

Insights From the Rav on the Maggid Section of the Haggadah

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Author's Note: The Rav often observed that the Yom Tov experience of one who devoted time in advance of its arrival to studying and reviewing the laws and themes of the holiday is immeasurably greater than the Yom Tov experience of one who did not do so. He himself would thus offer many special shiurim prior to each holiday, including, of course, Pesach. What follows is just a sampling of his many profound lessons and teachings relating to the Haggadah. I was privileged to hear some of these thoughts directly from the Rav myself; the majority, however, are culled from notes written (and in some cases published) by others, including HaRav Hershel Schachter, shlita, who was kind enough to lend me several of his notebooks from when he attended the Rav's shiurim. Any mistakes or inaccuracies here should be attributed solely to me.

לכול דכפיין ייתי ויכול - Let all who are hungry come and eat

Why does the maggid section of Haggadah, the primary focus of which is the fulfillment of the mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* (recounting the Exodus), begin with an invitation to those who are hungry to come eat?

It is obviously proper in general to be concerned with the well-being of those who are in need; the Gemara in *Ta'anis* (20b) in fact teaches that Rav Huna would invite hungry guests into his home on a regular basis using phraseology very similar to that mentioned here. Moreover, the Rambam (*Hilchos Yom Tov* 6:18) stresses that on *yomim tovim* in particular, one must be careful to see to it that those who are less fortunate will be able to enjoy the holiday as well. But why do we emphasize this specifically on Pesach and why at the very beginning of maggid?

The *Ramo* (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 429:1) rules that in advance of Pesach, there is a special custom to collect *maos chittin*, tzedakah funds that will be distributed to the poor in order to enable them to buy matzoh for the mitzvah at the seder. The Vilna Gaon there (*Biur HaGra*, s.v. *U'Minhag*) notes that this practice dates back to Talmudic times, and he points out elsewhere (as cited in *Divrei Eliyahu to Parashas Bo*, s.v. *shiv'as*) that it is even hinted at in a verse

in the Torah (Shemos 13:7) which alludes to an obligation to see that matzoh be eaten—apparently by others as well. It is thus perhaps to call attention to this unique requirement that we bring up the matter of feeding the poor at the start of the seder.

Alternatively, it may be suggested that this declaration is actually part of the demonstration of freedom and independence so central to the practices of the seder night (see Rambam, *Hilchos Chametz U'Matzoh* 7:6-7). The Gemara in *Pesachim* (88b) asserts that a slave has no possessions, since whatever he has belongs to his master. Consequently, a slave does not have the right to invite guests to join him for a meal; only the master can do so. By saying this phrase and telling guests to join us at our celebratory meal, we are affirming that we are in fact free independent people, not slaves. On this night, we proudly assert that we are masters, and we extend invitations to other to join us. This is thus a most appropriate way to begin the seder: by publicly demonstrating that we are *bnai chorin*. At the same time, though, we recognize that while still currently in exile, our freedom is somewhat incomplete; we thus conclude the paragraph with a request that we be able to return as a nation to Eretz Yisrael and experience true and complete freedom.

ה-הלילה הזה כולנו מסובין - *On this night, we all recline*

The last of the Four Questions, known as the *Mah Nishtanah*, notes that on the night of Pesach, we are all “*mesubin*,” usually translated as “reclining,” a reference to the fact that on this night, there is a special mitzvah to recline (*heseibah*) while eating and drinking, incumbent upon even the poorest of people (see *Mishnah, Pesachim* 99b and Rambam, *Hilchos Chametz U'Matzoh* 7:7); it is this unusual practice that the questioner highlights at this point. There are, however, places in the Gemara where a form of the word *heseibah* is used to describe people eating together in a group (see *Berachos* 43b, 46b). On Pesach night, there is a special preference to eat the meat of the *korban Pesach* together with others, as noted by the Rambam (*Hilchos Korban Pesach* 2:2; see *Pesachim* 91a). The expression “*kulanu mesubin*” may thus refer to the fact that on this night, unlike other nights, we make a special effort to eat together in a group.

