

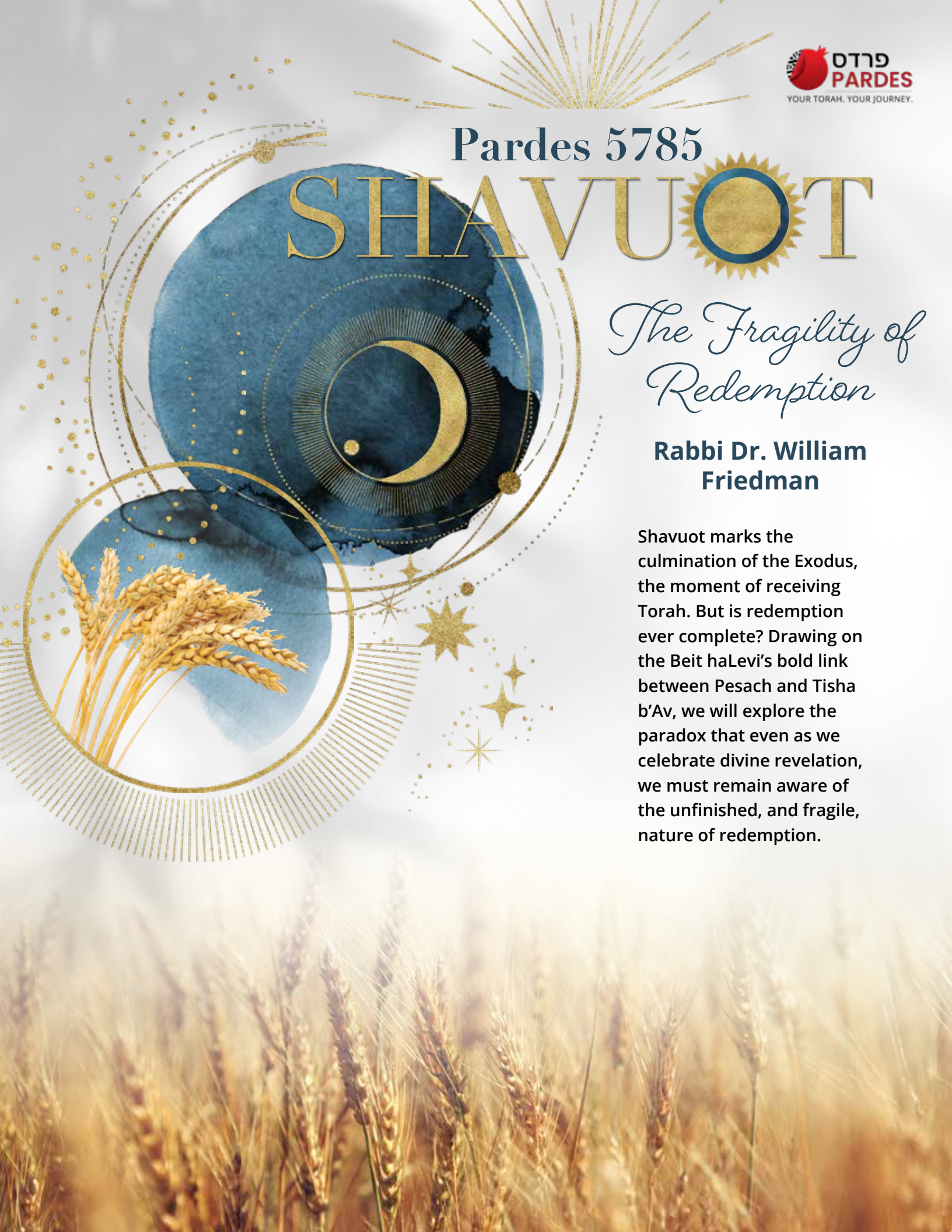
Pardes 5785

# SHAVUOT

## *The Fragility of Redemption*

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Shavuot marks the culmination of the Exodus, the moment of receiving Torah. But is redemption ever complete? Drawing on the Beit haLevi's bold link between Pesach and Tisha b'Av, we will explore the paradox that even as we celebrate divine revelation, we must remain aware of the unfinished, and fragile, nature of redemption.



There is a strong temptation to treat redemptive moments as complete and final, to see in a miraculous victory the culmination of a long struggle, and to believe, at last, that we are done. But as heirs to the long, tangled, and turbulent history of the Jewish people, we know this feeling is always illusory. What one generation achieves can be undone by the next, especially if we fail to uphold the high standards demanded by the Torah.

