

Be'ha'alotecha 5773

Rabbi Aharon Ziegler

Bnei Yisrael complain to Moshe. They claim that they remember the fish served to them in Mitzrayim, which they received “CHINAM”- for free, without payment (Bamidbar 11:5). The Midrash (Sifrei), cited by Rashi, asks, “How is this possible?” “The Egyptian oppressors wouldn’t even give the Jewish slaves straw for bricks beChinam, [see Shemot 5:7] would they have given them fish beChinam?” Rashi himself answers that question; Bechinam, says Rashi, means “free of Mitzvot”. What does all this mean?

In Mitzrayim, without the Mitzvot, the Jews felt free to eat without hesitation about what Beracha to make before eating, what Beracha to recite after eating. A slave eats what he is given, when he is given, without concern if it is Kosher, or about waiting six hours between eating dairy after meat. Now however, they complained, life is not that simple any more. Besides the above, we have to be concerned if the food we acquired is morally and ethically ours, did we take off the necessary Trumot and Maasrot, did we give the due share to the Kohen [Matnat Kehunah], did we take off our the ten percent due to the poor, and less fortunate Jews? In Mitzrayim the food was Bechinam, without these concerns, but not now anymore.

Moshe Rabbeinu responded by explaining to them what true freedom is all about. A slave has no choices to make; a man of freedom does have choices. He can choose to acknowledge that the food he is about to partake comes the One Above and he makes a Beracha before eating or he can devour the food without a Beracha Rishona and without a “thank you” Beracha after the meal- a Beracha Acharona. An animal, that is “so called free” eats by pure instinct, it does not have choices to decide if the food Kosher, if it is prohibited in a Shmita year, it does not say “NO, this is not for me!” A Jew, who is a true “Ben Chorin” does have a choice to say No when necessary. That is the meaning of “U’MOTAR HA’ADOM MIN HA’BEHEIMA–AYIN”. A human being is above an animal because he can say no.

Indeed, being free of Mitzvot can make a person feel unencumbered, but that is not true freedom, Moshe emphasized. Actually, the opposite is true. What appears to be a burden, can lead to unlimited freedom. When HaShem created

the world, the birds were formed without wings. They complained: “We’re so small and overpowered by the larger animals, how we will survive?” HaShem answered, “Have patients, and you will see”.

HaShem then gave the birds wings. The birds complained even more intensely. “It’s worse than ever” cried the birds. “Until now we were small but quick enough to elude the animals of prey. Now we have been appended by our sides and feel weighed down”

HaShem gently took the birds and taught them how to fly high and then higher. They were thus able to escape all threats from their animal adversaries.

The Mitzvot are like wings of the Jew. When not understood properly, they can make us feel stifled and weighed down. Yet, when understood deeply and given significance, they give us new ways of looking at the world and looking at ourselves. They teach us meaning and self-discipline. With these gifts we can then truly fly high and far- we then can truly be free.

It is noteworthy, that a survey taken on grandchildren of families who came to the United States between 1920 and 1950, found the majority left the fold of Judaism while only a minority remained faithful to their religion. When asked to write what they remembered about their grandfathers, the majority answered “I remember my grandfather always saying: ‘Oy Es Is Shver Tzu Zine A Yid’ [Oy, how difficult it is to be a Jew]. The minority remembered their grandfather joyously saying: “How privileged and fortunate we are by being Jewish”. The majority felt that the Mitzvot were a burden while the minority saw them as wings with which to soar high in spirituality.

It is important that we convey to our grandchildren the right message.