מ-משועבדים היינו - *We would still be enslaved*

The *Ba'al HaHaggadah* states that had Hashem not taken us out of Egypt, we and all of our descendants would have remained “*meshubadim*,” “enslaved” to Pharaoh. Is it not possible, however, that somewhere along the line, one of the Pharaohs might have released the Jewish slaves on his own, as indeed happened on other occasions in history in other places? The answer is that had that happened, we might indeed have been politically free as a nation, but we would have owed a constant debt of gratitude to whichever Pharaoh it would have been who set us free. In that sense, we would never be able to become completely independent. This explains why the word used here is “*meshubadim*,” “enslaved,” and not “*avadim*,” “slaves”—we indeed would not have been slaves, but we would have been enslaved, in the sense of indebted, to Pharaoh.

א-מעשה ברבי אליעזר - *A story involving Rabbi Eliezer*

It is clear from various sources in the Gemara that the different *talmidei chachomim* enumerated here lived in different places throughout Eretz Yisrael. For example, Rabbi Eliezer lived in Lod,

Rabbi Yehoshua lived in Peki'in and Rabban Gamliel lived in Yavneh (see *Sanhedrin* 32b). Why then did they assemble in Bnai Berak, which was the hometown of Rabbi Akiva, and not spend the holiday in the towns in which they each lived?

The mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* entails much more than simply retelling the story of the Exodus. After all, everybody already knows the basic outline of the events. Rather, what is required is in-depth analysis. We must search for new insights and interpretations; each person must delve into the details in an effort to come to a more sophisticated understanding, in accordance with his ability. This is why the study of the Scriptural passages describing the Exodus is done via the Midrashic exposition of each of the phrases, as opposed to via the simple reading of the text in the particular *parshiyos* (in the first part of *Sefer Shemos*) that relate the story. For this reason, the sages got together at the home of one of them in order to be able to converse about, discuss and expound upon the events with people on a similar level of scholarship, the better to be able to yield a deeper and more refined understanding for them all.

רבי אלעזר בן עזריה - Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said...

This passage in the Haggadah is taken from a Mishnah in *Berachos* (12b). The question is what its relevance is here, since the topic of that Mishnah is the mitzvah to mention *yetzias Mitzrayim* each and every night of the year, as part of the third paragraph of *Kerias Shema*. As such, it has nothing to do with Pesach night, per se, where the obligation is not merely to mention *yetzias Mitzrayim*, but to tell the story in depth and at length, from beginning to end, to relate it to others, and to analyze the reasons behind the unique mitzvos of the evening (see *Chidushei HaGrach* to *Pesachim* 116a). Why, then, is this Mishnah cited here at all?

In his version of the text of the Haggadah, the Rambam (found at the end of *Hilchos Chametz U'Matzoh*) adds the word "*lahem*," "to them," so that this passage reads, "*Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said to them ...*," thus suggesting that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah related the teaching in this Mishnah to others, namely, to the other scholars with whom he assembled for the seder in Bnai Berak on that very evening described above. Since it was on that evening that this Mishnah was taught, it appears here as a direct continuation of the previous story. Moreover, because the mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* mandates that one discuss the Exodus and the miracles related to it, the nightly recollection of the Exodus, albeit brief, is a part of the fulfillment of that special mitzvah on Pesach.

ברוך המקום - Blessed is the Omnipresent

Of all the names used to refer to God (see *Shevuos* 35a-b), why here do we use the name *Makom*, the Omnipresent? Each of the numerous names refers to a different attribute of His; throughout our Torah literature and our liturgy, we thus use different names to refer to Him depending upon which of His attributes is being highlighted. The name used here suggests that God is indeed everywhere, even in those places and at those times when we might not readily sense His presence. In fact, we may note that it is specifically on those occasions when we might think that God is far away from us and has perhaps abandoned us entirely that we are reminded, by referring to Him with this particular name, that He is in truth very much with us in our midst.

