

What Is Judaism?¹

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What?

Questioning plays a central role in our seder experience; the concept of *she'ela uteshuva*— query and response—is essential to the Haggadah, as the Rambam describes:

He should make changes on this night so that the children will see and will [be motivated to] ask: “What is different about this night from all other nights?” until he replies to them: “This and this occurred this and this took place.” ... When a person does not have a son, his wife should ask him. If he does not have a wife, [he and his colleague] should ask each other, “What is different about this night?” This applies even if they are all wise. A person who is alone should ask himself, “What is different about this night?”

Rambam, Hilchot Chametz Umatzah 7:3

וצריך לעשות שינוי בלילה הזה כדי שיראו
הבנים וישאלו ויאמרו מה נשתנה הלילה
הזה מכל הלילות עד ששייב להם ויאמר
להם כך וכך אירע וכך וכך היה. וכיצד
משנה מחלק להם קליות ואגוזים ועוקרים
השולחן מלפניהם קודם שיאכלו וחוטפין
מצה זה מיד זה וכיוצא בדברים האלו, אין לו
בן אשתו שואלתו, אין לו אשה שואלתו זה
את זה מה נשתנה הלילה הזה, ואפילו היו
כולן חכמים, היה לבדו שואל לעצמו מה
נשתנה הלילה הזה.

רמב"ם, הלכות חמץ ומצה ז:ג

Interestingly, the questions of the seder share a specific approach. They center on the “what” rather than the “why.” For example, we meet four sons with their respective appellations and different approaches to Judaism; yet, what the four perspectives have in common is that they revolve around the question “mah”—what. *Mah nishtanah* is accurately translated as “what” is different about this night. We articulate Pesach, matzah and maror, “*al shum mah*”—“are about what” when we identify them. Rather than focusing on the rationale for our faith and the Jewish story, we focus on what happened to us, what was the response and what we are about.

Perhaps this approach reflects the unique role of Pesach as the launch-pad for the Jewish calendar year. The Torah (Shemot 12:1) teaches us that Nissan is the first month of the Jewish calendar, and the Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 4b) explains further that Pesach is the first of the year’s cycle of Jewish festivals, the Moadim. The first evening of the year’s first holiday is the celebration of *Leil HaSeder*—the night of the seder, the anniversary of our birth as a Jewish nation. As we recline at our table, we relive and reflect upon our national beginning. In doing so,

¹ This essay is a tribute to our master and teacher, Maran Harav Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l, whose 20th yahrtzeit we observe on Chol Hamoed Pesach 5773. Many of the ideas presented here are culled from talks, teachings or writings of Rav Soloveitchik zt”l, whose greatness continues to inspire and enlighten. Many thanks to *Avi Mori*, Mr. Etzion Brand; Mrs. Ora Lee Kanner and Professor Leslie Newman for their helpful comments.

we consider the basic questions of what Judaism is about in the first place.² What is our religion and what does it mean to us? This process of questioning is similar to one of a potential convert, who approaches the Jewish community with a curiosity of what Judaism is about. A potential convert doesn't ask why be Jewish, for we have no response to such a person. In fact, we discourage potential converts when they approach. We do not seek converts, proselytizing why people should join the Jewish faith. We simply share answers to the "what" questions in response to those who ardently pursue our path. For example, we tell potential converts the specific details of gifts to the poor. It is fitting, then, that the Exodus is viewed by the Talmud as the first step in our collective conversion process to Judaism (*Yevamot* 46a).

This background to the seder places a challenge before us. For despite being one of Judaism's most widely observed rituals—one that has been practiced punctiliously within families for generations—many of us are stymied by the fundamental questions the seder raises. We repeat the words of its printed text but often lack true understanding of the answers it challenges us to provide. The basic question "what is this"—what is Judaism and for what did G-d take us out of Egypt—may still remain unresolved when we clear the last crumbs of matzah from the table. Perhaps with greater attention to the seder and the Haggadah we can each begin to formulate the contours of an answer for ourselves.

What is Judaism?

