I think I’ve learned more about the strengths, the weaknesses, the complications, and the glitches about the social media in the last few weeks than ever before. But how are you? I hope you are well. I hope you are safe. I hope you are keeping safe, and I hope the people around you, your family and friends are safe as well.

This is a very, very difficult time and it becomes really acute when we see it from the perspective of Pesach. This year we’re clearly dealing with an enormous phenomenon. Just today, the General Secretary of the United Nations has called this “the greatest challenge facing humanity since World War II”. So anything that I have to say, I say with absolutely humility and with hesitancy, because none of us know for sure what all of this means. But let me, in any case, share some thoughts with you.

*Ma Nishtana hashana hazot mikol hashananim?* What makes this year different from all other years? I think the answer is that we have never been more alone and we have never been less alone. What do I mean? We have never been more alone because the social distancing and the isolation that we’ve been practising mean that we are unable to celebrate Pesach the way it should be celebrated, in the way it has been celebrated ever since *Pesach Mitzrayim*, ever since the days of Egypt itself. It is usually celebrated around large tables, with extended families. And of course, this year our families are mostly going to be fragmented and so many of us will be alone.

But at the same time, we have never been less alone. The whole world is today eating *lachma anya*, the bread of affliction. The whole world is tasting *maror*, the bitterness of suffering. The whole world is in *Mitzrayim*, in the sense given in Psalm 118, “*Min hameitzar karati ka*”, meaning “from the confinement, from my isolation, I have called to God.” And it is as if all humanity is suffering the penultimate plague, the plague of darkness about which the Torah says “*lo ra’u ish et achiv, v’lo kamu ish mitachtav*”, meaning, no-one was able to see their closest friends and relatives, and no-one was able to get up and leave the house. That’s how it feels right now.

Now, the really wonderful Israeli musician Ishay Ribo has just today released a song on YouTube, a beautiful song about the current crisis called Keter Melucha. If you haven’t heard it yet, I do urge you to hear it because it’s really special and very beautiful and powerful. And in the course of this song, he asks HaKadosh Baruch Hu, “*Umah ata rotzeh shenavin mizeh*?”, What do you want us to understand from this? “*Umah ata rotzeh shenilmad mizeh*?” What do you want us to learn from what is happening to humanity? “*V’eich neyda lehitached b’parod hazeh*?” And how on Earth will we ever come together, given that we have been forced so far apart?

Well, those are good, good questions. They are the questions that I really want to address in this shiur. Let us look at some passages in the Haggadah specifically for the light they shed on where we are today, because where we are today is a bad place. As I speak, the pandemic has already affected 203 countries around the world. 885,000 people have been infected. 44,000 people have died. 563 in Britain in the last 24 hours.

This is huge and it’s difficult, but it’s worth saying, first and foremost, that on Pesach, unusually, we don’t only recall our suffering. We recall the suffering others. There is that famous story in the Gemara (in both Megillah and in Sanhedrin), where the Egyptians were drowning in
the Red sea, and the angels began to sing a song and God rebuked them and said, ‘My creatures, the people I made, are drowning in the sea and you're singing a song of victory?’”

We care about the suffering of others, even our enemies. Some people say that’s why we spill a drop of wine when we mention each of the Ten Plagues. Some people go further and they say look very carefully at the two passages in the Torah which really examine the festivals in parshat Emor and parshat Re’eh. Look carefully and do the arithmetic and you will see that simcha, rejoicing, is mentioned once in connection with Shavuot, three times in connection with Succot. But while discussing Pesach, simcha is mentioned, not once.

Nowhere does it say that there is simcha on Pesach. Everyone wishes everyone else a chag kasher v’sameach on Pesach, but I’ve always been deeply uncomfortable about that because Pesach is not, biblically-speaking, a festival of joy. Why? Because Pesach is a festival plucked, rescued even, from the heart of suffering, whether it was the suffering of our ancestors or whether it was that of the Egyptians. And today, when we are seeing the immense suffering of the whole world this festival of Pesach is very apt. We will reflect on the suffering of others as well as on our own, and in this very fact is hope.

