

בעזרה"ת

*Preparing
for
Pesach*

*Twelve Derashos for Shabbos
Hagadol*

Note: The first ten derashos are loosely based on the Aggada portion of the Shabbos Hagadol Derashos of Rav Moshe Feinstein זצ"ל as printed in Darash Moshe. These Derashos were given when Rav Moshe was the Rav of Luban in Communist Russia. Reb Moshe gave the Derashos at great personal sacrifice and used them as an opportunity to inspire a persecuted and suffering community to feel the joy of Pesach and Yetzias Mitzrayim even as they were experiencing persecution under the Bolsheviks. Reb Moshe went to great lengths to preserve these Derashos, keeping them with him at all times and even mailing copies to relatives outside of the Soviet Union. He felt that there was a Mitzvah to share them with a wider audience.

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Making it Personal

Introduction

Do we need to read the Haggadah and tell the story ourselves, or is it sufficient for the head of the seder to read it while we listen?

There are two components of the Mitzvah to tell the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim:

1. The Mitzvah of **והגדת לבנך** to tell the story to our children.
2. The Mitzvah of **סיפור יציאת מצרים** to tell the story whether we have children or not.

For the Mitzvah of telling our children, we can appoint someone else as our Shaliach or agent. He or she can tell the story for us. If the Shaliach is a grandparent there is even a special Mitzvah “that you may tell your children and your grandchildren”.

As for the universal Mitzvah of “Sippur”, things get a little more complicated. It seems clear from the Gemara’s description of the Seder and the Rambam that it was common for one leader to say the entire text while everyone listened. The Mishna Berurah seems to rule this way as well and encourages everyone to be sure to hear (but not necessarily say) at least the part of the Haggada beginning with Rabban Gamliel, Pesach, Matzah, and Maror. This is in keeping with the concept of “Shomei’a K’oneh” – listening is like saying.

But some take issue with this. The Brisker Rav says (on a different topic) that listening only works for speech but not for action. For example a Kohein needs to bless the people loudly. A fellow

Kohein could be 'motzi' him in the priestly blessing but not in saying it loudly¹.

The seder - more so than Birchas Kohanim - is full of action. We need to tell the story with Matzah and Maror in front of us and we need to tell the story with great joy but also a feeling of awe. We need to feel as if we ourselves left Egypt. Based on this, some insist that everyone present should say the Haggadah. The Haggadah is more than just words and is not something we can fulfill through somebody else.

I would like to suggest that perhaps there is a difference between Birchas Kohanim and The Seder. Saying the blessing and speaking in a loud voice during Birchas Kohanim cannot be separated. But on Pesach there are two separate Mitzvos. One: We need to feel the joy of freedom; two: we also need to tell the story. There is no problem with hearing someone else's words, as long as they themselves are speaking from true joy. But in order to be Yotzei with such a joyous person, we need to experience that freedom ourselves. This is something that nobody can do for us.

This is reflected in the Mah Nishtana. The child looks around and sees all of us leaning, eating Maror, eating Matzah and dipping our food. He uses words like לָנוּ and כָּלָנוּ and he notes that we are all celebrating - including the child himself. Once we have laid that groundwork and demonstrated our mood, the leader of the Seder can go ahead and recite "the answer" and we can fulfill our obligation by listening to his words and having it counted as if we said them as well.

¹ The Netziv notably disagreed with the Beis Halevi. He was of the opinion that historically only one Cohen would say Birchas Kohanim and the others would remain silent. This is supported by the Mishna in the third Perek of Megilla.

Understanding Why We Left Mitzrayim²

"גלתה יהודה מעוני – על שאכלו חמץ בפסח" - The Medrash tells us that we were exiled from the Land of Israel because we ate Chametz on Pesach.

This is strange. Aside from the fact that the punishment seems rather harsh for the crime, it is also not the full story. We know that the Jews had sinned grievously in the areas Murder, Adultery, and Idolatry. This was more than eating bagels at the seder.

Even the continuation of the Medrash that we were not treating those in need with proper attentiveness, seems to pale in comparison to some of the other things that were going on.

Rav Moshe Feinstein taught that in order to understand the nature of our sins that led to our exile, we need to examine why we were freed from Egypt and brought to Israel to begin with.

Egypt was a fine society. They were organized. They had a good economy and a fair system for taxation. They prosecuted murderers just like any civilized country. Better, in fact. Moshe was well connected. His stepmother was Pharaoh's daughter. He grew up in the palace. But that didn't stop Pharaoh from sentencing him to death.

Yet, that same Pharaoh somehow legislated the mass murder of every Jewish boy born in Egypt.

We don't have to be psychoanalysts to figure out how this could happen. Pharaoh was scared. He was afraid that the Jews would become a fifth column, side with his enemies and expel him from the land.

² Based on Darash Moshe, Drush 8, Luban, 1923

We see people – politicians and otherwise - do this all the time. They are adamant about something until it doesn't work out well for them.

In our terminology this is called “Kinah, Taavah, and Kavod” or “Jealousy, lust, and the need for respect”. These traits may seem somewhat trivial and not very far-reaching, but they are the root causes of the three cardinal sins of Giluy Arayos, Shefichas Damim, and Avodah Zarah. Pharaoh murdered because of his need for respect and his lust for power. He claimed he himself was a god because that was the only way he could bear to see himself.

We are just as human as Pharaoh was. We aren't immune to jealousy. We have our lusts and our creature comforts. And we all demand some form of respect.

Teaching Our Children (and Ourselves)

When we look at children we understand the danger of these traits. Jealousy over a friend's new toy makes it impossible for a child to be happy for a friend. Lust over a rice crispy treat equips a child with blinders as he shoves and pushes and grabs his way into the Kiddush. The need for respect causes kids to interrupt and constantly assert themselves. They know they are being unreasonable but they can't help themselves.

Adults suffer from Kinah, Taavah, and Kavod as well. When we wonder why someone has something that we don't and we wish that he or she didn't - that is jealousy. It doesn't matter what it is or whether it is tangible or attainable. If we wish they didn't have it - we are jealous.

When something we need is right within our reach but demands that we fudge the truth or turn the other way, that is desire.

Sometimes our desire is to relax and avoid confrontation, but that type of desire clouds our vision of what is important.

Honor is the toughest one. We all feel like we deserve recognition for something. And we are right. But how far will we go to get that recognition and how strange will we act when we don't? Some of us lust for honor and when we see someone else get that honor, we experience jealousy. That is lust and honor all rolled up in one.

Succumbing to Kinah, Taavah, and Kavod is what happened to Pharaoh and it is what happened to every honorable society that has walked this earth.

Power itself doesn't corrupt. Power becomes corrupt as a result of jealousy, lust, and the need to be recognized.

The Consistency of Torah Law

Even in our amazing and beloved country, there is a fascinating anomaly called a presidential pardon. If the president sees the words mercy in his alpha-bit cereal, he can save a life. If he doesn't like a law passed by congress he can pardon everyone who breaks it. He does not need any further explanation. As a matter of fact a pardon is considered to be a proof of guilt.

The presidential pardon is incongruous with our system of checks and balances, yet it is the law and has been used by every president since George Washington and in almost every civilized country in the world. Before it was called a Presidential Pardon it was called a Royal Prerogative, just the thing that the United States was fighting against. Yet this one piece of British Monarchy was something that the writers of the constitution just couldn't seem to get rid of.

