

Exploring the World and Ourselves

Rebbetzin Shira Smiles

Faculty, OU Israel Center

Did you ever wonder why people like to travel? Why exotic places draw such attention? Why people save up money to go on cruises or trips around the world? Rav Pincus in Tiferet Shimshon, explains that man is described as one who is so large, it is as if he encompasses the entire world. As such, a person has an inclination to explore and to traverse as much of the world as he can. Similarly, it is not surprising that people eagerly read the news about things that are transpiring thousands of miles away; information that is seemingly irrelevant to their lives. The challenge is to harness this energy to build, create, and better the world around us.

As a result of this infinite intrinsic energy that one possesses, people do not like to be constrained. Rav Chayim Shmulevitz in Sichos Mussar notes that this was the brilliance in Shlomo HaMelech “punishing” Shimi ben Gera, forbidding him to leave Yerushalayim under penalty of death. Although there are many people who live their entire lives in Yerushalayim, once one’s movement is restricted, he feels an intense desire to break loose. People innately want to choose what they do and where they go.

Once we understand this deep psychological wiring of a person, we

gain a deeper insight as to why being sold as a slave is such a terrible thing. A slave loses this ability to choose, to be master over his own destiny. Therefore, according to Torah law one can never sell himself as a slave forever. Slavery is counter to the tzelem Elokim that Hashem envisions for each person to activate his endless individual potential and to choose his distinctive path in life.

This quintessential aspect of the human race also helps us understand why the Torah focuses so much attention on Yetzi’at Mitzrayim. Rabbi Eliyahu Roth in Sichat Eliyahu comments that the very word Mitzrayim reflects the intensity of the galus experienced there. Mitzrayim is a composite of two words, “metzar” and “yam”. Metzar connotes constriction, narrowness. Yam, the ocean, is a paradigm of expansiveness; the whole world is an interlock of waters. Mitzrayim was the place that took that which is limitless - man - with all his dreams and aspirations and confined him; no slave ever escaped from Egypt. In recalling the Exodus, we remember how Hashem extricated us from such servitude to lead lives devoted to be servants of Hashem; people using their unbounded resources to make this world a G-dly abode.