אהבת תורה

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AHAVATH TORAH

Seder Starters

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Torah nuggets and thought questions from the CAT Spiritual Leadership Team to inspire discussion and reflection at your Seder table.

Rabbi Israeli

Dressing the Part on Seder Night

There is a prevalent custom on seder night for those leading the seder to don a special white kittel. There are quite a few suggestions as to why this has developed into the custom. Some point to the fact that we are supposed to remind ourselves that within all of the happiness of the night of the seder, we are still not to become too joyous and lose control. The kittel keeps us focused and serious. Alternatively, others explain that on seder night we wear a kittel to express royalty and Majesty. Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, was under the impression that the primary goal in wearing a kittel on seder night, was to express that the night is different than all other nights of the year. When children see the leader of the seder wearing a kittel, they will ask why, and we will teach them the story of יציאת מצרים.

Rabbi Avraham Schorr quoting the מהר"ל from Prague, describes that the goal of wearing a kittel on the night of the seder is to remind us that what we are doing on the night of the seder is as important as what the כהן גדול did inside the קדש קדשים on Yom Kippur. The Kittel is like our very own priestly garb.

1. Which of these 4 answers resonates or seems most convincing to you?
2. In what way is our mission on Seder night similar to the כהן גדול on the holiest day of the year?
3. How does clothing impact the way we think and behave?

Rabbi Balk

The Exodus, Sanctity, and the Possibility of Change

We say in Kiddush "zeicher l'yetziat Mitzarayim" "a memorial of the Exodus from Egypt." This makes sense on Pesach. But why do we invoke the Exodus during Kiddush for the other Yomim Tovim and on Shabbatot throughout the year? Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz (1760-1827), also known by the name of his work, Zera Kodesh, offers a fascinating insight on Kiddush, which addresses just this question.

He explains that the genesis of any kind of holiness stems from and is modeled by yetziat Mitzrayim. Attaining kedusha, or making meaningful personal change is a difficult task. In life, one cannot simply declare "I am holy!" and automatically become so. It takes, at times, painstaking efforts to bring about true, lasting changes. It is a process that often includes failure and disappointment. But the story of the Exodus reminds us not to give up.

The years of servitude had taken a significant toll on the Israelites, both physically and spiritually. The Zera Kodesh reminds us that when Bnai Yisrael were miraculously saved by the Almighty and taken out of Egypt, they were on the lowest possible level of ritual purity. Nevertheless, their lowly status did not preclude them from this tremendous miracle. Not only did Hashem still rescue them, but only a few weeks later, they merited to receive the Torah. To an onlooker, this reality would seem an impossible fiction. But the Bnai Yisrael achieved it, demonstrating that change and sanctity are never beyond our grasp.

1. Why is it so hard to change our behaviors even when we know we should?
2. Is the Exodus a good model for personal change? Why or why not?

Rabbi Poupko

Acting Free and Feeling Free

We recline to the left at critical moments of the Pesach Seder to demonstrate that we are free people, Bnei Chorin. This custom follows a similar 'philosophy of mitzvah behavior' that is found in the Sefer haChinuch. There, the author explains the reason for the prohibition of not breaking any bones in the Korban Pesach with the principle אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות - that the heart is influenced (lit. pulled) by a person's actions. Since a free or noble person, a ben chorin, would not eat so ravenously as to break a bone while eating meat – the Korban Pesach should be eaten in such a fashion as to reinforce or influence our heart to feel as a ben chorin. And likewise for leaning to the left, that the behavior of reclining is meant to instill within us the feeling of being a ben chorin.

1. Nowadays when reclining isn't customary when eating, does the behavior achieve the goal of feeling like a ben chorin?
2. Are there other, more contemporary, behaviors that achieve the goal?
3. Is there any deeper meaning to reclining today, given that it's not the usual way of eating or drinking?

Rabbi Hyman

The Torah Speaks to Every Type of Person

The Torah tells us four times that we must teach our children about the Exodus from Egypt. In each case, this mitzvah is worded somewhat differently. The Torah does this in order to provide an account that can speak to four different types of people. Because there are these four types of people, the Torah repeats the mitzvah and tells the story of the Exodus from Egypt four times. Since this mitzvah is one of the main reasons we conduct the Seder, the Seder begins with a discussion of how recounting these events must be accomplished. For each different personality archetype, the Torah provides a different approach.

1. What is Hashem modeling for us and communicating to us by having these four different Exodus "lesson plans" in the Torah itself?
2. If the wise son and the wicked son both ask in their questions, "you" (אתכם for the wise son and לכם for the wicked son) why is the wise son looked at in a positive light whereas the wicked son is looked at in a negative light?
3. Could we possibly explain that these four sons are really the same person? How could we apply that to ourselves?

Rabbi Goldberg

What We Talk About When We Talk About the Exodus

On Seder Night, we are charged with telling over the story of the Exodus from Egypt. It would seem most appropriate to read the account of these events told in the first four parshiot of Sefer Shemot. However, the Rabbis selected a different text to anchor our discussion of the Exodus and to fulfill this crucial mitzvah. They chose an excerpt from Mikra Bikkurim (Devarim 26:5-8). This was the special formula recited by farmers upon bringing their first fruits to the Mikdash.

> (8)...'A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous. (6) And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. (7) And we cried unto the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression. (8) And the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders. (9) And He hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

1. Why do you think the farmer must recall the Exodus when bringing first fruits? How does that historic perspective impact the farmer in that moment?
2. What are the benefits of reading Mikra Bikkurim over reading the account of the exodus found in the Book of Shemot?
3. What are some strategies to personalize mitzvot to make them our own and to see ourselves as part of the broader Jewish Story?

Chaya Kanarfogel Rayman

Korech: A Sandwich of Conflicting Emotion

One of the most interesting and messy forms of eating that takes place during the Seder is during Korech, when we combine matzah and marror to create a sandwich. The Rambam explains in Hilchot Chametz U'Matzah 8:6 that when the Beit HaMikdash was in existence, one could eat the matzah and maror together or separately. In fact, as the Haggadah explains to us, the sandwich that we currently eat without the Beit HaMikdash is missing a key ingredient: the Korban Pesach. It was Hillel who enacted this practice, based on the verse in Shemot 12:8

וְאָכְלוּ אֶת-הַבָּשָׂר בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה צְלִי-אֵשׁ וּמַצּוֹת עַל-מְרֹרִים יֹאכְלֻהוּ

They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs.

We see from the passuk that each of the three elements of the original "Pesach sandwich" could stand on their own, one naturally leading into the other. In a way, we trace the trajectory of our freedom backwards, as we take the korban, which signifies the very existence of our autonomy through the Beit HaMikdash, then the matzah, which shows how we were taken hastily out of our bondage in Egypt, and finally the marror, which commemorates the once dismal oppression that our forefathers lived through. The passuk tells us that you cannot remember one without the others. Putting these three phases show us the true meaning of our existence as a nation and G-d's involvement in bringing us there.

1. What is the significance of holding these foods in our hands given their contrasting nature?
2. What are some other Jewish holidays or practices that seem to combine conflicting goals or feelings into the same action?
3. Why do you think the existence of the Beit HaMikdash might change the way we eat these items?