



LOOKING PAST THE EVERYDAY: UNDERSTANDING CHAD GADYA

Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, known as the “Chida” (*Chaim Sha’al* 1:28), records a fascinating story of a Sephardic Jew who openly mocked Ashkenazic Jews for singing Chad Gadya on the Seder night. How foolish, he declared, to end off the sublime night of the Seder with a song about a goat! [At the time, apparently, Sephardic Jews did not sing Chad Gadya, whose origins lie in the medieval German school of Rabbi Elazar of Worms, the Ba’al HaRokei’ach. Today the song has been widely adopted in the Sephardic world as well.] The local Rav was furious at the man’s statement and excommunicated him. The man protested that excommunication was an undeserved overreaction. The question was presented to the Chida. The Chida responded:

כל כי האי מילתא פשוטה לפנייה כי אנוש זה זד
יהיר לץ המתלוצץ על מה שנהגו רבבות אלפי

ישראל בערי פולין ואשכנז ואביזרייהו ואשר
לפנים בישראל גדולי עולם קדישי עליונין דזור
דור וחכמיו ... ולא עוד אלא יש לענשו קנס
לעניים לפי ערכו ולהודיעו גדול עונו וישוב אל
א' וירחמהו ... וכבר נודע תוקף גדולת פיוטי
אשכנז המיוסדים על החכמה האמיתית.

It is obvious that this man is a sinful scoffer to mock the practice of tens of thousands of Jews in Poland and Germany for many generations ... He should be fined appropriately to give money to the poor so that he appreciates the extent of his sin and repents ... It is well-known that the Ashkenazic poems are based on Kabbalistic wisdom.

Clearly, the Chida was not ready to dismiss Chad Gadya as a meaningless song about a goat. What is less clear is the song’s actual significance. The Chida implies that it may be Kabbalistic. Others have suggested that the song is a metaphor — either for the successive exiles and ultimate

redemption of the Jewish people (Vilna Gaon), or the procedure for bringing the Pesach sacrifice (Chasam Sofer), or a description of the trials the soul faces when it descends into this world (Ya’avetz).

I believe we can appreciate the meaning of Chad Gadya — on the simplest of levels — by noting a significant shift that takes place toward the end of the main body of the Seder itself, before we begin reciting the poems which follow it.

The End of the Seder

The Mishna (*Pesachim* 117b) rules that after Hallel, we recite *Birkas HaShir* — the Blessing of Song — over the fourth cup of wine. The Gemara records a debate as to whether *Birkas HaShir* refers to the paragraph “*Yehalelucha*,” customarily recited at the end of

Hallel, or to “*Nishmas Kol Chai*,” which typically is the concluding bracha of *Pesukei D’Zimra* on Shabbos and Yom Tov. The Gemara also adds that we recite *Hallel HaGadol* at the end of the Seder. There are different opinions as to what that means — perhaps Tehillim 136, perhaps Tehillim 23, perhaps all the chapters of Tehillim that begin “*Shir HaMa’alos*” through Tehillim 136. Our accepted practice is to recite Tehillim 136 as *Hallel HaGadol*, as well as both *Yehalelucha* and *Nishmas*; the exact order of when to say these paragraphs and how to conclude them varies based on custom. [See *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 480 and the commentaries there.]

Why are these paragraphs added at the end of the Seder? It is easier to understand the addition of *Yehalelucha*, since that paragraph typically is recited at the conclusion of Hallel, but why add *Hallel HaGadol* and *Nishmas*?

The Gemara (*Pesachim* 118a) explains that the reason *Hallel HaGadol* (“the great Hallel”) is so called is because it describes how G-d distributes sustenance to every creature. As the Rashbam comments, this is indeed a great thing! Apparently, the theme of *Hallel HaGadol* is the notion that G-d provides for our needs on a daily basis. Indeed, that chapter can be understood as conveying that, while G-d is mighty and has historically performed many acts of kindness for the Jewish people, the ultimate expression of G-d’s kindness is His daily sustaining of all flesh.

A similar theme is associated with the bracha of *Nishmas*. The Gemara (*Ta’anis* 6b) identifies *Nishmas* as the blessing recited when rain falls after a period of drought. While the

Talmud (*ibid.*) speaks of rainfall as being even greater than the miracle of the resurrection of the dead, rainfall is a natural phenomenon, not a supernatural one. Linking *Nishmas* to such a phenomenon implies that *Nishmas* itself is a blessing of acknowledgement of G-d’s role in the miracles of nature, not those that transcend nature.

The text of *Nishmas* itself supports this idea. While there is a brief reference to the Exodus from Egypt, the vast majority of *Nishmas* thanks G-d for providing for us in times of hunger and drought, saving us from pestilence and the sword, and enabling the poor man to be delivered from oppression. None of these events are necessarily supernatural. The theme of *Nishmas*, like that of *Hallel HaGadol*, seems to be focused on G-d’s role in facilitating miracles covertly through the natural events of everyday life.

In light of the above, it seems that the last portion of the Seder enables us to progress from recognizing the Hand of G-d in the miraculous events of the Exodus — a notion that has been the focus throughout the Seder night — to seeing G-d’s Hand in the miracles of everyday life. We are meant to walk away from the Seder with our eyes opened to the presence of G-d in the world around us. An evening that begins with the commemoration of a specific historical event ends with a heightened sense of religious awareness that should impact on our every waking moment.

Although he is not addressing the structure of the Seder *per se*, a very similar point is made by Ramban (*Shemos* 13:16), in discussing the central role the remembering the Exodus plays in so many of our mitzvos:

ומן הנסים הגדולים המפורסמים אדם מודה
בנסים הנסתרים, שהם יסוד התורה כלה.

שאין לאדם חלק בתורת משה רבינו, עד
שנאמין בכל דברינו ומקרינו שכלם נסים, אין
בהם טבע ומנהגו של עולם.

By acknowledging the famous, open miracles, one comes to acknowledge the hidden miracles, [the recognition of] which is the foundation of the entire Torah. For one does not have a portion in the Torah of Moshe Rabbenu until he believes that everything that befalls us is ultimately a miracle, not merely “nature” or “the normal course of events.”

Reflecting the Themes of the Seder’s Conclusion

In light of this understanding of the spiritual journey we are meant to follow on the night of the Seder — opening our eyes to be able to see G-d in the world, beyond the facade described as the “normal course of events” — we can better appreciate the truly sublime message of Chad Gadya.

The goat, cat, and dog of Chad Gadya are exactly what they appear to be: A goat, cat, and dog, representing nothing more than the common and mundane experiences of this world. Goats are eaten by cats, oxen are slaughtered by butchers, and nothing about any of this seems extraordinary. It is only at the very end of Chad Gadya that G-d Himself suddenly appears on the scene. The message is that G-d is really behind all the seemingly mundane events in Chad Gadya. We need to merely scratch the surface of the world of goats, cats, and dogs to discover G-d Himself.

It is no wonder, then, that the Chida insisted that this poem be treated with respect. Chad Gadya reflects the very idea that Chazal sought to convey through *Hallel HaGadol* and *Nishmas*. In a sense, it captures the goal of the Seder itself.