The inherently temporary nature of redemption is highlighted by the Beit haLevi, R. Yoseph Dov Baer haLevi Soloveitchik, in his commentary on Shemot (Exodus) 12:8. There, he engages a striking midrash from Eikhah Rabbah 3:5 (= Petihtot 18), which links the "bitter lettuces" (*merorim*) the Israelites were commanded to eat alongside the Pesah offering and matzah, with a verse from Eikhah 3:15:

### Eikhah 3:15

*[God] sated me with bitters [merorim];  
[God] quenched my thirst with [bitter]  
wormwood.*

הַשְּׂבִיעֵנִי בַמְרוֹרִים;  
הָרוּנִי לַעֲנָה

The midrash draws an unexpected connection between the bitterness tasted at the moment of redemption and the bitterness of destruction that followed.

### Eikhah Rabbah 3:5

*Rabbi Avin opened [his sermon on Tisha b'Av]:*

*"[God] sated me with bitters" –  
on the first night of Pesah.*

*"[God] quenched my thirst with [bitter]  
wormwood" –*

*on Tisha b'Av.*

*From that which [God] sated me on the  
first night of Pesah,*

*[God] quenched my thirst on Tisha b'Av  
with wormwood.*

*Thus the first night of Pesah is the  
[same night of the week as the]  
night of Tisha b'Av.*

רבי אבין פתח:

"השביעני במרורים" –

בלילי הפסח של יום טוב הראשון.

"הרוני לענה" –

בתשעה באב.

ממה שהשביעני בלילי יום טוב הראשון של  
פסח, הרוני בתשעה באב לענה.

הוי לילי יום טוב הראשון של פסח

הוא לילי תשעה באב.



The Beit haLevi reflects on this midrash and wonders: why do the Sages link Pesah and Tisha b'Av at all? At first glance, the similarity seems superficial, a mere calendrical coincidence. But he argues that the connection runs far deeper: not only do they fall out on the same night of the week, **the redemption of Pesah sets in motion the destruction of Tisha b'Av.**

#### Beit haLevi on Shemot 12:8

*There is, apparently, no consequence to the fact that these two nights [of Pesah and Tisha b'Av] fall out on the same night of the week. Nevertheless, the deep intention of our Sages of blessed memory is that these two nights are interdependent and interwoven, and one **caused** the other.*

ולכאורה אין שום נפקא מינה במה שהני שני לילות חלים בלילה אחד בשבוע ובע"כ עיקר עומק כוונת חכמינו ז"ל הוא דהני שני לילות תלויים ומקושרים זה בזה והאחד גרם לחבירו.

Once he establishes that the Sages saw these two nights as causally linked, the Beit haLevi goes further: he proposes that the Exodus itself, coming prematurely, planted the seeds of future exile.

#### Beit haLevi on Shemot 12:8, continued

*And this is like what we wrote earlier (in parashat Shemot) that on account of the fact that [the Israelites] left [Egypt] before the time of the exile had been completed, they were necessarily compelled to be in exile a second time; hence, the night of Pesah caused the night of Tisha b'Av.*

וזוהו כמו שכתבנו למעלה (פרי שמות) דע"ז שיצאו קודם שנשלם זמן הגלות הוכרחו להיות עוד פעם שני בגלות ונמצא דליל פסח גרם ליל ט"ב.

To support this idea, the Beit haLevi turns to a midrashic pattern: Jewish history as a cycle of redemption and relapse. Over and over, human-led salvations collapse into new forms of exile. Only one kind of redemption, the midrash insists, will last.

## Midrash Tehillim 36:6

*"With You is the fountain of life; by Your light we see light" –*  
Said Rabbi Yohanan: ...  
*Israel was enslaved in Egypt, and Moshe arose and redeemed them; but they went back and were enslaved in Babylonia, and Daniel, Hananiyah, Misha'el, and Azariyah arose and redeemed them; but they went back and were enslaved in Eilat, Medea, and Persia, [and] Mordehai and Esther arose and redeemed them; they went back and were enslaved by Greece, and the Hasmonean and his sons arose and redeemed them; but they went back and were enslaved by the wicked Romans, [and] Israel said:*  
*"We are exhausted of our being enslaved and redeemed, and going back and being enslaved; now, we do not want redemption by flesh-and-blood, but [that] our redeemer [will be] the Lord of Hosts, the Holy One of Israel!*  
*And we do not want that flesh-and-blood shall enlighten us from now on, but that the Holy Blessed One will enlighten us, as was said:*  
*"With You is the fountain of life; by Your light we see light," and it is written: "The Lord is God, who enlightened us" (Psalms 118:27).*

