

The Exodus from Egypt, יציאת מצרים, is more than a story that happened to our people thousands of years ago. It is still as significant and relevant today as it was those many years ago. The exodus was the preamble to receiving the Torah at Sinai. One could say that all 613 commandments are rooted in some way to יציאת מצרים and receiving the Torah at Sinai, קבלת התורה. Often the Torah associates יציאת מצרים with Commandments, for example אני השם אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים. The Sabbath, as explained in the Ten Commandments in ספר דברים is rooted in יציאת מצרים. What is the guiding principle of the Commandments that are explicitly associated with יציאת מצרים? For instance, we are prohibited to act as the Egyptians did. The Torah tells us (Vayikra 11:43-45) אל תשקצו את נפשותיכם, don't defile yourselves etc. for I am the Lord your God, and you shall be holy for I am holy etc. For I am the Lord who has lifted you out of the Land of Egypt, and you shall be holy for I am holy. The Torah uses similar language (Vayikra 18:3) אני השם אלקיכם כמעשה ארץ מצרים אשר ישבתם בה לא תעשו. The Torah then commands us to follow "My laws, I am the Lord your God". This is followed by a list of illicit sexual relationships. The general principle is that commandments where man is warned to discipline himself and refrain from over-indulgence in corporeal desires are linked to ארץ מצרים. Judaism recognizes and accepts that man is comprised of body and soul, intellect and desires. Yet, Judaism's approach to the body is one of discipline. The body must be more than a tool of the savage, brutish caveman. The Jew must refrain and retreat from Torah prohibitions even though the actions promise him much pleasure. Engaging in such acts of pleasure ultimately defile man, therefore he must discipline his mind and train his body to resist them.

Indulging in the eating of forbidden food items, מאכלות אסורות, as described in פרשת שמיני and in forbidden sexual relationships as described in פרשת אחרי מות, defile man. Rambam grouped them both under הלכות קדושה. [The Rav noted that people criticize traditional Judaism for its emphasis on these things. He told the story of Jacob Schiff, a German Jew and potential donor, who was brought to YU to observe a shiur presented by Rabbi Aharanovich. He inquired what he was teaching and was told the topic was יורה געה הלכות בשר וחלב, the laws of mixing meat and milk. Schiff said that he was not interested in supporting a religion of the stomach.] It is easier for man to enter a shul and pray for an hour with dedication and sincerity than to discipline his body. Judaism is interested in the disciplining of one's body through the conversion of physiological functions based on man's primitive drives into a service of the Almighty. Rambam (הלכות דעות 3:3) concludes that man should strive to serve Gd when he eats and when he sleeps. This is the fulfillment of the command בכל דרכיך דעהו, know Him in all your ways [and activities]. Find Him not only on Yom Kippur at Neilah. Recognize Him in your dining room, your bedroom, the boardroom and in the rest of your personal and public life.

Another category of Commandments associated with יציאת מצרים is idolatry. The highest ethical norm among the pagan religions was the pursuit of physical pleasure. They developed a voluptuous way of life wherein they worshipped their gods through the most immoral acts that promised themselves much pleasure. Another group of Commandments associated with

לא תטה משפט יתום ואלמנה, אהבת הגר, is יציאת מצרים (Deuteronomy 24:18). These injunctions are principles of justice and charity. The Torah tells us (Exodus 22:20) וגר לא תונו ולא תלחצנו, do not abuse or oppress the stranger among you. In summary, the principles of justice and sanctity encompass all 613 Mitzvot and are associated with יציאת מצרים. Some Mitzvot exhibit both characteristics. In the Commandment to keep the Sabbath in Deuteronomy, we are commanded to ensure that the servant and the poor person do not work 7 days. This stems from the principle of justice that governs human relationships, including צדקה (charity) and צדק (righteousness). In Exodus, the commandment to keep the Sabbath focuses on the aspect of sanctity, קדושה. Observance of the Sabbath enhances one's inner strength, sanctity and spirituality and allows him to rise to exalted spiritual heights יציאת מצרים is fundamental to both.

However, there is a special group of Mitzvot that are closely associated with and remind us of the Exodus. Two types of Mitzvot belong to this group: Holidays, and precepts associated with the observance of the festivals. Eating Matzo on Passover and sitting in the Sukkah are the echoes and reflection of יציאת מצרים. The Exodus is not dead and irrelevant, we try to relive the events of יציאת מצרים. These Mitzvot are practiced annually, for a fixed period of time. The second group includes precepts that we practice on an ongoing basis and symbolize the Exodus. Two such Mitzvot are the first born, בכור, and תפילין, phylacteries. How is the Mitzvah of the first born, בכור, symbolic of the Exodus?

[The Rav pointed out that our analysis does not ask the question why, what is the motivation behind the commandment. Motivation applies to a human being. It is ridiculous to ask what motivated Gd to give certain laws. Gd is omnipotent and the realization of His will is the goal and purpose. In the explanatory sciences, the analysis and explanation reach out for the cause and effects. The scientific method translates the relationships between phenomena into a mathematical equation. Understanding means "what does it say to me". Ramban in discussing מצוות שלוח הקן (sending away the mother bird) says that it is nonsensical to ask why Gd ordained this Mitzvah. But it is appropriate to ask what it says to me. What am I supposed to take away from the Mitzvah? What can I derive from it? Does the Mitzvah give me solace, does it depress me? How do I feel when I carry out the Commandment? These are appropriate questions.]

Let us analyze the relation between יציאת מצרים and בכור, in particular the plague of the first born, מכת בכורות. Those that seek to portray Judaism as a blood thirsty religion, often focus on the plague of the first born. An understanding of מכת בכורות will provide insight into the Mitzvah of בכור. Why did Gd single out the Egyptian first born? In what respect were they responsible for the enslavement and torture of the Jewish People?

There is another difficult verse relating to מכת בכורות. But first let us review the context that precedes it. Gd met Moses at the burning bush and offered him the mission of redeemer and messenger of redemption. The Torah describes a debate כביכול, where Gd offers and Moses

counters. Moses finally accepted the mission. Gd told him that Aaron would be his spokesman and he should take the staff with him to use when performing miracles. Moses was given a direct and clear message to present to Pharaoh to let the Jews go so they may serve Gd in the desert. Moses eventually reconciled himself to his mission as redeemer. (see Exodus 3:18). Gd then told him to go to Egypt without any fear of prosecution or persecution, for the people who sought his death have died and no longer threaten him. Moses takes the staff and receives a final message from Gd that reviews the whole debate and conversation and the orders he was given pertaining to his looming encounter with Pharaoh. Gd advises Moses not to be depressed by Pharaoh's initial refusal to listen to his message. Eventually the resistance you meet will fade away. Suddenly, Gd told Moses to tell Pharaoh Israel is my first born and I command you "let My son go so he may worship Me". If you refuse, I shall slay your first born. The transition to the discussion of the first born is sudden and unexpected. Why did Gd mention this only after Moses departed for Egypt and not at the burning bush? What is the parallelism between the frame of reference in which the statements about בני בכורי ישראל appears and the rest of the preceding Parasha?

Chazal explain that the philosophy of power in ancient Egypt is described here. The oldest child is typically the strongest. The oldest son often exercised authority over his younger siblings. Quite often the older, more mature children simply tortured and ordered around their younger siblings. [The Rav observed that America is faced with the previously unheard of phenomenon of criminal youth, where they form gangs that terrorize children and adults as well. A child criminal was unheard of in previous generations. The origin of this behavior is the parental home. Eventually this activity develops into a conspiracy and a criminal organization.]

Historians and sociologists are accustomed to speak about the ancient patriarchal society. But the Rav added the concept of the patriarchal community. Judaism is both a patriarchal and matriarchal community. When the father teaches his children, he teaches them reverence and respect which leads to love. The father's commands are followed not because he threatens the children but because they accept his orders out of love. This is the society based on כבוד אב ואם that Abraham (and Sarah) established. This applies to both father and mother who enjoy equal respect and love from the children.

There was another patriarchal society in antiquity. In that society, the father was obeyed because he was the strongest. It was reverence based on tyranny. The Hebrews were not only slaves to Pharaoh. The weak were subjected to the brutality of every official, anyone who wielded power in Egypt. בכור means not only the oldest, but the strongest as well. Anyone who exercised power was considered a בכור. [The Rav remarked that in his youth, he was not victimized by the police or the government. Rather, the Jewish children were terrorized by a big gentile bully who simply would beat up the Jewish children. The Rav said he never answered the question as to why ten Jewish boys should be afraid of one gentile boy! But he observed that years later in YU the same mentality still applied!].

