternally empowered to bring about wondrous miracles, could save them yet.

Perhaps, with this in mind, we can now understand a particular Gemara. The Gemara (*Megillah* 6b) says that if there are two Adars, we celebrate Purim during the second one in order לְהַסְמִיךְ גְּאוּלָה לִגְאוּלָה — *to celebrate [the Purim] geulah close to [the Pesach] geulah*. Why would we specifically want Purim and Pesach, two independent Yamim Tovim that are unrelated to each other, to be as close together as possible? But now that we understand how the Purim *geulah* came about only because of Pesach, it is clear why we want to celebrate them close to one another.

Let's wish each other a *chag kasher v'samei'ach.* Those of us going away for Yom Tov will surely be *samei'ach*, but let's make sure that it's kosher. Those of us who are staying home will surely ascertain that it's all *kosher*, but let's also make sure it's *samei'ach*.

Appreciate the amazing opportunities we have on Seder night and use them to their fullest. In that *zechus,* we should merit to see the coming of *Mashiach tzikdeinu bimheirah b'yameinu*, וְנֹאכַל שָׁם מִן הַזְּבָחִים וּמִן הַפְּסָחִים. *Amen.*

THE 3RD OF NISSAN

THE LIGHT IN DARKNESS

Harav Yaakov Galinsky

Every person faces ups and downs. There are periods when it feels like it is always "day" — when success shines on us and there is only light. And there are dark times, when it feels like the night is never-ending.

There was no darker period, both spiritually and physically, than the Egyptian exile. Jews were forced to do backbreaking labor, making bricks from scratch, and at the same time had fallen to the forty-ninth level of impurity. They didn't see a light at the end of the tunnel; as far as they were concerned, this would continue for another 190 years.

And yet, they didn't despair — they cried out to Hashem, and they were saved!

הִנֵּה בָּרְכוּ אֶת ה' כָּל עַבְדֵי ה', הָעֹמְדִים בְּבֵית ה' בַּלֵּילוֹת — *Bless Hashem, all servants of Hashem, who stand in the House of Hashem at night* (*Tehillim* 134:1). A special strength is needed to stand in the face of any situation, especially the dark times.

לְהַגִּיד בַּבֹּקֶר חַסְדֶּךָ, וֶאֱמוּנָתְךָ בַּלֵּילוֹת — *To declare in the morning Your kindness and Your faith at night* (ibid. 92:3). What gives us the strength to remain standing in the face of adversity? It is the power of staunch faith that everything is in the hands of Heaven, that Hashem is our Shepherd, so that even when one "walks in the Valley of Death" he will fear nothing, because Hashem is with him no matter what.

Chazal teach כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה בַּלַּיְלָה, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מוֹשֵׁךְ עָלָיו חוּט שֶׁל חֶסֶד בַּיּוֹם — *Whoever occupies himself with the study of Torah at night, Hakadosh Baruch Hu draws a cord of kindness over*

him by day (*Chagigah* 12b; *Avodah Zarah* 3b). If one remains connected to Hashem even in the "night" — even when times are difficult — Hashem will bestow kindness on him in the day. He will bring light to his dark world and transform the darkness into light.

More than that, the person will not only emerge from the darkness into the light, but כִּי אֵשֵׁב בַּחֹשֶׁךְ, ה' אוֹר לִי — *although I sit in darkness, Hashem is a light to me* (*Michah* 7:8). Even while he still finds himself in a difficult situation, he will know that it is all for his good.

The Chasam Sofer *zt"l*, pointed out that the brief passage of *tochachah* in *Parshas Bechukosai* is cut off by a lengthy passage of *nechamah*, וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי וגו' לֹא מְאַסְתִּים וְלֹא גְעַלְתִּים וגו' וְזָכַרְתִּי לָהֶם בְּרִית רִאשֹׁנִים — *I will remember My covenant, etc. I will not despise them nor will I reject them, etc. I will remember for them the covenant made with the ancestors* (*Vayikra* 26:42-45). Yet the lengthier *tochachah* in *Parshas Ki Savo* does not conclude with any words of comfort at all. Why is this?