We thus find, for example, that a mourner, who certainly feels as though God has turned away from him, is to be consoled with the phrase “*HaMakom yenachem eschem ...*” “May the Omnipresent comfort you ...” Similarly, when praying on behalf of our brethren who are suffering and in distress, who likewise feel that they have been neglected by God, we appeal to Him by saying “*HaMakom yerachem aleihem ...*,” “May the Omnipresent have mercy upon them ...” And on the night of Yom Kippur, as we stand on the threshold of a day on which we will recount our sins, our iniquities and our transgressions repeatedly, and may thus feel that we are very distant from God, we remind ourselves at the very beginning of the service that we are praying “*al da’as HaMakom*,” “with the approval of the Omnipresent.”

On Pesach night too, when about to introduce the Four Sons, who are so different in their respective relationships with God, we might be tempted to think that it is really only the Wise Son who is capable of understanding the intricacies of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*, of discussing it intelligently, and of viewing himself as if he personally experienced the Exodus, and thus only such a person truly has a place at the seder table. Others not on that level might then feel alienated, as if somehow they don’t belong and as if they have no part in this special evening. We therefore say “*Baruch HaMakom ...*,” “Blessed is the Omnipresent ...,” here in order to stress that God in fact revealed Himself to each and every Jew, regardless of background or ability. Everybody, then, has to recall these events and everybody has a role to play at the seder, in accordance with his own ability, because God in fact is close to all.

אין מפטירין אחר הפסח אפיקומן - One may not eat dessert after eating the Pesach offering

This phrase comes from one of the last *Mishnayos* in *Masseches Pesachim* (119b) and its inclusion here as the message to the Wise Son implies that he is to be taught all of the laws of Pesach, through and including this lesson regarding the *afikoman*. (Indeed, in the text of the Haggadah presented by the Vilna Gaon, the instruction is to teach to the wise son “*ad*,” “until,” meaning all the laws in the *Mishnayos* until, and including, this law concerning the *afikoman*.) In other words, part of the requirement of the seder night is not only to relate and discuss the events of the Exodus, but also to learn and study the laws of Pesach, as stated explicitly in the Tosefta in *Pesachim* (10:8; see Rosh there, 10:33). In the Torah, the response to the question of the Wise Son includes a reference to fulfilling God’s statutes and decrees (see Devarim 6:21-24); in order to do so one must know exactly what they are and the laws must thus be explained—in proper detail—to this inquisitive child, as this too is part of the evening’s mitzvah.

The particular detail relating to the *afikoman* being taught here is that one may not have any dessert or eat any additional food after partaking of the meat of the *korban Pesach*, which is consumed at the end of the meal. The Rambam (*Hilchos Chametz U’Matzoh* 8:9) rules accordingly, but then adds that today, in the absence of the *korban Pesach*, one must eat matzoh at the end of the meal, and not taste anything afterward, so that the flavor of the matzoh, the eating of which is the mitzvah of the evening, should linger in one’s mouth. Although eating matzoh was also a mitzvah in the days of the Beis HaMikdash, as was eating maror, the requirement in those days was to end the evening specifically with the taste of the *korban Pesach*

in one's mouth; although eating maror is still a mitzvah today, the requirement is to end the evening with the taste of specifically the matzoh in one's mouth. Evidently, this requirement relates to the food item whose consumption constitutes the principle, or the most prominent, mitzvah of the evening; in the days of the Beis HaMikdash that food item was the meat of the *korban Pesach*, while today it is the matzoh.

לפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל כפר בעיקר - Because he removed himself from the community he has rejected everything

By implying that the laws of the Torah do not apply to him, the Wicked Son effectively removes himself from the Jewish community. The Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:11) asserts that such a person is considered among those heretics who have forfeited their share in *Olam HaBa*, despite the fact that he may not technically have violated any particular transgressions. The mere fact that one fails to identify with his fellow Jews is sufficient to exclude him from the destiny of the Jewish people. Perhaps for this reason, the Haggadah, as pointed out by the Vilna Gaon in his commentary, does not actually include the response found in the Torah (Shemos 12:27) to the question raised by this son, as he is not really interested in—or entitled to—an answer, since he is “out of the pale.” Indeed, in discussing the requirement upon a parent to relate the story of *yetzias Mitzrayim* to his children, the Rambam (*Hilchos Chametz U'Matzoh* 7:2) omits any reference to responding to the question assigned here to the Wicked Son, as no response need be offered to him. The words in the verse in the Torah, and those in the Haggadah as well, are not actually directed to this son at all; they are rather the words that are to be shared with the others who are assembled at the seder table, who consider themselves members of *Klal Yisrael*.

