

## **I shall take you to Me as a people. (6:7)**

The climax of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Egyptian exodus, occurred when Hashem told us we were to be His people, when He gave us the Torah at *Har Sinai*. At that point, we achieved our identity. A slave has no identity. He is a number, whose master predetermines his purpose and activities. His life is aimless, since he has no control over it. Our identity as *Yehudim*, Torah Jews, was established at Sinai when we accepted the Torah. Many biological Jews live in the world, but biology does not establish our identity, because it does not define who we are. Our alignment with Torah values, morals, principles and observance defines us and represents our *raison d'être* and, consequently, our identity.

*Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl*, explains that the Jewish concept of freedom, *cheirus*, means much more than merely escaping oppression; it means the ability to rise above one's base instincts and live in accordance with elevated moral and spiritual values. Jewish identity is intrinsically linked to the Torah. Our holy Torah is much more than a religious text; it constitutes the very essence of Jewish life, culture and ethics. Jewish identity is defined by living in accordance with its principles, which serve as a roadmap concerning every aspect of life from moral conduct to communal obligations. This idea guides us to maintain our Jewish identity amidst changing circumstances.

Freedom requires a vision for the future. Freedom imbues one with hope. A slave neither has hope, nor a vision for the future. He is not in control of his destiny. The Torah provides us with our vision for the future, so that, by adhering to its commandments, we stay on track and have the luxury of looking forward to the future. Feeling a brother's pain is a sign of redemption. Indeed, just feeling pain presents a glimmer of freedom. The worst form of slavery is when we become accustomed to our wretched situation; when we lack sensitivity, because we either have become used to the darkness and pain, or just have given up hope of emerging from our sorry predicament.

A man, lost in the forest chanced upon a dark cave. It contained absolutely no illumination whatsoever. As he groped around for a way out, he met a man who told him that he, too, was searching for a way back to civilization -- to no avail. He added, "Do not worry about the darkness. You will soon get used to it." The "visitor" countered, "I do not want to get used to it. Once that occurs, I will cease looking for the exit."

*V'Lakachti eschem Li l'am*, "I shall take you to Me as a people" has a deeper connotation with regard to identity. All too often we reach a point at which what others think of us determines our self-definition and identity. This can lead to diminished self-worth, which is one of the most destructive scourges to affect the human psyche. It is the opposite of freedom and the antithesis of Judaism, which teaches that one who aligns himself with the Torah is truly a free man. One who defines himself by the barometer of public opinion is a slave. Consider the following vignette.

A well-known speaker began his seminar by holding up a twenty-dollar bill for all two hundred participants to see. He asked, "Who would like this twenty-dollar bill?" Hands started going up

throughout the room. He then said, "I am going to give this bill to one of you, but first, let me do this." He proceeded to crumple up this bill, and then he looked at the audience and asked, "Who still wants the bill?" Hands went up in the air. Apparently, a little crumpling did not bother these people. "Well," he continued, "what if I do this?" He dropped the bill to the ground, stepped on it and ground his shoe into the bill.

He picked it up, now all crumpled and filthy, and asked, "Does anyone still want this bill?" The hands remained in the air. Money is money, regardless of its physical condition. "My friends," he began, "you have all been privy to a very valuable lesson. No matter what I do to the money, it does not affect your taste for the money. This is because, regardless of its physical condition, its value has remained the same. It is still worth twenty dollars. Remember, that throughout our lives, we are often dropped, crumpled and even ground into the dirt as a result of our decisions and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This can lead to feelings of worthlessness. Before we fall into despair, we must remember that, regardless of what has happened or what will happen, we will never lose our value in G-d's eyes. To Him, dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, we are still priceless to Him."

The value of our lives is not dependent on what we do or who we are, but by to Whom we belong! Hashem's love for us is unconditional.