

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGINATION

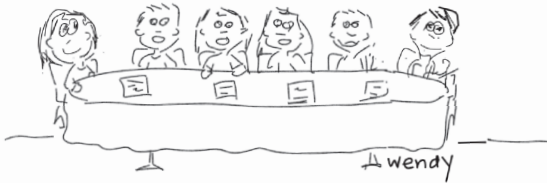
Jeff Schein

Imagination or creating a mental picture in one's mind, can help us in many ways.

Imagination can help to explain and formulate new ideas, to gain a better understanding of another person's perspective, and to clarify how things work. Rav Yechezkel Levenstein (spiritual leader of the Mir Yeshiva, d. 1974), wrote that a person cannot perfect his/her own character – which many Torah scholars state is one of our purposes in this world – without the ability to imagine situations beyond his or her own experiences.

The *Mishnah* (*Pesachim* 10:5), states, "In every generation a person is obligated *lir'ot*, to see themselves as though they themselves had gone out of Egypt." This *Mishnah*, which has been adopted as part of the Haggadah, adjures us to personally feel as though we were enslaved in Egypt and that *Hashem* freed us. (cont. on p. 2)

"Imagine please what it would be like if we were really slaves in Egypt?"



PRAYING FOR DEW ON PASSOVER

Rabbi Phil Kaplan

One of my absolute favorite prayer experiences of the entire year happens on the first day of Passover.

The Passover morning services are perhaps not something most, or many, people think of as particularly significant. On Passover, so much weight is given to the seders, of course, that many of the other special moments fade into the background. All of these iconic Passover moments, eating matzah while leaning to the left, the four questions, the four glasses of wine, the reading of the Haggadah--take place during the first two evenings of the festival at our Passover seder.

Pew Research reports that participation in a Passover seder is the most widely participated ritual in Jewish practice amongst American Jews--even more so than Yom Kippur fasting. So why do I look forward to the first day's morning service in particular when Passover rolls around each year? It is because of *Tefillat Tal*, the prayer for dew.

We recite *Tefillat Tal* on the first day of Passover at the beginning of the repetition of the *Musaf amidah*, the additional prayer service added on special days like Shabbat, *Yom Tov*, and *Rosh Chodesh*. The "*Tal*" prayer marks an important change that is made in the text of our daily prayer. Between the last day of Sukkot and the first day of (cont. on p. 3)

THE LITTLE GOAT'S CALL TO ACTION

Rabbi Charles Savenor

It is understandable to view the Passover seder as an experience primarily for children. The service includes interactive rituals, kid-friendly role-playing, and even a scavenger hunt.

The songs at the end of the evening certainly cement this pediatric impression with their tongue twisters and catchy tunes, especially *Had Gadya*. The seder's grand finale relates a seemingly straightforward story about a little goat that meets an untimely end through an almost comical course of events involving, among others, a cat, a dog, an ox, a butcher, the angel of death, and, ultimately, *Hashem*. Like any good bedtime story, the song projects a happy ending that reinforces the Al-mighty's protecting hand in history.

The animals in *Had Gadya* remind me of an unforgettable experience I had several years ago in El Salvador as an educator on the American Jewish World Service Alternative Spring Break. I joined scores of college students who dedicated their vacation to *Tikun Olam*, Judaism's conception of mending the world.

Our week in Central America consisted of assisting local farmers. Gardening had never felt like holy work to me before, but our efforts were infused with meaning. In just a single day of tending to a field, our group (cont. on p. 2)

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGINATION (cont. from p. 1)

How can we feel this? Were we there, suffering back-breaking servitude? The Hebrew word for Egypt – *mitzrayim* – comes from the root - *metzar* – meaning restrictions or troubles. All of us have our own troubles, our own “*mitzrayim*,” to deal with. One approach is to call out and pray to *Hashem* sincerely. Who will respond to us. Another approach is to use our imagination, and more specifically, employing a technique that is often found in Jewish thought, known as “*ki’eelu*,” which literally means “as if.” This approach helps us visualize – and fulfill our obligation--to picture ourselves as slaves in *mitzrayim* and feel as though we *personally* were liberated.

