

BECAUSE OF THIS ARE WE FREE

- A-206
- A-206
1. The key to the whole of Passover, with all its ritual and beauty, the whole Seder and its joyousness and festivity, is contained in one verse of the Bible which is itself difficult to understand. VEHIGADTA LEVINCHA BAYOM HAHU LEIMOR, BA'AVUR ZEH ASAH HASHEM LI BETZEISI MIMITZRAYIM...when your son will ask you why the Matzohs, why the Passover, why all the ceremony on this festival, you shall tell him: BAAVUR ZEH ASAH HA'SHEM LI BETZEISI MIMITZRAYIM, which is usually translated - and interpreted - "it is because of what the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt." That means, of course, that all the paraphernalia, all the special foods and special performances on the Seder night are symbols of the freedom G-d granted us from Egyptian slavery.
 2. Those who read the Hebrew text carefully, however, will notice that that is decidedly not the meaning of this verse. And the famous medieval commentator, Abraham Ibn Ezra asks the question: if that were the meaning, if the answer to the son's question really were that I make the Seder because G-d took me out of the Land of Egypt, then it should have been written: ZEH BAAVUR SHE'ASAH LI...this is because G-d took me out of Egypt, and not BAAVUR ZEH ASAH... And Ibn Ezra answers, and Rashi seems to concur in this novel but profound explanation, that the Bible means just what it says: BAAVUR ZEH ASAH LI HA'SHEM BETZEISI MIMITZRAYIM - it is because of this that G-d took me out of Egypt. The whole Seder and Passover service are not mere symbols to memorialize an ancient liberation; all of our religious practice is not merely a ^{ceremonial tribute} ~~fortunate consequence~~ ^{to} of Freedom. Rather, the whole reason for G-d's goodness in liberating us was to enable us to serve Him by making the Seder; the entire purpose of Freedom is to lovingly do G-d's will. No, says Ibn Ezra, we have been making a mistake. It is not true that Freedom is the cause and Religion the effect, that YETZIAS MITZRAYIM was the great event important in and of itself, and that the Seder only celebrates it by reminding us of it. On the contrary, BAAVUR ZEH, Freedom is the effect and Religion the cause, YETZIAS MITZRAYIM was accomplished only in order to have Jews make a Seder and thank G-d and draw close to Him. G-d brought about the whole episode of the Exodus only so that we might serve Him through the Seder and the Mitzvos all year long.

3. That interpretation of Ibn Ezra is a terrific challenge to us and to our whole conception of Judaism. If we understand ^{it} ~~them~~ properly ^{it} ~~they~~ ought to shock us into new realizations and open for us new horizons, for his words are in many respects directly contrary to so much of what we understand by Judaism. He means to teach us that the Seder is not just a reenactment of an ancient event. Passover is far more than a recapitulation of Jewish history. Religion for the Jew is not just a conglomeration of "symbols" of a long-forgotten past and its faded glories. Our Prophets were not historians, our Rabbis were not antiquarians and the Synagogue is not a museum. Rather, this is the main reason for living, for through these we draw close to the Divine Source of all life. BAAVUR ZEH... Torah is not a symbol but an essence, a goal, something worth striving for, something to which all the rest of life is only an introduction. "All past is prelude". We do not live for the past. Rather, we revive the past for the sake of the future. By living as Jews should live, we redeem our Redemption, we demonstrate that the Exodus had a purpose, that Freedom was not wasted on us, that all the suffering and pain and martyrdom were not in vain, that the hopes and dreams of all past ages have yet to be realized - by us. No, our Prophets were not historians but educators in life; our Sages not antiquarians but guides to the Future; and our Synagogues not museums but laboratories where we experience the deepest essences of life. BAAVUR ZEH.... Because of this are we free.

belong at beginning of #7

4. Not everybody understands that. For some the total expression of Judaism consists of a Yahrzeit lamp - a symbolic reminder of a dead past. For those who understand BAAVUR ZEH, the accent is on the Shabbos candles - a spark with which to light up the future. For some, Kiddush is a noble reminder that G-d created the world. For those who can grasp the full significance of BAAVUR ZEH, there is the knowledge that G-d created the world so that His creatures might make Kiddush, might live in sanctity and holiness. Mitzvos are not dessicated, worn-out, outmoded symbols of a past. They are the vital and dynamic reason for and justification of the past. They are the way to a future with G-d. Because of this are we free.

