

SHABBAT HACHODESH 1998
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Today we take out three Torahs. It is very unusual to take out three Torahs. We took out one Torah because it is Shabbat, we took out one Torah because it is also Rosh Chodesh, and we also took out a third Torah because it is Parshas Hachodesh. In the Torah portion that we read for Shabbat, we read Vayikra, and for Rosh Chodesh we read a special portion from the Torah portion of Pinchas, which has to do with Rosh Chodesh, and for Shabbat HaChodesh we learn that the first commandment given to the Jewish people as a people was the commandment to set up a calendar. It seems strange that this should be the first commandment given to the Jewish people, and that we should recall it right before Pesach. After all, shouldn't we recall ringing declarations of freedom? Shouldn't we recall the rigors of slavery? Why is it that the first thing that calls our attention to Pesach is the fact that we were given a calendar and told to use this particular type of calendar? Why should that be so? What does that have to do with freedom? In fact, in the Haggadah we say, "Rochel, you might think that we should start the seder on the first day of the month and not on the fifteenth day of Nisan when we were thrust out of Egypt." Why is it that the Haggadah even says that? Of course, they give the answer we have to do the seder when we have the symbols of the seder. We need to have the 12 mitzvahs of the seder before us when we go over the seder, but, yet, the assumption was that you should be able to start from the first of the month. Why?

The answer, I think, is because the calendar teaches us about the Jewish concept of freedom. We believe freedom within order. What do we mean by this? We know that the Jewish calendar is based on the moon. There are 354 in a lunar year. There are, of course, 365

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days in a solar year, which means that 7 out of every 19 years we have to add a whole month in order to reconcile the two calendars. More than that, the lunar cycle around the earth is just 29 and a half days which means that some months have to be 29 days and some months have to be 30 days. This leaves us a lot of leeway. In other words, the rabbis can then arrange so that Yom Kippur never comes on a Friday or a Sunday. We can play with the calendar in such a way that we can delay Pesach for almost a month. Sometimes it comes in the middle of March and sometimes it comes in the middle or end of April, so we know that there is a lot of play, but ultimately there are still only 365 days in a solar calendar.

This refers to our freedom. We have freedom within order. We do not have complete freedom. People think that freedom means I can do anything that I want whenever I want to do it, but that is self destruction, not freedom. To have true freedom, we must have limits. We all know that when it comes to dieting. We know that if we eat a lot and get very heavy, we will not be able to enjoy life. We will actually limit ourselves by not being able to have limited our appetite. We cannot get in our car easily, cannot play sports, can hardly breathe. We cannot enjoy life hardly at all. Perhaps our life will even be cut short. If we limit our food intake, we can live longer lives and enjoy sports and walking. Things will be much better for us. That is the Jewish concept of freedom. We have freedom, but freedom within limits. Those people who feel they should do anything they want means that they are self destructing, not that they actually have freedom. Freedom means freedom within limits. We get to make choices, but choices within limits.

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That's why actually on Pesach we have more limits than normal. We have to get together within families because we have choices, many choices within the family, many choices on everything in life, but they are within limits, and these choices make a tremendous difference on how we are going to live. We all know that most of our body is more or less ordained the way it is, but we can make a tremendous difference by just combing our hair and washing our face and, if we are a woman, putting on makeup and dressing nicely. It will make a difference, but 95% of our looks are really predetermined, but the other 5% makes a huge difference. We know that this is the same with most things in life.

There is an anomaly in Jewish life which seems very strange, and that is that you could break Shabbat to declare the new moon. In the olden days before the year 350, every new month had to be declared by witnesses. These witnesses were able to break Shabbat, were able to actually violate Shabbat to come for the Beis Din so they could declare this day or the next day as the new month. What difference does it make? There is only a difference of 24 hours. It teaches us that the little things are very important. The choices that we make are very important. They all add up and make a difference whether we will lead a good or bad life. Now, obviously, everyone will only live 70, 80, 90 years, but the time is really determined, just like we all go through certain stages in life, childhood, teenage years, adulthood, middle age, old age, and death. We all go through the same cycle of years, but how do we use our time? How do we employ our time? The choices we make determine whether we have a good or bad life.

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That's what the Jewish concept of freedom is, that you can make something of yourself, even though you are within form. There is no such thing as a formless life. We know we have to limit ourselves. I am reminded about the yeshiva boy who put an ad in the paper looking for a mate. He said, "Yeshiva boy looking for a mate, a yeshiva boy who loves Tisha B'Av, Yom Kippur, and all the other fast days, looking for a girl who also has similar desires so they can live in the fast lane of life." Of course, we know that you do not limit yourself completely or you will starve to death, but we are talking about making sure that you make choices that are within certain parameters, and this gives you freedom. This is what Pesach is all about. Pesach teaches us that we must look carefully at the choices we make, and that we must try to make the right choices in every given situation. We do have freedom, but it is freedom within order. Therefore, we know that when we look at life and make decisions, we can have a lot of creativity because there is a lot of freedom, but freedom only within limits.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a professor who wanted to test the new students on their mathematical ability. When they came to class he asked, "Tell me, how many seconds are there in a year?" Immediately one boy raised his hand and said, "I know. There are 12 seconds." The professor asked how he could say 12 seconds since there are 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 24 hours in a day, 365 days in a year. He said, "Easy, there is January second, February second..." It depends on how you look at things. There is a lot of freedom within structure. We should be able to use this freedom because the little things

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do count and add to our lives, but we must make sure that we follow them and use them and understand what freedom is about. It does not mean that we can do anything we want whenever we want. That is not freedom; that is irresponsibility. That leads to destruction. Freedom means that you make little but important choices, but within a family structure, within a Jewish structure, a community structure, a moral structure. If you do these things, you will live a moral and happy life. Let us all hope that we will do these things so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.