

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BORN AGAIN?

Nakdimon ben Gurion came to our Master, secretly by cover of darkness during the week of Passover to ask him about the kingdom. Yeshua said to him, “I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). That is to say, unless one is born again, he will not enter the Messianic Era. So what does it mean to be *born again*. Are you born again?

You Must Be Born Again

Yeshua says that there are two types of birth. On the one hand, a person is born physically into this physical world, born of a mother and a father. But spiritual birth is something different. Not everyone who is physically born experiences the spiritual rebirth, and only those who have experienced a spiritual rebirth, Yeshua teaches us, will enter the kingdom of heaven.

So how does one experience this spiritual rebirth? The Gospel of John says that we experience this spiritual rebirth in Yeshua. That we experience spiritual rebirth by looking to the Son of Man for salvation, as the children of Israel looked on the serpent that Moses raised on the pole. The gospel of John says, “That whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” And to believe in him does not mean just to believe that he exists, but to surrender oneself over, to abandon one’s own self to his authority, to cleave to him, to cast allegiance with the king and endeavor to submit to him.

I was born into a home of born-again Christians where being born again was part of the path of faith. For me, it happened at a young age, not more than three or four years of age, that I went to my mother, on my own impetus, and told her I would like her to pray with me to receive Jesus. On the other hand, I felt like I experienced spiritual transformation as a young teen at summer camp when I began to “get serious” about God. I also have a nephew who grew up in the faith, making such confessions, but he later said he never really was “born again” (to use the language), until he was eighteen or nineteen, and I expect that’s when he got serious with God.

Getting Serious with God

Is being “born again” the same as “getting serious with God”? To quit playing at religion and pretending. Maybe that’s not a bad way to put it. But then it’s possible that a person might need to be born again several times over the course of a lifetime as our faith and allegiance to Hashem and to his Anointed One ebbs and flows, like all relationships. We get more serious with God as we spiritually mature. So one might look back at earlier years of spiritual immaturity and wonder, “Was I really born again back then? I thought I was...but now I wonder.”

But “getting serious” with God is always just the beginning of a life of being born again. The apostles speak of the process as a complete regeneration, of becoming a new creature, of passing from death to life, from darkness to light, and taking hold of this new reality and new identity, and continuing to grow in it and mature in it. It’s not always something so easy to pin down to one moment in a person’s life. “Put off the old,” they say, “Put on the new.”

If you have never gotten serious with God, Passover is a good time to do so. It's possible to be very religious without having any real relationship with Hashem, without actually knowing the Messiah or trusting in God or surrendering one's will to him or living in genuine faith. That's not what we want. There's nothing more useless than an empty religion. What's the difference between an empty religious experience and a meaningful religious experience? The difference is inside you, whether or not you have a real relationship with God.

From Bondage to Freedom

To have a real relationship with God, we must experience his salvation, not unlike the children of Israel experienced at the first Passover when the firstborn of Israel were spared and the nation was redeemed. Passover is called the "Season of our Freedom."

In his book on the Passover Haggadah, *From Bondage to Freedom*, Rabbi Abraham Twerski tells the story of a young man who, after a long struggle with chemical abuse, went through a rehab program, and then returned to his family, and came home for Passover. Sitting at his father's Seder table, he heard his father reach the point in the Haggadah where we say, "We were slaves to Pharaoh." The young man interrupted the conversation and said, "Father, when were you ever a slave? But I can relate to being a slave. I was a slave to drugs, and there has never been so demanding and inconsiderate a taskmaster. So absolute an enslavement as addiction to chemicals. I had no choice whether to use them or not. I did things in my addiction I swore I would never do because a slave does as he is told. I not only used drugs when I liked them and wanted to, I used them when I hated them. If there was ever a slave in the world, it was me. I know what it means to be a slave, and I know what it means to be free."

Slavery to addiction is a real thing, a real slavery. The nicotine addict knows that nicotine is in charge. His whole day will revolve around getting his nicotine fixes, every day. The alcoholic knows that alcohol is in charge because he continually sets rules for himself to govern his own behavior, such as, "Just one drink, but that's it," and he consistently breaks his own rules.