5. When Freedom is assigned independent value., when it is pursued for its own sake and is ~~not~~ presumed to have a higher goal, to be prelude to something greater and holier,

but is regarded as a sufficient goal in life, as the most important thing to which all else is secondary, then the results can be tragic. Look at all the nations which got their freedom in the last several decades. After long battling for it, they got it - and were bitterly disappointed. For they didn't know what to do with it. Syria today is independent. What has it done with its freedom? - tyranny is rife, corruption is the rule, poverty is universal. Was it worth it? Is that the highest aim for which men are asked to give their lives? The same might be asked of so many other supposedly free nations. Is freedom alone sufficient? Where has it got you?

More than that, as ~~some~~ one brilliant analyst of our current scene points out (Eric Fromm), people are afraid of freedom. It places too much responsibility on them. It is too lonely. It requires too many independent decisions. No wonder so many people gave up their freedom without a fight during and after World War II! No, that kind of freedom may be valuable, but it is not worth the blood spilt in its name and the lives sacrificed on its altars. Our Matzoh and our four cups and our leaning at the Seder are not mere symbols of that kind of Freedom.

We can never say with the poet Dryden, "I am as free as nature first made man,/
Ere the base laws of servitude began,/
When wild in woods the noble savage ran."
The kind of conception of Freedom which looks upon it as merely running wild and being lawless is more savage than noble. The Jew prefers to say BAAVUR ZEH... Freedom is delicious when it is the entree to the main dish - of G-dliness. Freedom is eloquent when it is the preamble to Torah. It is beautiful when it is the overture to the whole symphony of life in which man harmonizes with G-d. The Jew does not make an idol of Freedom. He does not bring offerings of Matzoh and wine and Seder to it. Instead, he says BAAVUR ZEH, because of this are we free, this is the prize Freedom has gotten us. Freedom has enabled us to serve G-d. Therefore it is valuable, therefore it is worth the sacrifices of young lives. BAAVUR ZEH... because of this are we free.

6. Sometimes I wish that our brothers in Israel would take this more to heart. Of course, they are now involved in a ~~de~~ gigantic struggle for survival. Their thoughts and energies are concentrated on staying free. That is as it should be, and that is why we so often

speak about them and try in every possible way to help them. But at the same time it is painful to note that so many of them are unaware of the higher aim, of the greater goal to which Freedom is only the introduction. Looking about us at the world today, and the generally sorry state in which it is, is it not ridiculous in the extreme to say that we are fighting for freedom so that Israel can be GOY K'CHOL HA'GOYIM, a nation like all nations? What an anti-climax! What a let-down! What a small purpose for such great effort! Fortunately, that is not true of all Israelis. Fortunately there are many who understand that Freedom is only prelude, and who ^{are} therefore all the more passionate in their battle for Freedom. They are the ones who look forward to a great spiritual revival in Israel. They are the ones who work incessantly for the great Torah institutions of the Land. They are the ones who, while they are impassioned advocates of Freedom, are at the same time laboring for a cultural flowering and religious rehabilitation of our people in the Holy Land. They are the ones who know what our Rabbis said in a famous passage concerning the Ten Commandments, that they were not only CHARUS AL HALUCHOS, engraved on the Tablets, but that CHARUS should be read CHEIRUS, Freedom, that the purpose of Freedom is Commandments, holiness, a return to G-d. BAAVUR ZEH... Because of this, and this alone, are we free.

7. And what of us here today? Do we understand the correct interpretation of BAAVUR ZEH, the Jewish view of the value of Freedom and the purpose of Mitzvos? (...here read #4..) I feel that occasionally the pulpit's just criticism should be tempered with just praise. And I must therefore happily say that I am tremendously proud of our Kodimoh "regulars". You who come here have Freedom of Time - you can do with it as you please: use it or waste it. And you use it; you come to shul on Shabbos and on Yom Tov. You thereby show that you understand the meaning of Freedom and the meaning of BAAVUR ZEH. You are acting as Jews historically always have acted, and you are justifying the freedom G-d has given you. You have Economic Freedom. You are not dependent upon others for your sustenance. And you use that Freedom to help others, to respond to requests for charitable aid. Those of you who do that, and do it with open hearts and open hands, are practicing BAAVUR ZEH, not as the King James Version understood it but, LE'HAVDIL, as our Sages understood it. You have Freedom of Religion. And you do not misinterpret

that to read Freedom from Religion. Instead your homes and hearts are attuned to Torah and to G-d. When so many others have misused that Freedom and have done nothing with it, it gives me a glowing feeling of pride that so many of my people have understood it and have justified the confidence G-d had in them when he led them to a free land where this great freedom is theirs. It is living out the CHARUS-CHEIRUS. It is a classic experience of BAAVUR ZEH. It is a clear demonstration that you have captured the true spirit of Pesach which recapitulates and emphasizes this point as no other holiday does. For you show that the Mitzvos performed at the Seder are not just symbols. They are purposes, they are techniques of holiness, they are the singular path by which ordinary men and women can climb up to meet G-d. BAAVUR ZEH...