בשעה שיש מצה ומרור מונחים לפניך - At the time that Matza and Maror are placed in front of you

The mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* is inexorably connected to the mitzvos of matzoh and maror and thus can be fulfilled only when the obligation to eat those items is in force, namely on the night of Pesach and no earlier. Taking this a step further, the Vilna Gaon (*Biur HaGra to Orach Chaim* 430:1, s.v. *vehaminhag*) suggests that the custom cited there by the Ramo to recite the major portion of the maggid section of the Haggadah on *Shabbos HaGadol* (the Shabbos before Pesach) is improper because the obligation to eat matzoh and maror is not in effect at that time. Perhaps, however, that custom is designed to give people a chance to review some of the intricacies of the Exodus story in advance of Pesach, the better to be able to delve into them at the seder. The “prohibition” to relate the story when there is no mitzvah of matzoh and maror applicable yet pertains to one who is reading it with the intent of performing the mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*, not to one who is merely preparing for that mitzvah.

The Gemara in *Pesachim* (36a) states that the description in the Torah of matzoh as “*lechem 'oni*” (Devarim 16:3) refers to the fact that it is bread (*lechem*) upon which we declare (*'onin*) many things; Rashi there (s.v. *she'onin*) explains that the “many things” include Hallel, which is of course part of the Pesach seder. The Rambam (*Sefer HaMitzvos, Mitzvas Asei* 157) and the *Sefer HaChinuch* (*Mitzvah* 21) both consider praising God, which is the essence of Hallel, to be a

fundamental part of the mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*. The problem is that by the time that Hallel is recited at the seder, there is no longer any matzoh and maror at the table, as the mitzvah to consume them has already been completed. If *sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim* can be fulfilled only in conjunction with matzoh and maror, how can Hallel be included as part of that mitzvah? Presumably then, Rashi's reference is only to the first two paragraphs of Hallel, as they are recited prior to the meal, when matzoh and maror are still on the table. Alternatively, the fact that one may not eat anything after consuming the last piece of matzoh and therefore still has the flavor of the matzoh in his mouth (see Rambam, *Hilchos Chametz U'Matzoh* 8:9) results in at least the flavor of matzoh being present when the second part of Hallel is recited.

מתחילה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו - In the beginning, our forefathers were idol worshippers

According to Rav, cited by the Gemara in *Pesachim* (116a), the recitation of this phrase fulfills the requirement presented in the Mishnah there to begin the mitzvah of *sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim* by relating the degrading part of the story; it is indeed degrading to recall that our ancestors were idolaters. Shmuel, however, is of the opinion that the degrading part of the story is that we were once slaves to Pharaoh, as we declared earlier in the Haggadah, *Avadim Hayinu*. At issue here is whether the thrust of our enslavement was the spiritual side of it or the physical side of it. Rav emphasizes the spiritual degradation, as symbolized by our admission of the fact that we come from an idolatrous background, while Shmuel stresses the physical degradation, as seen in our acknowledgement that we were physically enslaved. In practice, of course, we have accepted both opinions, incorporating both our spiritual and our physical disgrace—and their ultimate reversals—into the Haggadah, and we indeed conclude the maggid section of the Haggadah with a *berachah* that includes praising God “*al geulaseinu*” — “for our redemption,” which is physical, and “*al pedus nafsheinu*” — “for the deliverance of our souls,” which is spiritual.