What was the mentality of the Hebrew slaves? It was fear of an Egyptian society that subjected them to brutality by the strong. The whole society consisted of tyrants and slaves. The father and older son ruled over his younger siblings. There is a hierarchy of slavery, seen recently even in communist Russia. The cohesive force uniting society is fear. On the night of Passover the Almighty smote not only all of the first born but all those that exercised authority and compelled people to comply against their will. The Torah tells us that Gd punished the Egyptian gods. Why? Because if you punish a nation you must also refute their philosophy, their ideology. Otherwise, that nation will return and repeat the same mistake. On the night of Passover Gd punished the Egyptian ideology of slavery, of terrorizing another person.

Did the excesses of the Egyptian first born lead Judaism to simply abandon the institution of the first born? Are all children assigned the same status? Or has it replaced the Egyptian institution of the first born by elevating it to a higher level? There is no doubt that Judaism recognizes the unique role played by the בכור in the household. Even though primogeniture was not considered to be a source of power, the Torah still commands us to sanctify the first born.

We all remember the story of the transaction of the birthright between Esau and Jacob. According to the text, it was clear that the acquisition of power was not the reason why Jacob wanted the birthright. Jacob was not interested in exercising authority over his brother. Kabbalah portrays Jacob as the symbol of רחמים, mercy and charity. Jacob wanted to obtain the birthright in order that he may perform the service of God, the עבודה. Even without relying on statements of Chazal, it is clear that Jacob was not interested in the blessings to obtain worldly power. He reluctantly accepted Isaac's blessings. Rivka commanded him to disguise himself and receive the blessings. Jacob had no interest in worldly blessings. He knew that the blessings of physical wealth would not satisfy him. Esau was interested in power and violence, to be the strongest and richest. This did not appeal to Jacob. Jacob knew that through the birthright he would inherit the covenantal destiny. He will be the successor of Abraham and Isaac. His purpose in attaining the blessings from Isaac was to ensure that Esau should not be the next in line after his father. Sarah was the first to fight for the covenantal destiny when she sent away Hagar and Ishmael. Throughout Tanach, there is a correspondence between the promotion of someone to greatness and the skipping over of the oldest. Abraham was not the oldest, neither was Isaac or Jacob. Judah, Joseph, Levi and Binyamin received a greater share of responsibility. Also, Moses, the younger sibling, was greater than his older brother, Aaron. And David was the youngest of Jesse's children.

What is involved in the birthright according to Judaism? Gd owns the world in general and the living world in particular. The cosmos generally consists of dead matter. The universe is divided into organic and inorganic matter. No one knows if there is organic matter elsewhere in the universe. Gd is everywhere even in the void of space. However, His mastery is greater

and more visible where there is living matter, especially where man is found, as man is the jewel of creation.

Dietary laws impose upon us many restrictions. Judaism limits access to the animal kingdom through a variety of laws that restrict enjoyment of animal meat. There are no restrictions on the vegetative world, especially outside Eretz Yisrael. Man may consume all vegetables, unless man corrupts the species through grafting and cross breeding. In Israel there are laws of *נטע רבעי* and *ערלה*. But one can't compare the depth and scope of laws that govern access to the vegetative kingdom to those that govern access to the animal kingdom. With the exception of the requirement to recite a blessing before we enjoy them, there are no restrictions on the vegetative and mineral worlds. The number of Halachic prohibitions associated with something correlates to the value placed on that object by Gd. The Torah tells us that blood is the soul and blood was given to atone for our sins. Therefore we are enjoined from eating blood. Eating Chaylev is punishable by *כרת* (Leviticus 17:10). Chaylev and blood were prohibited because they belong exclusively to Gd. Blood is at the center of life, there is an equation between life and blood, and therefore the prohibitions are stronger. Gd is master of all life and the entire world, particularly the living world, as He is *אלקים חיים*. There are many stipulations regarding consumption of flesh because the Torah reluctantly released it to man in the time of Noah. Prior to Noah, man was vegetarian.

The more precious the object is to man, the stronger the claim of the Almighty to that object. Children, man's most precious possession, belong to Gd as well. Chana was the archetype of recognition that the child belongs to Gd. She said *מהשם שאלתי*. It can be interpreted as I requested him and also that I borrowed him from Gd. After she nursed him, she returned him to Gd. The birth of Isaac is also viewed in a similar manner. The concept of the *עקדה* has been attacked by many, including ignorant Jews as well. But they are all missing the point of the story, that the child belongs to Gd. The birth of every child is an important event, especially to the mother. The birth of the first child is the greatest and most cathartic experience for the mother, when she is truly prepared to be a mother. There is an emotional, spiritual and metaphysical relationship between mother and child, especially the first born.

