

The Freedom of Family

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In the “*ha lachma anya*” paragraph at the beginning of the Haggadah, we invite all poor people to come inside our homes and join us in our festive meal. We then conclude the paragraph by stating that we are now slaves but look forward to the following year when we shall all be free.

This familiar text carries a mysterious flavor. The entire Passover experience is a celebration of freedom, a recounting about “*avadim hayinu*” – how we were once slaves, but have since been emancipated. It seems anti-climactic to describe ourselves as still being in a state of slavery. Also, the juxtaposition is odd – what is the connection between inviting poor people to our meal and ascending from a predicament of slavery to a state of freedom?

The answer perhaps lies in a curious Talmudic passage in *Bava Basra* (10a). The Roman officer Turnus Rufus, who regularly sought to undermine the Torah in his conversations with Rabbi Akiva, presented the great sage with a conundrum. Why, asked Turnus Rufus, if G-d loves poor people, does G-d not take care of them Himself? Rabbi Akiva promptly responded that G-d leaves it to His people to sustain the poor in order to merit salvation from perdition through this mitzvah.

The Roman officer was not satisfied. Clearly, he reasoned, if G-d ordained that a person should be poor, this is akin to a king throwing a servant into a dungeon in which case the king would be angry at anyone who tried to nourish the servant. There is a verse, after all, declaring the nation of Israel to be “slaves” of G-d (*Vayikra* 25:55). Rabbi Akiva answered that the analogy is flawed. When G-d decrees poverty upon a member of the Jewish community, this is comparable to a king who places his son in a dungeon in which case the king would be pleased if others would feed and nourish his child and uplift him from his miserable condition. This is consistent with the verse in *D’varim* (14:1) that describes the relationship of the Jewish people to G-d as one of “sons” to a father. Thus, it is perfectly understandable why charity is appropriate under such circumstances.

Undeterred, Turnus Rufus noted that Rabbi Akiva’s response would be fine and good if a Jewish pauper was indeed considered a “son” of his Creator as opposed to a “slave.” But the filial relationship of Jews to their Creator is only applicable when they perform His will, not when they do not perform His will. Since they were speaking of a time when the Jews were not performing His will, clearly the “slave” analogy was more apt, and it was therefore inappropriate for any member of the nation to thwart the King’s will by providing sustenance to the poor.

The Talmud does not spell out how it was clear that the disputants were living in a time when the Jews were not performing G-d’s will. However, this understanding emerges from the

explication of two contradictory verses in *D'varim*. One verse (*D'varim* 15:4) states: "There shall not be any poor people among you," while the other verse (*D'varim* 15:11) states: "There shall never cease to be poor people in the land." Rashi (15:4), citing Midrashic tradition, reconciles these two opposing verses by explaining that the verse heralding an era in which there will be no poverty is referring to a time when the Jewish people are performing the will of G-d, while the other verse proclaiming that poor people shall never cease is referring to a time when the Jewish people are not performing His will. Since Turnus Rufus was referring to a time in which there were poor people, it was obviously a period in which the Jewish people were not performing the will of G-d. Accordingly, the question posed by Turnus Rufus stood – how could the King be pleased if others sustain the servant whom the King has cast into the dungeon?

Rather than addressing the philosophical question, Rabbi Akiva parsed a verse in Isaiah (58:7) to justify the feeding of the poor: "*pha'ros lara'aiv lachmekha v'aniyim merudim tavi bayis*" (meaning "extend your bread to the hungry, and bring paupers who are *merudim* [literally, "wailing" or "cast out"] into your home"). The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 34:13) cites an opinion that interprets the word *merudim* as "rebellious" (per the *Matnos Kehunah* commentary), referring to those "who did not fulfill the will of their Heavenly Father." According to this explanation, it is possible that Rabbi Akiva interpreted the verse to mean that the time to "extend your bread to the hungry" is when "you bring rebellious paupers into your home." In other words, the verse indicates that even when a pauper is "rebellious" – not performing the will of Heaven – it is appropriate to provide him with sustenance.

However, presumably Rabbi Akiva could have just as easily cited any scriptural passage indicating that it is appropriate to give charity to the poor, such as *Vayikra* 25:35, or *D'varim* 15:7-8. Clearly, Turnus Rufus was not impressed with the obvious fact that the Torah mandates providing charity to paupers, for otherwise he would not have posed his question. Rather, he was asking a much more pointed query – why is it that G-d desires that we feed the poor when such an act would appear to contravene His will? It is difficult to discern how Rabbi Akiva truly answered his question simply by quoting a verse from the Prophets.