There is a strange provision in parshat Masei, that says that anyone who killed another person accidentally, a manslaughterer, should go and take shelter in the city of refuge, and stay there “ad mot haKohen Hagadol”, meaning until the High Priest dies. Now, what on has the death of the High Priest to do with the cities of refuge?

The Gemara offers various explanations in masechet Makot, but the Rambam in chapter 40 of Book III of The Guide for the Perplexed says something really revolutionary. He says the reason is that a manslaughterer had to stay in the city of refuge because the family of the victim naturally bore him animosity. They wanted to take revenge. But, says Rambam, when the High Priest dies, a communal mourning is experienced. And when you have aveilut k’lallit, meaning when you have communal mourning, individual people forget their private animosities. And therefore, all the desire for revenge goes away. In other words, shared suffering brings people together, even people who found it very hard to be together before.

I suppose that’s what Chazal meant when they said tza’arat rabim chetziz nechamah. When many people suffer, that is half of the consolation because suffering brings us together. That is why the Torah doesn’t use the word simcha on Pesach. It is candid in focusing on the suffering because out of that suffering comes togetherness. Out of that suffering, for instance, our people was born.

Now let me take that a little further and ask the following question, which bothered me for many years. We open the Seder each year with Ha lachma anya…, It means, “This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Whoever is hungry, come and eat.” I used to wonder, Is this hospitality? Calling out, ‘Hey, guys, are you hungry? Come and share my suffering!’ It seems like a very strange form of hospitality.

A second question, seemingly unrelated: What is the matzah? At the beginning of the Seder, it's ha lachma anya, The bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in Egypt. But later on, when we come to the section of the Haggadah that begins, Rabban Gamliel, matzah zo... al shum ma? At this point in the Seder we make completely the opposite point. We say that the matzah
represents the bread that our ancestors ate as they were leaving Egypt because they were in such a hurry [to depart Egypt for freedom] that they couldn't stop or delay, and let the bread leaven, and that's why it never rose.

So on the one hand at the beginning of the Seder, matzah is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in Egypt. But by the middle of the Seder it's the bread of freedom that our ancestors ate as they were leaving Egypt. How do we reconcile that contradiction? And oddly enough, these two questions have the same answer. I discovered this answer by reading that great book by the survivor of Auschwitz, Primo Levi, his great book about Auschwitz, *If This Is a Man*.

In this book, Levi says that the worst time of all in Auschwitz was actually the 10 days after the Germans left. They left fearing the Russian advance. They took with them any prisoner who could still walk on the Death March. And all who were left in Auschwitz were the patients in the Auschwitz hospital and people who couldn't walk. And for 10 days, they had no food, no shelter, no heat, no nothing and it was January in Poland. It was freezing. He said those 10 days were a nightmare. But eventually, he and two friends decided to light a fire and gather together for some warmth.

And then, he says, as the heat began to spread, something seemed to relax in everyone. These are his words: “And at that moment Towarowski (a Franco-Pole of twenty-three, with typhus), proposed to the others that each of them offer a slice of bread to us three who had been working [making the fire]. And so, it was agreed”.

Levi continues, “Only a day before, a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of the camp said, "Eat your own bread. And if you can, eat the bread of your neighbour,” and left no room for gratitude. It really meant when he offered me some bread, that the law of the camp was dead. It was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died slowly changed from prisoners to human beings again.”

Let us really think about this. One person offered Primo Levi a small slice of his bread of affliction during this Death March, and Primo Levi knew that was the moment at which he became a human being again. When we share our affliction with others, and we share what little we have with others, we turn the bread of affliction into the bread of freedom. Affliction shared is the beginning of redemption.

So I do urge you before Yom Tov comes in, to find somebody you can help and give a little, whatever food they need, or whatever else they need. But I also urge you to remember that this year, we are going to be sharing affliction with the whole world. But that is the first step to freedom. When we can share our affliction, we have begun to be free human beings.