It's easy to look at the drug addict or the alcoholic and say, "That guy really has a problem. Glad that's not me," but not realize that we too are in bondage to this world and its vices and its pleasures and its needful things. We are all too adept at removing the speck from our brother's eye while ignoring the log in our own.

The apostle Paul warns about slavery to one's appetites. He warns us about being enslaved to food or to sexual immorality. He warns us that even permissible things can become slavery. Although things may be permissible, they are not necessarily helpful. Although they may be permissible, he says, "I will not be enslaved by anything. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Master, and the Master for the body. And God raised the Master and will also raise us up by his power" (1 Corinthians 6:12-14).

Yeshua teaches that, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). How do you know if you are a slave? You are a slave when you don't have a choice. The addict knows that he

is a slave because when he tries to quit or stop. That's when he realizes he cannot. He realizes he is trapped. It does not matter what resolutions or firm promises he has made to himself and others. Likewise with all types of sin. The slanderer says, "I will govern my tongue. I will muzzle myself." But when the conversation comes up, he cannot help himself from speaking a choice bit of *Lashon Hara*, even though he firmly resolved not to do so.

But when Passover comes we can tap into the spiritual power of redemption, of liberation from bondage. This is an appropriate time for new beginnings, to cry out to God for deliverance, to be born again again and to start anew on the journey through the wilderness. We have forty-nine days ahead of us to travel through the wilderness. The forty-nine days of the counting of the omer can be a powerful season of spiritual growth as we go from bondage under Satan to freedom in the Spirit of God. At the end of the journey, we receive the Perfect Torah of Freedom and are "clothed with power from on high."

Freedom in Messiah

I want you to take advantage of the spiritual potential that is here now at Passover, right in front of you. Passover only comes once a year. But freedom in Messiah belongs to you all year long.

I think of Brother Yun, who was called "The Heavenly Man," who spent so much time in communist prisons in China because of his testimony for Messiah. He said that despite being a prisoner in these horrible communist jails, he felt like a free man. He was a free man inwardly because of his freedom in the Messiah. And he would say, "It's possible to be just as much a prisoner on either side of the bars."

He enjoyed a spiritual, inward freedom, as Yeshua says, "The one whom the son sets free is free indeed." Like Paul and Silas in the prison in Troas, who sang hymns through the night, Yun physically suffered behind the bars, but he remained spiritually a free man in Messiah. That is the power of the kingdom and the new creation.

My wife shared a story with the family that she read from Manis Friedman last week.

In the USSR, many Chassidim were sent to prisons, gulags, and firing squads for daring to commit "crimes" such as teaching children Hebrew or building a Mikvah. One such Chassid was sent to a gulag in the north pole. It was known that people who when sent to that gulag never came back sane, if they came back at all. This Chassid however, returned to civilization after serving his sentence completely sane. His friends asked him, "how did you do it? How did you maintain your sanity in a place where no one can?"

The Chassid answered "The rest go crazy because when you take away their ability to hunt, drink and enjoy themselves, you take away everything they live for. But I, What did I do at home? I prayed to God three times a day as Torah commands, What did I do in the north pole? I prayed to God three times a day as Torah commands!"

Unlike the other men who had lost everything they valued, the Chasid still had everything he valued. He still had his faith in God, his connection to Hashem, and his purpose in life as a

servant of Hashem. That's freedom. You can't take that away from him, and because of that, he was a free man, even in the labor camps of Siberia. That's an indication of a person who has been born again, born not of this world. Not in the conventional and specific sense of believing in Jesus, that's for sure, but in the practical sense of living not for this world but for the coming kingdom and the coming king. Yeshua says of such as these, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:16). To be born again means to be born into a different world.

Born for a Different World

I want you to quit thinking about being "born again" as a decision you made at some point in the past and start thinking about it as a decision you are making every day, as you are daily being renewed. Paul says, "You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:9-10).

We believe that God is going to remake the entire world. He is going to renew this world, and he is going to bring a new heaven and a new earth. The whole creation eagerly awaits the day when it "will be set free from bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). That is the incorruptible. The immortal.

There is nothing here that is permanent. The person who has been, born again, no longer lives for this world, he lives for God. He realizes that this world is only the vestibule of the world to come, a place of preparation for the kingdom and the world to come, so he relinquishes this world.