The answer to this question is illumined by a Talmudic passage in *Kiddushin* (36a). The Talmud records a dispute between the *tannaim* R. Meir and R. Yehuda regarding whether the Jewish people are considered the "sons" of their Creator even in the event that they sin. R. Yehuda says they forfeit the title; R. Meir cites Biblical texts (e.g., Isaiah 1:4) indicating that no matter how badly His people have strayed, they are always considered to be His "sons." Rabbi Solomon ben Aderet (the *Teshuvos HaRashba* 1:194) notes that although the law almost always follows R. Yehuda against R. Meir, this is one case where we accept the view of R. Meir because of his compelling scriptural proofs.

In other words, even when the Jewish people are not performing the will of G-d, the relationship remains one of a son to a father. There is no act so hideous to cause the filial relationship between the Jewish nation and G-d to be severed. This opinion, however, requires elucidation. After all, as Turnus Rufus indicated, there clearly are times when the Jewish people are described as "slaves" indicating that the status of "son" is not inviolate.

Perhaps the explanation is that Rabbi Akiva was offering a trenchant insight about the transformative nature of charitable behavior. According to the Midrashic interpretation cited above, the Biblical verse specifically describes the pauper as “rebellious” for a reason. During imperfect times, when there is still poverty and suffering in the world, we have all failed to fulfill our mission – we are all “rebels.” The antidote to this renegade status is to perform redemptive acts, to feed the hungry and welcome paupers into our home. The very act of feeding the poor transforms us from a state of “rebellious servants” to that of faithful sons.

This is not an arbitrary transformation. The very nature of the Jewish nation being “sons” also connotes the corollary notion of being siblings as well. In a society of servants, there is no familial connection that is felt towards a distressed individual. Whatever type of assistance may be offered is in the form of a detached gesture of a stranger’s largesse rather than a brotherly hug. In this sense, the notion of bringing a pauper into the home is a powerful recognition of his status as a family member, as a brother. This gesture of hospitality re-defines their shared relationship as “sons” to a common father.

In fact, there is a different approach than the one adopted by the Rashba in ruling like R. Meir against R. Yehuda. The *Arukh HaShulkhan* (592:6), in explaining the text used during the Rosh Hashana liturgy “*im k’vanim ... v’im k’avadim*” (pleading for mercy whether we are in the category of “sons” or of “slaves”) accepts as normative the distinction of R. Yehuda that during times of non-fulfillment of G-d’s will, the Jewish nation is fundamentally viewed as “slaves” rather than “sons.” However, it is possible that even R. Yehuda would agree that the status of “slaves” can be magically converted into a status of “sons” if the Jewish people demonstrate recognition of their brotherhood, as exemplified through the welcoming of a poor person into one’s familial abode.

Thus, the message communicated by Rabbi Akiva to Turnus Rufus may in fact have been consistent with both opinions expressed by the *tannaim* – even when we are “slaves” we can always become “sons” through acts of benevolence and brotherhood. The state of “slavery” itself – of subjugation and hardship in this world which have not been obliterated – are opportunities for us to rediscover our kinship and thus rescue each other from the perfidy of an unredeemed world.

Based on this understanding, we can gain a renewed appreciation of the “*ha lachma anya*” prelude to the Haggadah. Indeed, we are not completely free from bondage – “*hashata avdei*” – we are in the category of slaves as long as there is privation and misery on the outside which does not concern us on the inside. However, upon declaring that “*kol dichfin yese v’yechol*” – all who are famished should enter our homes and eat, and “*kol ditzrich yese v’yifsach*” – all who are needy should join our Pesach meal, we demonstrate that we truly view each other as siblings and as children of a common G-d. It is through this recognition that we aspire to merit “*l’shana haba’ah benei chorin*” – once we have truly shown that we are in the category of “sons,” we are poised to merit freedom from our bondage as “slaves” and the exultation of ultimate redemption.

Once we appreciate this opening theme to the Haggadah, it is not surprising that much of the focus of the following sections is upon the familial bonds that tie us together as a people. After

reading about how we were slaves in Egypt, we quickly transition to a discussion of the four sons. We don't speak in a vacuum about the *chacham* – the wise/righteous person, or the *rasha* – the wicked rebel. Rather, they are all “sons” – “*k'neged arb'aah banim dibrah Torah*” – no matter what their inclinations or paths, they are all welcome in our homes and Seder tables, they are all part of our family, they are all our brothers, and therefore we are all “*banim l'makom*” – united as beloved sons - to our Heavenly Father. It is this motif of familial connection and responsibility towards each other that enables us to be in the category of those who perform the will of G-d and who can therefore declare “*l'shana hab'ah b'ara d'yisroel*” – that we look forward next year to our Father providing a Pesach trip for the entire extended family to our rebuilt and redeemed homeland.