[The Rav remarked that the clamor of liberals to permit abortion is abhorrent and incomprehensible. How can a mother approach a physician and ask him to kill her child? The pretext for abortions used to be that the girl was frightened because she would be excommunicated by society. But where fright is not involved it is incomprehensible and inexplicable (not that fright was a valid excuse). The Rav considered today's society insane. The Rav remarked upon the insanity of the large number of abortions performed in Eretz Yisrael while there was a call for 60,000 youths to emigrate to Israel! How can this be reconciled? If you will kill a fetus, the time will come when even an infant will be killed. If the depression of the mother is a rationalization for abortion, then what happens when the mother will claim after the birth of the child that her mental balance depends on the death of the baby? Perhaps her serenity will depend on the removal of the baby a day or a week or a

month after the birth? Will that also be rationalized? Women from Orthodox homes consult Rabbis about abortion. There is a trend of Rabbis in the USA to march mindlessly with society on this topic, lest they be viewed as reactionary. Note that the Rav's insights are as important and relevant today as they were in 1975.]

The birth of the first child, especially for the mother, borders on the psychologically miraculous. Young women are excited when they discover that they are pregnant for the first time. This excitement is often absent, unfortunately, in subsequent pregnancies. Judaism wanted to maintain the excitement of the first baby and extend it to all children. Without a child, husband and wife are a closed community. They care for themselves and are concerned only with themselves. In metaphysical, Halachic terms, the bachelor is an egocentric person. As long as his parents or siblings live, he has a chance to be involved with someone else's needs. After that, there is no one left for him to be concerned with. Existentially the single person is selfish. That's why Chazal say (Brachos 8a) **מצא אשה מצא טוב** (one who finds a woman finds good), **(ילקוט שמעוני בראשית רמז כב) כל השרוי בלא אשה שרוי בלי שמחה** (all who live without a wife live without joy) etc. A solitary existence is incomplete. Solitary man can become selfish.

The next stage is marriage. The existential area extends to encompass spouses who care for each other. It now includes someone who I am ready to sacrifice for. Why is man admonished not to remain alone? After all he has no restrictions and encumbrances, there is convenience in being single. Yet Gd says **לא טוב היות האדם לבדו**. The Torah is speaking existentially. It is not good if man thinks only of himself and is concerned only with himself. So Gd made **עוזר כנגדו**. But being does not culminate in marriage. Rashi (Genesis 2:24) interprets in the verse **אחד** as referring to the child. With the birth of the first child, the wife begins to shift her focus from the husband towards the child. The husband cares for both wife and child. The area of concern now has expanded again. The couple alone is a closed community. With the arrival of the child, they become part of an open, expanding community.

[Having children depends on physiological factors and many can't have children. Yet the Halacha teaches us man can have children by being concerned with the education of children. The childless couple that cares for the education or well being of another's child or an adopted child expand their area of being as well. Such adoptive parents are often superior to couples blessed with natural children. The Halacha says that a man without children can't be appointed as a judge in capital cases because he lacks sympathy and compassion. Also, an old man can't be a judge because he has an innate cruel streak because his life is behind him. [The Rav remarked that he observed this in himself as well.] An older person never knows how much time he has ahead of him and feels a sense of envy towards the younger generation. Envy leads to cruelty at worst, and insensitivity towards others at a minimum.]

The closed community of husband and wife can't develop compassion and sympathy in the

same way that people who have to care for and be concerned for children can. With the birth of the child, the closed community opens its gates to a newcomer. From now on it becomes an open, hospitable community. Concerns of the parents encompass someone else. The first born son while an infant, is a source of immeasurable joy to the parents. Parents sometimes have an ecstatic joy over the first born, boy or girl. And if they enjoy him/her more than any other child, then the claims of Gd are more specific and more complete to that child because he is the most precious of all the children. Whatever belongs to Gd precipitates sanctity.

That is why we are commanded קדש לי כל בכור. Because this is the most precious possession as far as the parents are concerned. The child widens the community and concerns of the parents and brings in a sense of love, compassion and understanding that the parents never had before. That is why this child is קדוש. Gd claims the first born son for Himself because the parents enjoy him so much. Gd asks that the child be returned and that is why he is sanctified and the concept of פדיון הבן, redemption of the first born, applies.

The Jewish and Egyptian concepts of birthright are mutually exclusive. On the night of the fifteenth of Nissan, the Judaic concept of בכורה emerged victorious over the Egyptian concept. The main conceptual conflict between Pharaoh and Moses and Israel and Egypt revolved around whether בכורה is a symbol of קדושה or power.

