

## **Pesach: Freedom to follow God's ways – March 23, 2013**

Once, a member of my past Congregation called me a few days after Pesach, to share with me his joy for having made the effort and devoted himself, for the first time, to keeping the laws relating to the festivity. He told me that he, together with his family, had carried out the hagallah (preparation of the utensils and pots to make them appropriate for Pesach), performed the cleaning and elimination of the chametz, and even struggled to not consume products without rabbinical supervision. He was clearly proud of what they had achieved. And when he finished telling me, he asked me the following question: "Rabbi, how can it be that the festival where we celebrate freedom is also the one with more restrictions and laws?"

Without a doubt, a legitimate and interesting question. He was right. Apart from all the prohibitions that Pesach has in common with the other high holidays of our calendar, here we are also forbidden to eat, possess or take advantage of any by-product of the five cereals banned by our sages. In addition, there is the custom followed by some Ashkenazim of restricting rice, other cereals and leguminous plants as well. And as if this was not enough, these laws, which once defined what was classified as chametz, also included any of the derivatives or mixtures where they could be present. And thus arrives Pesach, in the midst of all these "don't do's" or "prohibitions" and invites us to speak about freedom. How is this possible?

For me, this apparent paradox presents us with an interesting challenge: to understand that rules are necessary, not just to enable us to live in harmony and in a civilized way, but also to help us build a common identity, determined in the first place by that which we can or cannot do.

The law, in this manner, becomes necessary, because it keeps us united and allows us to understand that which we have in common, as well as the mission which distinguishes us from others. Then, it is the duty of each generation to find, interpret and renew the sense held by such law, to the purpose of maintaining that identity alive and being able to pass it along to the next generation. But if to the contrary, we reject the regulations in the belief that we are gaining respect for our personal autonomy, we will put at risk, at the end, the identity that defines us, as well as its continuity.

In this sense, I prefer to consider Pesach not as a celebration of "freedom" but rather as a commemoration of our "redemption" from slavery. For only when we finish counting the Omer, when Shavuot arrives and we recall the delivery of the Torah, which is our Law, we will be able to define ourselves as a free nation, to the extent in which we commit ourselves to fulfill all its mitzvot.

Pesach is the time of year when we give thanks to God for having saved us from a pharaoh who forced us to obey his whims, building cities that only served his stingy interests. God then decides to free us, but not to cast us aside. He leads us to Mount Sinai, gives us a law that makes us different, and calls us to serve Him faithfully. Only if we can answer His summons, committing ourselves to His precepts, laws and requests, will we be ready to fulfill, as a people, the mission He entrusted to us and for which He delivered us: to love our fellow men and women and work to make this world a better place.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!