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## MAH NISHTANAH—THE REAL QUESTION OF THE SEDER

by *Rabbi Raphi Mandelstam*

For many of us, the pinnacle of the Seder is the famous Mah Nishtanah which the children ask to trigger the telling of the story of Yetzi'at Mitzrayim. Many commentators on the Haggadah notice that the four questions are more complex than they seem and require elucidation. For starters, what are the answers to these questions? Recall that our four questions are aimed at understanding why we have Matzah, Maror, the extra dipping of the vegetable into the saltwater, and the leaning at the Seder. Some answer that the paragraph following the four questions, Avadim Hayinu, answers our questions. However, Avadim Hayinu is but a one line description of how we were slaves who were freed because of Hashem's help. The simple understanding of that paragraph does not seem to provide a comprehensive answer to the four questions. Our question remains—where do we answer our four questions?

Perhaps, the answers can be found in Rabban Gamliel's statement that we must mention the Korban Pesach, Maror, and Matzah, in order to fulfill our requirement of Sippur Yetzi'at Mitzrayim. Although this statement can explain why we have Matzah and Maror at the Seder, it does not explain why we lean and make an extra dipping. In addition, if this explains why we eat Matzah and Maror, why was it not placed immediately following the four questions?

These perplexing questions have led many Meforashim, including the Abarbanel, to suggest that the Mah Nishtanah is not really four different questions which require four different answers; rather, it is four different applications of one major question: "Is this a night of slavery or a night of freedom?" The questions are expressions of confusion as to how we can do things which seem to contradict each other. How can we be eating Matzah, which reminds us of our freedom, and also eat Maror, which reminds us of our slavery? In addition, how can we eat the Matzah and the Maror together during Koreich, while at the same time eating Charoset, which sweetens the Maror? Also, why do we lean for certain things but not others? It seems as though we are confused as to whether we are slaves or a free nation.

To further develop our question, we can point out that in addition to the contradictions between the different aspects of the Seder, each aspect seems to contradict itself. On the one hand, Matzah is the bread that we eat to remember our freedom, yet on

the other hand it is "Lachma Anya," poor man's bread. Seforno points out that Matzah is not only what we ate on our way out of Mitzrayim, but it is also what we ate as slaves, because we did not have time to let our dough rise when we were slaves. Matzah is a remembrance of freedom and slavery at the same time.

Even the Maror, which seems to remind us solely of our slavery, hints to freedom as well. We are familiar with the promise that Hashem made to Avraham Avinu at the Berit Bein HaBetarim that Avraham's descendants would be slaves for four hundred years (BeReishit 15:13). However, we know that we were slaves in Mitzrayim for only 210 years. What happened to the other 190 years in which we were supposed to be in slaves? The Beit HaLevi explains that out of Hashem's kindness, he made our work harder than it was supposed to be so that we would be able to leave 190 years early. Therefore, the bitterness of the slavery, which is expressed by the Maror, actually hastened our Ge'ulah from Mitzrayim.

As we have seen, the real question of the Mah Nishtanah is not why things are different than usual, but why those differences seem to contradict each other. The answer is that "Avadim HaYinu," we were slaves. We start the night as slaves, as we demonstrate by the poor man's bread and the Maror, but we also have elements of freedom, as we mention that "VaYotzi'anu Hashem MiSham," meaning that Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim. Although we start off the Seder as slaves, we end the night as free men who can eat the Maror together with the Matzah and Charoset, because despite the bitterness of slavery, we recognize that we became a free nation. The night is not a contradiction, but rather a transition from slavery to redemption.

The Brisker Rav used to say that the hardest Mitzvah of the year is Sippur Yetzi'at Mitzrayim, because "Chayav Adam Lir'ot Et Atzmo Ke'ilu Hu Yatzah MiMitzrayim," meaning that we must see ourselves as if we left Mitzrayim. The only way we could imagine ourselves leaving Egypt is by realizing that the different Mitzvot and Minhagim of the Seder are meant to help us feel the transition from Avdut to Cheirut, from slavery to freedom. If we are able to truly recognize this, we will be able to conclude our Seder with a real sense of thanks and Hallel to Hashem.

