



HAGGADAH INSIGHTS

Adapted from shiurim given by Rabbi Shmuel Silber

KADESH

– A BRIGHT BURNING LOVE

“...this day of the Feast of Matzos.”

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev comments on this phrasing in Kiddush. Throughout the Torah, G-d calls this holiday Chag Hamatzos, but here we refer to it as Chag HaPesach. Why the distinction?

The Rebbe explains that both the Jewish people and God call the Yom Tov by a name that reflects a profound love for the other. God calls this Yom Tov Chag Hamatzos. This name expresses His love for His people. God said to the prophet Yirmiyahu, “I remember the loving-kindness of your youth and the love of your nuptials when you followed Me into the wilderness, in a land not sown.” God remembered when the Jewish people followed Him into the desert with nothing but matzos for food. More than 3,000,000 people followed God into a virtual wasteland with nothing more than a bit of matzah. In the eyes of God, matzah is the ultimate symbol of His people’s love for and dedication to Him.

We refer to this Yom Tov as Chag HaPesach. Our emphasis is on the love God showers upon us when He passed over our homes during the plague of the first born. We possess ongoing gratitude and love for this and many others acts of loving-kindness.

Thus, both God and the Jewish people call this Yom Tov by a name that expresses love and admiration for the other. This is why, in Kiddush, we refer to this day that God “has given us in love.”

Pesach is a holiday which represents the ongoing love between God and the Jewish people. As we celebrate our nationhood and freedom we must also take the time to celebrate our relationship with the Divine. Let us always remember how much He loves us and how much we love Him.

SEDER FOR SAGES

One of the more obscure episodes in the Haggadah involves the story of Sages in Bnei

Brak. As the story goes, Rebbi Elazar, Rebbi Yehosh-ua, Rebbi Elazar ben Azaria, Rebbi Akiva and Rebbi Tarfon were having their Seder together and were engrossed in a discussion about the obligation of Zechiras Yetzias Mitzrayim (the daily obligation to remember the exodus). The discussion spans the entire evening until the students must interrupt to tell their teachers that morning had arrived.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik questions the relevance of this story in the Haggadah. On the night of the Seder we are involved in the mitzvah of Sipur Yetzias Mitzrayim (the obligation to retell the entire exodus narrative) which is distinct from the year-round mitzvah of Zechiras Yetzias Mitzrayim. We fulfill our ordinary obligation of Zechira by simply recalling the exodus. Why then, asks the Rav, is this particular story (which focuses on the mitzvah of Zechira) included in the Haggadah? It is a discussion of an altogether different mitzvah not relevant for the Seder night?

The Dvar Aharon (R’ Avraham Aharon Friedman, the Rav of Tshap) explains that since there is an obligation to “remember the exodus” throughout the year, there is certainly an obligation to do so on the anniversary of the exodus event.

Rabbi Yisroel Meir Lau offers another approach. He quotes a beautiful story about the Malbim. The Malbim (Rav Meir Leibush Wisser) was appointed to his first rabbinic position at a very young age. From the outset he recognized the obvious hesitation of his congregants to embrace such a young leader. To assuage their fears, he offered the following interpretation of this section of the Haggadah. He explained that Rebbi Elazar ben Azaryah was certainly aware of the teaching of Ben Zoma. In fact, Rebbi Elazar had tried on repeated occasions to teach this very lesson to his rabbinic colleagues. But they never listened. Why? Because of his youth. They assumed that Rebbi Elazar did not possess as

much knowledge as his older, more seasoned colleagues and therefore, dismissed his ideas. Until, Rebbi Elazar taught the lesson of Ben Zoma; ei zehu chacham, halomed mi’koladam, who is truly wise, he who can learn from all. It was only once Ben Zoma taught that youth has something to offer that Rebbi Elazar’s peers began to listen. There is wisdom in youth.

