

Maror: Finding Meaning in Life

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Center for the Jewish Future presents this article in memory of the Fogel family of Itamar, Udi, Ruth, Yoav, Elad, and Hadas, who died al kiddush Hashem on 6 Adar 5771

Beyond telling the story Yetzias Mitzrayim and drinking the wine, one of the highlights of every seder table has to be when the maror is passed around the table and everyone takes that first breath of that biting aroma. Faces turn red, eyes water up, and a good laugh is had by all. But when we stop to think about it for a moment, it becomes puzzling. What is this halacha all about? Obviously there is something much deeper going on here than simply competing to see who can eat the most maror without drinking any water.

The Chiyuv of Maror

In three different places in Meseches Pesachim, the gemara tells us that in order to fulfill the obligation of maror, one must taste the actual bitterness. It is for this reason that the gemara says one cannot soak the maror,³¹ eat it with too much charoses,³² or even swallow it without chewing it first as is permitted with matza.³³

On the surface, this seems to be a very confusing halacha. Why would the Torah require of us to taste the bitterness? Of all the mitzvos we have that involve eating and drinking, this one seems to stand alone. In fact, mitzvos that require eating and drinking are generally enhanced by using better quality and tastier foods and wine. Why, then, is maror enhanced by bitterness?

On a basic level, the reason for this strange requirement is to remind us of the bitter slavery we were subjected to while we were slaves in Egypt. However, that doesn't fully answer the question, since the general focus of the seder, and the entire Yom Tov, is on the redemption, not the slavery. Pesach is a time to celebrate and thank Hashem for our freedom. While celebrating

³¹ Pesachim 38b

³² Pesachim 115b

³³ Pesachim 115b. This last halacha is codified in the Shulchan Aruch (OC 475:3) where R' Yosef Karo writes that one is permitted to swallow matza without tasting it, but if one swallows maror without tasting it one doesn't fulfill the mitzvah. This is also related to the dispute as to whether or not romaine lettuce can be used as maror. Although the Chazon Ish (O'Ch- 124:39) writes that one should not use romaine lettuce because it only turns bitter later on, other poskim disagree and maintain that romaine lettuce can, and in fact should be used because it resembles Bnei Yisroel's stay in Egypt, which started off sweet and turned bitter. (Sefer Kol Dodi, 15:19)

our freedom does create the need to remember that we were enslaved, why does it have to be to the extent that we have to physically taste the bitterness?

In Contrast to Magid

In stark contrast to maror is the gemara's principle³⁴ that is the basis for the nusach of Magid, namely to be *maschil b'gnus umisayeim bishevach*, to begin with derogatory statements about our past and to finish Magid with praise of Hashem. The Abudraham³⁵ and the Maharsha³⁶ both explain this structure as a way to keep in mind that the sole purpose of recalling the depths to which we had sunk is in order to fully appreciate what Hashem had done for us. As we realize how dire our situation was, the greater becomes our praise. According to this understanding, remembering our dark beginnings has no intrinsic value in and of itself. Rather, it allows us to more fully appreciate where we stand now.

Does this same concept of remembering the bad to appreciate the good relate to maror, or are we simply recalling the bitterness purely for the bitterness itself?

Perhaps we can shed some light on the issue based on the following gemara:

In the time to come the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring the Evil Inclination and slay it in the presence of the righteous and the wicked. To the righteous it will have the appearance of a towering hill, and to the wicked it will have the appearance of a hair thread. Both the former and the latter will weep; the righteous will weep saying, 'How were we able to overcome such a towering hill!' The wicked also will weep saying, 'How is it that we were unable to conquer this hair thread!'

Sukkah 52a

לעתיד לבא מביאו הקדוש ברוך הוא
ליצר הרע ושוהטו בפני הצדיקים ובפני
הרשעים. צדיקים נדמה להם כהר גבוה,
ורשעים נדמה להם כחוט השערה. הללו
בוכין, והללו בוכין. צדיקים בוכין
ואומרים: היאך יכולנו לכבוש הר גבוה
כזה! ורשעים בוכין ואומרים: היאך לא
יכולנו לכבוש את חוט השערה הזה!
מסכת סוכה דף נב.

Why should the righteous cry over the death of the Yetzer Hara when they should rejoice? The Maharsha adds that we should not attempt to explain that the righteous were crying tears of joy because the gemara seems to equate the crying of the righteous with the crying of the wicked. What then could possibly be the reason for mourning over the death of the Yetzer Hara?

Chazal use this gemara to explain a crucial principle of life: to not lose sight of the importance of the struggle itself. It has become an expectation of society that life should be easy. Any challenges or suffering that may come our way are divergences from the normal way of life and will automatically pass us by shortly, allowing us to return to our relaxed and peaceful existence. We all expect a happy ending and to live happily ever after.