The *Rambam*, Maimonides – one of the most famous figures in Torah scholarship--gave us some additional advice: use visual cues to help make this picture a reality. This command is actualized through reclining at the seder, drinking the four cups of wine, and recounting the story of the Exodus.

Our freedom, as well as so many other things in our life, are easily taken for granted. When things are going smoothly, it is easy to forget *Hashem*--and take the blessings He provides us for granted.

Allow me to give you a personal example:

One day, I noticed that I was not able to move my right arm in the same way that I normally do. Over the next few months, the problem became worse and more painful. I tried physical therapy, medication, even a corticosteroid injection, but to no avail. The pain and functional limitations only become worse. After an MRI, I discovered I had a full tear in my shoulder’s rotator cuff tendon that required surgery.

I never really thought about my shoulder before this event. I never realized how tremendously flexible and maneuverable the arm is, thanks to the shoulder, when it’s working properly. I took my shoulder – and *Hashem*’s genius design--for granted. But not after the surgery. I now started to see the brilliance of levers in the human body, and how humans have tried to mimic *Hashem*’s brilliant designs in machines, such as excavators and cranes. None of those observations were apparent to me before.

I believe a similar argument could be made for the morning blessings that we recite. Thank you *Hashem* for the ability to move, to see, to straighten up, etc. We say these blessings, but do we really feel them? How can we improve on our *hakarat batov*, our gratitude to *Hashem* and really feel these blessings? My suggestion is *ki’eelu*.

Picture yourself as a slave in *mitzrayim* (Egypt) who has been personally liberated. Here I am, free and unrestricted – *Baruch Hashem*, thank God. This will certainly engender *hakarat batov*/gratitude. How? By realizing that I am no longer a slave to Pharaoh! Instead, I have chosen to “trade in” slavery for a much more meaningful set of obligations to *Hashem*.

Keep in mind, *Hashem* took us out of Egypt for a reason – to be a nation with a unique set of instructions or *mitzvot*.

True freedom is a characteristic that *Hashem* endowed in every human being – that of *b’chirah*, freedom of choice – to do the *mitzvot*, and try to understand them in a meaningful way.

Jeff Schein, DrPH, MPH, is an epidemiologist who lives in Edison, NJ, with his wife and four children.

THE LITTLE GOAT’S CALL TO ACTION (cont. from p. 1)

“There’s a lot we can learn from ‘Had Gadya’ – one little goat”



...accomplished what it would have taken the farmer and his family a whole month to accomplish.

The village where we stayed, Ciudad Romero, was populated by cattle, goats, and chickens that roamed the unpaved streets along with their warm and friendly human neighbors. While our Salvadoran host family was generally reserved and shy, the universal language of smiles created opportunities for connection and openings for conversations, despite our language barriers.

What stood out was the pain in the people’s eyes, particularly the village elders. Since the “discovery” of the New World, this region’s indigenous population became subjects in their own land. To make matters worse, they were taught by the Church that their meager lot in life was G-d’s will; thereby transforming subjugation into something they were supposed to embrace, even if it manifested itself in regime sanctioned violence.

Despite these challenges, their faith, rooted in Liberation Theology, provides them with a blueprint for redemption. They believe that financial security does not constitute the will of G-d, and, equally important, everyone can improve their lot in life. The spiritual underpinning of their hope comes from the Jewish people’s Exodus story.

At the Passover seder this very same story becomes our legacy to the next generation. The seder is intended to appeal to children, but it conveys vital messages for all the generations around the table.

This brings us back to *Had Gadya* at the conclusion of the evening. It is important to note that

(cont. on p. 4)

PRAYING FOR DEW ON PASSOVER (cont. from p. 1)

...Passover, in every *amidah* we pray, we say the phrase, “*mashiv haruach u'morid hagashem*,” meaning “He [G-d] makes the wind blow and the rain fall.” On the first day of Passover, during our silent *amidah* of *Musaf*, we say this prayer for wind and rain for the last time. The chazzan then leads *Tefilat Tal*, and from that day onward, we don't say *mashiv haruach u'morid hagashem* again until the end of Sukkot.

