

## Loving the Stranger Part 2

*By Matthew Gold – April 2020*

There are many key lessons which I took from my experience in Ghana which I hope will stick with me for the rest of my life. I am not sure how adequately I can put them into words though, as the experience as a whole was fascinating, revelatory and deeply moving. I am incredibly grateful to all the organisations and people involved for the opportunity to learn more about myself, my Jewish identity and the role I can play in the world.

Despite seeing first-hand the incredible work that youth movements, community groups and local charities play in helping the region develop, the experiences that resonated most deeply with me were those where we interacted, however briefly, with individuals.

A memory that has stuck with me is my experience visiting a local youth group who work to empower their local community. The members of the group had either set up or took part in a youth parliament, a debating committee, several schemes that worked to improve the financial situation of those in need in their community, higher-education programmes, tutoring programmes, the list goes on and on. The people we met were inspirational. Their achievements and their active participation in activities which bettered the lives of those around them greatly outnumbered our collective contribution to wider society. It was honestly my highlight of the trip when we were paired off to speak to members of the group. Chaim (a fellow Ben Azzai participant) and I went for a walk around the neighbourhood with Abdul. He was clearly intelligent and personable, it was a real joy to spend time with him and discuss our relative lives. He spoke beautifully about how warm and loving his community is, and how every member of the community deeply respects one another. But what shone through above all else was his passion – his passion to better the world for himself and those around him, his fervent desire to use education to empower his community and bring about both personal and societal growth. He literally brimmed with happiness when talking about all the different schemes which he was involved in which improve or solved problems in his community. And not just his community – he took part in a national youth parliament which fought adamantly against government corruption on a national scale. He saw everything in life as a gift – despite the fact that life had dealt him a pretty rough hand compared to the

incredibly privileged lives that we lead – and also as a responsibility i.e. the responsibility to use that gift to improve himself and the world around him. He had such a joy for life, it was infectious. Chaim and I left our conversation feeling uplifted, inspired and motivated to inculcate his way of viewing the world into our own lives.

Abdul's perspective on life really resonated with me. Everyone goes through some sort of hardship in life, no one will live a life of pure bliss and harmony – and the dreadful situation that the world is going through now is a horrible reminder of this truth. But, what I learnt from Abdul was how to respond to such adversity. Why should not ask why but rather what and how – what needs changing in this world and how can I go about doing it? What gifts I have been given and how can I use them to make a positive impact on the world? What difficult moments have I gone through and how can I use them to empathise with and love those around me? These are the questions we should be asking. I know that I have certainly taken comfort and inspiration from the many people like Abdul in my community who have responded with an outpouring of love and affection to the current crisis, and have selflessly volunteered to help those in need in the community.

I believe that this idea is also rooted in our Jewish heritage. My shul rabbi, Rabbi Zobin, recently spoke (over zoom) and explained that everything we have is a gift from Hashem, it is not something that we are entitled to. Every breath we take, every second our heart continues to pump, every pound we earn and every relationship we build with others – all our achievements, possessions, knowledge and every gift and talent we have is a *free* gift – one we did not deserve, one we are not entitled to, and it would be just for Him to take it away at any moment. Only if we see every moment of our life as a gift can we begin to understand our place in life. We must first recognise that we are wholly dependent on others, not in control of our fate, and truly the beneficiaries of a gift.

Once we understand that Hashem has given us everything in our lives we can also recognise that He can take everything away in an instant – we do not really have ownership or control of anything. However, there is only one thing we have true freedom over – the way we react to events that occur. That is the only thing we truly can control, and that is the greatest gift of all the gifts that Hashem bestows upon us. He allows us the freedom to choose to improve

ourselves, to grow as individuals and to try and better the world for those around us. He gives us the opportunity to find meaning and purpose in this world, to search for Him and act according to His ways – we can be empathetic, kind, patient and love others. The greatest feeling of accomplishment arises when one perfects their own character, when they overcome their nature and put their efforts into helping those around them rather than helping themselves. There is no greater gift than the freedom to grow as a person and make life meaningful.

And this is perhaps one of the fundamental ideas behind the festival of Pesach. Rabbi Soloveitchik points out that the famous passage in the Hagadah of 'עבדים היינו' (we were slaves to Pharaoh) is not written grammatically in the way we would expect. The Hagadah is very particular in writing that 'we were slaves to Pharaoh', rather than calling us 'Pharaoh's slaves'. What is the difference between the two?

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains:

*"When the torah states that someone is 'Pharaoh's slave', we identify his whole personality with Pharaoh. Serving Pharaoh is not just incidental, it is the whole purpose of his life. For example, Pharaoh's Egyptian slaves are called עבדי פרעה – Pharaoh's slaves. However, a Jew's service to Hashem is not something that is incidental, but rather something indispensable to his existence.*

*The Jews in Egypt were slaves only in a political-economic sense. Had they been slaves existentially, had they lost their love of their spiritual heritage, had they been 'Pharaoh's slaves' rather than 'slaves to Pharaoh' they would never have been liberated...For the Jews, slavery was extrinsic, not intrinsic. It did not destroy their inner personality...**the Jews remained free**, even during this time of oppression".*

Pesach is a time to rejoice and reflect on the most miraculous event in our history, the world's history in fact. It was the birth of our Jewish nation. But crucially, it is a time to reflect on what it truly means to be free. It is a time to recognize that there is only one thing we have control of, and that is how we choose to react to the situation around us. Can we take advantage of

the opportunities around us and better the world by showing empathy, love and compassion to those around us, both near and far? Will we ask what and how, rather than why? This is both the opportunity and challenge of Pesach. Only once we understand this and choose how to respond will we truly be free.