ואחרי כן יצאו ברכוש גדול—And afterwards, they will leave with great wealth

Why was it necessary for the Jewish people to leave Egypt laden with gold, silver and other material wealth? The Gemara in *Berachos* (9a-b) explains, citing this very phrase, that God had promised Avraham Avinu that such would indeed be the case, and He obviously had to keep His word. Nevertheless, why was this point made such a basic part of the covenant with Avraham in the first place? The answer is that ownership of property is perhaps the most basic demonstration of a person's freedom. A slave owns nothing, as emphasized by the Gemara in *Pesachim* (88b), which teaches that whatever a slave possesses belongs to his master. When the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt they therefore had no material possessions belonging to them. When they would become free, therefore, they would immediately be given possessions, which made it clear that they were now no longer slaves. And the fact that these possessions would actually be given to them by the Egyptian people (see Shemos 3:21-22, 11:2-3 and 12:35-36) indicates that the Egyptians themselves at that point acknowledged their freedom.

והיא שעמדה - And this has stood by [us]

Yetzias Mitzrayim is not to be understood as a one-time event, having occurred many centuries ago, and which we now merely commemorate or even re-experience by means of various symbolic observances. Rather, it is an ongoing drama because there is always a Pharaoh who wishes to annihilate our people for reasons that are often unclear, and we survive as a nation only because God watches over us and protects us. The continued existence of the Jewish people against overwhelming odds is testimony to the fact that *Yetzias Mitzrayim* takes place very much in the present. Before we begin our analysis of the Exodus story, we remind ourselves here of our destiny as a people.

וירד מצרימה: אנוס על פי הדיבור ... ויהי שם לגוי גדול went down to Egypt: Forced by the Divine decree ... and he became a great nation

The Haggadah indicates that Yaakov went down to Egypt having been forced to do so by Divine decree. But didn't Yaakov himself decide to go there in order to see his beloved son Yosef, upon hearing that he was in fact still alive (see Bereishis 45:28)? Evidently, Yaakov's initial plan had been to go down to Egypt to see Yosef for a certain finite period of time, but then to return thereafter to Eretz Yisrael. The directive from God to go to Egypt and to stay there was the Divine decree that forced Yaakov's hand and is what is being referred to in this passage.

It was the will of God that the Jewish people, in order to emerge as the nation chosen to receive the Torah, must pay with great suffering for that special chosen status. Their development into the "goy gadol" —the great nation alluded to in the latter part of this verse—depended upon their first going through the harrowing experience of Egypt. Their national sensitivity to compassion and their aversion to cruelty (see *Yevamos* 79a regarding certain natural tendencies of the Jewish people) was to be molded by their own conditions in Egypt. Without the "vayeired Mitzrayimah" (and he went down to Egypt) there could thus be no "goy gadol." The Jewish people are likened to a flower among the thorns (see *Shir HaShirim* 2:2); just as a flower that blossoms among thorns stands out in its beauty, the Jewish people, emerging from the difficult environment of Egypt, would achieve their unique chosenness, applicable eternally, in a similarly dramatic fashion. The people's eternal greatness resulted directly from their affliction in Egypt.

ורב: כמה שנאמר רבבה כצמח השדה says, "numerous like the sprouts of the field"

At first glance, it would appear that the text (from *Yechezkel* 16:7) quoted here to explain the word "VaRav," "and numerous," is inappropriate, since it speaks of growth and development more in the sense of beauty and physical appearance than in the sense of numbers. Evidently then, the Torah is in fact communicating here not that the Jewish people increased in population, as that point was actually already made by the verse's previous phrase (and "supported" in the Haggadah by the citation from *Shemos* 1:7). Rather, the Torah here means

to teach us that the people matured and grew in terms of stature and dignity. They were now ready to be redeemed and become the chosen people who would receive the Torah. All they were still missing were the mitzvos, as alluded to by the nakedness mentioned at the end of the verse in Yechezkel.

וירעו אותנו המצרים - And the Egyptians thought of us as evil

This phrase is usually translated as meaning that the Egyptians mistreated us. Grammatically, however, if that were indeed the message, the verse should more properly have stated “*VaYarei’u lanu.*” As phrased here, the more correct translation would seem to be that the Egyptians thought of us as evil. They assigned bad attributes to us, depicted us as terrible people and attributed negative qualities to us. We thus read in the verse from Shemos (1:10) that Pharaoh accused the Jews of disloyalty, of plotting a revolution, of nefarious scheming. The Egyptians thus besmirched the reputation and good name that the Jews had previously enjoyed.