Living this kind of Jewish life is the best VEHIGADTA LEVINCHA, the best and noblest instruction you can give your children. Then Judaism becomes alive, then the Seder has real meaning, then you have become your child's teacher in the highest sense of the word. For you have convinced him that YETZIAS MITZRAYIM, that all the past of our people, its agonies and its glories, its defeats and its conquests, its misery and its ecstasy, have all been path-pavers for the Seder of life, the sanctified Order of Life, for a life which begins with Kadeish, with sanctifying life, and includes RACHATZ - purity, it includes delicious food and delights of all kinds, it may have a touch of MARROR, but there is also an AFIKOMEN, something that is saved for later, ~~that~~ a Seder of Life which contains HALLEL, thanksgiving to G-d for all His goodness, and concludes with NIRTZAH, with our being found acceptable in the eyes of the Most High.

8. The dream of Jews for ages and ages, the fondest hope they cherished in their bosoms when a hostile world condemned them to poverty and exile and even martyrdom, was the hope of Messiah. And our Rabbis said: EIN BEIN YMOS HALLALU LI'YMOS HA'MASHIACH ELA SHIABUD MALCHIOS BILVAD.....And the Rabbi of Lublin asked this question: In one comment, the Tosafos (the commentaries of the Rabbis of Germany and France in the Middle Ages) say that the word ELA, "only", should not be taken literally, for in addition to freedom from SHIABUD MALCHIOS, from foreign domination, there is also a Jerusalem to restore and a Temple to be built in the days of the Messiah. And in another comment, the same Tosafos say the reverse: that ELA should be taken literally. It is the only

difference between

nowadays and the awaited days of Messiah, the Jewish Utopia. And how, asks the Rabbi of Lublin, can you reconcile these two contradictory statements?

I want to suggest a simple answer along the lines we have been discussing. If by Freedom you mean Freedom as an end in and of and for itself, if that is the totality of your striving, then assuredly the ELA must not be taken literally, for Messiah will not come only for that. Freedom for its own sake is not the greatest Jewish ideal, it is not ^{that} ~~for~~ ^{which} ~~what~~ Jews have hoped and dreamed and prayed all their days. Religion is not only a paean sung to Freedom. And if that is all you want with Freedom, then remember that it is more than the overthrow of SHIABUD MALCHIOS that Messiah will bring with him. But if by freedom from foreign oppression you mean what the Torah means, if you understand that the function of Freedom is BAAVUR ZEH, that it is the means to a greater end, ~~that~~ it is the opportunity to rebuild a Jerusalem and restore a Temple, to usher in an era wherein Torah will flourish and men will act with humility to G-d and love to their fellow-men, if that is what you mean by the overthrow of SHIABUD MALCHIOS, then certainly ELA may be taken literally. For ELA, "only" is not, in this sense, restrictive. It includes everything. It contains all that the Jew has hoped for, all he stands for, all he looks forward to.

9. No greater and finer articulation of that dream of Jewry has been made than that given by Maimonides. At the very end of his immortal YAD HA'CHAZAKAH, he codifies the following law, with which we conclude, and which admirably expresses the idea inherent in BAAVUR ZEH as Ibn Ezra explained it, the relation of Freedom to Religion, the teaching that Freedom of Religion is worthless if it does not lead to Religion, that a life of Seder, of the order of Holiness, a life of Mitzvos, is not only a series of dusty symbols, but a pulsating, refreshing and loving devotion to G-d: LO NISAVU HA'CHACHAMIM V'HA'NVIIM LIYMOS HA'MASCHIACH, our Prophets and Sages did not hope for the days of Messiah because they wanted to conquer the world or subjugate the non-Jews or incur their envy or even to have enough to eat and drink and be happy; but only in order that they might be free for the study of Torah and its wisdom, with no one to oppress them and distract them, so that they may be worthy of the World to Come." May we, by properly understanding & appreciating the essence of this Festival, BAAVUR ZEH, be similarly worthy of G-d's goodness.