## THE POWER OF LOVE

by *Eli Hyman ('16)*

Consider the following two nights on the Jewish calendar: Leil HaSeder, the night of the festive and joyous Pesach Seder, and Leil Yom HaKippurim, the solemn and somber Kol Nidrei night. The two seem to be completely and utterly different from one another, sharing no commonality other than the fact that they

both are Mikra'ei Kodesh. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that these two incredibly holy nights share another common feature: on both, the Ashkenazic Minhag is to wear a Kittel.

In his *Netivot Shalom*, the Slonimer Rebbe sheds light on the significance of this long, white robe that we call a Kittel. He explains that it represents the idea of Hitchadshut, renewal, and that it signifies the start of a fresh page and the beginning of a new chapter in our spiritual lives. Both the night of the Seder and the night of Yom Kippur, are remarkably holy nights. Each one inherently possesses the power to renew each member of Am Yisrael like a "Beri'ah Chadashah," a new creature. These two nights give us an amazing opportunity to draw closer to Hashem by renewing our commitment to Torah and Mitzvot.

One might be inclined to ask how it can be that both of these nights possess this amazing power. After all, these two Mo'adim seem to be almost completely different! On Yom Kippur we fast and abstain from physical pleasures, while on Pesach we dine, recline, eat meat, and drink wine! The Slonimer Rebbe addresses this point by explaining that the Hitchadshut brought about by Yom Kippur night is inherently different than the renewal brought about by the Seder night. Whereas Yom Kippur's renewal stems from our own efforts to draw close to Hashem as a result of Yir'ah, Leil HaSeder's renewal stems from the abundance of love that Hashem showers down upon us on that night. While on Yom Kippur the renewal is based on our own initiative, on the night of the Seder, the Hitchadshut is a function that is independent of our personal efforts. On this one night each year, Hashem's love for us is so intense that all Jews are automatically gifted this sense of renewal, regardless of whether or not they deserve it.

This subtle difference between the natures of these two renewals is indicative of the broader, more elemental difference between Pesach and Yom Kippur. According to Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, the fundamental difference between these two Mo'adim is that Pesach is a Chag rooted in Ahavah and Chesed, whereas Yom Kippur is a Mo'eid embedded in Yir'ah and Gevurah.

The two characteristics of Pesach, Ahavah and Chesed, are usually viewed as two distinct concepts and are often interpreted as love and kindness, respectively. In truth, however, the two are very much interconnected, as both stem from the act of giving. The word "Ahavah" is formed from the root "Hav" (Hei-Vav), which means "to give" in Aramaic. This is sensible, for when a person gives in any way to somebody else, he or she demonstrates his or her love for that other person. The idea of Chesed being rooted in giving is one that is Kabbalistic in nature. According to Kabbalah, Chesed represents Hitpashtut, meaning expansion, enlargement, and openness. Chesed means branching out, and the act of going outside of oneself in order to help others is an act that exemplifies the Middah of Chesed. Avraham Avinu personifies this Midah, for he is

always looking outside of himself in order to help and give to others. On Pesach, we focus on Ahavah and Chesed by inviting "Kol DiTzrich," anybody who needs, to join us at our Seder, and we share our experiences, emotions, and Divrei Torah with our friends and family at the Seder.

On Yom Kippur, we act in a completely different matter, because the day is characterized by Yir'ah and Gevurah. Gevurah represents the exact opposite of Chesed; it denotes Tzimtzum, the act of contracting. When people act with Gevurah, they turn away from the outside world and turn inwards towards themselves – they dissociate themselves from their community and focus on their personal character and on their individual relationship with Hashem. On Yom Kippur, the pinnacle of the Yamim Nora'im, we act with Gevurah – we do not eat together with the community, but rather, we are engaged for a full twenty-five hours in the individualistic process of Teshuvah.

Yom Kippur is a time for isolation and separation, whereas Pesach is a time for the exact opposite – inclusion and communion. Pesach is a Chag rooted in Ahavah, and on this Chag, particularly on Leil Haseder, Hashem's love for us is so powerful and intense that we all automatically become Beri'ot Chadashot, spiritually renewed creatures.