How Often Do We Commemorate Passover?

Passover is the festival of freedom, and I want that we should all be free men and women, born again, and under no slavery to this world or the things of the world. How often do we remember the Exodus from Egypt? Once a year, right? We remember the exodus on Passover:

Then Moses said to the people, "Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten" (Exodus 13:3).

Not just once a year. The Torah designates all the festivals as commemorations of the exodus from Egypt, so we make mention of the exodus at every festival: Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. But not just that. It's not just several times a year, it's actually every week. Every Shabbat is a memorial of the exodus from Egypt.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:15)

And not just once a week, but actually, the Torah makes it an obligation every day, tying the remembrance of the exodus from Egypt to the daily mitzvot of Tefillin and Tzitzit. We remember the exodus from Egypt every time we conclude the Shema with the words, "You shall

be holy to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the LORD your God.” (Numbers 15:40-41).

In addition, there are numerous commandments which are tied to the story of the exodus from Egypt, such as the redemption of firstborn sons, the sanctification of firstborn animals and redemption of the firstborn donkey, and many of the commandments of the Torah of which it says, “because I am the LORD who brought you out of Egypt.” Even the first commandment of the ten commandments is, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt,” a theme repeated throughout the whole Torah. It’s the foundation of God’s relationship to Israel, and it’s the authority on which he predicates the commandments.

The entire purpose of the nation is bound up in this identity of redemption and of being rescued from the bondage of the past. The Prophets build on the theme of liberation, predicting a time when God will redeem his people from exile among the nations just as he once redeemed them from Egypt. Jeremiah says that, in the future, people will no longer say, “As the LORD lives *who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,*” but instead they will say, “*who brought up the people of Israel*” from the nations “*where he had driven them*” (Jeremiah 16:14-15). In this way, the story of the Exodus from Egypt is not only the story of the past, but also the story of the future, and everything in between.

The story of the exodus and the redemption creates the paradigm for the whole Bible. The story is first told in the story of the exile from Eden. Then it’s told in the story of Abraham and his trip to Egypt when his beloved Sarah is abducted by Pharaoh. God smites Pharaoh with plagues, Abraham and Sarah are redeemed and freed to go up out of Egypt, with great possessions. We encounter the story again with Jacob going into exile, falling into servitude under Laban, then returning to the land with great possessions. The story occurs again with Joseph going into Egypt as a slave. There is a theme at work here.

The same theme finds expression in the New Testament. The apostles speak of the Messiah as the redeemer who pays the ransom to redeem Israel and ransom his people and his disciples from bondage to the kingdom of darkness, from bondage to slavery and death. Yeshua offers his disciples freedom. He offers freedom from darkness, from Satan’s power, from sin, from the power of sin, freedom from the law of sin and death, and freedom from the fear of death.

So we see that the Passover story is part of all the stories, and part of everything in the Bible. This is why he commanded his disciples, “Do Passover in remembrance of me,” because Passover not only points toward him, but he is the culmination of the ultimate meaning of the Passover story. The bread, which is broken for us is matzah; the blood which is spilled for us is the wine of the Seder table.

Serving Two Masters

In view of all of this, it is inappropriate for a disciple to be a slave to anyone other than our Master, as he said, “No one can serve two masters, or simultaneously bend two bows, or ride upon two horses.”

In the days of the apostles, slavery was a normal part of the Roman world. Many of our brothers and sisters lived as slaves. So Paul says:

Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. (1 Corinthians 7:21-23)

Baruch HaShem, in the modern world, you are probably not a human slave, as it says in the morning blessings, “Blessed are you Hashem who has not made me a slave.” But you might be a slave to other things which, although permissible, are not beneficial. It’s possible to be a slave to worry, a slave to money, a slave to fashion, a slave to a relationship, a slave to your friends, a slave to your phone, a slave to food, a slave to video games, a slave to a television program, a slave to Netflix, a slave to any number of unhealthy habits. How much worse to be a slave to something that is completely forbidden!

Today is Passover. This is a day for seizing freedom, and for being born again.