The *tochachah* in *Bechukosai* is a response to אִם תֵּלְכוּ עִמִּי בְּקֶרִי — *if you treat Me as happenstance* (ibid. 26:21) — that Klal Yisrael says that everything that happens is a coincidence and not brought about by Hashem. If a person's faith is so lax, he will need those words of comfort, these reminders that Hashem is the One Who orchestrates everything that happens, to keep him strong.

In *Ki Savo*, Hashem's Name is mentioned throughout the *tochachah* יַכְּךָ ה' — *Hashem will strike you*; יִתֶּנְךָ ה' — *Hashem will cause you [to be broken]*; יוֹלֵךְ ה' אֹתְךָ — *Hashem will lead you [to an unknown nation]*; יִשָּׂא ה' עָלֶיךָ — *Hashem will bring upon you [a nation from afar]*. The knowledge that Hashem is doing all of this is itself the *nechamah*!

A Yid Is Never Lost

One *erev Shabbos,* Rav Mordechai Pogramansky *zt"l* had to travel by train from Kovno to Toberg. Across from him sat a distinguished-looking Jew. They started talking, and the Jew mentioned that he was a *shochet* and *mohel*. "I am also going to Toberg," he added.

To reach their destination, they would have to disembark in Minsk to switch trains. The ride was long and they dozed off. When they woke up, they realized they had missed their stop. The train had continued onward, and they didn't know where they were.

"*Mir huben zich farblundzet!* We're lost!" the *shochet* wailed. "*Oy*, what are we going to do now? Where are we going to spend Shabbos?"

"There is no such thing as a Jew who is lost," Rav Mordechai declared. "A Jew doesn't stray!"

"What?!" The *shochet* looked at Rav Mordechai with puzzled eyes.

"A Jew doesn't stray," Rav Mordechai repeated emphatically. "Hashem is with us wherever we go. Rashi says regarding the *pasuk* (*Bereishis* 21:14), וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּתַע — *She [Hagar] went and wandered [or strayed]*, that she returned to idol worship. How do we know this? Because if it says that she strayed, it indicates that she cut herself off from *Yiddishkeit*!"

"That's a very nice *vort*," said the *shochet*, "but practically speaking, we're lost."

"We'll get off at the next station," Rav Mordechai suggested, "and Hashem will help us find our way."

The train stopped and they disembarked. They found themselves near a remote village far from their destination.

They decided to head for the village. They had no choice; it was almost Shabbos and they had to find lodgings.

They stopped a gentile on the road and asked if any Jews lived in the village.

"Yes, one." He directed them to a shack at the edge of town where the Jew lived.

They knocked on the door, and the Jew welcomed them warmly. It wasn't often he had guests in this remote place. After they settled in, he said, "Tell me, do either of you happen to be a *mohel*?"

"Yes," said the *shochet*. "Why?"

Joyfully their host embraced him and said, "You see, today my son turns eight days old. I called for the *mohel*, who lives in the city, to come and perform the bris, but he never showed up. I don't know what happened. I davened to Hashem that He find me a *mohel* and here you are!"

Their host paused and then said, "I also bought a calf to prepare a *seudas mitzvah*. Are you also a *shochet*, by any chance?"

"Yes, I am a *mohel* and also a *shochet*."

"That's wonderful! So everything will work out well. It's just a real shame that we don't have a big *rav* here who could be the *sandek*."

"I've brought with me a big *rav*," said the *shochet*, nodding his head at Rav Mordechai.

After hearing this extraordinary exchange, Rav Mordechai turned to the *shochet* and said, "So *nu*, does a Jew get lost?"

Hashem is with us even in what seems like the darkest times.