There is no such thing as a pardon in the Torah. The closest we come is when Dovid Hamelech did not put Shim'i to death for cursing him. But even that was really just a postponement of his sentence and not a pardon. Shim'i was eventually put to death as well. The Talmud tells us: "Hamelech Dan; V'danim oso". The King is a judge and at times he is judged. The role of the king is to facilitate the laws of the Torah. Not to write his own.

It is for this reason that Moshe was not allowed to become a king. Even though Moshe wasn't a lawmaker, he is the source of our laws. It would not be proper for anyone to think that the king is the source of the laws. Moshe asked to be king and Hashem said אל תקרב הלוֹם, don't even think about it. King David, with all of his power and popularity said "If it wasn't for Torah – I would have absolutely nothing".

Leaving Mitzrayim, Yearly

Personal biases have the ability to affect any society, but we strive to be different. Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim to form a society that is based, not on our personal biases, but on the will of Hashem.

In a Torah based society, jealousy, lust and need for power are no longer King. We become governed by Hashem's rule.

Hashem gave us the tools to achieve the goal of a perfect society, but it is by no means easy. Every year we find ourselves back in Mitzrayim, motivated by jealousy, by what we think are our needs and by the respect we aren't getting but think we deserve. We don't use those words in our minds, but they are so much of what motivates us and – if left unchecked can motivate us to sanction even the worst of insults and even crimes.

On Pesach we go free. We allow our motivations to be dictated solely by the will of Hashem.

Our Job on Pesach

What emerges is somewhat shocking. Rav Moshe explained to his congregation in Luban that our role as a nation – or even as an individual community - is not to be powerful or successful or noteworthy. We are pretty good at that, but it isn't our primary goal. Many large and powerful and wealthy nations have left the world in shambles.

Our role as a nation is to be a people stripped of Kinah, Taavah and Kavod; a society that can concentrate on the will of Hashem. If in doing so we merit strength and wealth and power, we won't complain. In fact, it will help us accomplish more. But our basic goal is to be a society where what is right is more important than what we feel.

This is what every Galus and Geulah has been about. We go free to concentrate on what is important; we are exiled when we forget.

Chametz and Matzah

This brings us to Chametz and Matzah.

There is nothing more sensitive than flour and water mixed together. Done properly, with alacrity and constant work, the flour and water becomes a Matzah. Left to its own devices, the flour and water becomes Chametz.

We are a delicate mixture as well. G-d gave us a pure and holy soul paired with a very physical body. Without work, we could become selfish, lazy and calloused individuals. With work, we can be the

amazing Torah driven nation G-d freed us from Egypt to become. We have the ability to remain as holy as the day we were born.

If we can remain consistently holy, stripped of negative character traits, then we are true Bnai Chorin.

Our role on Pesach is to sit at the seder and remember not just how Hashem took us out, but why He took us out. We remind ourselves that we are free to renew our role in this world. We get rid of all of the chametz from ourselves and our surroundings. We start again and relive our exodus from Egypt with a pledge that we will never stop working on ourselves and our character.

It is during the seder that we can create a climate of freedom to do what is right and motivation to keep up our hard work. We can really show our children and ourselves what it was like to leave Egypt.

We don't need to talk. We can let someone else tell the story while we listen. However, when it comes to emotions, we need to be the ones feeling free and removing the Chametz from within us.

And then, to echo the words of Rav Moshe, we can turn to Hashem and say, "we got it". G'aleinu Na! Please redeem us. You sent us into exile because we had allowed too much Chametz to build up. We allowed jealousy, lust and need for respect to become Idolatry, Adultery and Idol Worship, but we are clean now. We will ask for mercy and G-d will certainly come. He will wipe all of our tears and take us home.

Torah Study: Group Activity or Individual Pursuit?

Introduction

I recently gave a class on Pesach and the theme was Freedom. After the class, somebody asked “Is there anything else that Pesach means to you besides for Freedom?”. I didn’t have an immediate response but someone else piped up and said, “Passover is the only time of year when I get together with my family and remember that I’m Jewish.” He explained very eloquently how he used to go to his grandparent’s seder, and then his parent’s, and now his children and his grandchildren. He felt like this was the mainstay of their Jewish identity.

It isn’t surprising to hear someone think of Pesach as a time to get together with family, but I wondered if that really is what Pesach is about. Maybe Pesach is just about Matzah and Maror and telling the story? Is Pesach more significant than Succos or Shavuos as a time to get together?

The larger issue I want to ask is whether getting together in general is a good thing. We have opportunities today that we never had before. We can sit in the privacy of our own home with texts in any language, with videos from any teacher and with tools that make learning alone more effective than it has ever been before. And yet, we still come together for a Shabbos Hagadol Drasha and for classes. How much of our Pesach and of our learning is supposed to be a group activity?

Alone or Together

There is a frightening passage of Talmud in Berachos. The verse in Yirmiyahu says “Cherev el Habadim” “a sword should be taken to the Badim” and Rav Yochanan understands this as a curse on those who study ‘Bad B’vad’ - all alone. This same sentiment is also echoed in a more positive way in the Mishna of Rav Chanina ben Tradion “Shnayim Sheyoshvim Ve’oskim Batorah” – “If two sit and study Torah, the Shechina will dwell between them”.

The opinions of Rav Chanina ben Tradion and Rav Yochanan were strongly held, as we see in their life stories. Rav Chanina ben Tradion risked - and eventually gave - his life to teach Torah in the marketplaces despite Roman persecution. Rav Yochanan was devastated and eventually died in despair when he lost his study partner Reish Lakish.

The Torah was given to us in a large group at Mt. Sinai, and as far as we can tell it was always studied in groups. Moshe was taught by G-d and studied with Aharon and the elders immediately on his descent from Har Sinai.

On the other hand, many people learn better on their own. We know that many holy people study and studied alone for the bulk of their days. The Chazon Ish and Rav Elyashev are two famous examples, but I think that in our minds we tend to picture almost any great Torah scholar in study alone, and it isn’t because they couldn’t find anyone to learn with them. Even Moshe on Mt. Sinai was given a ‘Revach lihisbonein bein parsha leparsha’, ‘time to reflect between the various topics’³. Rav Chanania ben Tradion himself says that even someone who learns alone is enveloped by the Shechina “Yeishev Badad V’yidom, Ki natal alav”. The Rambam

³ The Shemos Rabbah 41:6 records that Moshe reviewed with Hashem as well.

understands this to mean that if someone learns alone ‘it is as if the entire Matan Torah is re-enacted just for him”

In addition, the Gemara brings what appears to be an opposing view to Rav Yochanan that ‘Latznuim Chochma’, people who are private about their learning will acquire wisdom.

Should we learn Betzibur (in public), or should we learn where many of us learn best in quiet and solitude? The Shulchan Aruch quotes both views which means that both are correct. How do we reconcile these two opinions and how do we find an appropriate balance between the two?

The Seder

Just before we left Egypt, the Torah tells us that one or more households were required to come together as groups, designate a sheep, roast it, and eat the seder together under one roof. Up to one hundred people could participate in a single seder, as long as each person would get a Kezayis (olive’s worth) of meat from the lamb. It is also permissible to have one person make a Korban Pesach on his own even though he is taking a risk since it is forbidden to leave any Korban Pesach over after midnight. Despite this ruling, the Rambam writes that it is far better to have more than one person involved. There is no clear source for this Rambam because, as the Rambam’s son points out, the Gemara is clear that it is permissible for an individual to designate a lamb just for himself.

