

Tradition...TRADITION!

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

Vayakhel Pekudei HaChodesh 5783

Kalman Friedman was a friend of my grandparents in Jerusalem, a survivor of and fighter in the Warsaw Ghetto. During his time in the Ghetto, he became close to a particular Chassidishe Rebbe whose identity is no longer known to us, and served as his right-hand man. Indeed, he was one of the last ones to see that Rebbe alive. Kalman was quite musical and had a beautiful voice, and was a repository of many special Chassidishe *niggunim*- those that this Rebbe used to sing, and those that he himself grew up with. After the war, the small group of Chassidim of this Rebbe who survived the Holocaust established contact with Kalman Friedman, and asked him, as the person who was closest with their Rebbe, if he would take that Rebbe's place. Kalman turned it down; he had not been particularly observant before the war, and he certainly wasn't now; it would be inappropriate and disingenuous for him to be lead Chassidim. Though not particularly religious, he was deeply traditional and possessed a warm, deeply chassidic soul. Every year, my grandparents invited Kalman Friedman and his sons over for the Seder. When they got to the *nirtzah* section at the end, he would sing the tune he learned from his Rebbe for the poem at the end of the Seder, "Ki Lo Na'eh," extolling the virtues, as it were, of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. The tune he used is an extremely catchy, boisterous, repetitive tune

which he would belt out in his mellifluous voice and Galitzianishe accent. As he sang “Ki Loy Noooooeh,” joy radiated from his face-and tears streamed down his cheeks. My mother has never forgotten this image, and this tune- and in our family, we sing it every year as we recall the remarkable story of the one we learnt it from.

We just read *Parshat HaChodesh* a few minutes ago. It is the section of the Torah that talks about the mitzvah of *kiddush HaChodesh*, or sanctifying the new month, which was done each month based on the testimony of witnesses and declared by the Sanhedrin. Related to this mitzvah, the Torah speaks extensively about all the laws of Pesach- from the Korban Pesach to the laws of Yom Tov in general. It makes sense, therefore, that *Kiddush Hachodesh* was the first commandment the Jewish people received as a free nation. Being able to control our own calendar is a prerequisite to celebrating any of the Yamim Tovim- because knowing the calendar is a prerequisite for celebrating the Chaggim, not just in the proper month but in the proper season. Indeed, the very first Rashi in the entire Torah quotes a Midrash suggesting that, were the Torah merely a book of laws, it would begin with *Parshat HaChodesh*.

Rav Chizkiyahu ben Manoach and other commentators point out something fascinating. When setting the Jewish calendar, we begin counting from the month of Nissan, the month of our freedom and birth of a nation. We count years- for

Shemittah, Yovel, harvesting seasons and so on- from the month of Tishrei. But if we were really following the Torah's guidelines, we would refer to the impending month of Nissan as "*Chodesh Rishon*," to Iyar as "*Chodesh Sheni*" and so on, as the Torah does. In the *Nevi'im*, some months have descriptive titles, like *Yerach Eitanim*, "the month of the original ones," to describe the period we know as Tishrei. But in later prophets and in the *Ketuvim*, we find different, more familiar names for our months. The book of Esther makes reference to the 12th month, calling it also the month of Adar, and also refers to the first month as the month of Nissan. Other references to these names can be found in the books of Chaggai, Zecharia, Daniel and Nechemia. The names of the months as we know them now were brought back by the Jews from Babylonian captivity, and are Akkadian in origin. For example, the name Nissan comes from the Akkadian language, which itself borrowed a term from the Sumerian *nisag*, which means "first fruits." Some names are even idolatrous in origin: the name Tammuz is that of the Sumerian god of food and vegetation.

According to the Ramban, the Jewish people who came from Babylonia brought these names with them to celebrate their liberation. Why, then, do we continue to use these names? Doing so seems like a vestige of an assimilated exile experience!

I think there is an answer- and the answer is one word. It is a word that made the late Chaim Topol, of blessed memory, into a legend. It is a word that compelled him to study Torah later in life, reportedly finishing *Shas* twice. It is a word that is

drawing a capacity crown tomorrow to AYA to hear Steven Skybell perform the role of Tevya in Yiddish, a language he does not speak or understand. No doubt you guessed the word by now: TRADITION!!!! The Jewish people were so connected to the tradition of using these names- especially since using them promoted observance- that the names were allowed to stay. The power of these traditions, these *minhagim*, is so strong that even if they are of dubious origin, and even if they shouldn't have staying power, we allow them to- because they have holiness as markers of time, symbols of identity and a connection to our heritage.

If there is any season in which communal, family and personal *minhagim* are front and center, it is this one. The customs we observe around Pesach lend it a special character, and make it personal for us. It is no accident that the word לָכֶם, *for you*, appears so frequently throughout the Torah reading for Parshat HaChodesh. It's as if the Torah wants us to take the letter of the law, and personalize it so it remains relevant and compelling in each generation. This is a time to be proud of the traditions that have been passed down in our families. It is a time to rejoice in our family customs, like Uncle Jerome, who had a thoroughly misspent youth and has been reading the "wicked son" for decades now. It is a time to sing our family songs, like the Kalman Friedman *Kiloynoooeh* that is now such an important part of my family heritage. Everyone loves *these* kinds of traditions. But when it comes to *minhagim*, the story is quite different...

Every year, around this time, my colleagues in the Modern Orthodox rabbinate and I are subjected to a steady and highly tiresome stream of complaints about how much more sense it would make for us to adopt Sephardic *minhagim* for Pesach. First of all, there are those soft matzos- delicious, pillowy laffas, as opposed to the crackers we consume. And then there is the issue of *kitniyos*. Because these are processed together with grains, and because flour made from these products looks like and may be mistaken for Chametz, there is a stringency that dates back to the days of the Ashkenazic Rishonim, in which we Ashkenazim avoid eating these products. Sephardic communities never accepted this stringency, with one notable exception: Most Moroccan Jews do not eat rice on Pesach, though they will eat beans, peas and other legumes as well. A full discussion about the extent of this stringency is beyond the scope of a sermon, but suffice it to say that those who complain about this Ashkenazic tradition often rhapsodize about how much better their lives would be as Sephardic Jews- at least for eight days a year. I don't see these same Jews expressing a deep jealousy about getting up super early for Selihot throughout the month of Elul, for example. There is a facebook group called the Kitniyot Liberation Front, and I know of many Ashkenazi Israelis who have switched teams. In 2016, the Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism voted to do away with *kitniyot* restrictions entirely. Those who complain about this to me are not just looking longingly at the rice and beans their Sephardic

friends are eating; they are looking disdainfully at our own Ashkenazic heritage. I will admit that, in the past, I have participated in the chorus of those who denigrate the practices of some Ashkenazic communities, such as being careful not to get matzah wet at all- the practice of avoiding gebroktz- or only eating peelable vegetables, or refraining from eating fish. These are real customs, and they sound extreme, but denigrating them was and is wrong to do. It is wrong because these are *minhagim* observed by plenty of God-fearing and wonderful Jews, even if I am not one of them. But it's also wrong because these complaints stem from an inferiority complex, arising from the false perception that to be Ashkenazi is primarily to inherit a tradition of inconvenience and a sensitive GI tract. In fact, observing Ashkenazi *minhagim* is a privilege- the privilege of upholding a millennium of Jewish practices that are no less venerable than those observed by our Sephardic brothers and sisters. For the sake of our continuity and our community, ***we cannot sell our birthright for a bowl of lentil soup!*** We must own, embrace and celebrate our heritage, as our fellow Jews do. Our Chassidic brothers and sisters, who engage in many rather extreme practices like the ones I described a few moments ago, care not at all if others think these practices are bizarre. They are unabashed in their love and reverence for these practices; they don't look longingly toward their non-Chassidic neighbor and wish they, too, could have a kneidel in their soup on Pesach. After all, there are another 357 days a year when they can eat *kneidlach* with gusto, and with a clean conscience. The Sephardim in

this room right now are not searching for any greener traditional pastures, either- not just because they *can* have rice and beans, but because they revere their *minhagim*. I can assure you that if their Sephardic tradition *were* to scrupulously avoid any beans, rice and the like, they would do so with great care, pride and joy- the same pride and joy with which they now check every single grain of rice painstakingly, multiple times, for any stray grains. Yet somehow, we in the Modern Orthodox community are ashamed, and ready to flee. So let's be abundantly clear: There is nothing to be ashamed of or annoyed by in our rich heritage, for which there is ample precedent in classical sources and which has been upheld by countless generations. But even if there were, there is value to observing and celebrating these *minhagim* nonetheless. It's called team spirit- in Hebrew, the term is גאווה יחידה - when you stick with a team no matter what. It's why we cheered for Israel in the World Baseball Classic even as they got pounded by Puerto Rico and dominated by the Dominican Republic. These *minhagim* make us who we are; as the Rosh writes in his commentary on Maseches Pesachim, ישראל קדושים הם - the Jewish people are holy and observe a diverse array of customs surrounding Pesach. It is, in fact, the observance of these customs that makes them holy. I will tell you something else: Observing and upholding these *minhagim*- rather than complaining about them and jettisoning them- is what will ensure that other generations beyond us will sit at *their* Seder tables, and continue these traditions themselves.

May this month of Nissan bring us joy, happiness and personal redemption- and  
may we continue to celebrate our rich heritage for millenia to come!