While Hashem's love is present on Pesach regardless of our efforts and actions, our love on Pesach is completely dependent on how hard we work towards producing it. The Seder itself is designed to promote feelings of love and kindness. It is incredibly important for us to work on our Ahavat Hashem and to improve our relationship with Him, but it is equally important, if not more important, to work on our Ahavat Yisrael as well. If we can utilize the Seder, which is designed to promote a sense of Achdut, to increase the amount of love that we have for all of our brothers and sisters of Am Yisrael, we will turn the Seder into an amazingly transformative experience, and hopefully, through our combined efforts to increase our Ahavat Yisrael, may we be Zocheh to witness the Bi'at HaMashiach.

## SO THAT THE CHILDREN WILL ASK

by Gavriel Epstein (15)

Immediately following Ha Lachma Anya, the introduction to Maggid, there is a famous custom to remove the Seder Plate from the table. It is usually suggested that the purpose of this custom is to get the children asking questions, which is, on the surface, a highly dissatisfying explanation. The answer seemingly creates a circular argument; the answer to the question is the existence of the question itself. Perhaps it is necessary to look at the source for this Minhag and determine why exactly it is so important that children ask questions at the Seder.

The source for this custom is found in Pesachim (109a), where it says, "*Chotefin Matzot BaLeilei Pesachim Bishvil Tinokot SheLo Yishnu,*" "We grab the Matzot on the night of Pesach for the children, so they do not fall asleep." Rashi (ad loc. s.v. Chotefin Matzah) explains that "Chotefin" refers to grabbing, because we remove the Seder plate from the table so that the children will ask questions about it. Alternatively, Rashi suggests that "Chotefin"

actually means that the Matzah should be eaten quickly so that the children do not fall asleep before the conclusion of the Seder. This answer explains more logically why the action would prevent children from falling asleep during the Seder. However, this does not explain the custom to remove the Seder plate.

Several similar Minhagim at the Seder are based on the goal of keeping children engaged and awake throughout the Seder. One custom is to put the Afikoman on one's back and reenact Yetzi'at Mitzrayim. Another custom is to feed children "*Kelayot VaEgozim*," "roasted nuts" (Rambam Hilchot Chameitz UMatza 7:3), and a third custom is to remove the table before people are finished eating (ibid.). The purpose of these customs is, "*Kidei SheYir'u HaBanim VeYish'alu*," "So that the children will see and ask questions" (ibid.). Every Seder has an endless repertoire of customs established around the absolute necessity that children should be engaged and asking questions.

The crux of this network of customs is centered on two Pesukim in the Torah. One of them commands a parent, "*VeHigadta LeVincha*," "And you shall explain to your son" (Shemot 8:13) the story of Yetzi'at Mitzrayim. This Pasuk explains that children should remain awake throughout the Seder in order for parents to fulfill their Mitzvah of teaching. A second Pasuk instructs parents, "*Ki Yomeru Eileichem Beneichem Mah HaAvodah HaZot Lachem*," "If your children ask you 'what is this service to you?'" (Shemot 12:26) you should respond with Sippur Yetzi'at Mitzrayim.

Perhaps it is possible to explain the curious custom of removing the Seder plate by comparing it to its parallel Minhagim. While the other Minhagim have a specific action designed to entertain and engage children such as stealing, eating, and acting, removing the Seder plate from the table is associated only with the question that follows it. It seems to be the black sheep, the Minhag that drew the short straw and failed to entertain anyone.

The problem with the excitement of the Minhag arises not when the child asks the question, but when the parent answers "so the children will ask." However, Rashi simply writes that the Minhag exists "*SheYish'alu*," "So that [the children] will ask," (ibid.) but does not suggest that this should be the answer to their question. Perhaps the intended answer was left intentionally to the ad lib of the parent, removing any creative blocks and serving as a catalyst to engage the children and prompt them to further question the story Yetzi'at Mitzrayim itself. Children's active participation at the Seder table is an essential component of fulfilling the Mitzvah of Sippur Yetzi'at Mitzrayim, and one should go to great lengths to ensure that that participation is cultivated.