There was, of course, no logical basis for such accusations. The Jews had done nothing wrong; there is no indication anywhere that they were anything but model citizens in their adopted land, contributing to the country’s general development and well-being. But in seeking to isolate and ultimately persecute them, Pharaoh played on many people’s natural fear of those who are not just like them, portraying the Jews as “other” and “different,” as being aliens and outsiders and thus as a threat to be feared. In this way, Pharaoh was able to get widespread support from his Egyptian countrymen for his campaign to enslave the Jews. This of course is paradigmatic of classic anti-Semitism through the ages. Jews can live comfortably and productively in a land for many, many years, develop great and unswerving loyalty toward it, and work hard and even sacrifice on behalf of its welfare and success. But they are always in danger of an enemy who will arise, as has indeed happened on so many occasions in history, who will ignore their valuable contributions, paint them as dangerous and undermining outsiders looking for power and control, and create mistrust in and suspicion of them in the minds of those who consider themselves “native” citizens. This has been the experience of the Jew in exile for centuries.

ויאנחו בני ישראל מן העבודה - and the Jewish people cried out because of the work

While slaves in Egypt, the Jewish people could think only of their physical suffering, and thus cried out to God only “*min ha’avodah*”—because of the (hard) work that they could no longer tolerate. They had hoped that perhaps with the death of the first Pharaoh that their situation would improve; when it did not, they could no longer bear their situation and thus cried out to God in agony. Though they were spiritually oppressed as well, they either failed to recognize it or did not deem that worthy of their prayers, overwhelmed as they were with their oppressive physical conditions. One of the tragedies experienced by someone like a slave who is downtrodden and abused is that he cannot even appreciate clearly the magnitude of his unfortunate overall condition, accepting it as the norm. All he can focus on his physical pain.

וַיֵּדַע ... וַיֵּרָא - *And He saw ... and He knew*

God saw and comprehended much more about the Jewish people's situation than they themselves did. He thus heeded their prayers for relief from their physical disaster, but He did much more. Had He indeed responded only to their cries, the redemption would have been incomplete, focusing only upon the physical. Instead, however, He saw and comprehended that man is sometimes incapable of praying for what he himself needs because he is actually unaware of what he truly needs. In fact, people sometimes pray for things that in truth are unimportant or even detrimental to them. In Egypt, God saw the total damage done to the Jewish people and comprehended their spiritual deterioration; He then responded accordingly and brought about their complete redemption.

With this notion in mind, we can understand why, when we ask God in our daily prayers to hear our voices (*Shema Koleinu*), we implore Him to accept our prayers “*berachamim u'veratzon*”—with mercy, but with favor, meaning that He should fulfill only those requests of ours that are indeed favorable for us. We acknowledge that God alone knows what's really best for us and we ask Him to make the ultimate decision as to which of our prayers to realize and fulfill and which to reject. Only then will we be granted that which is truly in our best interests.

בְּיַד חֲזָקָה - *With a strong hand*

What exactly is meant by the strong hand that we are told God used in the process of redeeming the Jews from Egypt? On its simplest level, this description is of His great power, which was manifested when He performed the various miracles that were part of the Exodus. The reference may, however, be to something else entirely. The Gemara in *Sotah* (2a) describes the splitting of the Red Sea as a task that was difficult for God to accomplish (see also *Pesachim* 118a). What can this possibly mean? Is any task too difficult for Him? The answer is that when the Jews were crossing the Red Sea with the Egyptians in hot pursuit, and it became clear that God would miraculously lead the Jews to safety and then punish the Egyptians, an objection was raised: *Hallalu ovdei avoda zarah, vehallalu ovdei avodah zarah—these are idolaters and those are idolaters* (see *Midrash Tehillim* 15:5). At that time, there was no significant difference between many Jews and their Egyptian counterparts. Many Jews were not at all worthy of being redeemed. Why, then, should those people also be allowed to be the beneficiaries of this great miracle? Let them perish with the Egyptians!