This profound and complex question has a multi-faceted answer, perhaps reflected in the Torah itself. The Torah is multidimensional. It is a book that contains a range of mitzvot- specific, required actions that we are obligated to observe. It also contains a collection of narratives that teach us a framework of religious beliefs and a set of divine values. Finally, the Torah is also a story—the story of a people, a family and a nation. Perhaps we can suggest that the Torah is a mirror reflection of Judaism. Hence, Judaism is a set of practices, beliefs, values and a communal entity.³

As the seder night pours the foundation for our Jewish year, it can shed light on these four concepts. Let us examine how the Talmudic architects of the seder and the framers of the Haggadah created an experience that educates these four principles.

1. Mitzvot

The central element of the Pesach seder is the *korban Pesach*. We re-experience it on its anniversary—the night after the fourteenth of Nissan—in the form of matzah and maror in the absence of a Beit Hamikdash. This mitzvah of *korban Pesach* is replete with detailed specifications that govern the way it is purchased, slaughtered, prepared and eaten. We teach these provisos to the inquisitive, "wise" son, including even those restrictions that apply after the Pesach meal is over: "that we may not eat after the Pesach *afikoman*." The complexities and nuances of the laws of Pesach and its symbols, the matzah and maror, remind us of the responsibilities and focused

² Much like *na'aseh venishma*, we will do and we will (then) listen, first we identify what it is before inquiring about its rationale.

³ The four categories were developed through numerous discussions with students at Ida Crown Jewish Academy and Fasman Yeshiva High School during programs facilitated by the YU Torah Mitzion Kollel of Chicago.

actions that are part and parcel of the Jewish covenant. We understand that Judaism is comprised of commandments and boundaries within which we walk.⁴

A fundamental aspect of this system of actions and responsibilities, of halacha, is that it places limits upon human beings and challenges us to sacrifice when we encounter them. Much as one might like to share a slice of *korban Pesach* with a friend or neighbor who happens to visit during the seder meal, the guest must be turned away, for each *korban Pesach* is only eaten by those who were appointed prior to its slaughter. Similarly, one must constrain oneself to eating the *korban Pesach* in only one designated location, for it may not be eaten in multiple groups. These laws are reflective of the character of halacha and Judaism in general, as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explained:

In a word, Halacha requires of man that he possess the capability of withdrawal. Of course, as we have made evident above, man is called, following the movement of withdrawal, to advance once again, toward full victory.

"Catharsis" *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978, p. 46)

Through our seder experience we understand that to leave Egypt and accept Judaism means that we embrace a binding set of mitzvot that guide our lives and often call for sacrifice to elevate ourselves.

2. Beliefs

At the same time, the seder (like the Torah) is much more than a series of laws and limits. It is also a series of truths we avow. Through the seder experience we reaffirm the fundamental beliefs of Judaism. The Haggadah makes a clear statement regarding the foundation of our monotheistic tradition in the Exodus, as it cites the Midrash:

"And the Lord took us out of Egypt," not by an angel, not by seraph, nor by a messenger, rather the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory! as is said: "For I will pass through the land of Egypt in this night, and I will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments, I am the Lord." "For I will pass through the land of Egypt," I myself, not an angel; "And I will smite all the firstborn" I myself, not a seraph; "And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments," I myself, not a messenger; "I am the Lord," —I am He, no other!

Passover Haggadah

ויוציאנו ה' ממצרים, לא על ידי מלאך ולא על ידי שרף ולא על ידי שליח, אלא הקב"ה בכבודו ובעצמו. שנאמר: "ועברתי בארץ מצרים בלילה הזה, והכיתי כל בכור בארץ מצרים מאדם עד בהמה. ובכל אלוהי מצרים אעשה שפטים, אני ה'!"
ועברתי בארץ מצרים, אני ולא מלאך. והכיתי כל בכור, אני ולא שרף. ובכל אלוהי מצרים אעשה שפטים, אני ולא שליח. אני ה', אני ולא אחר!
הגדה של פסח

In contrast to the multiplicity of Egyptian deities, Judaism has only one G-d.

We address many other core beliefs through our study of the Exodus. For example, we do not have a specific firsthand human account of the creation of the world by Hashem. Instead, we have the miraculous events of the Exodus to teach us about the existence of G-d and the basic

⁴ Hence the word "mitzvah" means commandment, not good deed; and the word "issur" connotes a tether—a limit that constrains and connects. Halacha is a specific path along which we walk.