The End to the Darkness

In the year 5701/1941, on Shabbos of the week that *Parshas Beha'aloscha* was read, the Russians put 100 *yeshivah bachurim* — I among them — on a freight train to Siberia. The journey took a month. The world had turned bleak. We had no idea at the time that this would save us from the German invasion that began the very next day, that all of our friends who had succeeded in evading capture by the Russians (our friends whom we thought were so lucky), would perish at the hands of an even worse enemy.

We had two consolations. One, we were a close-knit group, and we were able to be there for each other and encourage each other not to despair. Second, we had our tefillin and *sefarim* with us. We also had some *megillos* and a few *shofaros*. With these, we thought, we could withstand that frozen Gehinnom.

This proved to be false hope. Our suffering had only just begun.

We arrived at the camp on Sunday of the week of *Parshas Mattos-Massei*. To our dismay, they confiscated all of our *sefarim*, tefillin, *megillos*, and *shofaros* and burned them right in front of our eyes.

I can't describe to you the feeling of despair, the air of danger that seized us. What would we do without *sefarim*? How would we survive without our tefillin? We thought all was lost…

But in Novardok there was no such thing as despair! That evening, after hours of backbreaking labor, we gathered, mournful and somber, for a *va'ad chizuk*, in a dark corner of the camp. It's scary to think what might have happened to

us if we had been caught: a protest assembly in the middle of Siberia!

We gathered inside one of the empty barracks and appointed a couple of *bachurim* to stand guard and give a shout if we were discovered. Whoever wished to speak was given the opportunity, on one condition: we were taking a huge risk and time was pressing. Everyone was allotted only a minute and a half to speak.

Of all of my friends, I remember the words of my friend Hertzl Drogochiner *zt"l*. Listen to what he said in just a minute and a half:

"The *navi* (*Yeshayahu* 40:27–28) says: לָמָּה תֹאמַר יַעֲקֹב וּתְדַבֵּר יִשְׂרָאֵל נִסְתְּרָה דַרְכִּי מֵה', וּמֵאֱלֹקַי מִשְׁפָּטִי יַעֲבוֹר, הֲלֹא יָדַעְתָּ אִם לֹא שָׁמַעְתָּ, אֱלֹקֵי עוֹלָם ה' בּוֹרֵא קְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ, לֹא יִיעַף וְלֹא יִיגָע, אֵין חֵקֶר לִתְבוּנָתוֹ — *Why should you say, Yaakov, and speak, Yisrael, 'My way has been hidden from Hashem, and from my G-d, my judgment passes'? Do you not know? Did you not hear? Hashem is the eternal G-d, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He neither tires nor wearies; there is no fathoming His understanding.*

"A person thinks that Hashem is hiding His Face from him. So, what do we tell him in response? That Hashem created the world. What kind of answer is that? How is this a comfort to him?

"A good question!

"What's the answer?

"When a person suffers, his suffering has a dual aspect: besides the distress and pain he is feeling right now, he suffers mentally, thinking it will never end. Who knows how long this will go on and whether it will ever be finished?

"Just from these negative thoughts, a person is liable to fall into the arms of despair and never recover, *chalilah*. Worse yet, he might also think that since Hakadosh Baruch Hu is infinite, the suffering He brings is also endless.

"So we say to him, 'Even though Hashem is the eternal G-d — without limit — He is the Creator of the ends of the earth; He created the earth and everything that happens on it with limits. In that case, the troubles He brings are the same: קֵץ שָׂם לַחֹשֶׁךְ — *He puts an end to the darkness* (*Iyov* 28:3). Soon you will emerge from the darkness into the light!'"

Hertzl's words gave us new life, a new will to go on!

Everyone who spoke after him connected their words to this theme, that הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא חִשֵּׁב אֶת הַקֵּץ — *Hakadosh Baruch Hu calculated the end*… the end of suffering. As the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah* 55a) teaches, when afflictions are sent upon a man, an oath is imposed on them that they must end at a specific time on a specific day and through the medium of a specific person. Though their mission is terrible, they are faithful to their oath that their time is limited.

So much *chizuk* in just a minute and a half!