"כי עמך מקור חיים באורך נראה אור" –  
אמר ר' יוחנן: ...  
ישראל נשתעבדו במצרים,  
ועמד משה וגאלם,  
וחזרו ונשתעבדו בבבל,  
ועמדו דניאל חנניה מישאל ועזריה וגאלום,  
וחזרו ונשתעבדו בעילם ובמדי ופרס,  
עמדו מרדכי ואסתר וגאלום,  
חזרו ונשתעבדו ביוון,  
ועמדו חשמונאי ובניו וגאלום,  
חזרו ונשתעבדו באדום הרשעה,  
אמרו ישראל: הרינו נתייגענו מהיותנו  
משתעבדין ונגאלין, וחזרנו ונשתעבדנו;  
עכשיו אין אנו מבקשין לגאולת בשר ודם,  
אלא גואלנו ה' צבאות שמו קדוש ישראל!  
ואין אנו מבקשין שיאיר לנו בשר ודם  
מעתה,  
אלא שיאיר לנו הקדוש ברוך הוא,  
שנאמר: "כי עמך מקור חיים באורך נראה  
אור"  
וכתיב: "אל ה' ויאר לנו" (תהלים קיח כז).

This midrash asserts, through historical example after historical example, that redemption by human hands is always temporary; only God's ultimate redemption will break the chain. The Beit haLevi claims that Moshe recognized this, and therefore wished that God, not he, should effectuate the Israelites' redemption from Egypt. Nevertheless, God chose a temporary redemption at Moshe's hands rather than a final, Divine redemption.



This brings us back to the Beit haLevi's core insight: redemptions that come through human effort are, by definition, partial. Their very existence signals their eventual undoing.

### Beit haLevi on Shemot 3:11

*Behold, if a redemption is effectuated by flesh-and-blood [rather than God], it is a sign that the redemption will not last, and the requisite amount of exile has not been completed, and that in the future the Holy Blessed One will redeem them ... and [only then] will there no longer be any enslavement at all.*

הרי דהגאולה אם היא ע"י בוי"ד הוא סימן שאינה גאולה קיימת ועדיין לא נשלם חשבון הגלות, ולעתיד יגאלם הקדוש ברוך הוא ... ולא יהיה שום שיעבוד אח"כ כלל.

It is still not totally clear from this argument why specifically the redemption from Egypt happened too soon and needed to be recompensed by a later exile. (Perhaps it has to do with the somewhat confusing and contradictory timelines around the length of time Israel was meant to be enslaved and were actually enslaved.) But the fundamental points are clear: 1) human redemptions are necessarily incomplete; 2) the very fact that a redemption occurred by human hands is sufficient to demonstrate its inevitable reversal.

The inevitable reversal of redemptions led by mortals explains the connection between Pesah and Tisha b'Av. To draw the connection, the Beit haLevi turns to a detail in the Pesah meal itself, a shift from eating the meat of the Pesah offering last to, after the destruction of the second Temple, eating matzah last.

### Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Hametz and Matzah 8:9

*At the end [of the meal], one eats even [as little as] an olive's volume of the meat of the Pesah offering, and tastes nothing afterwards. And nowadays, one eats an olive's volume of matzah and does not taste anything after it at all, so that it is the end of one's meal and the taste of the meat of the Pesah or of the matzah is in one's mouth, for their consumption is the commandment.*

ובאחרונה אוכל מבשר הפסח אפילו כזית ואינו טועם אחריו כלל, ובזמן הזה אוכל כזית מצה ואינו טועם אחריה כלום, כדי שיהיה הפסק סעודתו וטעם בשר הפסח או המצה בפיו שאכילתן היא המצוה.

The Beit haLevi notices that the requirement to eat the meat of the Pesah offering or matzah at the end of the Seder applies only to these foods, which symbolize redemption and freedom. But the practice of Hillel the Elder was to combine these foods with maror, the bitter lettuce, at the end of the Seder. According to Hillel's practice, then, the taste of bitterness also needed to linger in the mouth, alongside tastes associated with redemption, which for him explains the connection between Pesah and Tisha b'Av: wrapping redemption and bitterness together ensures that we do not regard our liberation as permanent.

