



YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREAT NECK

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The Parsha in Practice

Talk is Cheap

Perhaps this Dvar Torah should begin with a “trigger” warning. It is difficult to speak of Parshat Bo and not mention Pesach and here I will be doing even worse: discussing preparations for Pesach. If it’s any consolation, the preparation we’ll be discussing isn’t the preparation involving cleaning for Pesach, but the preparation involving the conversation we’ll need be having over Pesach.

We know Pesach as the holiday of matzah and maror, but it is also the holiday of communication between generations. On every day of the year, we are tasked to remember the Exodus from Egypt, but on the unique holiday of Pesach, we are called upon to perform the mitzvah of “Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim,” to review and relate the stories and lessons that we learn in these week’s parshiyot amongst ourselves, and to our children. When do we get started with this conversation about the symbols of the Seder? We are likely to be familiar with this question already:

WHAT YOU DO
SPEAKS SO LOUD
THAT I
CANNOT HEAR
WHAT YOU SAY
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

– כּוֹל מְרֵאשׁ חֹדֶשׁ? תִּלְמוּד לומר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא. אִי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְכוּל מִבְּעוֹד יוֹם? תִּלְמוּד לומר בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה –
בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה לֹא אִמְרָתִי, אֶלָּא בְּשַׁעָה שֵׁישׁ מִצָּה וּמְרוֹר מְנַחִים לְפָנֶיךָ.

It could be from Rosh Chodesh [that one would have to discuss the Exodus. However] we learn [otherwise, since] it is stated, "on that day." If it is [written] "on that day," it could be from while it is still day [before the night of the fifteenth of Nissan. However] we learn [otherwise, since] it is stated, "for the sake of this." I didn't say 'for the sake of this' except [that it be observed] when [this] matza and maror are resting in front of you [meaning, on the night of the fifteenth].

This well-known Haggadah paragraph entertains the idea that the conversation should begin as of Rosh Chodesh Nissan, a full fourteen days before the Seder night. On its face, this does not seem so unreasonable. After all, Rosh Chodesh is the time at which you begin to prepare for the Korban Pesach (Ritva), and it was on that day that G-d appeared to Moshe and Aharon to deliver the final message of the redemption (Rashbam). So why *not* begin then?

The Haggadah explains that the delay comes from the Torah’s text itself:

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם:

And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt.'

The words "on that day" indicate that you need to wait until the fourteenth, but the phrase "בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה" implies that it is THIS, the symbolic objects found at the Seder table, that we wait for to engage others in these important discussions.

The Terumat HaDeshen quotes this source as a reason that one should not begin the seder early on the eve of Pesach and some object to the custom of reading the Haggadah on Shabbat HaGadol for this reason as well. They explain that not only are we not required to have this conversation until the night of the Seder, but we are not allowed to. We can well understand why we are not asked to begin this conversation two weeks in advance, but why would we be restricted from doing so?

The Chashav Sofer, (R' Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, the great grandson of the Chasam Sofer [1902-1961]) explains that the critical lesson of faith and deliverance that we are meant to share on the seder night requires the best pedagogical methodology that we can marshal. It is always possible to remember or to speak of the Exodus, but what are the conditions required to effectively teach it to others? Easy. The "בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה," or more specifically, the ability to point to something while I am teaching it.

To best instruct others, we cannot simply give speeches or wax prolifically on an issue. Instead, we need to be able to show how truly engaged we are with the idea in our own behavior. Talk is cheap, but what is valuable in terms of educating and influencing others is modeling.

Words become mostly irrelevant without the actions to back them up. As the famous Ralph Waldo Emerson quote reminds us: "What you do speaks so loudly, I cannot hear what you say." We all have our own life experience, personal complexities, and sophisticated rationalizations that might explain why we are not perfectly consistent in our own messaging and behavior. Those explanations might be well justified (or not), but usually contain nuance that is impossible to express to others and is lost in translation when shared. Instead, we appear as hypocrites.

The Seder night is meant to be the premier Jewish educational moment and the Torah wishes that we have all our jets firing at once. We will speak, and we will show. Our children will see more than just platitudes about mitzvot, they will plainly see the mitzvot performed. We must remember that this pedagogic model must be followed throughout the year as well for any lesson we seek to teach. We do not need weeks of conversation and argumentation, rather moments of example and illustration.

How do we best influence others? Forget the long and eloquent speeches. The most compelling argument will always be "בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה." Just be... what you see.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach