

## **Ma Nishtana (Metzora)**

If you were talking with someone and they were to say the phrase ‘*Ma Nishtana*’, it is quite likely that you would continue with the words ‘*Halayla Hazeh Mikot Haleylot*’. This is because these words are learnt by Jewish children and sung in Jewish homes around the world on Seder night, and because they are the words of THE *Ma Nishtana*.

But what if you were to be told that there was not just ONE *Ma Nishtana* but many, and that while the *Ma Nishtana* that you know relates to Seder night, the other *Ma Nishtana*’s which exist relate to an assortment of other areas of Jewish practice?

A survey of the classic rabbinic sources (Mishna, Tosefta, Bavli, Yerushalmi, Midrash) quickly leads us to discover that the expression *Ma Nishtana* is - actually - a frequently employed literary device which is used by our Sages to compare and contrast different realms of Jewish practice. For example, it is used in *Sotah* 17a/*Menachot* 43b/*Chullin* 89a when considering the unique properties of *Techelet* in comparison with all other colours, while it is used in *Kiddushin* 22b when considering the unique properties of the ear in comparison with all other limbs.

And why do I mention this?

Because this Shabbat we read Parshat *Metzora*, and the expression ‘*Ma Nishtana*’ is twice used in *Arachin* 16b when considering the unique properties of the *Metzora* punishment & offering in comparison to all other punishments & offerings. As we read there:

‘Rabbi Shmuel bar Nadav asked Rabbi Chanina, and some say that it was Rabbi Shmuel bar Nadav the son-in-law of Rabbi Chanina who asked of Rabbi Chanina, while some say that he asked it of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, “What is the difference (*Ma Nishtana*) between a *Metzora* about whom the Torah says, ‘He shall dwell alone; outside of the camp shall be his dwelling’ (*Vayikra* 13:46) [and other sinners mentioned in the Torah]? It is because [by slandering and speaking *Lashon HaRa*], the *Metzora* caused husbands to separate from wives, and people to separate from one another. Consequently, the Torah says, ‘He shall dwell alone’. Rabbi Yehuda ben Levi says, “What is the difference (*Ma Nishtana*) between a *Metzora* about whom the Torah says, ‘he is to bring two birds for his purification’ (*Vayikra* 14:4) [and other sinners mentioned in the Torah]? The Holy One, Blessed be He says that it is because he performed an act of chatter; therefore the Torah says that he is to bring an offering [of birds, who chirp and] chatter.”’

As should be clear, the phrase ‘*Ma Nishtana*’ that is used in *Arachin* 16b has no obvious connection with Pesach. Still, just like its parallel in the *Haggadah Shel Pesach*, it is being used here as a literary device to compare & contrast different realms of

Jewish practice while also teaching us a greater lesson - namely the value of asking questions when we notice something unexpected or unusual.

Returning back to the *Metzora*, they are punished for gossiping, for prattling, and for causing disagreement and division between people. And how are they punished? They are sent away from the Israelite camp (to reflect the impact that their words have had on others), and they are then required to bring a bird offering for their purification (which symbolizes the kind of chattering gossip that they have uttered). Overall, the *Metzora* is someone who has used the power of speech to do harm.

In contrast, when we sit around the Seder table with others and hear the *Ma Nishtana* being recited, then we positively harness the power of speech to tell the story of the Exodus.

Our Sages inform us that one of the four things that the Israelites did not do while enslaved in Egypt was speak *Lashon HaRa* about each other (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 32:5). This itself is worthy of much praise and it teaches us a deeper lesson - that even during tough times, Bnei Yisrael did not weaponize their power of speech.

Accordingly, on Seder night, when we recount the Exodus from Egypt, we try and replicate this exemplary behaviour and we therefore positively harness the power of speech by telling the story of how we came out of Egypt.

What this comes to tell us is that Seder night is the inverse of *Metzora*. The *Metzora* creates division with their unkind words which sow disunity, while Seder night is when we come together and, with warm and generous words, we do what we can to strengthen the unity of the Jewish people.

Wishing you *Shabbat Shalom & Pesach Sameach!*