We find a similar idea in the contemporary seder: The Torah describes the Seder as a session of Questions and Answers. This is reflected in the Mah Nishtana which we have in the Mishna and in the Rambam. Our children ask questions, and we give them answers. The Rambam writes that if there are no children to ask

questions, the adults should ask the questions, if it is just a couple, a wife can ask her husband, and if it is him alone, he should ask himself the questions. Again, it seems clear in the language of the Rambam that it is preferable that the Seder take place in a group setting or at the very least in a simulated group setting. The Haggadah itself tells us that the sages got together to discuss Yetzias Mitzrayim even though historically this would have been a very difficult gathering to get together and even though in that small group there were differing opinions as to when and how to tell the story.

Freedom of Thought⁴

The key to understanding the Rambam lies in the nature of our freedom from Mitzrayim.

The freedom of Pesach is not about getting a better quality of life and getting everything we want. If it were, we would be celebrating on the tenth of Nissan, the day we crossed the Jordan river and entered the land of Israel. But we aren't celebrating arriving. We are celebrating leaving. Freedom is our excitement at being free and unencumbered by the Egyptians, their demands, their harsh treatment and who they made us become.

I once officiated a funeral for a 97-year-old woman from Vilna who had survived the concentration camp at Stutthof. After the war she somehow ended up assisting the Russian army as they were dealing with the Nazi prisoners of war. They offered her a chance to have hundreds of Nazis killed, but she said no. They offered her a chance to confront the person who had initially turned them in to the Nazis and she said no to that as well. She didn't know if she was right or wrong, but she said "I know I didn't come out of the

⁴ Based in part on Darash Moshe, Drush 8

Gehinnom I was in to act like the Nazis; I came out to show the world how a true Mensch acts”. Her priority was to demonstrate that a person can move on with their own life to do chessed and develop as a person.

Rav Moshe Feinstein explained that the Freedom from Egypt is specifically a freedom from our obsession with ourselves. In Egypt we were so busy, so taxed, and so hungry, that we didn’t have time or emotional space to consider the people around us. A person alone and self-centered is less likely to recognize any outside influence, including Hashem. That’s why we were told to join Chaburos – groups of people – who would get together to celebrate a seder and speak of G-d. “Tzei Ulmad” – we left our obsession with ourselves and we were able to learn.

Rav Elazar ben Arach

Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai had a student named Rav Elazar ben Arach who he praised for his Leiv Tov (good heart) and his ability to be a ‘Maayan Hamisgaber’ (an overflowing spring). After the death of Rav Yochanan, Reb Elazar ben Arach’s wife convinced him to move to Damascus. After all, he was an “overflowing spring”, he had a Lev Tov and did not need his colleagues for support. In the end, Rabi Elazar was all alone in Damascus and he forgot all his Torah. Finally, his colleagues came to see him. When he read from the Torah for them, he read “Hecharash Haya Libam” “Their hearts were plugged up” instead of reading “Hachodesh Hazeh Lachem” “This New Month is for you”, he read. His Lev Tov and his overflowing spring could not operate until his colleagues stayed and taught the Torah to him once again.

We see from here that without the input of others, our own thoughts don’t incubate or develop very well. Worse, we lose the

ability to be inspired and we just shut ourselves off more and more from the world around us. The first step in our freedom was to relearn interaction with one another and the seder every year is supposed to be about interaction and socialization. We could tell the story and eat the Korban Pesach on our own, but it would be missing a major ingredient.

Examining our Motivation

With this understanding, we can begin to see when it is important to learn with a group and when it would be ok to lock oneself in a room and learn alone:

If we are trying to withdraw from society, if we consider ourselves unbound to the input of others and unmotivated to contribute our share to others, then we are hurting our own learning. We are regressing back to Mitzrayim when the last thing on our minds was to get together with others and grow spiritually. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos does say that Hashem is with a person who studies alone, but the verse quoted is from Eicha (3:25). “Yeshev Badad V’yidom” “He sits alone and studies quietly”. When we are in Exile and we sit alone and withdrawn in our studies. We still merit divine protection as a result of our learning and we may even get our own private Maamad Har Sinai, but it will never be the same as it was when we all stood together like one person with one heart. Learning alone in exile is a very somber and subdued type of learning and it is doomed to become more somber and more subdued.

But there is another option. There is another verse in Eicha (2:19) that deals with Torah study in exile: “Kumi Roni Balailah”, “get up and sing at night”. This is what happens if we acknowledge the importance of others but at the same time tell ourselves that no

matter where we are, no matter what our circumstances we are going to learn and grow – with or without a chavrusa. That type of learning is a spirited and joyous learning – because if we are open to input from others, we are promised that Hashem himself will provide our chavrusa. The verse continues: “Shifchi Kamayim Libeich el nochach pnei Hashem”. Hashem Himself sits across from us and learns with us. The Medrash (Tanna D’vei Eliyahu 18) says that if this wasn’t a verse it would be forbidden to say.

A person who feels above all others and sequesters his or herself into a private room to study, will eventually find that their learning is regressive and suppressed. But a person who feels the opposite, that the world has so much to offer but he is shy or humble or simply learns better alone, ‘Latnuim Chochma’. He is a Tzanua and he will be blessed with Torah because a Tzanua has a respect for others.

Living With Others

The Shaarei Teshuva discusses an interesting situation in which two people live in a town where there is only one Kezayis (olive’s worth) of matzah available. It is clear to both individuals that only one of them can eat the proper amount and do the Mitzvah. The Shaarei Teshuva outlines four options: The first option is for each person to insist that the other eat the matzah. That would be a beautiful act of kindness but lacks in appreciation for the Mitzvah. Some say ‘Kol D’alim Gavar’, the Matzah is up for grabs and goes to whoever can grab it first. He or she is under no obligation to give up his Mitzvah in order to share it.

The third option is to split the Matzah. Neither would be doing the Mitzvah properly, but they would both be tasting Matzah on

Pesach. There is an idea of Chatzi Shiur, something is accomplished by eating just a partial shiur of Matzah.

The Shaarei Teshuva rejects all three of these options. To grab the Mitzva from someone else doesn't seem right, to eat a Chatzi Shiur might not work, and to just give the Matzah away is to scorn the mitzvah. Instead, the Shaarei Teshuva says that they should draw lots. Whoever wins gets the entire matza and whoever loses gets no Matzah at all, but he does get the mitzvah of enabling someone else to do the mitzvah properly. The Shaarei Teshuva says that helping someone else do the Mitzvah properly is more valuable than personally eating matzah on Pesach.

The whole idea of Pesach was and is to get together in a chabura to do the Mitzvah. It's about growing individually but at the same time gaining freedom from our own tiny world that we get lost in. Joining with others is the best way to become aware of Hashem at the seder and it's the best way to study Torah all year. Torah is acquired B'chabura. It's a state of mind that involves others.

Sometimes we could take that state of mind and employ it when we are on our own. And if we do it properly and we are open to a chavrusa, Hashem himself will join us just as he does at the seder, when we eat on the "Taka D'rachmana" – at Hashem's table.

The Bottom Line

One Tuesday, I received a call from a Reform Rabbi in Newport News. They were in the middle of a funeral and about to go to the cemetery when they found out that there was too much flooding to go ahead with the burial. The funeral was postponed to Thursday and they wanted to know if I would officiate the burial. I agreed.