And now, let's delve a little deeper. What actually is the lesson of this pandemic? What actually is the lesson of history in general? And let me introduce this by asking you, does anyone know the verse, the biblical verse that is quoted more than any other in the Haggadah? The answer is the verse *vehigadet levicha bayom hahu, laymor, ba’avor zeh asa Hashem li b’tzayti mimitzrayim*, meaning, “And you shall tell your child on that day, “Because of this that God did for me when I left Egypt.”
If you look in the Haggadah you will see [in the section about the Four Children], it's first used as the answer to the Rasha, the wicked one's question, "What does all this mean to you?" And you set his teeth on edge and say, “God did this for me when He brought me out of Egypt”, (but he wouldn't have done it for you).

Secondly, it's used as the answer given to the third child, the one who can't ask. You must quote this verse to teach your child how. As it says, “Teach your child that day”.

Number three, the passage in the Haggadah which says Yachol merosh chodesh, meaning perhaps we should read the Haggadah on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, or during daylight hours, on the morning of Pesach, but the same verse is quoted again, “because of this that God did for me”, meaning that you're pointing to something, therefore the Haggadah should be read on Seder night and that's the time when the matzah and maror are set out in front of you.

And finally, the ultimate principle of the Haggadah, the section beginning, Bechol dor vador, chayav adam lirot et azmo ke’ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim, meaning each of us must see ourselves as if we had personally left Egypt. "As it says, you shall teach your child on that day, saying, ba’avor zeh asa hashem li b’tzayti mimitzrayim. Tell your child this is what God did for me, when He brought me out of Egypt." You don't say He brought “my ancestors”. You say “brought me”. So, it is said four times on Seder night. It is the most repeated verse. But what on earth does it mean? It seems simple, but actually it isn't. There are two completely opposite readings of what this verse means.

The first reading is the one given by Rashbam, by Ramban and others. They interpret this verse to mean, ‘The answer to question, ‘Why am I eating matzah and maror?’ is, because God took my ancestors out of Egypt. I am doing this because of something that happened in the past.’ That's Rashbam and it makes eminent sense. However, Rashi says completely the opposite. ‘Why did God take me out of Egypt? In order that I should fulfil these mitzvahs of eating matzah and maror.’ In other words, I’m not doing this because of the past. The past happened so that I would do this, all these centuries later

The Ibn Ezra was a great rationalist. Unsurprisingly, he follows Rashi on this and not Rashbam. Now, on the face of it, Rashi is completely incomprehensible. We went through all that suffering in Egypt just so that we would eat matzah and maror? If so, God could have left out the whole episode of Egypt. We needn't have gone there. We needn't have endured slavery. He could just have told us, ‘For seven days, eat matzah and maror.’ What on earth does Rashi mean? But actually, Rashi is being incredibly profound. Why were our ancestors slaves? Why did God allow it to happen? God wanted us at the beginning of history, of our history, to lose our freedom so that we would never let it be lost again. He wanted us to know what it feels like to be a slave, so that we would become the world's most consistent fighters for freedom.

In fact, that is the explanation for all the difficult passages of suffering in the Torah. Abraham and Sarah had to wait all those years for a child, so that we would appreciate a child is a gift, a miracle, precious, and we would become the most child-oriented faith in the world. We walked as a people through the ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’ so many times. Why? So that we would never forget the sanctity of life. What you once lose, you never take for granted. We went
through slavery, so that we would never settle for less than freedom. The freedom that is today embodied in the state of Israel.

Listen to the depth of this truth and relate to it now. There are two possible things that might happen once this pandemic is over. Possibility one is the very real possibility that the world will simply go back to normal, and nothing will change. It will be as if it never happened. Maybe we'll remember it, once a year. That's all. And then, Hegel will be proved right when he said “the one thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history”.

We take exactly the opposite view. Ba’avur zeh: History exists so that we may learn from it. History exists so that we can avoid repeating it. That is what we went through all these sorrows for, so that we would be changed thereby, and that is what has to happen after this terrible pandemic.