I absolutely love the *nusach* of *Tal*--the liturgical mode and melody that accompany *Tefilat Tal*. This *nusach* is unique in that it is only used twice a year--for *Tal* during Pesach and for *Geshem*, the prayer for rain, during Sukkot. But I also love the messages that *Tefilat Tal* communicates when we look a bit deeper.

The Talmud, in tractate *Taanit*, teaches that the Jewish people prayed to G-d to be present for them “like rain.” G-d responded, why would you compare Me to something that is sometimes desired and sometimes not desired? Rain is necessary and important, but when it comes at the wrong time, it can be destructive and unwanted. Furthermore, rain is unpredictable and can be absent at critical times. Instead, G-d offered a correction to the Jewish people--we should pray that G-d come to us as dew, something that is always desired and may be subtle, yet is consistent.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, picks up on one particular line from *Tefilat Tal*, “*tal yasis tzuf harim*,” “Dew, let it sweeten the mountain streams.” This metaphor means, according to Rav Kook, that while rain gives fruit its substance, dew gives it its taste. Similarly, teaches Rav Kook, rain represents a form of *teshuva*, repentance and personal change, in which someone completely pivots, and takes an entirely new direction in life. Dew, on the other hand, represents a more gradual and linear form of *teshuva*, where someone builds on themselves and their character, slowly enhancing themselves, giving themselves more of a taste, so to speak. When the Jewish people asked for rain, they were asking G-d for grandiose inspiration and to provide a major impetus to change. G-d responded, “Maybe that is what you want, but it's not what you currently need. What you need is *Tal* - subtle and inconspicuous, yet reliable and nourishing growth.”

Tal teaches us that G-d's blessings are abundant, regardless of how subtle they may be. Sometimes blessings come in the

form of powerful rains, and sometimes, blessings come in a more subtle form--like the droplets that form when water vapor in the humid air condenses on the cool surface of the earth, not drawing quite the attention that a rainstorm might, but nonetheless a key component in sustaining us.

Passover recounts the most amazing miracles ever performed. G-d visited 10 plagues on the Egyptians, He divided a great sea in half, creating a pathway of dry land for Israel to pass through safely, and He redeemed His beloved people from centuries-long enslavement. It's all quite theatrical and larger-than-life. And, therefore, there is no better time than the beginning of the festival of Passover to be reminded of the lessons contained within the Prayer for Dew.

Don't let waiting for the big miracles distract you from seeing all the smaller miracles that occur around you daily. Don't expect to immediately and easily take seismic steps in your journey of personal growth and development. Small, subtle growth is good too!

Lastly, remember to always appreciate the things that are most consistent, yet can be easily overlooked--that's sometimes where we find the greatest blessings.

Chag Sameach.

Rabbi Phil Kaplan is the rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in Metairie, Louisiana. Rabbi Kaplan has a passion for building warm, welcoming Jewish community for Jews of all backgrounds and education levels.





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EGYPT ON MY MIND (cont. from p. 2)

...despite the early exit of the eponymous character, the song never lets us forget about this vulnerable kid. While the cycle of violence only stops when *Hashem* intervenes, G-d's resolute commitment to fight for society's most vulnerable remains unflinching.

At the end of the seder each year, with the taste of liberation on our lips, *Had Gadya* becomes a battle cry for

freedom, and this unforgettable little goat beckons us to mend the world one field, one school, one heart at a time.

Rabbi Charles Savenor is the Executive Director of Civic Spirit, an organization that provides training in civic education to day schools.

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Beresbit: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Larry Greenman and Rivka Bornstein of NJOP. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about NJOP programs, please contact us: 1345 Avenue of the Americas, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10105-0014, 646-871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.

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