### Beit haLevi on Shemot 12:8, continued


*"In the manner of sermonizing [derush] ... one can say that the intention behind [requiring the taste to linger] is that on this night, we make a remembrance of two opposite things. There are things which remind us of freedom, like the Pesah offering and the matzah, and things which remind us of enslavement, like the bitter lettuce and haroset [which resembles the mortar used by our enslaved ancestors], because on this night they were enslaved and also redeemed on that very night from their enslavement. It is necessary, therefore, that the taste of the Pesah offering linger in the mouth to teach that from now on freedom had begun. ...*

*For Hillel, however, who would wrap the Pesah [meat], matzah, and bitter lettuce [together], it turns out that according to him all of them had to be eaten while satiated. But why does bitter lettuce have to be eaten while satiated? Why should its flavor linger in the mouth? The bitterness of slavery had already departed, never to return henceforth!*

*Only because ... the entire redemption [from Egyptian slavery] was predicated on the fact that they would enter into another exile. Because of that, the flavor of [bitter lettuce] needed to linger in the mouth. And this is the meaning of the Sages' derashah "that which [God] sated me with bitters on the night of Pesah" – that which bitter lettuce was consumed already sated – is a sign that there would yet be Tisha b'Av.*

ובדרך הדרוש ... י"ל הכוונה בזה דבליה זו עושים זכרון לשני דברים מהופכים, יש בו דברים זכר לחירות וכמו פסח ומצה, ויש דברים זכר לשיעבוד וכמו מרור וחרוסת, והוא משום דבליה זו היו משועבדים וגם נגאלו בלילה זו משיעבודם וצריך להיות טעם פסח נשאר בפיו להורות שמכאן ואילך התחיל החירות. ... להלל דהיה כורך פסח מצה ומרור, ונמצא דלדידיה ה"י כולם נאכלים על השובע. והרי לכאורה מאי שייך במרור להיות נאכל על השובע דלמה לו להיות נשאר טעמו בפיו והרי מרירות של השיעבוד כבר חלף ועבר לו ואיננו עוד מעתה. רק כיון ד... כל הגאולה היה על סמך זה שיהיו עוד בגלות אחר משי"ה צריך שיהיה נשאר טעמו בפיו, וזהו שדרשו מה שהשביעני במרורים בלילי פסח דמה שנעשה שבע במרורים זהו לסימן שיהיה עוד תשעה באב:





The Beit haLevi's point is sobering: Hillel the Elder recognized that the redemption from Egypt, like future redemptions, was conditional and temporary, and inexorably accompanied by a future exile. He therefore subverted the very moment in which God's protective presence (first actualized and later symbolized by the meat of the Pesah offering) and redemptive power (symbolized by the matzah) are literally consumed by adding in the warning sign of the bitter lettuces: do not think our past redemption guarantees us anything; you must also taste that our future downfall is inevitable.

Still, the message isn't to reject celebration altogether. **Even if redemption is fragile, it is no less worthy of gratitude.** We hold the joy and the vulnerability at once, just as we recite Hallel with the taste of maror still in our mouths, and, on Hanukkah, with full knowledge that that redemption, too, was but a passing shadow in the scope of Jewish history:


### Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Hanukkah 3:1

*The God of our ancestors was merciful upon them, and granted them salvation and rescued them ...and kingship returned to Israel for more than two hundred years, until the second destruction [of the Temple].*


ריחם עליהם אלהי אבותינו והושיעם  
מידם והצילם ...  
וחזרה מלכות לישראל יתר על מאתים  
שנה עד החורבן השני.

Despite the time-limited nature of these redemptions, we still fix holidays to celebrate them, which remain among the most popular of Jewish celebrations. Redemption, then, is a tricky thing: on the one hand, it is to be appreciated and celebrated; on the other, it is to be treated as fragile, its collapse something we must constantly guard against. We must remain ever vigilant to the possibility that sin and transgression can wilt and blow away even what appears to be a sure and secure flowering of redemption.


## Reflect & Discuss



The Beit haLevi teaches that the very night of our redemption planted the seeds of our future destruction. What does it feel like to celebrate freedom even as we sit with the tension between Pesah and Tisha b'Av? How does that tension play out today?



Midrash Tehillim traces a pattern of redemptions rising and falling, again and again. How do we hold on to hope when our history, and maybe even our own experience, suggests it may not last?



The Beit haLevi reads Hillel's maror as a reminder that even in freedom, we must still taste bitterness. What kind of strength does it take to build in the present, even if we know it may be undone in the future?