3. Values

As Divine agents in this world, Judaism calls us to the ideal of *imitatio Dei*—to imitate the values of our Creator, as the Rambam teaches:

And we are commanded to walk in these ways that are good and straight paths—as Deuteronomy [28:9] states: “And you shall walk in His ways.” [Our Sages] taught [the following] explanation of the mitzvah: Just as He is called “Gracious,” you should be more gracious; Just as He is called “Merciful,” you shall be merciful; Just as He is called “Holy,” you shall be holy; In a similar manner, the prophets called God by other titles: “Slow to anger,” “Abundant in kindness,” “Righteous,” “Just,” “Perfect.”

Rambam, Hilchot Deot 1:5-6

ומצווין אנו ללכת בדרכים האלו הבינונים והם הדרכים הטובים והישרים שנאמר והלכת בדרכיו. כך למדו בפירוש מצוה זו, מה הוא נקרא חנון אף אתה היה חנון, מה הוא נקרא רחום אף אתה היה רחום, מה הוא נקרא קדוש אף אתה היה קדוש, ועל דרך זו קראו הנביאים לאל בכל אותן הכנויין ארך אפים ורב חסד צדיק וישר תמים גבור וחזק וכיוצא בהן, להודיע שהן דרכים טובים וישרים וחייב אדם להנהיג עצמו בהן ולהדמות אליו כפי כחו.
רמב"ם, הל' דעות א:ה-ו

Values, like the ones enumerated by the Rambam above, are principles that shape our attitudes and guide our actions. They are subtle and nearly impossible to convey in a direct command; rather, values must be conveyed by circumscription, through modeling. Hence, our seder becomes a laboratory for modeling Jewish values that are central to our faith.

For example, the value of truth must be learned and conveyed by seeking truth through the exercise of question and answer, never being satisfied with one's previous knowledge. We now appreciate the Haggadah's requirement of *afilu kulanu chachamim*—even the most learned individuals—must re-examine the story each year.

The value of gratitude is learned by actually expressing thanks, as we do in the lyrics of the Dayeinu poem and the subsequent passage *Al Achat Kama V'Chama*—“how much more so.”

Compassion and concern for others must be lived by inviting those less fortunate to share in our blessings. This, explained Rabbi Soloveitchik, is why we begin the seder with a preamble:

No wonder our seder commences with the declaration, “Ha lahma anya, This is the bread of poverty.” Whatever we possess, even if it is just the bread of the poor, or poor bread, is too much for us and we invite all to come and share with us: “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” ... It is a proclamation that we are ready to help one another. Pesach night is a time of sharing... (Festival of Freedom, pp. 23, 46)

4. Community

Finally, Judaism is unique in that it is not just a faith; it is a community. Judaism has been characterized by some as a race (usually in a pejorative sense) or a family (although unlike the Amish, we accept converts); but as a community it is something unique, as Rabbi Soloveitchik described:

The community in Judaism is not a functional-utilitarian, but an ontological one. The community is not just an assembly of people who work together for their mutual benefit, but a

the land, respectively. For greater insight, see the Maharal's commentary on the Haggadah and *Haggadah Shirat Miriam* of Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon, pp. 205- 210.

metaphysical entity, an individuality; I might say, a living whole. In particular, Judaism has stressed the wholeness and the unity of Knesset Israel, the Jewish community. The latter is not a conglomerate. It is an autonomous entity, endowed with a life of its own. We, for instance, lay claim to Eretz Israel. God granted the land to us as a gift. To whom did He pledge the land? Neither to an individual, nor to a partnership consisting of millions of people. He gave it to the Knesset Israel, to the community as an independent unity, as a distinct juridic metaphysical person. He did not promise the land to me, to you, to them; nor did He promise the land to all of us together. Abraham did not receive the land as an individual, but as the father of a future nation. The Owner of the Promised Land is the Knesset Israel, which is a community persona. However strange such a concept may appear to the empirical sociologist, it is not at all a strange experience for the Halachist and the mystic, to whom Knesset Israel is a living, loving, and suffering mother.