## PESACH IN THE DAYS OF CHIZKIYAHU - THE DREAM AND THE REALITY

by Rabbi Ezra Frazer ('96)

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Divrei HaYamim II (Chapter 30) tells the story of a major Pesach celebration in the days of King Chizkiyahu of Yehudah (8th century BCE).<sup>1</sup> This essay examines the significance of that event within the broader context of Chizkiyahu's reign.

### Religious and Political Background

Chizkiyahu inherited the throne following the death of his father, the wicked King Achaz, who defiled the Beit HaMikdash, as Divrei HaYamim II (28) describes<sup>2</sup>:

21. For Achaz took away a portion from the house of the Lord, and from the house of the king, and from the princes, and gave it to the king of Assyria; but he did not help him. 22. And in the time of his distress he trespassed still more against the Lord; this is that king Achaz... 24. And Achaz gathered together the utensils of the house of God, and cut in pieces the utensils of the house of God, and shut the doors of the house of the Lord, and he made himself altars in every corner of Yerushalayim. 25. And in every city of Yehudah he made high places to burn incense to other gods, and provoked to anger the Lord God of his fathers.

Chizkiyahu opened his reign by immediately reversing his father's sinful policies. According to Divrei HaYamim II (29), he summoned the Kohanim and Levi'im as soon as he ascended the throne, and he ordered them to rectify his father's behavior toward the Temple:

3. [Chizkiyahu], in the first year of his reign, in the first month opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them. 4. And he brought in the Kohanim and the Levi'im, and gathered them together into the east street, 5. And he said to them, "Hear me, you Levi'im, sanctify now yourselves, and sanctify the house of the Lord God of your fathers, and carry out the filth from the holy place. 6. For our fathers have trespassed, and done that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs.

During this same period of history, a major political change was transpiring in the Ancient Near East. Assyria was rising as a superpower, and the Assyrian army subjugated many smaller nations. Achaz allied Yehudah with Assyria, whereas his northern neighbor, the Kingdom of Israel,

<sup>1</sup> Shortly after King Shlomo's death (approximately 200 years before Chizkiyahu's reign), his kingdom split in two: the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Yehudah. The kings of Yehudah descended from David and Shlomo and maintained Yerushalayim as their capital city.

<sup>2</sup> Translations of the Bible in this essay were copied from Davka writer (Version 6.6.3) with minor changes.

resisted Assyria. During the early years of Chizkiyahu's reign, the Assyrians destroyed and exiled Israel. Hence, as Chizkiyahu's reign progressed, his northern Israelite neighbors lost their independence and were reduced to a small number of survivors of the Assyrian exile.

#### *The Goals of Chizkiyahu's Pesach*

Divrei HaYamim II (30) recounts how Chizkiyahu organized a major Pesach celebration in Yerushalayim. Based on the aforementioned religious and political background, it appears that Chizkiyahu sought to accomplish two distinct goals through this celebration: 1. Chizkiyahu saw Pesach as an opportunity to formally rededicate the Temple—the culmination of his mission to purify the Temple from his father's defilement. 2. In light of the Kingdom of Israel's collapse, Chizkiyahu hoped that his major Pesach celebration would attract remnants of Israel's tribes to Yerushalayim and thus reunite them under his rule. However, Chizkiyahu's lofty goals faced formidable challenges. He apparently could not successfully prepare the Temple for rededication by the 14th of Nisan, "because the Kohanim had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, nor had the people gathered themselves together to Yerushalayim" (30:3). The northern tribes had been living as a separate kingdom for roughly 200 years, so—not surprisingly—many of them scoffed at the idea of traveling to Yerushalayim—the capital of a foreign kingdom—to observe Pesach.

