

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY TORAH MITZION
BEIT MIDRASH ZICHRON DOV

PESACH SEDER

Companion



YESHIVA UNIVERSITY
TORAH MITZION
BEIT MIDRASH
זכרון דוב

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and in honour of the Scholars of the YU Torah MiTzion Beit Midrash Zichron Dov נ"י

With gratitude to the Beit Midrash for all of the learning opportunities
Golda Brown and Harry Krakowsky

לזכר ולעילוי נשמת אבינו מורינו ר' משה בן ר' דוד שלמה ז"ל
ואת אמנו מורתינו רצא בת ר' עזריאל ז"ל

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In memory of our dear uncle Bill Rubinstein ז"ל, and in honour of our cousins
Eli and Renee Rubinstein, you are an inspiration to us all.
May Hashem give you the strength to continue your tireless efforts for our community.
Sincerely, Yaakov and Aviva Eisenberger

Dedicated l'ilui nishmat a wonderful husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather
Aharon Mechel Ben Chaim Meir ז"ל, a man who epitomized the values of Torah uMadda.

With love, honour and respect,
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Seder Companion 5778

Yeshiva University Torah MiTzion

Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

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SETTING THE TABLE

Why is This Table Different?

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The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 472:2) codifies a unique law regarding the Seder: “The table should be set nicely, with fine place settings, according to one’s means, and a seat should be prepared so that a person can sit in a reclining position as a free person.”¹

Upon a close read, it appears that two separate laws are presented. First, one should use fine place settings for the Seder. Second, one should prepare a seat upon which to recline. While Shulchan Aruch explains that the latter aids in creating the feeling of freedom, he provides no reason for the former. However, the Vilna Gaon (Biur HaGra 472:2) explains that just as reclining demonstrates freedom, so nice tableware demonstrates freedom.² The Mishneh Berurah (472:6) quotes a similar explanation, writing that on other nights a person should minimize the use of fancy tableware in remembrance of the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash. However, on Pesach night, one should use nicer tableware, since free people are accustomed to using fancier dishes and silverware.

A second explanation for the use of nicer tableware is quoted in the names of Rabbi Shlomo Kluger and the Chatam Sofer. To understand their suggestion, we need some background.

An integral part of the Exodus story is the taking of Egypt’s wealth. In three places, the Torah explains that the Jewish people would take Egyptian spoils upon leaving Egypt.³ Yet, at the Seder, while we commemorate many aspects of the Exodus story, there is almost no reference to the gold and silver that we miraculously received. Why is this central detail absent from the Haggadah?

If we look at the third biblical reference to the collection of Egypt’s wealth, we find something curious. G-d tells Moshe to “please” speak to the people, and to ask them to request gold and silver vessels from the Egyptians. (Shemot 11:2) The word “please” implies that some exhortation was required to convince the people to take spoils from Egypt. This is puzzling. Why would the Jews need encouragement for this task?

The Talmud (Berachot 9a-9b) explains that when Moshe told the Jews that they would leave Egypt the next day and they would take with them the wealth of Egypt, the people responded, “It is enough if we just leave, ourselves.” In other words, the physical freedom was enough; the wealth was not necessary. The Talmud provides a parable to illustrate their sentiment: A prisoner is told that he will leave prison tomorrow with great riches. The prisoner responds that he would rather leave today without riches, than tomorrow with riches.

What emerges from the Talmud’s example is that one day of freedom is worth more than wealth. It is noteworthy that this lesson is not rejected by the Talmud. Nevertheless, G-d commands Moshe to exhort the Jews to collect the gold and silver in order to fulfill the promise of G-d to Avraham that the Jewish people would be oppressed in Egypt, “and afterwards they will leave with great bounty.” (Bereishit 15:13-14)

Returning to our question: Considering the importance of the wealth taken from Egypt to the story, why do we not highlight it at the Seder? We praise G-d for all the miracles of the Exodus; why do we omit this one?

Rabbi Shlomo Kluger and the Chatam Sofer argue that while we make minimal verbal mention of the miraculous looting of Egypt, we do commemorate this miracle through our actions - by using our nicest tableware. When we see our fancy tableware, we are reminded that when the Jews left Egypt, the Egyptians gave their gold and silver to the Jewish people. Rabbi Kluger and the Chatam Sofer further explain that the despoiling of Egypt teaches us that G-d is the ultimate Giver, and we only have that which G-d gave us. The message of these spoils, reflected in our tableware, serves as the backdrop to the entire Seder.

I believe that there is an additional significance to using nicer tableware at the Seder. As mentioned, G-d was primarily concerned with the Jews leaving with bounty to ensure that He would fulfill His promise to Avraham. This reminder, that G-d keeps His word, is critical at our Seder.

While we rejoice when we commemorate the Exodus, our Sedarim are lacking. Sadly, we have no Beit HaMikdash and we do not bring the *korban pesach*. We can only recite “*zecher l’Mikdash k’Hillel*,” a paragraph about the practice of Hillel when the Beit HaMikdash was in existence. At the beginning of *Nirtzah*, we say, “so may we merit” to bring the *korban pesach* in the future, and we declare, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

The beautiful tableware, present throughout the Seder, serves as a reminder that just as G-d fulfilled His word by redeeming the Jewish people with great wealth, so He will redeem us from our current exile, as He has promised.

When Rabbi Akiva saw a fox emerge from the location of the Holy of Holies, he laughed, and he explained that just as G-d fulfilled His word to destroy the Temple, so, too, G-d will keep His promise to rebuild the Temple. (Makkot 24b) Our beautiful tableware reminds us that G-d will keep His promise to redeem us, so that we may bring the *korban pesach* in Jerusalem. While looking at our tables, we truly hope and pray, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

¹ Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu (1929-2010) suggests that those who use disposable dishes and cutlery at the Seder should try to use nicer disposables, based on this halachah in the Shulchan Aruch. See <http://bit.ly/1q2L5qa>.

² The Bach (1561-1640) implies this explanation as well.

³ See Shemot (3:21-22), Shemot (11:2), and Shemot (12:35-36).

Did you know?

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ורחץ: U'RCHATZ Understanding U'Rchatz

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The second section of the Seder is *U'Rchatz* - washing one's hands before eating the *karpas*. The act of washing and the way in which it is done raises several questions:

1. People eat vegetables dipped in sauces all year, and generally do not wash their hands before eating. Why is the Seder night different than all other nights?
2. Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 473:6) states that no blessing is recited when washing one's hands at this point. Why not?
3. Some families have the custom that only the head of the household washes his hands at this point. Why should there be a distinction between the head of the household and everyone else at the Seder?

As for the first question, the sources for this custom indicate that washing should be the practice throughout the year as well. In the Talmud (Pesachim 115a), Rabbi Elazar says in the name of Rabbi Oshiya that one is required to wash his hands before eating foods exposed to liquid. This law is codified in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 158:4), where Rabbi Yosef Karo writes that when food is dipped in wine, honey, oil, milk, dew, blood, or water, and the food has not been dried, there is a requirement to wash one's hands without reciting a blessing prior to consumption. Mishneh Berurah (158:20) explains that there is a debate among the medieval commentators as to whether Rabbi Elazar's ruling was meant to apply only when the Beit haMikdash stood and the Jewish people observed the laws of purity, or whether it was meant to teach a practice to be observed forever. Shulchan Aruch rules in accordance with the authorities who hold that this was a permanent decree. However, since there are dissenting opinions - and in cases of doubt regarding blessings we are lenient - no blessing is recited upon washing the hands. Therefore, the practice of washing hands before eating *karpas* (since the *karpas* is dipped in a liquid) is the practice Shulchan Aruch endorses year-round.

Taz (Orach Chaim 473:6) also believes that the practice on the Seder night should be no different than any other day of the year. He employs the *Mah Nishtanah* question rhetorically, asking, "What is different tonight from other days of the year?" and says washing before eating *karpas* at the Seder should act as a rebuke for everyone who is not meticulous with this practice in general.

Yet, despite the Shulchan Aruch and Taz's rulings that one must wash before eating food dipped in a liquid all year, the practice of many people is to be lenient. Mishneh Berurah (158:20) justifies this practice based on the medieval commentators who believed that this law only applied during the times of the Beit haMikdash, when the Jewish people were careful with the laws of purity. If so, why are we stringent to wash on the Seder night?

- Shaar haTziyun (Orach Chaim 473:69) says that this practice is done so that that the children will ask about the difference. Many practices during the Seder are geared toward sparking interest in the children. The Talmud (Pesachim 114b) says the reason for *karpas* itself is in order for the children to ask questions. As such, *U'Rchatz* falls under the same category. This reason explains why some families have the custom that only the head of the household washes at this point. Since the practice is primarily to get the children to ask questions, distinguishing between the head of the household and everyone else is sure to pique their interest.
- Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (*Haggadah Imrei Shefer*) says that our actions during the Seder should mimic the actions that were performed when the *korban pesach* was sacrificed. We want to remember how Pesach should ideally be celebrated, and therefore, we wash our hands as we would have washed them in sacrificing the *korban pesach*.

These two explanations for why we wash our hands before eating *karpas* complement each other to provide a deeper meaning and appreciation for *U'Rchatz*. If the only goal of *U'Rchatz* was to change our routine in order to spark interest among the children, our rabbis could have instituted any number of actions that diverge from our normal routine. It is possible that this practice was specifically chosen to offer a means to educate our children about the traditions of Pesach when the Beit haMikdash stood. An integral part of Pesach is educating our children and passing on the practices and traditions to the next generation. *U'Rchatz* is a way to connect our children to the way Pesach was celebrated in the past, and the way it will hopefully be celebrated in the near future.

כרפס: KARPAS Creative Karpas?