("The Community," *Tradition* 17:2 [Spring 1978], pp. 9)

This sense of community is an essential aspect of the seder, whose roots can be traced back to the original Pesach evening in Egypt. When Hashem first instructs Moshe regarding the *korban*, He states that Moshe should speak not merely to the children of Israel, but rather to *kol kehal adat Yisrael* - the entire congregation of Israel—about the commandment. The communal nature of the event is stressed in the manner in which the *korban* is slaughtered:

and you shall keep it unto the fourteenth day of the same month; and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at dusk.

Shemot 12:6

וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת, עַד אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה;
וְשָׁחְטוּ אֹתוֹ, כָּל קְהַל עֵדֻת-יִשְׂרָאֵל--בֵּין הָעֶרְבִים.
שְׁמוֹת י"ב:

The collective quality of the Pesach is underscored by the three different words used to describe the community: ישראל, קהל, עדת. Consequently, the Talmud (*Yoma* 51a) views this sacrifice as communal even though it is offered by individual Jews, since it is offered in the Beit Hamikdash in three large groups, paralleling the three Biblical terms. Pesach is the model for interconnectedness of community, which creates the legal concept of *shlichut*—agency (*Kiddushin* 41b). This sense of community is felt at seder tables throughout generations at which families and friends, young and old gather together and share the experience, strengthening the sense of community that transcends time and place. The Haggadah is the story of the Jewish people, beginning with the founding fathers and ending with the future redemption; this, too, is a definitional dimension of Judaism.⁶ Judaism is a community.

What for?

We conclude the seder with a monumental intellectual achievement, having grown in our awareness and understanding of Judaism. Yet there is something missing, if not deficient, if this is all we have achieved. Rabbi Soloveitchik, in a published letter, once noted this lacuna as a general educational challenge that faced the American Jewish community during his lifetime:

⁶ We learn from our mystical traditions that ישראל ואורייתא וקרב"ה חד הוא — Israel, the Torah and G-d are one.

I inadvertently touched on a grave educational philosophical problem that weighs on my mind for a long time. I said, that for the religious youth, the Torah is revealed in intellectual constructs of analysis, with cognitive clarity and cold logic. However, they have not merited to its revelation in a living experiential feeling that innervates and enlivens hearts. They understand the Torah as an idea, but they do not encounter it as a reality without any intermediary, one that is sensed with taste, sight and feel. Due to this lack of Torah feeling, the outlook of many of them on Judaism is truncated.
**(“Al Ahavat HaTorah Ugeulat Nefesh Hador,”
B’sod Hayachid Vehayachad pp. 407-408)**

נגעתי שלא במתכוון בבעיה חינוכית פילוסופית חמורה המטרידה את מוחי זה עידן ועידנים. אמרתי, כי לצעירים החרדים נתגלה התורה בצורות מחשבה למדנית, בהכרה שכלית והיגיון צונן. אולם לא זכו לגילוייה בהרגשה ה"חושית" החיה, המרעידה והמרנינה לבבות. מכירים המה את התורה כאידיה אבל אינם נפגשים עמה כ"מציאות" בלתי אמצעית הנרגשת ב"טעם מראה ומישוש". מחמת העדר "התחושה" התורתית מסורסת היא השקפתם של רבים מהם על היהדות.
**"על אהבת התורה וגאולת נפש הדור,"
בסוד היחיד והיחד, עמ' תז-תח**

Our Jewish life cannot simply be a sheaf of cognitive accomplishments. We learn this, too, from the seder, which is built in such an experiential manner. Our seder laws and lessons are illustrated by stories, punctuated by toasts and tastes and transformed by song.⁷ The ultimate desired effect of the seder is the affect, much like all of Judaism, as Rav Soloveitchik explained in his letter⁸:

It must exist in taste and sight. It is very important to us. The Halacha itself, which begins with pure intellectual effort of the greatness of mind, ends with taste and sight—Divine visions; there are within this experience, the particles of Divine inspiration. The verse stands and cries, “taste and see that Hashem is good.” The sublime goal is feeling the G-d of experience.
(ibid, p. 412)

צריכה להתקיים בטעם ובראייה, חשובה לנו מאד. ההלכה עצמה, שתחילתה התאמצות שכלית טהורה של גדול הדעת, סופה טעם וראייה, מראות א-להים, יש בחווייה זו משום נובלות רוח הקודש, הכתוב עומד ומצווח: "טעמו וראו כי טוב ה'". התכלית העליונה היא הרגשת ה' ה"מוחשת".