One hour later, I received a call from a funeral home in Maryland. Someone had passed away in Maryland and she was supposed to be buried in Newport News. They heard I would be there, so they wanted to know if perhaps – once I was already there – I could officiate a second funeral as well. I agreed.

In speaking to the second family, it became very clear that the children were not leading a very religious lifestyle. We had a nice conversation about their mother and – as an afterthought – the son asked me what denomination I was from. I told him I was Orthodox.

“I think my mother will appreciate that ”, he said, “when she came to Virginia after the war she joined the Orthodox congregation and she always identified with them”. I later found out that she had taught all the women in Newport News how to make Pesachdike food.

The Tahara was arranged with the Chevra Kadisha in Silver Spring, and I officiated the service according to Halacha. The son spoke and said many of the things that one would expect at a funeral. But after he finished speaking, he started to cry and he said, “I just want to say one more thing: My mother’s life was a series of miracles. If the Nazis had their way, she wouldn’t have been buried at all. It is against all odds that my mother is being buried today in a Jewish Cemetery by an Orthodox Rabbi. As I sit here today I realize that this is exactly what the Nazis wanted to take away from her.

We need to celebrate freedom by realizing that the Egyptians wanted to take away our ability to grow, and we need to celebrate the freedom that Hashem gave us by coming together, whether in groups or as individuals to learn how to come closer to Him again.

In Every Generation⁵

How Do We See Ourselves Leaving Egypt?

The custom is for the Rabbi to give a class on the laws of Pesach on the Shabbos before pesach.

One of the most difficult laws of Pesach is mentioned in the Mishna: “A Person is obligated to see himself as if he left Mitzrayim. We need to tell the story to our children in first person “This is what Hashem did for me when I left Mitzrayim”.

Some have a custom to fulfill the commandment to see himself as if he left Mitzrayim by speaking of personal redemption or by aspiring toward personal redemption. This helps us see ourselves, but it does not include Egypt.

In addition, the seder is in many ways a re-enactment because a mere verbal acknowledgement of our good fortune and Hashem’s kindness does not equal actually being there in Egypt.

It is important to understand what we are trying to remember. Which part are we re-enacting? Are we remembering when we were slaves or trying to feel free?

Many haggados emphasize the idea that we were slaves. We celebrate our current freedom by remembering how bad things were. We are like the man who receives a drink and complains about how thirsty he was. We remember our bondage, the Matzah, the Maror, the hard work.

⁵ Based in part on Darash Moshe, Drush 8

Yet, we also celebrate freedom. This fits in with wining and reclining and dining like kings. It brings the idea that even the poorest person needs to be royal at the seder. But again, is it really true? Are we really so free? Why do we eat maror if we are free? And aren't we still waiting for Moshiach?

The Gemara tells us that Pesach will pale in comparison to Moshiach. The haggadah itself recognizes that we are still on our way to Eretz Yisroel. So what is the nature of the freedom that we relive on Pesach?

We are taught that even the wisest and learned men spent the entire night discussing the story of the exodus. In Lud, Rabban Gamliel spent the night discussing the halachos of Pesach. What were they discussing?

As far as practical halacha, I think that we are safest with the words of the haggadah that emphasize that if Hashem had not taken us out, we would still be there. We tell the story. Perhaps we share the halachos. Still, there is obviously more to it, and I would like to attempt an explanation.

Reliving Pesach

Let us take ourselves back to Mitzrayim. One might ask why we were so enamored with the Exodus. After all, 80% of us stayed behind, a tragedy of epic proportions. It is only the human being who can be both free and unhappy at the same time.

As we lived those bittersweet moments our focus was definitely the Korban pesach.

The Jewish people had been slaves for many years. On Shabbos Hagadol, we went out of their houses and defiantly took sheep for our Paschal offerings. We had seen nine Makos and knew that there

would be more. But the tenth Makah was a little bit different: This time we were expected to do something. We had to stay in our homes to avoid the makkah. We also had to have a big feast, and before the big feast we needed to have a bris. The Medrash tells us that many people were not interested in a Bris but the smell of the meat overpowered them.

After the people agreed to a Milah and ate the Pesach, Hashem hugged them and kissed them (as it were). It was through this that we became closer to Hashem. This was the “Eis Dodim” - The time of love.

What was the nature of this love? How was it inspired?

The Purpose of Freedom

Reb Moshe explained to the people of Luban that Freedom is overrated. People work Avodas Perech (Backbreaking Labor) even when they are free. Often freedom is just a question of which master we are serving.

Worse, many people throughout history have chosen to use their freedom to become masters over others.

The point of Torah was not just to free us; it is to remove Perech from the world and allow us to become true servants of Hashem.

During the story of Pilgesh B’givah, when the entire nation rose up righteously against the tribe of Binyamin, we united even with no king or other uniting element. It just worked. That is why Shmuel criticized us for wanting a king.

Throughout history we’ve managed to be one, even without a king. This is because we are all subjects of Hashem.

That is why when Hashem first spoke with Moshe at the burning bush, He reassured Moshe that the Jewish people would come to serve Hashem at Har Sinai. We began the process with “Mishchu Ukechu”, by removing ourselves from the Avodah Zarah. We accepted many Mitzvos many like Lashon Hora and respect for elders and tznius and not changing our culture, but all of it was worthless until we removed ourselves from Avodah Zarah.

Moreover, we had to acknowledge that our life was not ours. It is not ours to abuse and it is not ours to give away. We need to enjoy life and the gifts that Hashem gives us.

The Korban Pesach

When we ate the meat from the Korban Pesach we knew that it could not be too cooked or too raw. More importantly, we knew that ultimately it was not about how we want the meat or about the best way to make meat. It was about what Hashem wants. This is hinted to in the medrash that the roasted meat reminds us of Avraham who was willing to be burned in the fiery furnace. Hashem’s will overrides any of our desires.

Part of the Mitzvah of the Korban Pesach was to have equal partners in the Pesach. Nobody had the prime role and nobody was left without a portion.

By approaching life with the realization that we are not our own masters we truly became free. It was only the people who ate the Korban Pesach that were able to move forward and out.

Putting Ourselves in Egypt

Our Mitzvah to see ourselves as if we left Mitzrayim is to evaluate whether or not we would have left. Can we fill the criteria? Can we follow the rules?

Matzah

When we ate Matzah in Mitzrayim we didn't know why we were doing it. We could have baked the bread while we were preparing the sheep, but Hashem told us not to. He told us to make Matzah. The Jews didn't make all of their dough into matzah. They figured that they would have time to do that later. They planned to let the dough rise, figuring that they were in no rush. It was only after Pharaoh came and chased us out at midnight that we understood that they really weren't in control.

The Matzah reminds us of Sarah who cooked matzos for the Angels just before they gave her the unexpected news that she would have children. She was not in control of her future and neither are we.

Borrowing From the Egyptians

Once we had acknowledged that we were free, Moshe asked us a favor. We were to stay in Egypt just a little bit longer and "borrow" jewels from the Egyptians. This was another example of our servitude. The Egyptians could return and claim their debt at any time, which they did. It was only when we were using their jewels properly that we were able to appease their senses.

Maror

We eat Maror because we can't forget what it is like not to be servants of Hashem. The Maror reminds us of Yaacov: Yaacov and Eisav were brothers but the maror recalls the bitterness that existed between them.

Our Job

We need to remember pesach, matzah, and maror on pesach because we need to go through the same motions. Just as we

smelled the Korban Pesach, we need to smell the fragrances of the world and realize that Hashem is gathering blessings from the four corners of the world to give us. We can have them, but we need to realize that we are not in control. We eat the Matzah to remind us that we cannot be in control and we eat Maror to remind us that things can get really bad.

Experiencing Hashem's Love

It was through Pesach, Matzah and Maror that we earned Hashem's love and experienced a special "Eis Dodim".

We are accustomed to thinking that we are in control, that freedom is about guiding our own destiny. This is not true. Someone recently told me that the reason why we stop eating at midnight is to show that we have control. The opposite is true: we stop eating at midnight to show that Hashem has control.

The Danger of Human Control

Having control can be a terrible thing. Societies that do not believe in G-d have higher rates of suicide. It is not good to just be free.

I know a man who decided to be a citizen of the world. He revoked all of his citizenships and declared himself free. It didn't work. He had nowhere to hang his hat, no way to identify himself. No citizenship at all. Eventually he got it all back by pleading that he had been insane.

The Jewish people also need Someone above us. Hashem rules the world and we need Him. We don't get to make the decisions or decide what is best for us or for G-d. G-d makes our decisions. Of course, we have free choice, but it is a free choice between serving G-d His way or our way.

Applying Pesach Mitzrayim to Pesach Today

We ate meat not knowing that it would be our last meal in Mitzrayim. We ate bitter herbs not understanding why we needed to eat bitter herbs if our lives were already bitter, and we ate Matzah even though there was really no rush. This was all about the Jewish people learning that it was Hashem who was calling the shots. He is and always was our true master.

This is our obligation on Pesach. We need to relinquish our control to Hashem so that we can be worthy of leaving Egypt and worthy of moving forward into the rest of the year.

Unoppressed⁶

Halacha

The Shulchan Aruch (440:3) tells us that on Pesach it is forbidden for a Jew to eat at the same table as someone who is eating Chametz. The Beis Yosef bases this on a Teshuvah Harashba (1:177) and it is the accepted halacha. We have a similar halacha about eating milk and meat at the same table, but in that case we are allowed to make separation between the two people eating with a placemat or a centerpiece. That doesn't help for Chometz. Also, in the case of Milk and meat, if the two people at the table don't know each other, we allow them to eat milk and meat at the same table because they aren't going to share their food. Again, in the case of Chametz we are stricter. It doesn't matter how little we know the person, how big the table is, or how much stuff there is between us, we are not allowed to eat at that table on Pesach. The Betzail Hachochma even writes that if you are on a plane and the person next to you is eating Chometz, you are not allowed to eat at your own tray. That's how stringent we are.

There is some discussion in the commentaries (Magen Avraham, Chok Yaaov, Gra) as to why we are so stringent with Chametz. It might be because bread is such a staple that we would find it hard to resist, it might be because even a tiny crumb of Chometz is forbidden on Pesach as opposed to milk and meat which can be nullified in sixty. It might be because Chametz doesn't feel very forbidden because it is permissible most of the year.

⁶ Based on Darash Moshe, Drush 9

It occurred to me that perhaps there is another reason. Right at the beginning of our relationship with Egypt, the Egyptians made very clear that they would not eat bread with us. They wouldn't even sit at the same table as us when we were eating bread. When Yosef worked for Potiphar, he was given control of everything in his household except the bread that he ate. The Ibn Ezra explains that this was because the Egyptians refused to let us come anywhere close to their bread. Perhaps it is with this in mind that we turn things around a little bit. Not only do we have our 'Nahama D'nehemnusa' - our bread of faith – we are so happy and proud of our bread that we remind ourselves of the times that we were so looked down upon that people would not eat bread in our presence. Just for Pesach we take some extra pride in 'our' bread and we don't get near any other. As a matter of fact the questioner in the Teshuvos Harashba writes this very idea that the Chametz being eaten should be treated as a To'eivah – something disgusting – that should not be brought anywhere near us.

History

With that in mind, I'd like to review some of our initial contacts with the Egyptians and see if we can make rhyme or reason of where things went wrong.

- Right at the beginning, in Parshas Lech Lecha, we know that Avrohom and Sarah made their way to Egypt. Sarah was kidnaped by the reigning Pharaoh. He blamed Avraham for the mistake and escorted him out of the country. Rashi explains that the Egyptians were so immoral that Pharaoh knew that if he stayed one day longer the story would repeat itself. So they blamed Avraham and made him leave.

- Yitzchak never went to Egypt and Yaacov didn't go until he was 130 years old, but Yosef did go to Egypt as a slave. As mentioned, he was not allowed to touch the bread despite the fact that he did an amazing job and brought only bracha to Potiphar's household. Eventually he was framed and sent to the dungeon where he continued to bring blessing and good advice. When he was finally recommended to Pharaoh as someone who could interpret his dream, the butler referred to him as a slave and a Naar Ivri. The Medrash Rabba explains that he was reminding Pharaoh that Yosef might be good at dreams, but he was still a hated Jew. Hated because he would never be allowed to eat at the same table as an Egyptian.
- As time goes on and the brothers come to visit, we learn a little more about this practice. The Targum says that the reason the Egyptians refused to eat with us was because their deity was a lamb, and we eat lambs. Strangely, Yosef specifically had his son slaughter an animal (maybe a lamb) for the brothers to eat and they all sat at different tables. Yosef couldn't eat with the brothers because he was pretending to be an Egyptian and he couldn't eat with the Egyptians because they knew that he was Jewish (43:32)
- A little bit later in the story (45:17) Pharaoh invited us to come down to Mitzrayim and offered us his best land. At about the same time (46:20) Hashem comes to Yaacov and tells him not to be afraid. Hashem will come down with us to Mitzrayim and He will take us out one day as well.
- When Yaacov and the brothers introduced themselves to Pharaoh (46:41) they deliberately introduced themselves as shepherds so that they would be shunned and sent to

Goshen. They knew the Egyptians hated shepherds so they made sure to tell Pharaoh (46:47) “We came here to be shepherds”.

- That was the last time we find Yosef speaking directly to Pharaoh. When Yaacov passed away they negotiated through an agent to have Yaacov buried in Mearas Hamachpeila.
- At the end of Bereishis (50:16) we can already feel the oppression beginning. Rav Moshe explains that they felt the Galus more when Yaacov was gone. Somehow Yaacov was able to counteract the bad feelings until the moment he passed away. With the birth of Miriam, serious bondage began. The Medrash tells us that her parents named her Miriam – bitter – and later separated so that no further children would be born to be killed by Pharaoh.
- In the beginning of Shemos we find the Egyptians afraid that the Jews are going to take over and the decree to throw all of the babies into the Nile. Moshe was born and rescued but then he rescued a Jew who was being killed and became a fugitive. Interestingly, he also ran away and became a shepherd.
- Later (8:22) Moshe returns and asks for permission to serve Hashem outside the city because they planned to bring sheep as sacrifices. Pharaoh said no and the Egyptians make our lives worse and worse.

Rav Moshe

Rav Moshe Feinstein gave a Shabbos Hagadol Droshe in 1926 in Luban during the communist pogroms and he gave the same

drasha fourteen years later in New York during World War II. He explained that all of the hatred for the Jews traces back to the fact that we ate sheep and that we were shepherds. The Egyptians were afraid that we would take over because they were afraid that we would influence them with our mentality of not giving sheep the respect they deserve.

What was the big deal? Rav Moshe explained that the worship of the sheep was a worship of the weakest thing in society. The Egyptian religion was symbolized by a sheep because their philosophy was caring for the underdog. The sheep was helpless so they protected it. Anybody who did not was disgusting. In their warped minds, they were caring for the underdog by hating anybody who did not. They were caring for the underdog by not eating with us, calling us disgusting and killing our babies. Rav Moshe compared this to the communists and the Nazis. The ideology they believed in allowed them to abuse and disrespect everyone else.

Why didn't we just give in and respect the sheep? We obviously weren't going to bow down to them, but why did we have to own them and eat them? Rav Moshe explains that we knew that we were better than the sheep and that we had a right to eat them and own them.⁷

A friend told me that he had a guest coming to his Seder who said he could not eat meat. When pressed for a reason, he explained that he was Jewish but he had given meat up for Lent. In other words, as Jewish as he was, he couldn't bear to hear that

⁷Rav Kook leaned more toward vegetarianism and explained that for us to respect the sheep in the way the Egyptians did would have been unnecessary and very fake. It would have been a dishonest way for us to live.

someone else was frummer than him, so he took on the catholic Minhagim as well.

This was the nature of our slavery in Egypt. From the time of Avraham and through Yosef, the brothers and the growth of the nation, we were constantly told that we were not good enough. As long as Yaacov was alive there was some protection from the oppression but afterwards we became nothing but the most undesirable members of society. Eventually, the Egyptian attitude seeped in and we didn't feel too proud of ourselves either, until Hashem came with His strong hand and outstretched arm and made us free.

This is not a foreign concept. We all spend a lot of time unrecognized for how good we really are and we allow other people to affect the way we feel about our Avodas Hashem. It is true that we need to be willing to accept rebuke, to make sure that we are doing everything according to Halacha - and better - and that we are constantly growing. We need to learn from others. There is even a concept of 'Kinas Soferim, tarbeh Chochma' that good jealousy causes us to grow further. Still, in our essence we need to be ourselves. We need to be confident in our avodas Hashem. We need to be proud of what we have done with our lives and of the challenges that we have overcome and overcome daily. This is who we truly are. We need to be ourselves augmented by others, not creations of others augmented by a little of ourselves.

The Egyptians hated the idea of ourselves. They liked themselves to the exclusion of all others. The Jews could run their households, save their country and be loyal citizens. But the Egyptians would never consider eating with us because we sometimes ate sheep.

Mitzrayim is represented by people around us telling us that we aren't good enough. Sometimes they aren't even thinking that but we think that they are. Maybe we don't have enough academic degrees or maybe we don't work hard enough or have enough patience for people or volunteer for soup kitchens or do as much as they do. Or maybe we don't learn or daven or take on stringencies as much as we would like. But, maybe we have our own challenges too. People around us don't understand what it takes for us to study Torah, to get up for shacharis, to refrain from business on Shabbos or to eat out in only certain restaurants. Other people have no idea what kind of difficult life we have when we get home or when we speak to our relatives. We can't expect people to understand our greatness. And we can't allow anyone to make us feel inadequate.

In the Haggadah we quote, 'Vayarei'u osanu Hamitzrim' – the Egyptians made us feel inadequate. They made us bad. They convinced us that we were an uncultured nation that needed to be suppressed and oppressed. They tried to make sure that we wouldn't get out and make our mark on society. But we did. We took their sheep to symbolize our confidence in the word of Hashem and in our own mitzvos. We left the country confident that we were ready to inhabit our own land with our own value system. And we received the Torah that teaches us our higher way of life and higher way of thinking that encompasses compassion and social justice and honesty and a differentiation between good and evil.

Rav Moshe (Kol Rom 3:105) points out that even after all of the miracles that happened in Egypt the Jewish people had trouble pulling away from the Egyptian mindset. Moshe begged them 'Mishchu' pull yourselves away from the Egyptians and the way

they have trained you to think. Pull yourselves away from their influence and do a Mitzvah.

Where do we get the strength? When we tell the story of our sojourn in Egypt we begin at a very strange point in time: We begin when Lavan tried to destroy Yaacov. We know that Lavan was not very good to Yaacov, but why do we make a point of mentioning it in the Haggada. There are so many Pesukim in the Torah that deal with Egypt and for some reason our sages wanted us to begin with 'Arami Oveid Avi'. Why?

Reb Moshe (Darash Moshe, Ki Savo) explains that Yaacov's trip to Lavan was a test run. Lavan tried to kill him, to corrupt him, and to make him feel inferior, but it never worked. The reason is because for the entire time that Yaacov was with Lavan he kept all 613 mitzvos. Im Lavan Garti Vetaryag Mitzvos shamarti. Yaacov knew that if we would keep the Mitzvos in Mitzrayim, we would have pride and confidence. Not only because we were right or because the Egyptians were wrong, but because we were with Hashem.

Pesach

This is our freedom this Pesach. We say that when Hashem took us out of Egypt it was not through an angel and not through a messenger. Hashem Himself took us out of Egypt.

Why couldn't Hashem send an angel? The Zohar says that Egypt was too impure and we were too quagmired in impurity. Maybe the angels couldn't have survived it. The Dzhikover Rebbe adds that if Hashem sends an angel, then that angel does his job once and he is done, but when Hashem himself does something He actually elevates that time of year so that every Pesach we have that spirit of Hashem taking us out of whichever Mitzrayim we might be involved in at the time.

Rav Eliezer Dovid Friedman, shlita, takes it a step further. A malach would have come and taken one look at us in Egypt and decided that we were impossible to rescue. We had no saving grace. The Egyptians had oppressed and suppressed us to the point that there was not much of a distinction between us and them. That is why Hashem had to come. Hashem Yireh Leleivav – Hashem can see deep into our hearts and Hashem could see who we truly were and why we were truly deserving to be redeemed.

The word Mitzrayim means suppression. At our yearly Yetzias Mitzrayim, Hashem looks deep into our hearts and allows us to become ourselves, free of the bondage and the judgements and the accomplishments of the people around us. He just lets us be ourselves. That is the greatest freedom.

Conclusion

I'd like to end with a story that happened a few weeks before Pesach. I got a call from a woman who knew a man that had been through a lot and he was just not pulling out of it. She wasn't Jewish but he was and she thought he needed to speak to a rabbi. So she brought him into my office. He told me that he is not very religious but is very strict about a few things. He will only marry someone Jewish. He will only eat Kosher meat. And he has a Shabbos meal every Friday night. He then went on to tell me how much trouble he was having in life, in part because of his insistence on these things. Of course, there were some other serious things going on as well. He was standing up to all of the pressure, but he felt like he couldn't go on. His life was falling apart.

We talked for a while and before they left the woman asked me to recommend some prayers for the man to say to feel better about

himself or about life. I recommended Shema. I then spent a few minutes explaining to him how all of our problems and challenges and thoughts can be found in the words of King David and Tehillim. He was already saying Shema and Tehillim. On a whim, I asked if he had ever thought about the words to Shalom Aleichem. Turns out that he does not say Shalom Aleichem. He stays home, he makes Kiddush and he eats kosher meat but he does not say shalom Aleichem.

I took out a siddur and I explained how when he is Moser Nefesh to shut out everything in his life and sit down at his table and eat a meal in honor of Shabbos, two malachim come to his meal and bless him and his Shabbos and his life with Shalom. He is beginning that meal surrounded by malachim, but in the last verse we say goodbye to the malachim. The Slonimer rebbe explains that this is our time with Hashem. It is the time when Hakadosh baruch Hu looks deep inside us where we have beauty that even the malachim can't see. And I encouraged this man to recognize the Kedusha and holiness that he is bringing into his life each Friday night and to be encouraged to continue in that path. He started to cry, and the non-Jewish woman started to cry. He stood up, gave me a hug and promised that he would sing Shalom Aleichem every Shabbos from now on.

And that is what we need to do today. The Zohar tells us that on Pesach, Hashem gathers His entire heavenly entourage to watch us conduct our seder. We need to feel the Kedusha of Hashem's presence this Pesach and we need to take that Kedusha that we have internally and proudly go forward in our lives knowing that we are licensed to be proud of who we are, who we have become, and where we headed.

Game Changer⁸

The Names of Hashem

The Jewish people complained to Moshe. He had come to help them, but he had only succeeded in making things worse. Before Moshe came, the Jewish slaves had been supplied with enough straw to fulfill their brick making quotas. Now they had to find their own straw. Moshe had damaged their reputations and increased their suffering.

Moshe turned to Hashem and complained, “Why have you caused this nation to suffer? Why did you send me?”

Hashem assured Moshe that He would help the Jewish people. He added: “I have appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaacov with the name of ‘Kel Shakai’. I did not make my name of YHVH known to them”.

The name YHVH represents the idea that Hashem was, is and will always be. He is the cause of everything, He is with us at all times, and He will always be with us. The forefathers did not need this reassurance because they understood that Hashem had a plan. In many cases, the forefathers saw their problems resolved in their own lifetimes. Avraham and Sarah bore Yitzchak and Avraham even lived to see Yishmael do Teshuva. Yitzchak survived the Akeidah and presumably had nachas from his children. Yaacov spent the last seventeen years of his life living peacefully and

⁸ Based on Darash Moshe, Drush 11

surrounded by all of his children. Throughout their ordeals, the forefathers remained holy, faithful and deserving of Hashem's favor.

Moshe recognized that the suffering in Mitzrayim had impacted the Jews on a very deep level. There was no end in sight and the Jews could not even think about freedom. The Egyptians had succeeded in taking over their entire lives. They were losing their national identity and soon they would not deserve to be saved.

Hashem reassured Moshe with his name of YHVH that He would continue to be with the Jewish regardless of how downtrodden and unholy they might be.

Hashem taught Moshe that His love and His plans for our glorious future can transcend and defy all logic and fairness. Hashem is with us and he will see us through to the end.

Four Questions

There are still a number of puzzling questions that need to be answered:

Firstly, why does Hashem say that He did not make His name of YHVH known to the forefathers? This name was not a new revelation; we find it throughout the book of Bereishis. The Jewish people used it when they cursed Moshe at the end of Parshas Shemos, and Moshe himself used it in this very conversation. In what context was the name YHVH not used in previous generations?

Secondly, The Torah records that Hashem was 'angry' when Moshe, in apparent humility and thoughtfulness, suggested that

his older brother Aharon lead the Jewish people. Yet, when Moshe accused Hashem of sending him to cause harm to the Jewish people, the Torah does not record any anger. Why is there no anger?

Third, according to the Medrash Hashem compared Moshe to the forefathers and mourned the loss of greater generations. Moshe had questioned Hashem's plan where the forefathers had never questioned Him. Yet, we find that the forefathers did question Hashem. When Hashem promised the land of Israel to Avraham, he asked: 'Bameh Eidah?' "How do I know?" Why was Moshe considered to be the first to question Hashem?

Finally, although the doubts of Avraham and Moshe were similar, the consequences that they were dealt were completely different. Avraham's punishment was that his children were exiled for four hundred years while Moshe's punishment was that he would not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel. Why the difference?

True Knowledge

Many of these difficulties can be resolved by examining a single word. Hashem said that he "did not make His name of YHVH *known* to the forefathers". What is the idea of Hashem making his name known?

In Hashem's conversation with Avraham we also find the word 'know': Avraham asks, "How will I know (that my children will inherit the land)?" and Hashem responds "You will surely know for your children will be slaves in a land that is not theirs or four hundred years".

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Drashos 11) explains that when Hashem first told Avraham that he would be given the land of Israel, Avraham was dismayed. Avraham had prayed to prevent the downfall of Sedom and he was not excited about the idea of conquering and expelling seven nations and thirty-one kings from the land of Canaan. He asked the question “How will I know?” using the word ‘know’ in the biblical sense: “How can I make peace with this? How can I appreciate this? How can this relate to me?”

Hashem responded to Avraham by explaining that there is a natural progression in world history. Trends change, nations change, beliefs change, and lands change. Just as the world has progressed past idolatry and slavery, there have been and will be many progressions throughout history. Hashem assured Avraham that there would be no sudden expulsion of the Canaanite people. Rather, the Canaanite society would disintegrate and deteriorate over time. They would succumb naturally to the Jewish invaders. Such is the way of the world and it was to remain that way until Moshe came along.

Moshe Rabbeinu

Moshe grew up in Mitzrayim in the palace of Pharaoh. His fellow Jews were oppressed and suppressed but they showed no interest in dissent or rebellion against Pharaoh. It was only Moshe who came in from the outside who protested the treatment of the Jews and even killed a Mitzri. The Jews complained about Moshe’s involvement and harassed him to the point that he was forced to abandon his protest and flee to Midyan. When Hashem appeared to Moshe and sent him back to Mitzrayim, Moshe understood that the time was finally right for conditions to improve. He took his family and his belongings and returned to Mitzrayim.

Moshe knew that the process of freedom would take time, but he believed that the Pharaoh and the Jewish people were ready to start talking about freedom. Soon, Moshe found out that he was a lone voice. Pharaoh refused to take him seriously and the Jews cursed him for getting involved. Moshe realized that if history was to progress at a natural pace, the Jews would not live to see the end of the story. His complaint to Hashem was not about a lack of G-dliness in this world, but about the slow pace of change. He saw that the Jews did not have the stamina to take much more and that they had lost all desire to be free.

Moshe begged Hashem for a game changer.

Hashem responded by abandoning the natural process and rushing the Jewish people to freedom. The ensuing story of the Ten Makkos and of Yetzias Mitzrayim was a story of Shock and Awe. Rather than wait, as Avraham had requested, Hashem shocked Pharaoh and the Jewish people into change. Within a year, Pharaoh was begging the Jews to go and the Jews were free of bondage.

The quick change came at an expense. Attitude did not have time to catch up to reality. Pharaoh immediately regretted letting the Jews out, and the Jews begged to return to Egypt. We needed forty years of wandering in the desert just to shake off our slave mentality and prepare ourselves to enter the land of Israel. Even after we entered the land of Israel, our freedom was not eternal. It lasted only 410 years.

We needed more time, but Moshe had realized that there was no more time.

Rav Moshe explains that when the final Geulah (redemption) comes to the world, we will be ready for it. As we say in Aleinu, the whole world will be perfected through the name of “Shakai” and the freedom will last forever. We constantly beg Hashem to rush our redemption, but we know that He will rush it in a way that will not cost us our freedom.

Our Place in History

When Moshe was a child he made a choice between a Diamond and a coal. He knew that the diamond was more valuable, but he picked up the coal instead. The angel who guided his hand taught him that sometimes the short term choice is the best choice. Opting for the coal saved his life, and the speech impediment that it caused was a constant reminder that sometimes we need to be impatient. We need to give up on the historic process and introduce a game changer.