And yet, God split the Red Sea and permitted *all* the Jews cross in safety nonetheless. To do so, He had to disregard His attribute of justice and perform this miracle for the Jews—for all of the Jews, even the undeserving—and that is what made the splitting of the Red Sea so “difficult” for Him. It was in that sense as well that at the earlier stages of the Exodus story, God likewise had to employ a strong hand, as He needed it, as it were, to enable Himself to overcome that which strict justice demanded. When we speak of God redeeming the Jews with a strong hand, then, we are perhaps referring to this idea that He had to “force” Himself to push aside His attribute of justice and take all the Jews out of Egypt.

ובמורא גדול: זו גילוי שכינה - And with a great fear: This is the revelation of the Divine

By deriving that “*mora gadol*” refers to Divine revelation, we see that according to this analysis, the word “*mora*” is not related to the word *yirah*, meaning fear or awe, but rather to the word “*re’iyah*” meaning something that is seen. At the time of the Exodus from Egypt, God’s Presence was seen, His *Shechinah* revealed. Later in the Haggadah, we highlight this point when discussing matzoh and describing the fact that there was no time for the dough that they were preparing to rise because God suddenly revealed Himself to the people and redeemed them. The notion of *giluy Shechinah*, Divine revelation, generally more readily associated with the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, was evidently a pivotal piece of the *yetzias Mitzrayim* story as well. It is for this reason that we find numerous times throughout the Torah’s description of the wonders performed in Egypt, including the ten plagues, that part of the desired goal was for Pharaoh and the Egyptians to come to the realization of and to acknowledge the existence and the power of God. In light of this approach, we can understand why the Divine revelation is included in the same verse with other examples of God’s miraculous manifestations associated specifically with the Exodus.

מכת בכורות - The plague of the first-born

Why did God choose to punish the Egyptian first-borns in particular? In Egyptian society, as in many cultures, the first born has a special status in the family. It is he who can exercise control over other family members, who can set the tone for his siblings, and who can often lay down the law for the entire family. It is important to stress that although the Jews in Egypt were slaves to Pharaoh, they were really slaves to the entire Egyptian nation as well. It would not have been possible for even a despot like Pharaoh to have carried out his plan to enslave the Jewish nation without support from the leadership of the rank and file. Given the influence that the first-borns had in their respective families, they must have played an active role in assuring that the Egyptian people fully “bought into” Pharaoh’s plans. Since they were part of the enslavement process, they were singled out for special punishment.

רבי יוסי הגלילי אומר - Rabbi Yosi from the Galil said

This passage, which presents a three-way dispute as to exactly how many plagues were visited upon the Egyptians in Egypt and how many at the Red Sea, does not appear at all in the Haggadah of the Rambam. The reason may relate to a comment made by the Rambam in *Hilchos Chametz U’Matzoh* (7:1), where he states that there is a *mitzvas aseï* (positive commandment) in the Torah to speak about the miracles and the wonders that were performed on behalf of our ancestors in Egypt on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan. This can be understood in one of two ways. Either it means that the mitzvah itself applies on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan, the last phrase modifying the first, or it means that the mitzvah is to speak about the miracles and wonders which were performed on (or leading up to) the fifteenth of Nissan, the last phrase modifying what immediately preceded it. If the latter is correct, then the mitzvah on Pesach night does not include speaking about what took place at the Red Sea, as

those events, important though they were, transpired after the fifteenth of Nissan. In consideration of this latter approach, the Rambam omits from the text of his Haggadah any discussion about things that did not happen on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan (including both this passage about the plagues at the Sea and the subsequent “Dayeinu” passage, which likewise brings up other events, such as the giving of the Torah).