All of this is because Judaism, and its four components that we have touched upon, are not the goal in and of themselves. Rather, they are the means to the ultimate goal: the cultivation of a relationship with the Master of the world.

In this vein, Judaism is remarkably empowering: it enables each of us to bring G-d into our world and our life, elevating ourselves as we develop this relationship. The seder, in its form as a microcosm of Judaism, is an important gift to help us build this relationship. It is quite fitting,

⁷ All of these are one integrated whole, a unified experienced. For its expression in Halacha, see *Mishnat Yaavetz Orach Chaim*, no. 18.

⁸ In this deeply personal letter to the editor of the Israeli newspaper *HaDoar*, Rav Soloveitchik responds to criticism that he received from a published interview he gave to journalist Elie Wiesel. Rav Soloveitchik distinguished between the intellectual realm of Torah and the experiential aspect of Jewish life. He describes and decries the general lack of appreciation for the latter in the Torah world in his time; something that he claims is his inability to transmit to his students. His description of the Pesach seder experience is a prime example of this type of emotional and experiential Judaism (see preface to *The Seder Night: An Exalted Evening*). Rav Soloveitchik further expounds this theme of the complementary legal and living aspects of Torah in his tribute to the Rebbetzin of Talne, published in *Tradition* 17:2, Spring 1978.

then, that many editions of the Haggadah conclude with a coda—the book of Shir Hashirim.⁹ The story of Shir Hashirim is the tale of a passionate relationship of a young couple—an allegory for our relationship with our beloved Creator. While the story is told in words, largely in prose, its key understanding lies in the feelings expressed by these words in its poetry.¹⁰ The essence of any relationship is the feeling that exists between the two parties. It is the feeling of the poetry that connects us with Hashem on the deepest level and elevates our soul. It brings Hashem into our lives in such a real way that we can feel His presence. Hence, at the seder, our palates taste the bitterness of maror and the sweetness of wine; we relax on pillows and create an ambience to reach the emotional side of our existence to cultivate our feelings. We focus on a story, an imaginative and embellished tale, which becomes more praiseworthy as it grows and fills our hearts, more than our minds.¹¹ Having fulfilled the seder properly in both intellect and emotion, we feel the security of God's providence so palpably that we do not fear any external anxieties and do not recite the *bracha* of *HaMapil*, which asks G-d for protection when we sleep (Rama O.C. 481:2).

This level of relationship with G-d, who is transcendent beyond comprehension, the א-ל מסתתר, is ordinarily beyond our reach. However, perhaps we can use the seder and its experiential learning format as a means to help us invest emotionally in this relationship, to connect just a bit more deeply to Hashem through our Judaism. The cultivation of this sublime feeling is a paramount achievement of a Torah life, as Rabbi Soloveitchik shared:

I learned from her [my mother] the most important thing in life—to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders.
("A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne," *Tradition* 17:2 [Spring 1978])

⁹ A source for reciting Shir Hashirim at the conclusion of the seder can be found in the *Chayei Adam* 139:19:16 and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 119:9.

¹⁰ Perhaps this is why we conclude the seder with *Nirtzah*, songs of praise to Hashem, despite the Rambam's ruling cited in *Shulchan Aruch* 481:1, that we should follow the seder with the study of the laws of Pesach and a discussion of the miracles of the Exodus. Our practice focuses on the songs that reflect our relationship with G-d as the ultimate achievement of the seder.

¹¹ This is the meaning of *v'chol hamarbeh lesaper, harei zeh meshubach*—one who spends additional time discussing the Haggadah is praiseworthy—according to Rabbi Sender Gross zt"l. Not only does the one who engages in the discussion become greater; the story itself becomes more praiseworthy.