



A NIGHT TO RELIVE, NOT JUST TO REMEMBER

Once, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria and Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon reclined for the sake of the Seder in Bnei Brak, and they recounted the tale of the Exodus from Egypt all that night long, until their students arrived and said, “Rabbis – the time for reciting the morning *Shema* has come.”

We are well accustomed to the twice daily remembering of the Exodus (*zechirat yetziat Mitzrayim*), fulfilled through the recitation of the third paragraph of *Shema*. It might be natural to think that our Pesach Seder is some form of the daily obligation on steroids – but this would overlook essential differences between that daily obligation and the once-a-year experience of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim*. Understanding these distinctions reveals not merely differences in form between the two *mitzvot*, but of function, and casts new light on the well-known story of the Sages’ Seder in Bnei Brak. In fact, it reveals how “this night is different from all other nights” for the purpose of remembering and relating the Exodus from Egypt.

Aside from the fact that *zechira* is fulfilled twice-daily through the recitation of *Shema*, and *sippur* is a “one night only” occurrence at the Seder, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik enumerated other differences between the two:

The daily command of *zechira* is achieved through a mere mention of “I am the L-rd your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Bamidbar 15:41). *Sippur*, in contrast, requires elaboration and enumeration of the many miracles, spanning the great tale’s arc from slavery to redemption, from our degradation to our status as a nation that can sing to Him in great praise. “All who elaborate and expand in the recounting of the Exodus perform a praiseworthy act!”

Zechira is not enhanced by being performed in the company of others; remembrance (although it must occur through audible speech) is a monologue. *Sippur*, the great recounting of the adventure, is best performed dialogically, ideally in the forum of parents and children.

According to Rambam and others who enumerate the 613 *mitzvot*, the daily remembrance is bundled together as part of the obligation to recite *Shema*. *Sippur* is an independent *mitzvah* according to all opinions.

Rav Moshe’s son, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, expanded upon these distinctions. The Rav observed that Pesach night’s *sippur* is no mere, dry historical recounting, but carries an accompanying obligation of *Hallel* – to praise G-d for the miracles of which we speak. The recitation of *zechira* in *Shema* is “just the facts” of what occurred millennia ago. At the Seder, since we are obligated to view ourselves (or portray ourselves, as Rambam would have it) as if we are personally experiencing the miracles in real time, the requirement to sing our praise and thanks to He who redeemed us personally goes into effect.

This analysis opens new interpretive insights to the Seder Night in Bnei Brak. What is the meaning of the seemingly simple, yet actually enigmatic, students’ statement, “The time for reciting the morning *Shema* has come”? Why use the particular idiom of *Shema* as a marker of time? Why not inform their masters using the more common “morning has broken,” or, “*boker tov!*” or, as the Tosefta records in a somewhat parallel case of Rabban Gamliel and the Elders in Lod who sat at the Seder table “all that night long until the cock crowed” (Tosefta Pesachim 10:2)?

The Sages in Bnei Brak realized they had a once-a-year opportunity to transform the mundane, daily remembrance of things past, to a spectacular reenactment. The Seder serves as a time machine, enabling the participant to step into the action of the Exodus. The various manifestations of the *mitzvah* challenge us to elaborate and expand, and “thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt, honor, bless and raise high acclaim” to the One *redeeming me right now* at this very moment.

The five reclining Rabbis made the most of the brief window enabling them to experience this – *kol oto haLyla*, for the length of that one night. When their disciples found them still at it the next morning, they signalled to them that the window had closed by declaring “the time for reciting the morning *Shema* has come.” That is, the time to return to the daily reality of *zechirat yetziat Mitzrayim* in *Shema* has arrived, with its distance between the reciter and the historical experience. The once-a-year opportunity of personally experiencing His redemption has again come and gone.

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