#### *Chizkiyahu's Attempted Solution*

Sensing that they were not ready to rededicate the Temple, Chizkiyahu consulted with other leaders and citizens, and they decided to delay Pesach by one month. During this extra time, Chizkiyahu sent letters to the remnants of Israel, urging them to "return to the Lord" (30:9) by joining the Pesach celebration in Yerushalayim. Although most remaining Israelites mocked this message, "A few men of Asher and Menasheh and of Zevulun humbled themselves, and came to Yerushalayim" (30:11). A cursory reading of the text indicates that when the Pesach observance finally took place—one month late—it was a smashing success. The text depicts such tremendous joy that the nation stayed for an additional week after the formal holiday concluded: "And the whole assembly took counsel to keep another seven days; and they kept another seven days with gladness" (30:23). Hence, it would appear that Chizkiyahu made the correct decision to delay Pesach by one month.

#### *Delaying Pesach*

However, a closer look at this event raises serious questions about Chizkiyahu's course of action. While the decision to delay Pesach succeeded in increasing the number of participants, the text never provides us with Chizkiyahu's legal justification for this bold action. Two possible halachic models exist for this decision: 1. Pesach Sheini – An individual who legitimately cannot bring the Korban Pesach

in Nisan is permitted to bring it one month later, on the 14th of Iyar. 2. A Leap Month – According to Talmudic law, an extra month of Adar can be added before Nisan when certain circumstances would cause Pesach to occur too early in the year. Of these two models, a simple reading of Divrei HaYamim seems to indicate that Chizkiyahu followed the model of Pesach Sheini by actually moving Pesach to Iyar. Divrei HaYamim II (30:3) provides two reasons for Chizkiyahu's decision to delay Pesach—*"Ki HaKohanim Lo Hitkadeshu LeMadai VeHaAm Lo Ne'esfu LiRushalayim,"* "Because the Kohanim had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, nor had the people gathered themselves together to Yerushalayim"—and they parallel the two legitimate reasons that the Torah gives for waiting until Pesach Sheini to bring one's sacrifice: a) ritual impurity, and b) geographic distance from the Temple (BeMidbar 9:10-11):<sup>3</sup>

10. If any man of you or of your posterity shall *be impure because of a dead body*, or is *in a journey far away*, he shall still keep the Passover to the Lord. 11. On the fourteenth day of the second month at evening they shall keep it.

Moreover, the text repeatedly refers to Chizkiyahu's Pesach as taking place "in the second month," which is the biblical date for Pesach Sheini. These similarities to the circumstances described in BeMidbar (9) seemingly lead to the conclusion that Chizkiyahu essentially advised the entire nation to withhold their sacrifices until Pesach Sheini. Indeed, one view in the Tosefta (Pesachim 8:4) and Gemara (Sanhedrin 12b) asserts that Chizkiyahu "coerced the congregation to observe Pesach Sheini."<sup>4</sup> Despite this evidence, most commentators reject the possibility that Chizkiyahu's celebration was a communal Pesach Sheini. They note that the Torah presents Pesach Sheini as a solution for *individuals* who are unable to observe Pesach with the rest of the nation in Nisan, whereas Chizkiyahu delayed the holiday for the *entire nation!* Furthermore, Pesach Sheini is a one-day event on the 14th of Iyar in which individuals bring the Korban Pesach (the ritual sacrifice) that they could not bring in Nisan. Those individuals still observe the seven-day festival and its restrictions on leavened products in the month of Nisan, along with the rest of the nation.<sup>5</sup> But Chizkiyahu did not merely delay the *sacrifice* by one month; he delayed the *entire seven-day festival!* As Ibn Ezra observes (Long Commentary to Shemot, Introduction to Chapter 12), the claim that Chizkiyahu told everyone to observe the seven-day festival as Pesach Sheini in Iyar, must assume:

<sup>3</sup> For detailed parameters of which circumstances entitle someone to participate in Pesach Sheini, see Rambam, Hilchot Korban Pesach, Chapters 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> This quote comes from the Tosefta; the Gemara presents this view with a slightly different formulation. These two sources also differ regarding the author of this statement—R. Yehudah (Tosefta) or R. Shimon b. Yehudah citing R. Shimon (Gemara).

