

The Message of Maggid

We might suppose that the text of Maggid, the section of the Haggadah in which we fulfill the mitzvah of telling the story of *yetzias Mitzrayim*, would focus on the elucidation of that narrative. When we take a closer look at the actual text of the Haggadah, though, we find a surprising phenomenon. Directly following a one-sentence answer to the Mah Nishtanah, we find ourselves meandering through ten paragraphs of various halachic discussions before we finally reach the story of the Exodus.

First, we learn who has to perform the mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* (even great sages) and how long we have to spend on it (the longer the better), and in order to prove this, we read the story of five sages who spent all night discussing the Exodus. Then we learn whether the obligation extends to every night of the year (it does), and how to properly fulfill this mitzvah (in four different ways for different types of children). We end by pinpointing exactly when we are commanded to perform this mitzvah (not on Rosh Chodesh, not on the afternoon of Erev Pesach, but on the Seder night). This halacha shiur, replete with explorations of the different halachic opinions and the sources for each conclusion, is interrupted only by the paragraph, *Baruch HaMakom baruch Hu*, in which we praise Hashem for giving us the Torah, and make no mention of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. We may well wonder: why do we spend so much time teaching our children halachos, some of which do not even pertain to



Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

Ruth Buchbinder Mitzner Chair in Talmud and Jewish Law

the Seder night, instead of relating the story of the Exodus?

Upon reflection, it seems that this is exactly the deeper message that the Haggadah is trying to convey. Don't rush into the actual mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Haggadah tells us, until you have learned all the halachos that pertain to it. If we look carefully, we see this message explicit in the answer to the wise son — *af atah emor lo k'hilchos Pesach*; we teach the learned son the laws of Pesach and not only the story of the Exodus. And while the five sages mentioned in the Haggadah spent all night engrossed in the story of the Exodus, the Tosefta (Pesachim 10:11-12) tells us that Rabban Gamliel and his colleagues stayed up the entire Seder night learning Hilchos Pesach, and uses this story to prove that "*chayav adam la'asok b'hilchos Pesach kol halailah* — one is obligated to analyze the halachos of Pesach throughout the Seder night." This is not just an insight, then, but an actual halacha — the mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* demands that we learn not only the story, but the halachos of telling the story as well. But now the question becomes even sharper. Why should this be so? Why should the minutiae of halacha be considered a part of the story of the Exodus?

Perhaps we can suggest an explanation based on an understanding of the purpose of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. We may have noticed that in Sefer Shemos, Moshe Rabbenu asks Paroh time and again to let the Jews go, but he never actually asks him to set them free from slavery. Rather, he requests over and over that Paroh allow them to worship Hashem in the Sinai desert. Why didn't Moshe just tell Paroh the truth, that the Jews wanted freedom? Many answers have been suggested to this question,¹ but perhaps the simplest answer is that he *did* tell Paroh the truth. Hashem's reason for redeeming us from Egypt was not so that we could be free, but so that we could be free to accept the Torah at Har Sinai and serve Hashem. The language of the commandment of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* is:

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה
עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים.
שמות יג:ה

*You shall tell your son on that day, and say: because of **this**, Hashem performed the Exodus for me when I left Egypt.*

Shemos 13:8

Rashi asks the obvious question: because of *what* did Hashem redeem us? His answer is based on the interpretation found in the halachic section of Maggid "*b'sha'ah sheyesh*

matzah umaror munachim lefanecha,” sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim can only be fulfilled when the matzah and maror are lying on the table. It is because of the matzah and maror lying on the table, because of the mitzvos that we do, that Hashem knew we would accept on Har Sinai and would perform loyally to this very day, that He took us out of Egypt.² Perhaps this is why this verse was chosen as the answer to the wicked son, who wants freedom devoid of obligation, freedom without Torah and mitzvos. We tell him *ba’avur zeh*, because of this — the reason Hashem miraculously changed the course of history and redeemed us from slavery was not to give us more leisure time, but to grant us the opportunity to become deeper and nobler people, to grow spiritually and connect with the Divine, to realize our full potential as human beings by serving Hashem and performing His mitzvos.