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Rosh Beit Midrash, 5770-5778**

Parsley and celery... or banana and pineapple? The former two items on the list are traditionally seen as Karpas material, but one could make the argument that the latter two items on the list are more true to the halachic purpose and philosophical meaning of Karpas.

Technically, the word *karpas* refers to certain wild greens (Mishnah Sheviit 9:1) or to green materials. (Esther 1:3) Therefore, it is commonly thought that the food we eat for Karpas must be green. However, this is not among the requirements established in the Talmud, Rambam or Shulchan Aruch; the Talmud does not even use the word *karpas* to describe this item eaten at the Seder. Our earliest source for this part of the Seder simply says to dip something, and it notes that *chazeret*, widely believed to be lettuce, is eligible:

They bring before him and he dips [even] chazeret before coming to the food that will be eaten with bread.
(Mishnah Pesachim 114a)

In discussing this dipped food in a later generation, the Talmud's expansion on this mishnah still does not use the word *karpas*. It only makes clear that this should be a food which warrants the blessing of *borei pri ha'adamah*, which is normally recited for produce which grows from the ground, including banana and pineapple:

Obviously, one who has other vegetables [besides marmor] should recite borei pri ha'adamah [at the karpas stage] and eat, and then recite al achilat marmor [at the marmor stage] and eat. Where one only has lettuce, what should he do? Rav Huna said: He should first recite borei pri ha'adamah on marmor [at the karpas stage] and eat, and then recite al achilat marmor [at the marmor stage] and eat. (Pesachim 114b)

The word *karpas* only enters our literature to describe this Seder food in Gaonic times. Still later sources would contribute layers of meaning linked to the word *karpas*, such as an anagram which scrambles the Hebrew letters of כרפס into כרפס indicating 600,000 slaves who suffered backbreaking labour], but these cannot limit our food choice to greens, given the absence of the word *karpas* in the original halachic sources.

What, then, is our *karpas*? A dipped item which warrants the blessing of *borei pri ha'adamah* as above, and which will cause children to ask questions:

As for your question about why we dip twice, it is to generate a reminder for children. (Pesachim 114b)

Indeed, the fact that we wash our hands before *karpas* may just be another way to inspire questions from our children. It is true that in the time of the Beit haMikdash we would wash before dipping produce, but this is generally not practiced today. Some suggest that we incorporate dipping at the Seder because this dipping is mitzvah-related. (Levush 473) Others suggest that it is meant to commemorate the washing practiced in the Beit haMikdash. (Netziv, introduction to Haggadah Imrei Shefer) But the major halachic works of the early 20th century, Aruch haShulchan (Orach Chaim 473:18) and Mishneh Berurah (Shaar haTziyun 473:69) both stated that we might wash simply to interest the children.

Given that our goal is to inspire children's questions with a food on which we recite *borei pri ha'adamah*, it would seem logical to use banana or pineapple, foods which qualify for the blessing and which are likely to attract more attention from children than celery or parsley.

Further, in the thought of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook our Karpas stage is meant to represent eating for pleasure.

After describing the purification that comes via washing before Karpas, Rabbi Kook quotes a talmudic statement (Shabbat 140b) that a person who lacks bread should not eat vegetables; vegetables stir up the appetite, and people who eat only out of necessity do not wish to be hungry. To Rabbi Kook, the vegetables of Karpas are meant to represent the food of the wealthy, who eat in order to enjoy the experience.

In Egypt, as Rabbi Kook writes, "Being lowered depressed the spirit to the point of the lowest immersion in life's nadir, in which one senses only the pleasure of [filling] the hungry stomach, "the fish... the cucumbers, the melons, the leek, the onions and the garlic. (Bamidbar 11:5)" But he continues to describe our growth, saying, "All of this was a long-term plan to impress upon us the message that nothing in life is so low that it cannot ascend... The kiln of gold removed the dross and catalyzed a mighty preparation, creating a purified gold worthy of entry into the land of desire, 'the land in which you will lack nothing – for Israel lacks nothing. (Berachot 36b)"

On this night, we evolve from the ever-hungry slaves of Egypt to the sated celebrants of the Seder, and our newfound physical pleasure enhances our ability to connect with G-d not under stress-bound, horizon-narrowing pressure, but with the full range of human feeling. This is represented in our Karpas – and so it would be logical for us to use not the pedestrian parsley and celery, but the more exotic and expensive banana and pineapple.

We see that banana and pineapple suit two critical aspects of Karpas: they trigger children's curiosity, and they represent luxury. To this we might add one more benefit: Once children see these used at the Seder, they will be far more likely to remember that their blessing is *borei pri ha'adamah*.

Did you know?

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מה נשתנה: WHY IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT? Curiosity or Wonder?

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Our retelling of the Exodus from Egypt begins with four questions. We ask the same questions every year, and, in fact, these questions are formulated for us in a mishnah (Pesachim 10:4). What is the purpose of these questions? The mishnah's language is unclear: We are told that at this point in the Seder the second cup is poured, and the son should ask his father questions. If the son does not have the intelligence to ask, then his father asks for him. This statement is followed by the text of the *mah nishtanah* and then by other components of the *Maggid* section of the Haggadah.

The continuity between the sections of this mishnah is ambiguous. Is the intention that the four questions are a prepared text to be used by a father if his son has no questions of his own to ask? This seems to be the understanding of the Talmud Yerushalmi (Pesachim 10:4), which identifies the varying questions that different types of children ask, and then correlates the *mah nishtanah* with the son who does not know how to ask. It follows from this reading that the questions are not an essential or formal part of the Seder. The Babylonian Talmud (Pesachim 116a) has a different take. It rules that the questions must be recited at every Seder, even when there are no children present, and even when one is conducting a Seder alone. Evidently, these questions are a formal part of the text, just like Pesach, Matzah, and Marror, and are independent of children's questions. The strongest formulation of this position is that of the Rambam (Laws of Chametz and Matzah 8:2) who seems to rule that even if the child has recited the *mah nishtanah* questions, the leader of the Seder must read them *again* as part of the official recitation of the Haggadah. The halachah follows the Babylonian Talmud's reading, though without the stringency of the Rambam (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 473:7 and N.B. the Rama's gloss). The *mah nishtanah* questions are a formal part of the Seder.

Why should this be case? Why should one ask questions which one will personally answer a short while later? Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk answered this question by first asking another one: We know that on Seder night we are required to retell the story of the Exodus. However, this mitzva seems identical to one which we fulfill twice a day anyhow, when we recall G-d's taking us out of Egypt in the third paragraph of the Shema. What is the difference between what we do at the Seder and what we do in shul just before? Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that there are several discrepancies between the retelling at the Seder and the Shema. One of these is that there is a question and answer format. The retelling at the Seder must be accomplished by first asking the questions (i.e. the *mah nishtanah*), and then responding to them. This is the reason why the four questions must be a formal part of the Haggadah text.

This approach invites certain critiques. Firstly, it is not immediately clear why a question and answer format is useful in all contexts. If a child is asking the questions, the pedagogical value is self-evident, but why should an individual need to ask himself? Also, we may note that questions we ask are not all directly answered in the course of the Seder. We never explicitly address the issues of leaning and dipping twice. This is strange if these questions form the core of the "call and response" format of the Seder.

A variation on Rabbi Soloveitchik's answer can be formulated by first changing our conception of the phrases in the *mah nishtanah*. We have been referring to them as questions, but perhaps they aren't. Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein notes that sentences beginning with the word *ma* (meaning what or how) can be understood as statements of exclamation, in stead of questions. For example, this is the case with the phrase "*mah tov u'ohalecha Yaakov*" (Bamidbar 24:5), which is not a request for information, but an exclamation – "How goodly are your tents, Yaakov!" The *mah nishtanah* phrases can be similarly interpreted. In stead of "Why is this night different?", we read "How different is this night!"

We can complete our approach to the questions by noting that the mitzvah of retelling the Exodus at the Seder includes not only historical information, but also lived experience. A mishnah (Pesachim 10:5) instructs Jews of every generation to see themselves as though they have left Egypt personally. The Rambam (Ibid, 7:6) adds that one must feel as though this redemption is happening now. How is it possible to feel the immediate effects of an event which occurred millennia ago? The most direct way is to recognize that the event never stopped. The opportunity for redemption recurs every year on Seder night. The Torah refers to night of the Exodus as *leil shimurim*, the night of watching. (Shemot 12:42) It is an evening which is primed for personal and communal redemption (see Shemot Rabbah 12). In this special time, we really can experience personal redemption, even at such a great temporal distance from the Exodus. But this will only happen if we become aware of the night's unique qualities. Perhaps this, then, is the goal of the four questions. They are an exercise in recognizing the disruption which has occurred in our regular lives. How strange and wonderful is this night! From this point of departure, we can engage in the story of the Exodus and it can have a real and direct impact.

We can now understand why the *mah nishtanah* is a formal part of every Seder. A sense of wonder is necessary for every Jew embarking upon the story of the Exodus. We attempt to instill our children with this wonder by stimulating their curiosity, but we are just as obligated to instill it in ourselves year after year.

מעשה ברבי אליעזר: THE SAGES IN BNEI BRAK Do You Have the Time?

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After informing us that even the great sages must tell the story of the Exodus, the Haggadah illustrates this point by noting that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon, the Torah giants of their generation(s), told the story of the Exodus from Egypt for the entire night, until they were told by their students that it was time to say the morning Shema.

Most discussions of these sages and their actions revolve around one of three questions:

1. How could Rabbi Akiva recline in front of his teachers, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, when a student ordinarily does not recline in front of his teachers?
2. What is Rabbi Eliezer, a resident of Lod, doing in Bnei Brak, when Rabbi Eliezer “praises the lazy person who does not leave his home on the holidays” (Sukkah 27b)?¹
3. Why did Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya participate in the all-night gathering, when his opinion is that the *korban pesach* may only be eaten until midnight (Pesachim 120b), and the telling of the story of the Exodus is intertwined with the time to eat the *korban pesach*?² In other words, according to Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya there is no mitzvah to tell the story of the exodus past midnight. Why did he stay up all night telling the story of the Exodus?³

When reading this passage at the Seder, I often wonder about a fourth question: Why didn't these great sages know that it was time to say Shema? As the ideal time to say Shema is immediately before sunrise (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 58:1), when there is already light outside, surely the great sages would have seen that it was nearly sunrise, and would have stopped on their own to say Shema. Why did they need to be reminded by their students that it was time to say Shema?

Rabbi Yitzchak Zylberstein (Chashukei Chemed, Introduction to Bava Metzia), quoting the Aderet,⁴ provides a fascinating answer. A midrash states that when Rabbi Eliezer would learn Torah, his face would radiate, like the light of the sun. Therefore, when these great sages were learning Torah, on the night of the Seder, the radiance was so great that it was impossible to tell whether it was night or day. The students, then, had to inform their teachers that it was daybreak, for otherwise the sages would not have known whether it was day or night.

The Maharal (Gevurot Hashem 53) provides a similar answer to this question. He asks: How could the sages have stayed up all night, and deprived themselves of sleep, which seemingly would have ruined their Yom Tov? He answers that the sages were so engrossed in the Seder that it felt to them as if only a short time had passed. In reality, the whole night had passed, but the sages only learned that it was morning when their students told them that it was morning.

What emerges from both answers is that the sages were so focused on the Seder that they did not realize that it was morning. Yet it is still odd that instead of saying that it was *morning*, the students communicated that it was time to say the morning *Shema*. Perhaps, an additional lesson may be learned from this exchange. One essential purpose of the Seder is to teach the next generation. It may be suggested that the best way to teach is by personal example. After observing their teachers' devotion at the Seder, the students were eager to apply their own devotion to a mitzvah. Thus, they did not merely state that it was morning; they stated that it was time to do another mitzvah.

Though it is doubtful that any of us will experience a Seder where he/she cannot tell the difference between night and day, we nonetheless must strive to have a Seder where we become so absorbed in the text of the Haggadah, in the explanations thereto, and in the divrei Torah that we share, that we lose track of time. By doing so, we can truly have a transcendental experience at our Seder, and, G-d willing, succeed in passing the Jewish tradition to the next generation.

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¹ See Maharatz Chiyut to Sanhedrin 32b

² See Ritva to this passage of the Haggadah. The Minchat Chinuch (mitzvah 21) discusses this as well.

³ See Reshimot Shiurim of Rabbi Soloveitchik (Berachot 9a), who answers that there are 2 aspects to the mitzvah, one that is applicable before midnight, and one that is applicable the whole night.

Rabbi Yaakov Kanievsky (the Steipler) famously answers that since the Seder took place in Bnei Brak, where Rabbi Akiva was the Rabbi, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah deferred to the opinion of Rabbi Akiva, who holds that the mitzvah is for the whole night (Kehilot Yaakov, Berachot 4; see there for other answers).

Rabbi Shlomo Aviner questions the answers to each of the three questions mentioned above, and ultimately concludes that even if we don't know the answers, the great sages found a way to reconcile their opinions with each other in order to have a Seder together, for the sake of unity.

⁴ Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim (1843-1905), was the Rabbi in Ponevezh, and then was a Rosh Yeshiva in Mir. In 1901 he moved to Jerusalem, to be the assistant and then successor of Rabbi Shmuel Salant, as the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, but fell ill and predeceased Rabbi Salant. He was the father-in-law of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook.



ארבעה בנים: THE FOUR CHILDREN The Wise and the Wicked?

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Women's Beit Midrash, 5776-5778

The typical Haggadah reader thinks of the *Chacham* as the 'good son' who cares about the halachah, and the *Rasha* as the 'bad son' who distances himself from the Jewish People. This impression is perpetuated by the artistic depictions of the Chacham and Rasha in many illustrated haggadot, and by the apparently harsh treatment of the Rasha in the answer given to his question.

While this perception is rooted in a straightforward reading of the Haggadah and in the traditions surrounding it, it is possible to uncover a more nuanced reading of both the Chacham and the Rasha from both the Haggadah and the related verses from the Torah. Such an approach enables us to regard these two 'children' less as caricatures, and instead view both the Chacham and Rasha as exhibiting beliefs and tendencies that are not uncommon – and that require parental and educational guidance.

With the Haggadah's identification of the first son as **chacham** (wise) and not a **tzaddik** (righteous - which would be the true opposite of a Rasha), there is already an opportunity to view his attitude as one that is imperfect and requires some direction. The Chacham asks the question: "What are these laws, statutes and ordinances that the Lord our G-d commanded you?" (Devarim 6:20) This inquiry exhibits an interest in and a focus on the halachic aspects of the observance of Pesach. The verses in Sefer Shemot from which our answer to the Chacham is taken (Devarim 6:21-24), instruct the parent to ensure that the child is not only versed in the practical aspects of the *korban pesach*. Instead, the answer begins by laying out the narrative of the slavery in Egypt ("*Avadim hayinu*" [we were slaves] ...), the miraculous salvation ("*B'yad chazakah*" [with a strong hand]...), and G-d's intended goal of giving us the land of Israel ("*Lema'an havi otanu*" [in order to bring us]...). Only after reiterating all the crucial aspects of the Exodus as a backdrop and justification are the mitzvot addressed ("*Vayitzaveinu*" [and He commanded us]...).

In the text of the Haggadah, where we have already introduced our retelling of the Exodus with "*Avadim hayinu*", the answer to the Chacham is focused on the specifics of halachah - but it is not meant to stand on its own. This is the meaning of **af atah emor lo** - therefore, **also** say to him. Having already told the Chacham the story of slavery, ensuring he has the proper prior understanding of the big picture, we can add in the detailed aspects of the halachah.

With this approach we now see the Chacham as having an admirable quality, but perhaps his focus on the laws of Pesach can be seen as a flaw. The parent or teacher needs to ensure that the Chacham recognizes that the halachah is directly connected to the story and to our relationship with G-d.

Turning to the Rasha, the Torah presents his question as one that is posed in generations well after the Exodus ("It will be, when you come to the land"...). (Shemot 12:25) In asking what is this service to **you**, the Rasha appears to be challenging the relevance of the Pesach service to the current generation. While the Rasha might appreciate the story of the Exodus as part of the national history, his apparently dismissive tone indicates that he might not value its relevance to Jewish life now.

In this light, the comment of "If he had been there, he would not have been redeemed (*nigal*)" may not be as harsh as it seems on the surface. There are four terms associated biblically with our redemption, *nigal/geulah* is only one of them. The first two (*v'hotzeiti*, [I will take out], and *v'hitzalti* [I will save]) speak to physical salvation, whereas *v'ga'alti* [I will redeem] refers to a recognition of the continuing relationship of G-d and His nation (...and you will know that I am Hashem your G-d" – Shemot 6:7). The Rasha's attitude might have him experience and appreciate the physical salvation of *v'hotzeiti* and *v'hitzalti*, but not the redemptive experience of *v'gaalti*. By this approach, "He would not have been redeemed" does not mean that the Rasha would not have been physically taken out of Egypt, but rather that the "*gaalti*" aspect would not have affected him. Rather than say that he would have been left behind in Egypt, we are saying he would have missed out on the critical spiritual nature of the experience. A foundational aspect of the Exodus is the message of "*Li bnei yisrael avadim*" – [Bnei Yisrael are servants to Me]." (Vayikra 25:55) This is as relevant to us now as it was to Bnei Yisrael in Egypt, and this is the point that the Rasha is missing out on in his belittling of the mitzvot. Therefore, the parent is instructed to pay attention to the tendencies of the "Rasha" and recognize that they, too, come from an incomplete appreciation of the full redemption of the Exodus.

Looking at the questions of the Chacham and the Rasha in this manner, their inquiries may in fact be two sides of the same coin. The Chacham relates to the halachah, but may overemphasize it and not appreciate its connection to the story. The Rasha may appreciate the story as a national experience, but does not see how it has ramifications for how we live our lives now, and, by extension for the halachot of the night. In a sense, both exhibit a disconnect between the *sippur yetziat mitzrayim* - the story, and the *eidot* and *chukim* - the halachah, and the parent's job is to connect the two.

Clearly, a perspective that devalues the mitzvot (i.e. that of the Rasha) is wrong. But neither is it sufficient to be a Chacham with a desire to know the halachic details, if this comes at the expense of internalizing the experiential aspects of the Exodus and the relationship it forged between our nation and G-d. Or, in the words of the Haggadah, "*Afilu kulanu Chachamim, kulanu nevonim, kulanu yodim et hatorah*" [even were we wise, educated, and aware of the rules of the Torah], we are commanded to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt."

יכול מר"ח: STARTING ON ROSH CHODESH? What's in a Moon?



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Rosh Beit Midrash, 5770-5778**

Immediately after presenting the Torah's four calls for us to teach our children about our national exodus from Egypt, the Haggadah cites a midrash which suggests, "Perhaps this teaching should have begun on Rosh Chodesh?" (Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael Bo 17) The midrash and Haggadah texts do not provide any reason for this suggestion, though; why would we think to discuss the departure from Egypt on Rosh Chodesh Nisan?

We may glean a simple answer from the Talmud's discussion (Pesachim 6a-b) of when we are supposed to begin learning the laws of Pesach:

- One view suggests we prepare for thirty days, because in Bamidbar 9 Moshe instructed the Jews in the wilderness about Pesach Sheni, for the 14th and 15th of Iyar, while they were celebrating Pesach Rishon one month earlier.
- Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel contends that two weeks suffice, because in Shemot 12 and Bamidbar 9, Moshe instructed the Jews regarding Pesach, for the 14th and 15th of Nisan, on Rosh Chodesh Nisan.

Using Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's argument, our mitzvah of teaching our children about leaving Egypt may begin on Rosh Chodesh Nisan because that is the date when Moshe taught the Jews the laws of Pesach. However, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, a.k.a. "the Netziv", saw a deeper idea at work in the selection of Rosh Chodesh.

The Torah repeatedly associates our departure from Egypt and our Pesach celebration with the month in which they take place. The verses include:

- "This month is for you the head of the months; it is for you the first of the months of the year. Tell the nation of Israel: On the tenth of this month they shall each take a sheep per clan, a sheep per home, etc." (Shemot 12:2-3)
- "Today you leave, in the month of Aviv." (ibid. 13:4)
- "Guard the holiday of matzot; for seven days you shall eat matzot, as I have commanded you, at the time of the month of Aviv, for then you left Egypt." (ibid. 23:15)
- "Guard the holiday of matzot; for seven days you shall eat matzot, as I have commanded you, at the time of the month of Aviv, for during the month of Aviv you left Egypt." (ibid. 34:18)
- "Guard the month of Aviv, and you shall make a Pesach for Hashem, your G-d, for in the month of Aviv G-d took you out of Egypt, at night." (Devarim 16:1)

The Netziv explained this close association between event and month: "This month, as a unit, caused you to leave Egypt then, in order to teach that the entire month is specially suited to inculcate the foundations of faith and service of G-d. From here we learn to involve ourselves in matters of Pesach from Rosh Chodesh, so that this immersion will help inculcate faith... And this is why we say in the Haggadah, 'Perhaps this teaching should begin on Rosh Chodesh?'" (Haamek Davar to Shemot 34:18)

The Netziv identified special traits for other months, too. Tishrei is the month when the world was created, and so it remains the month when the world's necessities are renewed with the judgment of Rosh HaShanah. (Birkat haNetziv, Bo 1) Adar is the month when we were saved from destruction, and the whole month is now suited for that celebration. (ibid., Bo 17) In sum, as Netziv wrote, "The date when something is created becomes a day suited for its strengthening in future generations."

It makes sense, then, that we entertain the possibility of beginning to educate our children with the Haggadah at the start of this special month. But then why does the Haggadah abandon that suggestion? As the Haggadah explains, Shemot 13:8 says to tell this story when we can point to "this", meaning to the ritual Seder objects, but what is the message of that instruction? Why not start on Rosh Chodesh and continue until the Seder?

Both Shemot 23:15 and Shemot 34:18 identify Pesach as a *chag* which occurs at a particular *moed*. A *chag* is a festival marked by our rituals; a *moed* is a pre-arranged time. What is the meaning of these dual identities?

- Indubitably, **the date of Pesach** is a *moed*, a Divinely arranged fate beyond the influence of human endeavour; G-d identified the date of our departure from Egypt centuries before it happened. According to Rabbi Yehoshua's talmudic view, Nisan was even selected for this role at the time of Creation. (Rosh HaShanah 10b-11a)
- However, **the commemoration that occurs on Pesach** is a *chag*, a feat of Divine composition but human execution; our *korban pesach*, our *matzah* and our *marror* are what comprise the celebration. As Devarim 16:1 commands, "Guard the month of Aviv, and **you shall make a Pesach** for Hashem, your G-d."

Perhaps this is why we reject the midrashic suggestion of Rosh Chodesh as a date to relate the story to our children. True, as the Netziv said, the *moed* of Nisan has been invested with potential ever since G-d selected it for our redemption. Nonetheless, the time to tell our children the story of that redemption is at the moment of *chag*, when we can say of the ritual objects of our Seder, "For **this** G-d took me out of Egypt." These mitzvot, the active participation of the Jew, were the reason for selecting Nisan in the first place; G-d redeemed us at the *moed*, but the goal was always *chag*.

May the Pesach we create, our *chag* celebration at this time of *moed*, set the stage for telling our children of our departure from Egypt in a way that they will remember and perpetuate for generations to come.

Did you know?

We engage in internal learning until 12:30 PM daily; this year, we are studying the 39 *melachot*.



מתחילה: IN THE BEGINNING “And now G-d has brought us close”

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A mishnah teaches that at our Seder we should “Begin with disgrace, and conclude with praise.” Rav and Shemuel, two talmudic sages, debate how to fulfill this: Rav says that we begin by describing our ancestors as idolaters; Shemuel says that we begin by describing our ancestors as slaves. We incorporate both views in our Haggadah.

Let us focus on Rav’s view, as it appears in our Haggadah: “In the beginning, our ancestors worshipped foreign gods, and now G-d has brought us near, to His service.” The disgrace in this is clear: our ancestors worshipped foreign gods. But what is the praise? If drawing near to G-d is the praise, why say that this is happening “**now**”? This happened long ago! And if it is about what happens now, how does it reflect any praise for our ancestors?

The author of the Haggadah chooses to strengthen his statement with passages from the final chapter of Yehoshua; when we understand these verses, we will also gain clarity regarding what the “praise” is, and why it is happening “now”.

Before his death, Yehoshua gathers the Jewish nation. He opens his address by describing the formation of the nation, “Historically your ancestors dwelled beside the river – Terach, father of Avraham and father of Nachor. And they served foreign gods.” (Yehoshua 24:2) But is Terach the father of the nation?

Biologically: Avraham was the son of Terach, and of course Yitzchak and Yaakov were his descendants as well. According to the Talmud (Megilah 14b) our matriarch Sarah is Yiskah, granddaughter of Terach. Rivkah, Yitzchak’s wife, is a great-granddaughter of Terach through Nachor and Betuel, and Rachel and Leah are Terach’s great-great-granddaughters through the line of Terach-Nachor-Betuel-Lavan. Further, according to a midrash, Bilhah and Zilpah were also daughters of Lavan, and therefore descendants of Terach. (Bereishit Rabi, Bereishit 29:24) What emerges, then, is that our patriarchs and matriarchs were indeed descendants of Terach.

Spiritually: The Kuzari (I 95) asserts that the “Divine trait” did not emerge in Terach, but he carried a special affinity for it, which passed to his descendants.

In truth, we relate to Avraham as a sort of Adam, in his journey to Canaan at the Divine command of *lech lecha*, “Go from your land... to the land I will show you.” (Bereishit 12:1) But according to the Torah’s text, even before this his father Terach had taken his entire family on a journey to Canaan: “And Terach took... to go to the land of Canaan; and they reached Charan, and they settled there.” (Bereishit 11:31) What was the meaning of this trip? And why did they stop at Charan?

Terach harbors potential – the unique ability to abandon idolatry and follow G-d. Terach fulfills an element of spiritual growth, abandoning all and taking his family on the path to Canaan. [See Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer 8, pg. 147.] But the difficulties of the journey, and perhaps the financial situation in Canaan (which would ultimately compel Avraham to descend to Egypt), humble him. He halts in Charan, and therefore *lech lecha* is not identified with him.

When Avraham obeys the *lech lecha* call, he starts from a more advanced position; he is already partway to Canaan, and he finishes the mission. This is hinted at in the Torah’s use of similar language for the two journeys to Canaan:

- “And Terach took his son Avram, and Lot son of Haran... And they departed with them from Ur Kasdim to go toward the Land of Canaan, and they arrived, etc.” (Bereishit 11:31)
- “And Avram took his wife Sarai, and Lot his brother’s son.. And they departed to go toward the Land of Canaan, and they arrived, etc.” (ibid. 12:5)

Only after this verse, when Avraham sees his mission as an extension of his father’s mission, does G-d appear to him for the first time and promise him the Land of Israel. G-d draws him near to His service, and Avraham first builds an altar. (ibid. 12:7)

Yehoshua stands before the children of those who had left Egypt and died along the way, and he begins his address by talking about Terach. This is not a historical summary; he omits central events like the revelation at Sinai and the Golden Calf. Yehoshua wishes only to deliver a message to the nation: You have merited to settle the land, but remember that you are here because of the merit of your biological and spiritual ancestors. The land was promised to the ancestors of this nation, your ancestors who were slaves in Egypt and idolaters, and who chose to leave that in order to serve G-d. They walked through the wilderness, but did not succeed in reaching the promised land, and now you have continued their path and have merited the fulfillment of the Divine promise.

This is the praise for our ancestors – that despite the difficulties, they worked to reach the promised land, and they paved the way for us, granting us the opportunity to receive the land they never merited to see. We begin with the disgraceful description of where our ancestors began, and as Maharal noted, this enables us to understand the greatness of what they did. (Netzach Yisrael 1) On this night we praise them and see ourselves as continuing their path, in their merit. And so we bring that past into our present, and as we say in the Haggadah, “**now** G-d has brought us near, to His service.” It began when they drew close, and it is fulfilled as we complete the journey.

צא ולמד: GO OUT AND LEARN Is Bagel-and-Lox Judaism Worth Anything?

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וְהָיָה שָׁם לְגוֹי - מִלְמַד שֶׁהָיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל מְצַיֵּינִים שָׁם.

And there, he became a nation - this teaches that Israel was distinctive there.

What made Israel distinctive as they lived in Egypt? The classic commentaries of the Haggadah credit geographical isolation in the suburb of Goshen, as well as several other elements which can be found in midrashim. While some elements can be traced to earlier and more authoritative works, and others less so, the following are listed in some form or another: in Egypt, Israel would not engage in forbidden relationships, nullify the practice of circumcision, speak lashon hara, reveal each other's secrets, change their names, change their language, change their manner of dress, or change their culinary habits.¹ Most importantly, a significant number of these midrashim claim that it was in the merit of these behaviors that our nation was eventually redeemed.

At first glance, such a claim is rather surprising. While indeed, some of the items on these lists relate to important laws that we continue to practice today, a significant number seem to address areas that we might consider more trivial, if not entirely unnecessary. Why then, have our Sages placed them on such a pedestal, claiming that without them, the redemption could not have occurred?

The answer likely lies in the unifying theme that these behaviors represent. All of them, in one way or another, are the ingredients of what our Haggadah boils it all down to – being a גוי, a nation with its own culture and identity. Some characteristics may be less intrinsically important than others, but when taken together, they make up the essential building blocks for a people that stands in distinction to others. Why is that so important for our leaving Egypt? Quite simply, an absence of these elements would have led to a complete dissolution of our identity. It's not so much that these behaviors inherently merited salvation, but that they set the stage for it, making it possible. Had we completely assimilated into Egyptian society, without any manner of distinguishing ourselves from the rest of the country, there would have been no nation left to save. It is in this sense that the building and maintaining of a national identity, with its own culture, deserves some credit in our Pesach story tonight.

That being the case, the follow-up question, of course, is whether or not these values are equally relevant and necessary today. Certainly, marital fidelity, circumcision, and the laws of lashon hara deserve our full endorsement, but what of Jewish names, speaking Hebrew, Jewish dress, and Jewish food? We often live our lives without these elements, and some of them are even derided as the hollow forms of “bagel-and-lox Judaism”, superficial connections to a heritage that is far richer than they can express. Do these practices deserve more credit than we typically give them? To complicate matters further, our ancestors in Egypt were most certainly not eating gefilte fish, dressing in manners now associated with “traditional” Judaism, or giving their children nice “Jewish” names like Velvel or Shprintze. Is the very notion of a genuine Jewish culture even possible to pursue today?

In a responsum² concerning the propriety of non-Jewish names, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein considers the possibility that these elements of Jewish culture praised by our midrashim are no longer relevant. He argues that perhaps, in a post-Sinai world, our national culture and identity was effectively replaced with something far more valuable – our Torah, its mitzvot, and its ethics. Certainly, a far greater mark of distinction can be found in their observance – which often require that we stand as a nation apart from others – than in Jewish names. And yet, despite the logic of this suggested approach, Rabbi Feinstein still felt that it was improper to give children names lacking a genuinely Jewish source.³ Why?

It would seem that in his ultimate view of the topic, it should be considered a false choice to pit the Jewish culture of our midrashim up against Torah observance. Perhaps both are valuable for the following reason: while the primacy of Torah observance should be a given for us, for many among our people, it sadly is not. In light of this reality, contemporary Jewish culture – even when it couldn't be further from the practices of Goshen's Israelites – also serves a significant purpose that shouldn't be overlooked. As in Egypt, it is the cultural element that can keep a Jew's identity distinct, with identifiable features and expressions of belonging to our people. That sense of belonging, like in Egypt, can keep alive the potential for each individual to blossom with their own personal redemption, within the more developed system of what Judaism now is. In contrast, without even “cultural Judaism” keeping one connected, assimilation can yield an even greater danger, that of an irreversible trajectory out of the fold.

Indeed, we should celebrate a national identity that is so much richer than “bagels and lox”, but our tradition teaches us that those little things are also of worth – like in Egypt, they can serve as the springboard for so much more.

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¹ See Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kasher's *Torah Sheleimah* 8, pg. 239 for a complete analysis of the various midrashim.

² Igrot Moshe, Orach Chayim 4:66

³ He was, however, willing to make exceptions for naming after relatives in their honour.

Did you know?

We hold Business Ethics Lunch and Learns, many of which are CLE-eligible, at GTA businesses.



ויצעק: AND WE CRIED OUT Binding Heaven and Earth

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And we cried out to the Lord, the G-d of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice, and He saw our affliction, and our toil and our duress. (Deuteronomy 26:7)

Over the past several years, drought conditions have posed a growing threat to Israeli agriculture. Desalination technology and water conservation have provided some recourse to alleviate this painfully difficult situation; however, Israeli farmers still face significant challenges. The situation reached an interesting crossroads when the Minister of Agriculture, Uri Ariel, invited farmers and the broader community to a public prayer gathering at the Kotel on the 10th of Tevet (Dec. 28, 2017).¹ Many significant personalities, including both Chief Rabbis, Rabbis Yitzchak Yosef and Dovid Lau were in attendance. In an interview with Ynet, Minister Ariel was asked, “Do you honestly think that this is the way to solve a drought?” Ariel’s answer throughout the interview was an unequivocal yes. He had done all that he could in his capacity as the Minister of Agriculture and was now turning to prayer as a tool which has tremendous precedent standing behind it from the Jewish tradition.²

In a tweet that doesn’t directly reference Min. Ariel,³ Rabbi Yuval Cherlow wondered, “Is the Minister of Defense permitted to be a partner in a mass prayer for the success of our soldiers? The Minister of Transportation to cry out over road accidents? The Minister of Labor at a rally at the Western Wall to stop construction site accidents? The Minister of Religious Affairs in a deep prayer for the success of Torah learning?”⁴ The answer is that it depends. If the prayer gathering is being organized to brush a failure to take responsibility under the proverbial rug, it would be wrong to take part in such a gathering. On the other hand, if the official in question has acted honestly, performed his or her civil duty faithfully, and now finds it fitting to turn to prayer, then, “[H]is world is directed by the greatness of man and also in light of his limitations. Therefore he prays - this is the person who binds heaven and earth.”⁵

Perhaps the most striking discussion found in the follow up comments to Rabbi Cherlow’s tweet is that of balancing **human effort, hishtadlut**, and pure trust in and **reliance upon G-d’s intervention, bitachon**. The source of *bitachon* and the proper understanding of it has been subject to great debate across generations of Jewish thinkers. Starting with Tanach, on through the leaders of our own time, it is common to come across markedly disparate views on *bitachon*. On the one hand, statements such as, “When you take the field against your enemies...have no fear of them, for the Lord your G-d...is with you.” (Devarim 20:1), have been understood to be general calls to have trust in the imminence of G-d’s salvation even in the most dire of situations.⁶ At the same time, the very fact that such trust is formulated in the context of war highlights the importance of human action and effort. Nevertheless, a clear stream of thought develops across a variety of traditional sources that emphasizes the power of *bitachon* to enable salvation. Some argue that *bitachon* is the trust in G-d’s ability to save one, that is: G-d **can**.⁷ Others make clear that not only can G-d accomplish the task, but also that He **will**, provided the requisite level of *bitachon* has been achieved.⁸

Rabbi Cherlow clearly favors the former approach and sets forth a practical suggestion to approaching this often difficult balance between *hishtadlut* and *bitachon*. In Shemuel I 14:6, Shaul’s son, Yonatan and his armor bearer are faced with the prospect of an intimidating adversary – a large contingent of Philistine soldiers. As battle looms, “...Yonatan said to the young man that bore his armor, Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised: perhaps the Lord will perform for us: for there is no restraint upon the Lord to save the many or the few.” This verse represents three key elements of *bitachon* that are made most clear when viewed in reverse order. First, we acknowledge to unlimited power and dominion of G-d - “for there is no restraint upon the Lord.” Next, the uncertainty which is part of the fabric of our lives enters - “perhaps the Lord will perform for us.” This uncertainty itself is the catalyst for action accompanying *bitachon* - “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised.”

As Rabbi Cherlow notes in a comment to his original tweet, “We live in constant flux between these two poles [*hishtadlut* and *bitachon*].” Our lives are filled with situations that demand *hishtadlut* and could seemingly be navigated without the spiritual experience of *bitachon*. On the surface, it’s very easy to assume that the times in which our response slides heavily toward *bitachon*, meaning there is little to no concrete action that can be undertaken, are rare. One might think that the response of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt, “we cried out to the Lord, the G-d of our ancestors” is reserved for those situations which appear all but hopeless. This is far from the truth. The state of flux that Rabbi Cherlow describes is a daily experience and represents both a challenge and opportunity to bind heaven and earth.

¹ <https://goo.gl/4FDHfT>

² See, for example, the first three chapters of Mishnah Taanit

³ From both R’ Cherlow’s post and his responses to comments, it seems he was using the occasion as an opportunity to speak broadly about the ethics involved in the relationship between religion and politics in Israel.

⁴ <https://goo.gl/jHFM6T>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Shaarei Teshuvah 3:31-32

⁷ See Chazon Ish, Emunah UBitachon ch. 2

⁸ See Madregat Ha’Adam, Darchei HaBitachon pg 152-153. See also The Limits Of Religious Optimism: The Hazon Ish and The Alter Of Novardok On Bittahon, R’ Daniel Stein, Tradition 43(2).

וּנְצַעֵק: AND WE CRIED OUT The Necessity of Hope



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Rosh Beit Midrash, 5770-5778**

The midpoint of Maggid, arriving after we have introduced the mitzvah of telling our story and after we have described our original idolatry and descent into slavery, is the following verse:

And the Egyptians harmed us and oppressed us, and set hard labour upon us. And we cried out to Hashem, G-d of our ancestors, and G-d heard our voices and saw our suffering, our struggle and our strain. (Devarim 26:6-7)

This retrospective verse summarizes a longer passage found earlier in the Torah:

And it was, after many days, the King of Egypt died, and the Children of Israel groaned from the labour and they cried out, and their wail rose to G-d, from the labour. And G-d heard their cry, and G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. And G-d saw the Children of Israel, and G-d knew. (Shemot 2:23-25)

This is the fulcrum of our redemption; pressure upon us generates our prayer, which pushes upward to result in our redemption. But why did we wait so long to call out to G-d? What was it about this moment, nearly 210 years after our descent to Egypt, that triggered our plea for salvation?

One might suggest that we actually prayed all along, but only now was G-d ready to hear us, because the pre-ordained moment of our redemption had not yet arrived. This is difficult, though; there was a pre-set date for our exit from Egypt (Bereishit 15:13), but our verse stresses the association with the death of Pharaoh! Further, couldn't that date be descriptive, rather than prescriptive?

This question leads commentators to assume that some factor prevented us from praying until this moment in time. Suggestions of what the obstacle may have been include:

- Until this point we thought that life would improve with Pharaoh's death. Once he died, and our situation did not improve, we cried out to G-d. (Ramban to Shemot 2:23) This is difficult, though; the death, and not its aftermath, seems to be the trigger for our cries.
- Life was not yet difficult enough to warrant prayer; Pharaoh's "death" was actually his experience of *tzara'at*, a disease which he tried to cure by bathing in the blood of Jewish babies. (Rashi to Shemot 2:23) This is challenging, though; was slavery and the drowning of Jewish babies not reason to cry out?
- One might suggest that we did not cry out earlier because we were idolatrous, as per Yehoshua 24:14 and Yechezkel 20:7-9. But why would Pharaoh's death have led to an end for our idolatry?

We might suggest another approach: the Jews did pray, but their prayer lacked Hope until the death of Pharaoh.

There is a classic debate between Rambam and Ramban regarding the actual mitzvah of prayer. Rambam writes:

There is a commandment to pray daily... And the number of prayers is not set biblically, and the text of prayers is not set biblically, and prayer does not have a biblically set time. This is the obligation of the commandment: To ask and pray daily, telling the praise of G-d, and then asking for one's needs with a request and plea, and then offering praise and thanks to G-d for the good that G-d has bestowed upon him, each according to his needs. (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillah 1:1-2)

Rambam emphasizes a duty-bound acknowledgement of our needs and recognition of Divine deeds. But Ramban emphasizes a different element:

If the exegesis of prayer has a biblical root, we will count it in the Rambam's count [of biblical mitzvot] and say that it is a mitzvah, in a time of troubles, to believe that G-d hears prayer and saves from troubles through prayer and crying out. (Hasagot to Sefer haMitzvot, Aseh #5)

In other words, as Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein explained in his article *The Duties of the Heart and the Response to Suffering*, "Ramban speaks of a duty to believe that *tefillah* [prayer] is efficacious, rather than of a duty to pray." Hope is a requirement for meaningful, acceptable prayer.

The same idea may underlie a mishnah which teaches, "One who cries out for what has passed is praying uselessly. If one's wife is pregnant, and one says, 'May it be G-d's will that my wife birth a son,' this is a useless prayer. If one is coming in from the road and he hears a cry in the city and he says, 'May it be G-d's will that this not be in my house,' this is a useless prayer." (Mishnah Berachot 9:1) Many halachic sources dictate that prayer for miracles which defy hope is prohibited. (Sefer Chasidim 795, Shenot Eliyahu to Berachot 54a, Rabbi Akiva Eiger to Orach Chaim 230, Igrot Moshe Orach Chaim 2:111) Perhaps it is for this reason: hope is a requirement for meaningful, acceptable prayer.

Perhaps, then, the Jews cried out for a miracle all through their suffering, but they did not truly think that their situation could change. Only with the death of Pharaoh did the nation dream of salvation and put their faith in G-d to rescue them, and then G-d heard their cry.

This does not mean that we should refrain from prayer until we have full faith that G-d will answer. Rather, we continue to offer our prayers to G-d, all the while seeking grounds to believe that this time might be different, a factor that has changed such that our results may be better, the death of the old which enables the birth of the new.

Did you know?

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עשר מכות: THE TEN PLAGUES The Death of the Firstborn

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring jziring@torontotorah.com
Sgan Rosh Beit Midrash, 5775-5778



THE DEATH OF THE FIRSTBORN.

Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Death_of_the_First-born_\(1878\)_-TIMEA.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Death_of_the_First-born_(1878)_-TIMEA.jpg). Colour version available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Foster_Bible_Pictures_0063-1_The_Death_of_the_Firstborn.jpg

The painting reproduced here is entitled “Death of the Pharaoh’s Firstborn Son”, by Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1872). In it, you see a stony eyed Pharaoh with his son, lying dead in his lap. In contrast to his depressed but calm demeanor, his wife, the boy’s mother, is hysterical, her head buried in her son’s cold torso. In front of Pharaoh, several bald servants (priests?) are prostrating themselves, seemingly making a request of the king. Other characters are present – a dejected looking servant at Pharaoh’s side, other Egyptians playing music (perhaps in mourning?) in the background, and what seems like two Jews in the background entering the room, perhaps Moshe and Aharon.

This depiction forces us to imagine the scene in the aftermath of the death of the first-born, one that depends on the resolution of a seeming contradiction between two verses.

When Moshe issues his final warning to Pharaoh, the Torah records that meeting as follows:

*Moses said, “Thus says the Lord: Toward midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians, and every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle. And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again; but not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites, at man or beast—in order that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. **Then all these courtiers of yours shall come down to me and bow low to me**, saying, ‘Depart, you and all the people who follow you!’ After that I will depart.” And he left Pharaoh’s presence in hot anger. (Shemot 11:4-8, JPS 1985)*

Moshe indicates that it is not Pharaoh who will bow to Moshe, but only his servants. However, after the plague strikes, the Torah records that:

And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians—because there was a loud cry in Egypt; for there was no house where there was not someone dead. He summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, “Up, depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you! Go, worship the Lord as you said! Take also your flocks and your herds, as you said, and begone! And may you bring a blessing upon me also!” The Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the country, for they said, “We shall all be dead.” (Shemot 12:30-33, JPS 1985)

These verses seem to indicate that Pharaoh is so distraught that he himself runs out to beg Moshe and Aharon to leave the country. Which is it?

The Talmud (Zevachim 102a) assumes that in fact it was Pharaoh himself, who in anguish, forgets the formalities of the royal court and humbles himself before Moshe, pleading that the Jews leave and end the torture he has endured. When Moshe said it would be Pharaoh’s servants who would come to him, he was showing respect for the monarch, refraining from discussing his utter degradation.

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, also known as “Netziv” (Haamek Davar, Shemot 11:8), notes that one could have concluded that in fact Pharaoh never went to Moshe. Rather, the verse means that Pharaoh communicated through a messenger, but maintained his dignity even when he succumbed to G-d’s demand and let the people go.

What hangs in the balance is not simply a question of how Pharaoh conveyed his wishes to Moshe - it is the nature of the broader narrative. Chazal’s image, as immortalized by Uncle Moishe, is a “Pharaoh in pajamas in the middle of the night.” The king, who has been able to refuse to obey G-d’s command time after time, is finally broken. He had managed to harden his heart, or have his heart hardened, after each plague, but the last time was too much. As his resolve broke, his dignity went with it. So, when he changed his mind and chased the Jews into the sea, this can be understood in different ways. Either, when the pain was fresh, Pharaoh broke down, but as soon as the pain has faded into the past, he collected himself and returned to the hardened dictator he had been just days before. The scene after the death of his son had been temporary. Alternatively, it was specifically that pain that drove him to the sea, even when G-d’s hand was so evident. The pain that could make him free the slaves was the same one that could drive him irrationally to seek vengeance, even if it cost him his empire, and perhaps his life.

However, if the Netziv’s alternative read is correct, perhaps the scene looked very different, more like it does in this painting. Pharaoh remained cold and calculated. However, all around him, he saw pain and devastation. He too had been hit. As king, he made the executive decision that his nation could take no more. A few days later, however, the calculation seemed wrong. His nation had been struck hard, but he could help them recover. He could convince them to channel their pain into bravery, to bring their slaves back. And so he would try, though ultimately fail.

When we imagine the Exodus, do we imagine a frenzied monarch driven by pain, irrationally freeing and then chasing his slaves to his doom? Do we imagine a hysterical king who needed only to wait and calm down for his cruel personality to reassert itself? Or do we see a calculating Pharaoh, constantly weighing what his nation can handle, pushing them to inflict as much agony on the Jews as they can manage? And which king is it that G-d wanted to bring to his knees at the sea? The Torah leaves it vague and ambiguous so that we can visualize it in different ways, immersing ourselves in the greatest story ever told. And seeing how others visualized it helps us do just that.



בכל דור ודור: IN EVERY GENERATION כֵּאלִילוֹ: The Importance and Significance of Narrative

**Sofia Freudenstein, sofiayfreudenstein@gmail.com
Women's Beit Midrash, 5777-5778**

In 2018, many of us are frightened of the news. We worry about what is real and what is fake. We seem to be beginning to truly recognize the power of narrative when receiving information. Our sources of knowledge cannot simply state the facts without subjective intentionality and significance that affect how information is presented. This might seem like a new issue in our world of technology and international communication, but it has in fact been a constant reality throughout history. The holiday of Pesach is a clear example of this phenomenon because it is a holiday where we are commanded to tell a story. But how does one tell the story? Which form of narrative does one choose? Not only in the technical sense, but how does one tell the story responsibly, especially if we are not primary witnesses of the event? What messages are we trying to send at our Pesach Seder when we tell the story?

The classic text on this topic that we read in the *Haggadah* is taken from the Talmud:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים שנאמר (שמות יג, ח) והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ד' לי בצאתי ממצרים

In each and every generation a person must view himself as though he left Egypt, as it is stated: "And you shall tell your son on that day, saying: It is because of this which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:8) (Pesachim 116b)

The Talmud (uncharacteristically) does not go into detail as to how to view oneself as though one left Egypt. The Rambam provides a bit more detail. He understands the commandment of viewing oneself as leaving Egypt to mean adopting the mentality of leaving actual slavery. One must truly imagine oneself as a slave who was freed.¹ Although it is helpful that the Rambam provides a how-to for this commandment, in the 21st century it is hard for us to relate to the concept of slavery. Slavery definitely still exists in the world, but not explicitly in our Western first-world context, while in Rambam's medieval Middle Eastern world it was an everyday reality. Is this how we *too* are still supposed to relate to the mitzvah, or was the Rambam's description merely helping the Jews of his time period?

Rav Shagar (Rabbi Shimshon Gershon Rosenberg, 1949-2007), a Religious Zionist rabbi who is becoming more well-known for his writings that grapple with postmodernism and Judaism,² understands the commandment differently than the Rambam does. Postmodernism in the secular understanding focuses not on facts but rather on the messages and meanings behind the facts. In the postmodern understanding, the world cannot be explained by facts alone, because it is not possible to certainly know what is true and what is not. Rav Shagar uses this approach to explain how to relate to the mitzvah of viewing oneself as if one left Egypt. Rav Shagar understands this mitzvah not as relating to the actual slave mentality as the Rambam suggests, but rather as an eternal example of struggle and fighting for what is right in the context of every new generation.³ He wants the Exodus to be relevant for the contemporary Jew, and to provide hope for all types of struggles. He understands the explanation in the Talmud by focusing on the prefix of "כֵּאלִילוֹ", "as if," stressing the significance of the Exodus more by analogy rather than truly relating to slavery.

One could suggest that Rav Shagar is not novel in this interpretation, but in fact has precedent within the Tanach itself. Different leaders throughout Jewish history have explained the Exodus story focusing on different aspects in relation to the issues of that time, which seems to correlate with Rav Shagar's search for the relevant meaning of the Exodus narrative for every generation. The first example after the generation of Israelites that experienced the Exodus itself is at the time of Joshua, when right before his death he recounts the history of the Israelites thus far. When he gets to the Exodus story, the focus of Joshua's narrative is that when the Israelites cried out to G-d in specific times of distress, G-d helped them.⁴ Joshua does not mention the slavery itself, but rather stresses G-d's quick response to the Israelites' needs. Joshua is speaking to a recently settled group of Israelites, who are still trying to figure out what it means to be G-d's nation and need real reassurance that G-d will help them when in trouble. Joshua is using specific aspects of the Exodus narrative in order to push his contemporary agenda, recognizing which parts of the Exodus story will truly resonate and comfort the Israelites at that moment. This is just one of many times the Exodus narrative is recounted and rephrased with certain nuances that have the ability to impact the national feelings of the Jews in a given time period in order to combat their contemporary oppressions and struggles, just as Rav Shagar suggests.

There are many ways to tell stories. Instead of being scared of the spin or attempting to be completely objective, Pesach demands of us to own up to the different narratives within our tradition, and to use them to our benefit to better ourselves as individuals. This can be done by taking the Maimonidean approach and viewing oneself as a freed slave, or by finding a contemporary world issue and making *that* one's Exodus as a more Shagarian approach.

May we find our personal Exodus stories relevant and fulfilling this Pesach.

¹ Mishneh Torah, Leavened and Unleavened Bread 7:6

² For more information, check out the newly translated into English *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age*, Koren Publishers 2017.

³ לוחות ושברי לוחות: הגות יהודית נוכח הפוסטמודרניזם, pg. 431

⁴ Joshua 24:5-7

בכל דור ודור: IN EVERY GENERATION The Burst of Emotions

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In the Haggadah, we are told that “one is obligated to see himself as if he had left Egypt.” When reading these words we should ask ourselves: is it possible for us to truly feel that Hashem took us out? What can we do to realize this challenging mitzvah and experience *Yetziat Mitzrayim* [the Exodus] in a personal way?

The Rambam (*Hilchot Chametz U'Matzah* 7:6) cites this halachah, but with a subtle yet significant change in the text: “In each generation one is obligated to **display** himself as if he **now** left from the bondage of Egypt...” Rambam’s adaptation differs from the wording found in most Haggadot. He says “display” rather than “see”. What does he accomplish by doing so?

We began by asking how is it possible to see oneself as having personally escaped the slavery of Egypt. It seems that the Rambam struggled with this very question. Indeed it is quite difficult to “see” ourselves as having escaped; however, a display of freedom is very much within our reach. One who expresses himself behaviorally, acts in an outward display that achieves this objective. The Rambam understood that while our goal is to “see” ourselves as having left, we can only do so by way of displaying what the experience would have looked like if we were, in fact, participants. The Seder night is all about creating the perfect setting, the ambiance which allows us to step into the role we have been cast to play each year on Pesach.

Therefore, we eat the matzah, the same food as our impoverished forefathers. We taste the bitter *marror* as a reminder of their suffering, and we drink four cups of wine symbolic of the freedom they were given. According to the Rambam, bringing the events of the Exodus to life is the most effective method of reliving the story. By doing this, we come closer to understanding the emotional state of the people who actually left.

The author of our Haggadah appears to have a more ambitious goal in mind. Although we do bring the Exodus to life at the Seder, we do not stop there. Our ultimate goal is “to see ourselves” as having left personally, not merely understanding the mindset of those who lived it. Through reliving their experience we strive to internalize and personalize the feelings of those whose story we tell on Pesach.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in his work *Zman Cheiruteinu*, makes this very point:

Man is incapable of praising and glorifying with passion unless he senses the inspiration within himself. The events that occurred are not merely relevant for us... rather they are part of who we are... b'chol dor v'dor is not a mitzvah of eating; it's an emotion and a state of mind. We should awaken our emotions and feel connected to Jewish history.

The way to envision ourselves as having actually left Egypt on the night of the Seder can only be achieved with astute emotional awareness. The display that we perform around our tables brings us to that sense of connection.

With this understanding, we can answer another well-known question. Many have asked why there is no blessing on the mitzvah of *maggid*. We know that the commandment of “And you shall tell your son” is a biblical mitzvah; why do we not recite a *berachah* for it as we do for all of the other mitzvot of this night?

The *Chatam Sofer* suggests that in fact, *maggid* does have a blessing. As we conclude the *maggid* section of the Haggadah we say, “He who redeemed us and our forefathers from Egypt...” and we conclude “Blessed are You... Redeemer of Israel.” But if this is true, asks the *Chatam Sofer*, why does this blessing differ from most other blessings upon mitzvot, which are recited prior to the performance of their mitzvah?

In explaining why this blessing is atypical, the *Chatam Sofer* offers a comparison to another such blessing that can only be recited after the mitzvah is complete. When a non-Jew completes the conversion process, his final step is immersion in the mikvah. Only when he exits the mikvah can he recite the blessing. The most basic reason for this is that prior to entering the mikvah, he is still not a Jew and is still unfit to recite blessing.

This may explain the concluding blessing of the Haggadah as well. When we begin reading the Haggadah we see ourselves as those slaves from generations ago. We are subservient to the Egyptian nation and nearly consumed by the presence of idolatry in their culture. Can a person in our situation honestly declare that he is free?

The paragraph of “In every generation” introduces the conclusion of the Haggadah. At this point, specifically, we begin to reflect on the entire journey from bondage to freedom. After celebrating the splitting of the Sea and the burst of emotions that came with the confidence of freedom, we can finally thank Hashem properly in declaring “Redeemer of Israel” – that He has given us, in each and every generation, an everlasting freedom.

Did you know?

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הלל: HALLEL Sing, and You Will Understand Why

**Rabbi Jonathan Ziring jziring@torontotorah.com
Sgan Rosh Beit Midrash, 5775-5778**

Sometimes in Tanach, a narrative will be accompanied by a song. The splitting of the sea is followed by the exultant song of the Jews, led by Moshe and Miriam; the victory over Sisera is paired with Devorah's beautiful (and at times, biting) ballad. In some cases, the song provides details absent in the story itself, as in the case of Devorah. However, the primary goal is usually to provide perspective, rather than relay facts. Hence, *Az Yashir*, the thanksgiving offered after the splitting of the sea, reflects the ethos of the moment. Moshe had insisted that the Jews need only remain silent because G-d alone would fight the Egyptians (Shemot 14:14). Thus, the song outlines how G-d is the "Man of War", the hero in this battle. In contrast, the story of Devorah reflects the responsibility of human beings to participate, allowing G-d to work through them rather than without them. Hence, Devorah tells Barak that his unwillingness to go to war without her would cause the glory to go to someone else, a woman, who would defeat the enemy. Her song builds on this, lauding the tribes who entered the battle and acerbically rebuking those who shirked their national duties.

The Hallel we sing at the Seder is referred to as *Hallel HaMitzri* (or *Hallela Mitzra'a* in the Talmud's Aramaic), the Egyptian Hallel (Berachot 56a). Rashi (ibid s.v. *Hallela Mitzra'a*) writes that it is so called because it is the Hallel we say during the seder. It seems that its role in the seder is not merely to praise G-d for the miracles, but to provide perspective on the tale of the Exodus. Moreover, as Rashi notes (s.v. *Nisi Mitrachish Lach*), this unit of psalms is meant to be said after Jews experience **any salvation**. Thus, its message should frame our understanding of all such events.

An example of this is found in chapter 115 of Psalms. We beseech G-d that He continue to save us, not for our sake, but for His. Not for us, but so that His name will be honoured. If G-d does not save us, the nations of the world will think that G-d is no better, or is perhaps weaker, than the worthless idols. Thus, we declare our conviction that it is only worth having hope in G-d. This belief, we hope, will convince G-d to save us in the future.