One of the challenges we face as adults is the loss of our child-like simplicity. As we get older we become more complicated, cynical and jaded. The Seder offers us an incredible opportunity to reclaim some of our youthful attributes. Our children come to the Seder with an enthusiasm and excitement that we should embrace and foster. Much of our Seder is child-centric, encouraging our children to ask questions and be engaged. This dynamic helps serve our children, but can be valuable to adults as well. Our children may not convey information that is new – but their excitement, optimism and joy is something we can learn from. There is great wisdom to be found– even in youth.

HA LACHMA ANYA

- AN OPEN INVITATION

There are many mitzvos (commandments) we fulfill during the Pesach Seder. We consume Matzah as a reminder of both servitude and liberation; we drink the Four Cups as a behavioral demonstration of our freedom and we eat the Marror (bitter herbs) as a commemoration of the bitter and difficult circumstances we endured during 210 years of Egyptian servitude.

Even with this beautiful and holy plethora of mitzvos, the main focus of the sacred Seder night is the mitzvah of Sipur Yetzias Mitzrayim, the retelling of the Exodus narrative. We recite Avadaim Haayinu (we were servants to Pharaoh), and link this historical experience to our contemporary circumstances. By melding our past into our present we allow ourselves to re-experience

the exalted feelings of emancipation and freedom.

Yet, at the very moment we are about to begin to relate the story of slavery and salvation we recite a fascinating paragraph – Ha Lachma Anya, this is the bread of affliction. This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are needy, come and celebrate Passover (partake of the Paschal lamb). This year we are here - next year, may we be in the Land of Israel. Let all who are hungry, come and eat. This year we are slaves - next year, may we be free.

The Rav, Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik zt'l asks a simple question. "Why are we "inviting" people to our Pesach Seder after the Seder has already commenced? After all, by the time we issue this invitation we have already drunk the first of the Four Cups (Kiddush) and the Seder is well underway. Furthermore, if we are truly interested in inviting people, why make this declaration in front of the already invited guests? The people at the table already have a license to be present. If we are looking to invite those who may not have a Seder to attend, if we are looking to invite those who are in need, why not go to the door and extend a true and sincere invitation to those on the outside?" What is the meaning and the message of this paragraph?

The Rav explains that this "invitation" is a symbolic manifestation of our new-found freedom. A slave does not have the ability to engage in the mitzvah of Hachnosas Orchim (hospitality) for one simple reason—the slave has no possessions. The slave has no rights of ownership. Everything he owns becomes the property of his master. Furthermore, the slave is so focused on survival and self-preservation that even if he somehow manages to acquire something (and hide it from his master), he hoards it for himself, worrying that if he shares it with others he will compromise his own existence. In this section of Ha Lachma Anya we make two profound declarative statements. I am free and as such I can invite anyone and everyone I desire. I am free and I have the ability and inner strength to share with and care for the other. I am no longer a slave who is solely focused on survival; I am free and can look out for the needs of the other. "Let all who are in need, come and celebrate with me; I can think about and concern myself with the welfare of others. Whoever is hungry, come and join - I can help - I am free."

The precious words of the Rav teach us a profound lesson. The first thing we do before

launching into the Exodus story is create a true and meaningful definition of freedom. Freedom is not simply the absence of an oppressive task-master or the ability to do as I choose. Freedom is the ability to do something meaningful with my life. Freedom is the opportunity to harness my strengths, abilities and resources and find a way to make the world a little kinder. Freedom is the ability to impact those around me in a positive fashion. Let all who are hungry, come and eat. Let all who are needy, come and celebrate Pesach.

MAGGID **- BEGINNING AND ENDING**

At first glance, the Haggadah appears to be a random collection of verses, stories and statements. However, upon further reflection we come to understand the intentional yet, nuanced structure of this ancient script. The Talmud (Pesachim 115) explains Maschil B'Genus U'Misayeym B'Shevach, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise. We begin the Seder by discussing the "low points" or disparaging chapters of our national existence. The sages disagree as to which "low point" we should begin with. Shmuel explains that we begin with, "Avadim Hayinu, we were slaves." We acknowledge that we did not begin as a nation of free men and women. We were slaves who served a human master. Rav states, "Mitchila Ovdei Avoda Zara Hayu Avoseinu, in the beginning our forefathers were idolaters." We were not always monotheists, we did not always pledge our allegiance to God, we served and paid homage to other gods. According to Shmuel over the course of the Pesach Seder we work our way to celebrating our physical freedom. According to Rav, the Seder is the opportunity to celebrate our newfound spiritual emancipation. Rav and Shmuel may disagree on the specific beginning and end points but do agree on the structure of the Seder night; Maschil B'Genus U'Misayeym B'Shevach, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise.

What is the meaning of this rabbinic framework? Why must we start with the negative or disparaging chapters of our national existence? Why not begin and end with our freedom, emancipation and positive identity as the nation of God?

The commentaries on the Haggadah share many approaches and answers. The Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush, 1809-1879) explains that the best way to make a dramatic point is through contrast. One appreciates light when one has been exposed to darkness. In order to

fully appreciate the freedom granted to us on this sacred night, we must first acquaint ourselves with servitude. In-order to feel physically free we must spend time reminiscing, Avadim Hayinu L'Pharaoh B'Mitzrayim, we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Only after we engage in historical reflection and taste some of the bitter marmor, can we truly thank God for redeeming us. In order to fully celebrate our spiritual emancipation, we must reflect what it was like to be a spiritual wanderer, not knowing what to believe or how to connect. Mitchila Ovdei Avoda Zara Hayu Avoseinu, in the beginning our forefathers were idolaters. Only when we remember our past can we truly appreciate our future.

The great Maggid of Kohznitz (Rav Yisroel Hopstein, 1737-1814) explains that the greatest danger we face is believing we are beyond salvation. A person may think to himself, "I have done so many terrible things, I have tarnished my soul, I have sullied my reputation, I have failed to actualize my potential; what hope is there for me?" Maschil B'Genus, even if the beginning is degrading, even if the beginning is stunted and handicapped, Misayeym B'Shevach, I choose how the story ends, I can change, I can live better, do better and create a beautiful future. We were slaves, we were more animal than man, we were viewed by others and we viewed ourselves as chattel and property. And yet, look at us now; we are a strong and free people. We were idolaters, spiritually bankrupt and estranged from God and yet, we managed to find our way home. We lifted ourselves from serving the creations of our hands to serving the King of Kings. We cannot always rewrite the past but we can absolutely decide how to script our future.

Perhaps, there is a third lesson as well. Life requires patience. Events occur and we search for answers. Situations unfold and we try desperately to understand their deeper meaning. We want insight and clarity and we want it now. Clarity will come but it requires the pas-sage of time. Maschil B'Genus U'Misayeym B'Shevach, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise, the difficult life situations will have a positive resolution (not necessarily the resolution we desire, but positive nevertheless). However, just as it takes time to reach the Shevach (praise) contained within the Haggadah; it takes time to see our personal praise and resolution as well. It will come— we just have to be patient.

Maschil B'Genus U'Misayeym B'Shevach, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise; the rabbis were not simply giving us a format for the Haggadah, they were providing us with a format for life. To actualize our freedom and maximize our ability to shape our personal and national destiny we must internalize the messages of the Haggadah. We must remember that while building our future; we must reflect on the events and messages of our past. No matter how far we have wandered, no matter how estranged we have become from God, ourselves and one another – no person is beyond salvation. We must bear in mind that resolution, understanding and happiness will come to those who are patient enough to wait.

