

## The Number Four in Passover

The holiday of Pessah, or Passover, is here. One of its characteristics is the number four. It seems to appear all over the place during its celebration. For example:

- We must drink four cups of wine during the seder.
- The children ask four questions when they sing the Ma Nishtana.
- We must explain the meaning of the holiday to four sons who are very different: The wise one, the wicked one, the simple one, and the one who does not know how to ask.
- There are four names for the holiday:
  - Chag haPessah (the Festival of Passover), to remind us that the houses of the Israelites were 'passed over' by the Angel of Death, and so they were spared from losing their firstborn;
  - Chag haMatzot (the Festival of Matzah), to remind us that we must eat unleavened bread, because the Israelites had to leave Egypt so fast the bread did not have time to rise;
  - Chag ha-Aviv (the Festival of Spring), to remind us that we are in spring, the season of renewal; and
  - Chag ha-Cherut (the Festival of Freedom), or Zman Cheruteinu (the Time of our Freedom), to remind us of the most important part: We became a free people after centuries of being enslaved.
- Four times the Torah commands us to tell the story of the Exodus to our children: Three in the Book of Exodus and one in the Book of Deuteronomy. [Exodus 12:26, 13:8, 13:14 and Deuteronomy 6:20]
- There are four steps in our redemption from Egypt. In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses:
  - Say... to the children of Israel, I am HaShem, and
  - 1-I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians, and
  - 2-I will deliver you from their bondage, and

3-I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments,  
and

4-I will take you to be My people... [Exodus 6:6-7]

-How many matzot are there in the matzah cover on the seder plate?  
Three, right? Yes, but soon after the beginning of the seder, the middle matzah is broken into two parts, and one part, the afikoman, is hidden, to be eaten at the end of the seder. This makes FOUR pieces of matzah!

-How many parts does the seder have? Fourteen, right? Yes, but they can be aggregated into four main parts: The opening, the story of the Exodus, the meal, and the closing.

-In the wider Jewish tradition, there are four main sources: The Tanach, or Bible, for the basis; the Talmud, for the law; the Midrash Rabbah, for the parables and stories; and the Zohar, for mysticism. In them, the phrase "four things" appears 51 times. For example:

-Four things must be done energetically: The study of Torah, good deeds, prayer, and work for a living. [Berachot 32b]

-Whoever speculates on four things, it would have been better for him if he had not come into the world: What is above, what is below, what is before, and what is after. [Mishna, Chagigah 11b]

Now let us ask: Why four? What is so special about four? The answer is that four represents totality, completeness. For example, four represents completeness in time, space and substance:

-First, completeness in time. A complete year has four seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter.

-Second, completeness in space. There are four directions: East, west, north and south. We talk about the "four corners of the earth", meaning "everywhere". Physicists tell us that we live in a four-dimensional world: Three dimensions of space and one of time.

-Finally, completeness in substance. In Talmudic times, the four basic components of the world were thought to be earth, water, air and fire. Today, they are the four basic states of matter observable in everyday life: Solid, liquid, gas and plasma. There are other states, but they are very rarely seen.

To conclude, I will ask four questions of my own about a basic declaration in the Haggadah. During the seder, we lift the matzah and say:

הא לחמא עניא די אכלו אבהתנא בארעא דמצרים. כל דכפין ייתי ויילל,  
כל דצריך ייתי ויפסח. השתא הכא, לשנה הבאה בארעא דישׂראל.  
ז השתא עבדי, לשנה הבאה בני חורין

*Ha lachma anya di achalu avahatana b'ara d'mitzrayim. Kol dichfin  
yeitei v'yeichol, kol ditzrich yeitei v'yifsach. Hashata hacha, l'shanah  
habaah b'ara d'Yisrael. Hashata avdei, l'shanah habaah b'nei chorin.*

This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. All those who are hungry, come and eat. All those who are in need, come celebrate the Passover. Now we are here. Next year in the land of Israel. This year we are enslaved. Next year we will be free.

-First question. There seems to be a repetition: "All those who are hungry, come and eat. All those who are in need, come celebrate the Passover." Don't these two sentences mean the same thing?

The answer is given by 20<sup>th</sup>-century Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. The second statement does not refer to food or material needs, only to companionship. That's why seders must be with family, friends, and people who have no one to share the holiday with. The goal is that no one should feel lonely or depressed, even if they are rich and have plenty of food.

Others say that there may be people who do not lack food and do have family and friends, but do not know how to make a seder. We must reach out to them and teach them.

-Second question. We call the matzah the "bread of affliction", as it is described in the Torah. [Deut. 16:3] But is it fitting to offer "affliction" to the poor? To offer the hungry a taste of suffering, as if they did not have enough of it? What kind of an offer is that?

The answer is given by Abravanel, 15<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish sage. When the poor eat at the home of the rich, they may feel ashamed and dependent. So everybody begins by eating plain matza, as an equalizer. The host is indirectly telling his guests: "All of us are equal before God. Even though you are poor, don't feel estranged at my table, because all of us were impoverished as slaves in Egypt." [Abravanel, *Zevach Pessah Haggadah*]

-Third question. We are all seated at the seder table, have lit the candles, done kiddush and dipped parsley in salt water. *Then* we invite people to the seder. Isn't it a little late? And we do it *inside* our homes, where no outsider can hear. Shouldn't we be in the streets, shouting out that invitation?

One answer is that it is not an invitation at that moment. All invitations in the spirit of that declaration have been sent out weeks ago and the guests are already here. It also reminds us that, at the time of the Temple, people invited neighbors to share the Paschal Sacrifice with them, the Korban Pesach. That's why we add "Next year in the Land of Israel". It's a prayer that we should once again be able to bring the paschal sacrifice in the rebuilt Temple.

-Fourth question. We say "This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate *in* the land of Egypt". Shouldn't it be "... that our ancestors ate **when they fled** the land of Egypt"?

Actually, they ate it in the transition period between slavery and freedom, so it represents both.

Let me add that the Maharal, from 16<sup>th</sup>-century Prague, said that when we have a lot of superfluous things, it is difficult to break from a bad life. The puffiness of bread symbolizes superfluous things. The simplicity of matzah enables freedom. Contemporary Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that what transforms the bread of oppression into the bread of freedom is the willingness to share it with others, as we are doing here.

Chag sameach. (Four times!)