However, the righteous had the opposite perspective on life. They understood that without the Yetzer Hara, their lives would now become stress-free. Problems will be solved automatically and challenges will be easily overcome. Life will be easy. In the eyes of the righteous, that is

³⁴ Pesachim, 116a

³⁵ Hagadah, s.v Avadim Hayinu

³⁶ Chiddushei Agadita, Pesachim, 116a

indeed reason for mourning. Because they understood that without the struggles and without the challenges, we lose out on the opportunity to add real meaning to our lives. To not just simply sit back and expect the world, both the spiritual and the physical, to be handed to us on a silver platter, but rather to feel the meaning within the struggle.

Don't say "when I become free, I will learn", for perhaps you will not become free.

Avos 2:4

ואל תאמר לכשאפנה
אשנה שמא לא תפנה:
אבות ב:ד

We generally assume that when we are faced with a challenge or we are struggling, we need to pause our Avodas Hashem and deal with the challenge. However, the mishna in Avos instructs us otherwise. Perhaps we are not *supposed* to be “free.” Perhaps what Hashem really wants from us is to study Torah and come closer to Him while in our troubled state. While we hope not to have hardships in our life, real life includes hardships. A crucial test of our commitment to Torah and Hashem happens when we are faced with tests and we are able to succeed and overcome them.

A Deeper Understanding of Maschil B'gnus

Oftentimes the challenges we deal with in our lives simply disappear or resolve themselves. It is in those situations that we are able to appreciate what we have by realizing how difficult the situation was. The greater the stress, the greater the relief and appreciation. On Pesach we relive those difficult experiences so that we can fully praise Hashem and recognize how much He helped us.

Therefore, during Magid, we focus on two low points in Jewish history:³⁷ that our forefathers were idol worshippers and the terrible enslavement of Egypt. These two examples of trying experiences represent two very different situations. Being an idol worshipper is an internal experience, something within our own selves. In contrast, being enslaved in Egypt was an external experience, brought upon us by the Egyptians. These two episodes were chosen to be recalled on the seder night because they capture the essence of troubles that we face in our daily lives which, when overcome, help us appreciate our lives more.

Unfortunately, there are trying times and episodes in our lives that never get resolved. These circumstances can drain our energy and leave us feeling helpless and hopeless. What is the purpose of these bitter experiences?

Finding Meaning in Life

Through his own horrific experience surviving the atrocities of the Holocaust, Dr. Viktor Frankl taught us an invaluable lesson on how to view the challenges and the suffering in our lives. In his book, Man's Search for Meaning, Frankl explains that in order to live a fulfilling life, one must find meaning in that life. However, he cautions us not to expect that meaning to be automatic or even to come easily. Granted, there are times that we are fortunate to see meaning in our daily lives through our avodas Hashem, our personal relationships, or our profession. However, very

³⁷ See Pesachim, 116a for a discussion of which event is considered the “gnus” that we focus on.

often, life presents us with experiences that seem to be pure suffering with no purpose and no end in sight, challenges and stressors that seem to have no solutions. It is at those times, writes Dr. Frankl, that we must find meaning within the suffering, because we cannot expect life to work out the way we want it to, and we need to experience the challenge in a way that we find most meaningful. Of course, he continues, a person must be strong enough to fix whatever problems can be fixed. However, once something is beyond that point, when a situation in our lives seems to have no solution, it is up to us to maintain our happiness and to find the meaning in the suffering.

The reality is that our lives are filled with challenges and situations that can only be resolved with tremendous exertion, if at all. Whether it is struggling to earn a livelihood, finding a spouse, or having and raising children, challenging situations permeate every aspect of our lives. The trick to being happy in life is not to hope to be able to avoid these situations, because that is just not realistic. Rather we must embrace the challenge, and yes, even the suffering, and somehow find the inner strength to see meaning within them.

One of the most common (and even the most important) applications of this is within our marriages. Drs. Julie and John Gottman, world renowned marital therapists, through their research of thousands of married couples, estimate that nearly 70% of all marital conflict is never resolved. One of the most common mistakes a couple can make is to assume that whatever issues they will face will be resolved, and to expect that, with minimal effort, things will just work out exactly how they want them to. However, true love in marriage can only be found with the opposite perspective. Whether it is in our attempt to rise above the friction with our spouse as our differences arise, or to overcome whatever challenge life happens to throw our way, the key to a happy marriage is not to avoid friction or challenges, but rather to embrace and find meaning and simcha within them.

Maror: The Key to Real Meaning in Life

This is the true meaning of the maror: a purely bitter taste with no sweetness allowed. Sometimes in life, we have to taste the bitterness. We cannot avoid it and we cannot find a solution for it. Rather we must experience it and be able to find the meaning within it. Whether it leads us to strengthening our prayer, commitment to Torah, or working on our middos to become more patient and accepting, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel, it is just that we have to bring that light into our lives and not expect it to come to us.

May Hashem grant us all the inner wisdom and strength to embrace all of the challenges we are faced with in life. To fix that which can be fixed, but to accept that which cannot; and realize that therein lies the potential for finding true meaning in our lives.