A MESSAGE TO OUR CHILDREN

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "Because of this, the Lord did [this] for me when I went out of Egypt." (Exodus 13:8)

The Torah describes the Pesach experience as an inter-generational teaching opportunity. Parents must transmit to their children the experiences and lessons of our ancestors and how they shape, inform and influence our lives to this very day. However, the Torah does not want the parent to simply lecture or convey information. We attempt to pique the curiosity of the child. We want the child to initiate the questions, we want the child to yearn for answers and so we do many things over the course of the Seder that look different and out of place – all in order to create an atmosphere of spiritual exploration. Perhaps, the most well know (and scripted) set of questions at the Seder is the Mah Nishtana. Mah Nishtana HaLayla HaZeh MiKol HaLeylos, Why is this night different from all other nights? The child asks, why tonight do we only eat Matzah? Why do we consume the marror? Why must we recline when eating and drinking? And why do we "dip" repeatedly? We ask these questions year after year in order to initiate the parent-child dialogue. This is the hallmark of the sacred Seder night. Then something strange occurs. We recite the paragraph of Avadim Hayinu; we were servant to Pharaoh in Egypt. One would have thought that after the child asks these legitimate and good questions, the parent would immediately answer. However, we don't address any of these questions and instead we give a history lesson on the Exodus narrative.

Why not answer the child directly? Explain to him why we eat the Matzah. Tell her, the symbolism of the Marror; explain the behavioral freedom of reclining. The Mah Nishtana questions are solid and the answers to them serve as the foundation of our Pesach experience. Why not answer the questions directly and immediately?

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) provides a magnificent insight. We have many mitzvos – some of which have a readily understandable reason and some which do not. Some mitzvos appeal to our intellect, others speak to our heart and still others seemingly defy comprehension. However, upon further reflection it becomes clear that even the things we think we understand – we don't truly comprehend. The ways of God are magnificent and mysterious. The actions of God confound and amaze. The decisions of God can both gladden and break the heart of man. So why serve a God we can't understand or comprehend? The answer is contained in one word, belief. We believe in God and we believe that He believes in us. We believe that we are part of a master plan and that every step we take is necessary and meaningful in the actualization of that plan. We believe that our life challenges and difficulties are not an ends but rather a means to achieve completion, fulfillment and self-actualization. We believe that God loves us more than any human mind could ever comprehend. We believe that God cherishes His relationship with us. We believe that God celebrates our accomplishments and mourns our losses. We believe.

This is how we answer our children on the Seder night. My child asks me thoughtful, meaningful and significant questions. Why do we do this and that? Why do we observe? What is the meaning of these practices? I can give my child a whole list of technical answers and reasons. I can give my child multiple opinions and levels of understanding as to the symbolic and ritual meaning of everything we do. But instead I do something simpler, yet much more profound. Avadim HaYinu L'Pharaoh B'Mitzayim VaYotziaynu Hashem Elokeinu Misham, We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God took us out from there. My dear child, I do what I do – because I believe. God took me out because He loves me and because He realizes that I have something important to contribute. My dear child, if

there is something I want to convey to you tonight – it is my sense of belief. I want to pass on to you the strong belief I received from my father and he from his. I want to give you this Emu-nah (belief) because if you have it and if you nurture it – you will feel the warm embrace of the Divine. As parents it is our obligation to teach our children how to practice and observe the Torah and its Mitzvos. But tonight, we teach our children how to believe. How do you teach belief? You model it. When my child looks to me at the Seder – I will try my best to convey to him how privileged I feel to be a Jew. When my child looks at me – I want her to see the joy I have in serving my God. When my children look at me – I want them to feel the privilege they have to be part of a magnificent nation with a holy destiny.

Tonight, is not the night for complicated intellectual analysis, it is not the night for detailed discussions regarding Jewish Law. Tonight is the night for simple, beautiful, and genuine faith.

Let us hope that in the merit of conveying our faith to the next generation we will be privileged to once again experience redemption. Let us hope that in the merit of bolstering our Emunah we will experience salvation of both body and soul.