ובנה לנו את בית הבחירה - *and [He] built for us the Chosen House*

What is the significance of the name for the Beis HaMikdash used here, the “*Beis HaBechirah*,” “the Chosen House?” There are actually two independent aspects of the *Mikdash*, impacting different laws relating to it. In *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* (1:1), the Rambam identifies the mitzvah to build a house dedicated to God, in which the sacrifices will be brought and which will be visited three times a year, based on the Scriptural verse that says “*v’asu li Mikdash*,” “and they shall make for Me a Mikdash” (Shemos 25:8). In *Hilchos Melachim* (1:1), however, the Rambam speaks of the same mitzvah and yet, after asserting that it goes into effect only after the entry of the Jewish people into Eretz Yisrael, the establishment of a sovereign government, and the eradication of the descendants of Amalek (see *Sanhedrin* 20b), he cites as its source a completely different verse (Devarim 12:5), which speaks of a place that God has chosen. The *Lechem Mishneh*, among others, takes note of and attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction. Perhaps, however, the answer lies in understanding that there are indeed these two aspects to the *Mikdash*.

One aspect relates to the *Mikdash* in terms of its unique functions such as, for example, to serve as the place where the sacrifices are brought. This has nothing to do with a particular chosen place, as evidenced by the fact that the Jewish people had such a place in the desert, namely the *Mishkan*, whose location changed regularly as the people travelled. Even in Eretz Yisrael, the *Mishkan* stood in a number of different locations. The requirement to build such a building is derived from the verse in Shemos. The other aspect, however, relates to the *Mikdash* in terms of its being built in a specially determined location that would have on-going sanctity, and after whose designation no other location could ever again be eligible to house it. This building could be only in Eretz Yisrael, and could be built only after the establishment of a government and the eradication of Amalek; the requirement to build this place is derived from the verse in Devarim. This is the *Beis HaBechirah*, the Chosen House, referred to here, and the location where it stood, unlike that of any of the places where the *Mishkan* stood, has sanctity and significance to this very day. (For further elaboration, see *Chidushei HaGra”m VeHaGri”d* to the Rambam’s *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* 6:14.)

פסח מצה ומרור - *Pesach, matzoh and maror*

The three mitzvos referred to here in Rabban Gamliel’s teaching (quoted from the Mishnah in *Pesachim* 116a-b) appear to be presented out of order. After all, given that the maror symbolizes the bitterness of the slavery, that should be mentioned first, followed by the Pesach, which reminds us of the fact that God passed over the Jewish homes when punishing the Egyptians,

and finally the matzoh, which calls our attention to the fact that there was no time for the people's dough to rise when they finally left Egypt in great haste. It must be, then, that the order here relates not to the chronology of the events represented by these food items, but to the significance of each particular item in terms of halachah. Pesach is first because it is the most important food item; in the days of the Beis HaMikdash, when there was a *korban Pesach*, the matzoh and the maror were eaten simply as an adjunct to the meat of that *korban*, as stated in Shemos 12:8. Matzoh is second because there does exist an independent Biblical mitzvah to eat it even in the absence of the *korban Pesach* (see Shemos 12:18); that mitzvah is in effect even today. Maror is last because today, the obligation to eat maror exists only on a Rabbinic level, as maror is mentioned in the Torah solely in conjunction with the *korban Pesach* which we obviously no longer have (see *Pesachim* 120a).

בכל דור ודור ... לפיכך אנחנו חייבים להודות *In every generation ... therefore we must thank*

The phrase “*bechol dor vador...*,” found in the Mishnah in *Pesachim* (116b), seems to be simply the formulation of a halachic requirement to view oneself as if one has personally experienced the Exodus from Egypt (see Rambam, *Hilchos Chametz U'Matzoh* 7:6). Why, then, is it recited as part of the text of the Haggadah? The answer is that it serves as the prelude, indeed as the basis, for what follows, namely our acknowledgement and fulfillment of the obligation to offer song and praise to God on this joyous occasion. Precisely because we view ourselves as having gone through the Exodus personally, this obligation is indeed our very own. It is not the recollection of something done in times gone by; it is our song, our praise, our Hallel, that is about to be offered. It may indeed be suggested that the narrative of the seder is in fact called “Haggadah” because it is a form of “*haggadas eidus*” – of testimony in which we attest to events that we ourselves, as it were, have personally witnessed. These events impact us today the same way they influenced our ancestors so many years ago.