On the first day of Nisan, in preparation for Passover, God said to Moses and Aaron, “This month shall be the first of months for you.” Nisan is the first month of the year. But wait, there’s a problem with that reckoning because we already have a New Year in the month of Tishrei: Rosh Hashanah. That’s how we ended up with two new-years: one in Tishrei and one in Nisan.

Joseph Good made a beautiful teaching out of this. He said, “Look, it’s like this. You have a natural birthday, the anniversary of when you were born. But you also have a spiritual birthday, the anniversary of when you were *born again*.” Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of man, is like the natural birthday, the birthday of this present world, but Nisan, is the spiritual birthday, the rebirth. In Nisan we are born again.

In his Haggadah, *From Bondage to Freedom*, Rabbi Twerski makes a similar observation. He points out that, when God created man, the angels objected, and tried to persuade him not to do it. The angels pointed out that man would be a sinful creature in rebellion against God. And when we look at humanity, with our selfishness, our shortsightedness, our cruelty, our capacity for evil, and our self-destructive obsessions, we must admit, it would appear the angels were correct on this count. It would have been better if God had not made human beings at all.

But Rosh Hashanah and the creation of man is not the end of the story. There is also Nisan and the festival of Passover, the other new year, in which God recreates us, a spiritual birthday, in which we are made new, born again, through the redemption. That’s the power of Passover. It’s the festival of being born again.

This matzah we eat, what is the reason for it? It’s the born-again bread. Free from the old culture of yeast, untainted by the old batch, it represents a new beginning, a new start.

Death and Rebirth

What does it mean to be born again?

Being born again isn't exactly a foreign concept in Judaism because Judaism teaches reincarnation. The mystics teach that people are routinely born again—but first they die, and then, if they have some rectification to fulfill, they might be born again into a new body. That is not a New Testament teaching, but the New Testament has a similar idea. In the New Testament, to be born again, a person must first die to himself. To be born again means to give up ownership over your own life and to hand it over to God. It means to die to yourself, to selfishness, to your own hopes and pursuits, and to sin. (Which is repentance.) The one who will cast allegiance with King Yeshua for a spiritual rebirth surrenders his own will. It involves relinquishing your rights to God, to the Messiah. And one who dies to himself, in the Messiah, is born again, raised to a new life in the Messiah. Paul says, “Therefore, if anyone is in the Messiah, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Have I satisfactorily answered the question “What does it mean to be born again?” No. Not at all. But we are getting closer. I'll take another run at it tomorrow morning.

Have I been Born Again?

I think it's a healthy thing to ask oneself, “Have I been born again?” You might be a believer. You might even think of yourself as a disciple or as a Christian or as Messianic. But have you been born again? I mean, born for the next world? Have you ever done business with the Messiah on this level, where he says to you, “Follow me,” and like Levi abandoning his tax booth or Simon and Andrew abandoning their boat or James and John abandoning their nets, you leave off with your life, and follow him?

And if you've done that, have you stayed on that path? The Bible warns us against falling back into bondage. Having once already made the decision as a follower of the Messiah to follow after Yeshua, we should be careful not to fall back under a yoke slavery. The Torah says regarding Egypt, “You shall not go that way again.” Paul says, “For freedom the Messiah has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). It's a well-known phenomenon that we fall back into the same old trap again, as the Proverbs say, “The dog returns to its vomit.”

So perhaps, once in a while, a person needs to be born again, again. And that's my question to this community today, on the holy day of Passover, the festival of freedom. Messiah has set you free. The Apostle Peter says, “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God” (1 Peter 2:16).

The book of Galatians says, “You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13).

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The first time you were born, you were born to your parents, the son of so-and-so, the daughter of so-and-so. But when you are born again, you are reborn as a son or a daughter of God, because it's a spiritual birth. Even our Master Yeshua experienced this, on a certain level, when he heard the voice at the Jordan River declare, "You are my son, in whom I am well-pleased," as it says in Psalm 2, "You are my son, today I have begotten you." So too for each of us.

In the merit and virtue of our holy Master Yeshua, may we be born again, set free from bondage to the ever-changing impermanent world, this very day, and be reckoned, sons and daughters of the living God.

We were slaves in Egypt, but today, today, we are free men.

Chag Sameach, Shabbat Shalom, Hoshanah to the Son of David.