



SLAVE MENTALITY

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AS I WRITE THIS, it's been a year since COVID-19 upended our world. A full year. A year of pain, grief, illness, and fear. A year of lockdowns, restrictions, masks and social distancing. A year in which the stuff of science fiction and nightmares has become daily reality.

And here is perhaps the most sobering part of all: We are getting used to it. Corona life is becoming the "new normal." A year ago, we were horrified and in shock; now, we have begun to accept the situation and learn how to

navigate it. Apparently, people can get used to anything. Like *galus*.

The story is told of an indigent villager who would spend his days begging for charity. Day after day, from morning to night, he would trek up and down the roads, up and down stairs, and from one town to another. A coin here, a meal there, and yet another meager few coins somewhere else allowed him to provide for his family. Sometimes, all he got was a sympathetic nod.

One afternoon, exhausted from yet another not-so-successful day of soliciting, the beggar found himself in front of a stately mansion. This one seemed promising. But between him and the door was an imposing staircase, and he was just too tired to climb.

Lifting his eyes to the heavens, the poor man declared: "One day, I will be rich. In fact, I will become the mayor of this town! And on that day, I will issue a decree that all homes may only be one story high. This way, when I go around collecting coins, I won't have to climb all those stairs..."

Arguably the greatest tragedy of slavery is the slave mentality, where the slave becomes comfortable with

the reality of being a slave, identifies as a slave, and even begins to fear the unknown and insecurity of freedom. He dreams not of independence, personal responsibility and new frontiers, but of a more comfortable prison.

Are we that slave? That beggar dreaming of collecting alms with less difficulty? Upon honest reflection, are we simply waiting for the virus to pass? Do our dreams consist of our children being able to go to school in person and play ball together? Are we just hoping to celebrate *simchos* with extended family again and hug our grandchildren without fear? Can we even conceive of an existence infinitely more wonderful than a COVID-free world?

In a famous and powerful letter to Yitzchak Ben-Tzvi, then the president of the State of Israel, the Rebbe wrote¹:

“From the time that I was a child attending cheder, and even earlier than that, there began to take form in my mind a vision of the future Geulah, the Redemption of Am Yisroel from its last exile, Redemption such as would explicate the suffering, the decrees and the massacres of galus.”

From the most tender age, the Rebbe has been dreaming of the *Geulah*. As a child and youth experiencing pogroms, anti-Semitism, the deprivation of war, and typhus epidemics, the Rebbe sought not a more tolerable *galus*; *galus* itself was intolerable. Despite barely escaping from the fires of the Holocaust and grieving the loss of his own family members, the Rebbe remained focused on the dream: *Geulah*.

The Rebbe never made peace with the reality of *galus*, speaking of it as an inexplicable tragedy each day anew. Especially in the years after 5748, the Rebbe would speak on a weekly—at times daily—basis about why Moshiach must certainly come today. Not next year, not this year, not tomorrow, not tonight—now. We were in prison, and the *Shechinah* was in prison. And a more comfortable prison just wouldn't cut it. There was that dream of a young child – and it was as alive as ever.

It's the dream not simply of a world free of suffering and oppression, illness and brutality; it's the dream of a world in which we will truly *live*. A world where freedom is not only “we won't have to climb the stairs to beg,” an external reprieve within prison life. Rather, it will be a world in which we experience the true internal liberation of the free man—a psychological and spiritual freedom. We will be free to be our essential selves, unencumbered by the limitations of our psyches and the trappings of our egos. We will be free to fulfill the purpose of our existence rather than being preoccupied with our status

amongst the prison population.

It is this very dream the Rebbe has tried so hard to transmit to us. The Rebbe wants us to feel that same deep frustration with *galus*, to see ourselves as free people who have tragically been enslaved and yearn to be free. The Rebbe wants us, too, to be indignant about the length of this exile and to demand the *Geulah*. And to do that, we need to break free of our slave mentality.

The famous allegory is told of a family that was cast into a dungeon for not paying their rent. Since the money never materialized, they remained there indefinitely, raising their family in a dark, bare underground prison. Eventually, new generations were born and the original ancestors passed.

With endless time on their hands, the same debate raged amongst the population day in and day out: Was there, or wasn't there, another world out there? Was it true, as they had been told forever, that there were many other people living on a vast expanse of earth, with sunlight, grass, trees and water? Was this indeed a prison from which they might hope to break free? Or was that an old wives' tale created by some bored souls? After all, the dark walls of the dungeon were all any of them had ever known.

There were the optimists, the believers. They held on tenaciously to the story. And there were the pessimists—no, the “realists.” Not for them was a fantastic tale of an alternate universe. The curious thing, though, that they could never explain, was that hole from which baskets of food and water descended every day. Did that not prove that, in fact, there was more to reality?

And then, one day, there was a commotion. A new prisoner was suddenly thrust into the pit!

Everyone converged on the newcomer, who took in the scene with pity. He described to them his life and the very real world outside the pit. The story was true. This was certainly a prison.

Whose reality was more similar to whose? *Chassidim* analyzing this allegory have pointed out that though the believers seemed to be on the same page as the outsider, in truth the gap between the new individual and all the other prisoners was infinitely wider than the difference of opinion amongst the group. For to them—all of them—the dungeon was the only reality they had ever known.

This, *chassidim* of old have explained, is the role of the Rebbe.

The Rebbe is that individual arriving from the outside, from the reality where Hashem is One and we exist for

¹ *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 12, letter #2226

Selfishness, jealousy, insecurity, fear, conflict and materialism are the only world we have ever really known.

no other purpose than to serve Him. And he looks at us with deep pain and sympathy—people who try hard to believe in the promise of a *Geulah*, but who have never known anything other than slavery. Selfishness, jealousy, insecurity, fear, conflict and materialism are the only world we have ever really known. Is *Geulah* possible? If it is, do we want it? Wouldn't it be scary and boring?

From the self-centered perspective to which we have become enslaved, we even wonder: Will we be happy?

And the Rebbe calls to us: My children, follow me. There is a wonderful world out there waiting for you. Just trust me. Trust me that you can leave the habits, feelings and attitudes you call reality behind. Trust me that life without an ego is possible, and better than you can fathom. Believe in that dream—I know it is true. I will describe that world to you. I will help you envision it, and I will show you how to get to it.

Through thousands of *sichos*, *maamarim*, letters, and conversations, the Rebbe helps us break free of our *galus* mindset. No, what “everyone does” doesn’t matter. What “everyone thinks” doesn’t matter. What “the world says” has no bearing on our lives. The forecasts and predictions, the theories and the trends—they are shackles from which we can break free. No one is holding us hostage to them but our own minds. We don’t even—*gasp!*—need to follow the news; we, as *Yidden* and *chassidim*, can and must create the news.

Above that hole in the dungeon is a world of light, the Rebbe insists. A world of clarity, joy, goodness and giving. That food you receive every day—Someone is providing it. And that Someone yearns for a relationship with you.

When we internalize the Rebbe’s vision and start dreaming of the true *Geulah*, there is no going back. We, too, will begin to feel the intense frustration and pain of the Rebbe at the length of this *galus*. *Galus* itself—not simply corona—will become unbearable.

And then, we will have reached the place the Rebbe implored us to reach. As the Rebbe painfully expressed himself on 28 Nissan 5751: “What more can I do to motivate the entire Jewish people to clamor and cry out, and thus actually bring about the coming of *Moshiach*?”

We will cry out and demand the *Geulah*. Because we are free people who do not belong in *galus*. And even one more moment is one moment too long. ❧

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