<sup>5</sup> In the words of the Mishnah (Pesachim 9:3), one may possess Chameitz and Matzah together in one's home while offering the Korban Pesach on Pesach Sheini



served according to Halachah, without embarrassing his non-Jewish guests by saying that only they are forbidden to touch the wine. Although the rabbi knows that many guests will be violating Yom Tov by driving home after the Seder, he does not disinvite them, since his entire purpose in hosting this Seder is to reach out to unaffiliated Jews. Indeed, he hopes that God will forgive these individuals for driving home, since they at least made the sincere effort to observe the Seder despite their unfamiliarity with Halachah. In essence, Chizkiyahu faced a similar situation with the residents of the Northern Kingdom. Despite the extra month that he delayed Pesach, many of these people failed to purify themselves. Once he knew that they were still impure, Chizkiyahu could have simply told them that impure people may not participate in the Korban Pesach at all. However, if he did so, then he would alienate precisely those members of the Northern Kingdom who cared enough to come to Yerushalayim when most of their neighbors had mocked Chizkiyahu's invitation. So instead, Chizkiyahu implemented a policy in which only Levi'im were permitted to slaughter the sacrifices. Although Israelites are normally permitted to slaughter sacrifices, Chizkiyahu restricted the slaughtering to Levi'im in order to prevent impure Israelites from slaughtering their own sacrifices without embarrassing them. Chizkiyahu knew that these impure people would anyway eat from their sacrifices outside the Temple, but he did not want to bar them from the entire event. Therefore, he controlled what happened in the Temple and prayed that God would pardon any other transgression that well-intentioned but impure people might commit.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Assessing the Event*

The story of Chizkiyahu's Pesach concludes with a seemingly happy ending:

25. And all the congregation of Yehudah, with the Kohanim and the Levi'im, and all the congregation that came from Israel, and the foreigners who came from the Land of Israel, and who lived in Yehudah, rejoiced. 26. And there was great joy in Yerushalayim; for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Yerushalayim. 27. Then the Kohanim the Levi'im arose and blessed the people; and their voice was heard, and their prayer came up to His holy dwelling place, to heaven.

Ralbag (30:26) observes that the comparison to Shlomo's time alludes to the holiday of Sukkot in the year that Shlomo inaugurated the Temple. Shlomo juxtaposed a seven-day celebration of the Temple to the seven days of Sukkot, thus creating 14 consecutive days of celebration (Melachim I 8:65, Divrei HaYamim II 7:9). Chizkiyahu's rededication of the Temple

once again entailed a seven-day biblical festival juxtaposed to an additional seven days of celebration. Nevertheless, despite the apparent success of Chizkiyahu's Pesach, it soon lost its standing as the greatest Pesach of the First Temple Era. Chizkiyahu's great-grandson, King Yoshiyahu, organized his own major Pesach celebration, about which the text attests: "And there was no Passover like that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; nor did any of the kings of Israel keep such a Passover" (Divrei HaYamim II 35:18). Radak (ad. loc.) remarks that Yoshiyahu's Pesach overshadowed his great-grandfather's Pesach due to the aforementioned drawbacks of Chizkiyahu's event—the scorn of those residents of Israel who refused to attend and the impurity of many of the people who did participate. The story of Chizkiyahu's Pesach blends hope and optimism with difficult realities. It was remarkable to host an event 200 years after the nation split into two kingdoms, where people now came from throughout the Holy Land to rededicate the newly-cleansed Temple. In modern terms, Chizkiyahu could have arranged a "photo-op" to prove that he accomplished his two goals—rededicating the Temple and bringing residents of the north to Yerushalayim. On the other hand, that photo-op would conceal the reality that most members of the northern tribes boycotted the entire event, that most of those who did attend ate their Korbanot in a state of impurity, and that the event was delayed by a month through a questionable legal procedure. Chizkiyahu's Pesach thus reminds us of the constant challenge of pursuing one's ideals while remaining pragmatic enough to implement them to the best of one's ability in a complex reality.

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<sup>12</sup> The Gemara (Sanhedrin *ibid.*) treats Chizkiyahu's prayer for divine forgiveness as proof that Chizkiyahu sinned by delaying Pesach. However, Radak (30:2) points out that a simple reading of the biblical text clearly demonstrates that Chizkiyahu's prayer relates to ritual impurity and has nothing to do with the date of Pesach.