Judaism tells us to sanctify the first born. Yet there are 3 types of בכור. First born to the father, first born to the mother and first born to both parents. קדושת בכור depends on the first born of the mother, regardless of whether the father has other children. The Torah assigned the first born פי שנים, the right to a double portion in the father's estate, to the paternal first born. כי הוא ראשית אוננו. Why vis-à-vis קדושה does the mother determine the בכור yet regarding inheritance the father determines the בכור?

The Rav explained that regarding inheritance, the paternal first born is usually father's helper. He carries part of the load. He takes father's place in matters of business as well as manual work. [The Rav noted that since he was the oldest he was entrusted with duties that his father could not do. He was a helper to his father and therefore accompanied his father on various trips where his help was needed. Nowadays the father at home and the father at business are 2 different personas. Children have no opportunity to help and participate because the home is destroyed. The modern home is a house with all modern conveniences, but it is not a home. The first born being the father's helper may sound like a foreign concept to the current generation. The Rav quoted the example of Eli Black, a student of the Rav and president of United Brands, a multi-billion dollar company, who committed suicide. His wife and children had no concept of the pressures he was under. There is an unbridgeable gap between home and office today.] The oldest son was father's substitute, helper, his representative. That's why the Torah assigned him a double portion in father's estate as compensation for services performed and help extended while father was alive. After all, he helped father accumulate his wealth and estate.

However, in the patriarchal society the responsibility was focused in the first born so he wielded power over his siblings, male, female and even mother. When father got older, the oldest child became the tyrant. But even during father's lifetime, father's authority was transferred to him. The younger child was afraid of the first born. Therefore, as far as sanctity was concerned, Gd transferred קדושה to the ones that suffered with their mother, the בכור from the mother's side, not the father's. The first child born to the couple is the one that is symbolic of פטר רחם, the opening of the womb as well as the opening of the spiritual and emotional community to both parents. Suddenly they discover that there is someone else with whom they must be concerned. It is this child that is distinguished through his קדושה and not simply as someone recognized with payment for services rendered to his father.

Gd told Pharaoh בני בכורי ישראל. If you refuse to release him, I shall slay your first born. Gd called Israel His first born, בכורי. If a person introduces a particular child as "my first born", by inference we would understand that there are more children, but this is the oldest. Otherwise, I would say that he is my בן יחיד, my only child. When Gd called Israel His בכור, He implied that He has other sons, otherwise He would have specified that Israel is His only son. Who are those other sons? The answer is all the nations of the world. All people are created בצלם אלקים, in Gd's image, and loved by Gd. The child has a code, the צלם אלקים that unites humankind to the Father, Gd. Israel's role is that of בכור, first born. But this does not exclude others. When Gd gave the law at Sinai, He said ויהייתם לי סגולה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ. I am giving you, the Jewish people, the law. You will be the chosen among all people because all nations are Mine. But don't think for a moment that I am going to abandon the rest of the world and humanity. Israel will be selected to be on intimate terms with Gd, to be His messengers and priests to carry His message. But the world will not be abandoned. Gd told Moses to give Pharaoh this message, that Gd will not abandon the world.

The Paternal first born helps the father. But the maternal first born also has a most critical job, to teach the younger siblings. The older brother plays a big role in the education of his siblings. Honoring the father and mother is incumbent on each child because the father and mother teach the children. This also applies to the first born, the oldest child who teaches his siblings. Gd is ready to adopt any nation if the latter is prepared to join the covenantal community. As long as they walk along the righteous path of charity and justice as set forth by Abraham, they will be welcome.

Girls have contempt for their mothers at a younger age than boys have contempt for their fathers. The impact of an older sister on younger ones is very great. Often the older brother or sister is the most influential teacher. Their teaching is by osmosis, through imitation of the behavior model they present.

The role of the Jew is to be the first born, to teach the rest of the world, our siblings, how to act. Sometimes a child will dismiss their father or mother as belonging to an older generation,

However, an older sibling is part of the same generation and can't be dismissed so easily. The parents are involved with the house chores. But the oldest siblings, brother or sister, are involved in the education of the children. The role of teacher is not fulfilled simply by writing books. Teaching is done by example. קדוש שם שמים, sanctifying the name of Gd, does not always require martyrdom. Rather, it can be accomplished through the daily dignified and honest interpersonal relations of the Jew with his fellow human being. If a Jew commits a crime he violates his assignment of teacher to others. Every Jew is capable of teaching. Judaism is a living discipline, לא המדרש העקר אלא המעשה (Avos 1:17). The simplest Jew can be an effective teacher. This is the message of בני בכורי ישראל and לי כל בכור.

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