So let me suggest the way that I think we should be changed, and let me suggest what I think is the answer to Ishay Ribo’s question “Umah ata rotzeh shenilmad mizeh?” (What do you want us to learn from what is happening to humanity?) Let me answer this by asking you another strange question. I ask you to tell me the biblical word for freedom.

I guarantee that 99% of you will answer, “cherut”. After all, we talk about, me’avadut le’cherut, from slavery to freedom, we call Pesach “zman cheruteinu”, the season of our freedom. We say right at the beginning of the Haggadah (at the end of the ha lachma anya paragraph), “leshana haba’ah bnei chorin”. So the Hebrew for freedom is cherut.

Well, this answer is, in fact, wrong. The Tanach does not contain a single instance of the word cherut meaning freedom. In fact, only once do those same Hebrew letters appear in Tanach at all, and that’s in a completely different context. When Moses takes the tablets from God on Mount Sinai and it says they were written on by God and the writing of God was charut, meaning “engraved” on the tablets (Ex. 32:16). So that’s the only time the word appears, punctuated with different vowels and with a completely different meaning.

The biblical word for freedom is chofesh. See Exodus 21:2, when a slave is set free, because the word used comes from chofesh. “Yeitze la’cha’afshi chinam”. Whereas cherut is a rabbinic word (not a biblical one). So I want to ask, why did the Rabbis coin this word? What is the difference between chofesh and cherut?

The answer is chofesh is individual freedom. A slave with chofesh is an individual who no longer has a master. A slave who goes to freedom can now do what they like, they have individual freedom. Cherut is different. It means collective freedom. Freedom that we share as a society.

What’s the practical difference? Well, imagine a society in which everyone had chofesh, everyone was able to do whatever they liked. Would that be a society? The answer is that it would be anarchy and chaos. That is exactly the situation that Tanach describes in the last verse of the Book of Judges, Bayanim haheim ein melech b’yisrael, ish hayashar b’einav ya’aseh, meaning “In those days there was no king of Israel. Everyone did whatever they liked” (Judges 21:25). That is anarchy. Real freedom is law-governed liberty. It means caring for others, not just yourself. It means caring not just for self-interest, but for the common good.

Now, the difference between chofesh and cherut could never have been more evident than in the last few weeks, certainly not in my lifetime. We’ve seen chofesh, individual freedoms being
exerted. We've seen people doing what they like. We've seen it in Israel, in the UK, in the USA, elsewhere. People who care only for themselves. They go panic-buying. They hoard food. They fail to follow government guidelines. They don't do social distancing. They don't observe self-imposed isolation. The result is that everyone suffers and people die.

We have also seen the opposite. Cherut. Collective freedom. People caring for the common good. We've seen the heroism of doctors and nurses. We've seen the courage of people who keep our vital services going. We've seen the incredible number of volunteers. We've seen extraordinarily good neighbourliness all over the place, and that is the difference between chofesh and cherut, between caring for “me” and caring for “all of us together”.

Out of all this suffering, we have to become less selfish as individuals, more caring as societies, more united as humanity, having discovered our collective vulnerability. And if we do that, we will have rescued blessing from this curse. So the Sages said about telling the story on Pesach, “Begin with the shame, end with the praise”. Begin with the story of suffering, and end with the story of redemption.

Well, I think we can fairly say that this year, we have all fulfilled the first part. We have begun with the suffering. May Hashem grant us that we may speedily observe the second likewise, may we witness the chance to end this episode with praise and with redemption. And if you ask me which line of the Seder is going to resonate with me most powerfully this year, more than any other, it will be a line I never even thought about seriously before. It's a line we give to children. It's the very last line of the Haggadah. The last verse of Chad Gadya. When we say the closing words of the evening, “Ve'ata HaKadosh Baruch Hu v'shachat l'malach hamavet”, Let God come and stop the Angel of Death, speedily and soon. Amen.

Chag Kasher V'Sameach to all of you, may there be a refua l'chol ha'olam.