This explains the position of Rav who argued with Shmuel in *Pesachim* (116a) about the proper interpretation of the requirement of *maschil b’gnus umesayem b’shevach* – to begin with a depiction of the lowly state of the Jewish people initially and conclude by describing their exalted status after the Exodus. What type of contrast must we emphasize? Shmuel explained “*Avadim hayinu*,” that we were slaves and then freed, but Rav preferred “*Mitechilah ovdei avodah zarah hayu avoseinu*,” that we were originally idolaters and then taught to worship Hashem. Shmuel focused on the physical story of the redemption, while Rav focused on the purpose for which we were taken out of slavery; which is our spiritual redemption and ennoblement. Our Haggadah incorporates both opinions. We fulfill the commandment of “*vehigadeta*

l’vincha, you shall tell your son on that day, and say: Hashem performed the Exodus for me,” by telling the story of our redemption from physical slavery, and we fulfill the crucial element of “*ba’avur zeh*, because of this,” by telling our children that the purpose of the Exodus was not to attain physical comfort and economic success, but rather to accept the Torah and strive for spiritual perfection.

This insight also explains the seemingly irrelevant passage beginning *Baruch HaMakom baruch Hu*. Before the description of the four sons, we abandon the topic of Pesach entirely and praise Hashem for giving us the Torah, in language reminiscent of our daily *Birkat HaTorah* – “*Baruch shenasan Torah l’amo Yisrael*, Blessed is He who gave the Torah to His nation Israel.” It might seem peculiar to stop and say *Birkat HaTorah* in the middle of the Haggadah, but if we understand that we cannot fulfill the mitzvah of Maggid properly without recognizing the purpose of the Exodus, which is receiving the Torah, then it becomes clear that appreciating the value of the Torah is an essential element of understanding *yetziat Mitzrayim*.

We can now appreciate the profundity underlying the structure of the Haggadah. If we immediately began the Maggid by telling our children the story of the Exodus, we would miss the point of the story. Rather, we first tell them that we’re doing a mitzvah tonight, and that we are fulfilling this mitzvah in the detailed fashion prescribed by the halacha. Instead of merely telling our children that the best use of our freedom is to serve Hashem, we guide them through the experience of halachic living, and share with them the process by which a Torah Jew fulfills the mitzvos in the exacting and precise fashion that befits

one who is commanded. By framing the narrative of the Exodus in the context of Hilchos Pesach, we ingrain the message that the only appropriate context for freedom is the striving to fulfill the will of Hashem.

Perhaps this also explains why we call the Pesach experience a “Seder,” meaning order or structure, and we are careful to announce at each turn that we are following the structure, “*kadesh*,” then “*urchatz*,” all the way to “*nirtzah*.” Freedom is misused if it is seen as an absence of responsibility. It becomes an excuse for laziness and the shallow pursuit of ephemeral gratification, devoid of meaning or purpose. The Hagaddah teaches us to view freedom as an opportunity to take responsibility, to seek out the purpose of our existence and strive to live up to it. We are commanded to impose structure on our freedom in order to harness it towards the pursuit of higher goals instead of descent into anarchy and nihilism. What better way to begin teaching this crucial lesson than to hold a “Seder,” a halachically structured celebration, finely calibrated to further the sublime agenda of growing spiritually and infusing our lives with meaning. The “Seder” of Pesach transforms freedom from emancipation into redemption, from emptiness into fulfillment, and from chaos into glorious opportunity.

Notes

1. See Ibn Ezra to 11:4, Rabbenu Bahye to 3:18, and *Akedat Yitzchak* ch. 35.
2. See also Ibn Ezra who expands on this theme, *Chizkuni* who interprets similarly but with a subtle distinction, and Rashbam, Ramban, and R. Yonah Ibn Janach (quoted by Ibn Ezra) who interpret this verse in a completely different fashion.