This argument has a history. After the Jews plummeted from the spiritual heights of Mount Sinai to the depths of the Golden Calf, Moshe could not in good faith argue that the Jews deserved to be spared. Instead, Moshe argued that there was no choice. G-d has brought the Jews out of Egypt, and in so doing his legacy was inescapably tied up with the Jewish people. If He killed the Jews, the nations of the world would assume that He was too weak to take them further, too weak to defeat the kings of Canaan (Shemot 32:11-12). G-d accepted this argument when there should have been nothing to say. (Note that Moshe also invoked the merit of our forefathers as part of his appeal.)

Again, when all hope was lost after the sin of the Spies, Moshe pulled out this argument (Bamidbar 14). In Haazinu, as understood by Rabbi Nechemiah (Sifri Devarim 368), the fear that the enemies of the Jews will say "Where is their G-d" is that which ensures that G-d does not abandon the Jews, even if they might deserve it. This argument is advanced again by Yechezkel (Chapter 36) and several times throughout Tehillim.

What does this argument mean, and why does it have any merit? If the Jews don't deserve to represent G-d, why would G-d be forced to allow them to survive and continue to do so? Ramban (Devarim 32:16) explains that the purpose of the entire world is to sanctify the name of G-d, to ensure that His legacy be known. To this end, He chose a nation, the Jewish people, to represent Him. Once He did, in the eyes of the world, His legacy was tied to ours. If He were to destroy the Jewish people, the world would think that He was no more than a passing force of nature – like pagan gods. Thus, G-d allows the Jews to survive so as not to undermine the very purpose of creation.

This notion not only provides some relief for the Jewish people, as we inevitably have moments of sin, it also frames the extent of our responsibility. We have a role in this world that no one else can fulfill. G-d saved us so that we, and we alone, would be His emissaries to the world. We may be a *Mamlechet Kohanim*, a nation of priests, of teachers, tasked with leading the world to serve G-d. Yet, until that goal has been reached, we are identified uniquely with G-d's message. When G-d saves us from whatever troubles we may face, it must remind of us of why He is doing that – so that we can fulfill our roles. And we hope that G-d saves us because we actually represent Him, not only because we one day might.

כורך: KOREICH

Something Essential is Missing



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After eating a fair amount of matzah and *marror* we are enjoined to eat them again in sandwich form because this is what Hillel did in the times of the Beit HaMikdash. Why do we go to such great lengths to commemorate Hillel's actions?

Halachic Stringency

Our concern may be halachic. The Talmud (Pesachim 115a) notes that Hillel would always go out of his way to eat matzah and *marror* together, while other rabbis disagreed and held that matzah and *marror* could be eaten separately. What is the nature of this debate?

- According to Tosafot (Pesachim 115a s.v. *ela*) both sides agree that one can fulfill both mitzvot even if they are eaten separately. Hillel is only presenting what ought to be done ideally (*lechatchilah*).
- However, according to Rif (as understood by Ba'al HaMaor and implied in the presentation of Rosh), Hillel holds that one can *only* fulfill the mitzvah of *marror* when it is eaten together with matzah. The rabbis argue that this isn't true. Matzah and *marror* can be eaten separately.

Today, because we have no *korban pesach*, technicalities arise that cause us to eat matzah (see Pesachim 115a), and *marror* (see Tosafot *ibid.*) by themselves. The former is true even according to Hillel, who himself argues that today matzah must be eaten alone. (Pesachim *ibid.*) According to Rif, however, in eating *marror* alone we have not fulfilled the mitzvah according to Hillel's view. Eating the sandwich is therefore a way of ensuring we have fulfilled the mitzvah according to all views. This halachic rigor fits with our general practice of being extra careful on Seder night.

Commemoration

Another possibility is that there is no pressing halachic need to eat the sandwich (this position is ascribed to Rema by the Mishneh Berurah 475:18). Rather, as the Haggadah indicates, we undertake this extra eating as a *zecher l'Mikdash*, a memorial for the Beit HaMikdash. Why are we memorializing the Beit HaMikdash at this point? And why is Hillel's halachic position central to this memorial?

The fact that even according to Hillel matzah and *marror* must be separated in our seder today points to the broken way in which we now fulfill these mitzvot. There is no *korban pesach*, and no Beit HaMikdash. Traveling to Yerushalayim to bring the korban is the central act of Pesach. Matzah and *marror* are only accessories to this. By eating the sandwich, we recognize that without a *korban pesach* our seder is fundamentally lacking. And we remember the time when its presence allowed Hillel to fulfill his halachic position to its fullest, by eating matzah and *marror* together.

Deeper Symbolism

There may be a symbolic level to this memorial as well. *Marror* symbolizes our suffering at the hands of the Egyptians and the fact that this torture was ended. Matzah represents our freedom, and the haste with which we were ushered into lives of free choice and meaning. The *korban pesach* represents G-d's tangible intervention to make all this possible. He passed through Egypt and "personally" saved the lives of each individual Jewish family. Today we still enjoy the benefits symbolized by matzah and *marror*, but G-d's direct intervention in our lives, binding all these experiences into one, is missing. Without the *korban pesach*, we must eat matzah and *marror* separately. We observe Koreich to remind us of a different era, when a Jew came to the Beit HaMikdash with his *korban pesach* and understood how the *marror* and matzah were part of G-d's direct interaction with our lives.

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ויהי בהצוי הלילה: AND IT HAPPENED AT MIDNIGHT

At Midnight, Stop Being a Pumpkin

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Sgan Rosh Beit Midrash 5772-5774, Community Maggid Shiur 5775-5776

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The beautiful poem *Va'Yehi BaChatzi HaLaylah* was written by Yannai, an early poet who lived in Eretz Yisrael in the sixth century. Interestingly enough, the poet originally intended it to be recited as a *Kurva* prayer on the Shabbat morning when *makkat bechorot* (the Plague of the Firstborn) is read from the Torah; it was part of a much larger body of poems associated with different Torah readings. In the end, though, this poem was the only one to survive from the whole opus – after being incorporated into the ending of the Ashkenazi Haggadah.

As the Divine hand planted this *piyut* in its current place, and since we know Jews have recited it in this manner for more than a thousand years, it seems right that we view it within the context of the Haggadah – even if it was not meant to be seen that way by its writer.

The poem presents a long list of miracles and dramatic events from Jewish history; all of them happened at night, and many of them at midnight. Catalogued in here we find, apart from the obvious plague that killed the firstborn, Avraham's victory against the four kings, the dream that warned Lavan against harming Yaakov, the death of Sancherev's soldiers and the writing of Haman's letters against the Jews, all of them happened, whether per *peshat* or *derash*, during the night. The poem ends with a prayer to G-d to hasten the day which is neither day nor night, when night will be illuminated like day.

If your Seder participants are somewhat sleepy, it could be refreshing to hold a guessing game regarding what event each line in this poem describes. But what is the message in all of this? What is so important about these deliverances happening at night, or exactly at midnight?

A well-known little riddle asks: how far can you walk into a forest? The answer is – up to its middle, as after that you are already going out and not in... Midnight, then, may serve as a symbol for a turning point: night represents the darkness of exile and slavery; and from midnight onward, we already face the way out of these conditions. But the role of midnight may be more complicated.

The Talmud (Berachot 4a) points out a curious detail regarding *makkat bechorot*; while the plague struck exactly at midnight (Shemot 12:29), Moshe warned Pharaoh that the plague would strike “around” midnight. (Shemot 11:4) Recognizing the exact time of midnight was extremely difficult in the ancient world, so if Moshe would declare that death would come at midnight, the Egyptians might calculate midnight incorrectly, and then accuse G-d of not fulfilling the pledge communicated by Moshe, G-d forbid.

Midnight is the moment of a hidden and surprising revolution; a minute before it, you were still treading along in an ever-growing night, and a minute later, you begin your journey towards the light – but you will not recognize it for its importance until after the fact. You cannot know when midnight is, until after the morning finally dawns.

The insight into the nature of midnight may be at the heart of a well-known tannaitic dispute: when is the last possible time to eat the *korban pesach*? The Talmud (Berachot 9a) tells us that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah thought it should be midnight, while Rabbi Akiva held it to be dawn. The Talmud further explains that Rabbi Akiva believed that we should follow the time in which the Jews participated in their redemption by walking out of Egypt, while Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah stressed midnight as the time of the Divine action which began the process of redemption.

Following our point regarding the ambiguous instant of midnight, we may suggest that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah celebrates the redemption from our current point of view, from which we are able to appreciate midnight as the pivot minute of the redemption. Rabbi Akiva wants us to feel as though we are there, such that the meaning of this midnight moment is not yet fully comprehended.

As we finish this analysis of the poem, praying together with the poet for the quick turning of night into day and darkness into light, we may point to one last midrash which may guide us in our attempt to identify the midnights of our lives – points which may be dark by themselves, but which can and should be recognized for their pivotal importance.

The following moving picture appears in the Talmud (Berachot 3b): “At midnight do I rise to give thanks to You, for Your righteous laws.” (Psalms 119:62)... Did David know the exact time of midnight?... David had a sign. For so said Rabbi Acha bar Bizna in the name of Rabbi Shimon HaChasid: A harp hung above David's bed. As soon as midnight arrived, a north wind came and blew upon it and it played of itself. He arose immediately and studied the Torah till the break of dawn.” One can wake up at midnight, then, if one has an open heart and he lets the north wind play his strings.

May we recognize this time of midnight, and wake up to hear G-d's announcement that both day and night are His, and only His, are both day and night.

OUR MISSION

To engage, inspire and educate the Jewish community of the Greater Toronto Area. We apply our Torah heritage to the daily lives of modern Jews, through classes, discussions and chavrutot in our home Beit Midrash and our Yeshivot Bnei Akiva, as well as the synagogues, campuses and workplaces of the GTA.

Our Beit Midrash is named “Zichron Dov” in memory of Mr. Bill Rubinstein, of blessed memory, whose ideals are represented in the Torah we learn and teach every day.

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