As we consider the world around us, we need to envision the diamond and the coal. The diamond looks boring but has long term value; but the coal can sometimes hold more excitement and more hope.

Rav Moshe observed that the world is almost ready for Moshiach. Most of the ingredients are in place and it is just the details that are missing. Jealousy, lust, and the need for honor cause people to act in ways that they don't believe in. Poverty, pressure, and societal norms cause us to do crazy things. Still, we can look beyond the insanity and know that we are almost ready.

In the Ha Lachma we declare that, by rights, nobody should remain hungry or needy. Unfortunately we are enslaved and in

exile. We do witness hunger and hatred. We hope that next year we will be redeemed and our true colors will show.

When we tell the story of Pesach, we are told to begin with the bad and end with praise. We may not have a perfect ending yet, but we can praise Hashem and appreciate who we are and how far we have come.

On a personal level, we can teach ourselves to be patient with the historic process, but to be willing to introduce a game changer when necessary.

We can sit back and let things progress naturally, or we can use our unique abilities to effect some badly needed change.

We can be the ones to bring the world one step closer to perfection.

Freedom⁹

Wanting to be Free

I once helped a man get out of jail. He had been caught on tape smuggling hundreds of cases of cigarettes and admitting that what he was doing was illegal.

As soon as it was clear that this man was in big trouble and that he felt bad for what he did, everybody ran to help. There were family members, lawyers, politicians, district attorneys, sheriffs, and prison chaplains on his case. Many people made a trip down to Norfolk to see how they could help. It was beautiful and sad at the same time.

One of the things that the man needed to do was prepare a statement convincing the judge that he was contrite and remorseful. This was not a statement that would be made in court – it was a statement that the judge requested in writing before he would even try the case.

Knowing, as I did, that the man felt truly remorseful, I sat with him for hours to help him articulate his thoughts and put them into writing. We wrote and we crossed out and we wrote again. Finally, the man just let his feelings burst out. We took those feelings and wrote them down because they pierced my heart and, later, the heart of the judge:

“I just want to be free!” He said, “I hate the attention that I am getting from all of these activists and lawyers and judges and important people. I hate the fact that I did something stupid and now I have to deal with it 24/7. I want to be free from prison, free

⁹ Based on Darash Moshe, Drush 12

from lawyers, free from activists and free from all of these statements and decisions. I want to be free to start again, to get a normal job, to support my family, to pay my rent and to get on with my life”.

He told me that he was willing to go to prison if it meant that he could just get the whole thing out of his way and get on with his life. Freedom wasn't about getting out of jail, it was about getting out of the situation that he was trapped in.

On the night before the trial the man stayed at my house with his wife. By 11:30 pm everyone involved with the case had either left the house or gone to sleep. Only the two of us were awake. As I prepared for bed I asked the man if there was anything else that I could do for him. He said: “Can we learn Gemara Sukkah together for a few minutes?”

We sat down at my dining room table and learned a Gemara in Masechtas Succah. We had a big day behind us and a bigger day in front of us, but we forgot about it all and discussed an obscure sugya in the first chapter. We made diagrams, looked at the Rashi's and argued about the Tosfos. It was well past midnight when we finally closed our Gemaras. We were both exhausted but we had no regrets at all. We had connected with something sane, something real, and something that would last beyond the present crisis.

The man didn't ask to learn Gemara because he felt like a tzaddik or because he wanted to impress me. We were way beyond that point. He wanted to learn because he wanted to feel free for a few minutes. He wanted to reconnect with Hashem and free his Neshama of the burdens that he had brought upon himself. He wanted to do something 'normal'.

Baruch Hashem, the judge was convinced by the man's remorse and finally allowed him to walk away with no more jail time, no more parole, and no more investigations. There were big bills to pay, but at least he was free to continue with his life, get a normal job, and spend Pesach with his family.

A few weeks later the lawyer and I received a gift of some large boxes of Matzah. They were the best Matzos that I ever ate, because they were a gift from a man who had just learned the true meaning of freedom. As I ate the Matzos at my seder, I thought about what the man had said about being free. I felt like I really understood the idea of Avdus L'cheirus. When we left Mitzrayim our entire mindset changed. We were free to be our own people and to begin a new life for ourselves.

Mah Nishtanah

The Gemara in Pesachim tells a story about Rav Nachman and his slave named Daru. At the seder Rav Nachman asked Daru how he would react if his master set him free and gave him thousands of dollars in gold and silver. Daru said that he would jump for joy and praise his master. Rav Nachman said "with your words we have fulfilled the obligation of asking the Mah Nishtana". He skipped Mah Nishtana and continued the seder with "Avadim Hayinu"

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Drush 12, 1929) asks a very simple question. How was Daru's statement about freedom a fulfillment of Mah Nishtana? If anything, it was a fulfillment of Avadim Hayinu? Daru's statement was explaining why we celebrate, not asking why things are different.

Rav Moshe explains by quoting another Gemara about Daru. In Bava Kama, Rav Nachman writes that if he were to lose Daru he would incur absolutely no financial loss because Daru was not

worth his food and board. Daru's only skill was dancing at parties and people who dance at parties do not make enough money to support themselves. Daru was lucky to be a slave because otherwise he would have starved to death.

When Daru jumped for joy at the thought of going free he had no idea what he was getting himself into. He was dependent upon Rav Nachman to support him. Even with the thousands of dollars in gold that he would receive, he would eventually run out of money and find himself with nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep.

Daru was like a fish that is drawn out of the water. He jumps and thrashes and looks like he is much happier and much more excited than any of the other fish swimming placidly in the water. In truth, he is going to die and the other fish are going to live.

Four Sons

Rav Moshe goes on to explain that the four questions of the Mah Nishtana are actually the questions of the four sons. Each of the sons challenged the seder and had a reason why he thought that it made no sense. The first question of "Halaila Hazei kulo Matzah" is the question of the wise son. The wise son looks at people like Daru and asks why we are celebrating. Are we really truly free? Are we really so happy? We get excited about things from time to time, but do they have lasting value? Do we really live in a perfect world with perfect lives, or are we like Daru – jumping for joy when we are really starving to death?

When the Jewish people left Mitzrayim the Matzah was the one thing that didn't work out. Everyone who deserved to leave left, the Egyptians were unable to touch us, and we got to keep some of the Egyptian's wealth. The matzah was the only 'flake' - our bread did not have time to rise. Instead of finally eating normal

food, we were forced to eat the same flat bread of poverty that we had eaten for hundreds of miserable years as slaves in Mitzrayim.

The Chacham looks around him and sees “only Matzah”. We left Mitzrayim in a rush and kept eating Matzah and we seem to have been holding onto that “Matzah” for thousands of years. Nothing works out perfectly. We are always running, rushing, not getting things right, and trying something new. Nothing is permanent. We are like Daru, celebrating and dancing around when we are not free at all.

The Rasha’s question is the exact opposite of that of the Chacham. The Rasha is happy with the temporary world around him. Like Daru, he has fallen for what seems to be freedom, but is really a messed up world. He asks “Halailah Hazeh Kulanu Mesubin!” – “everyone is leaning in luxury eating good food and wearing fancy clothes, why are we so obsessed with Galus and Geulah?”

There was once a couple in Europe that would daven daily for Moshiach to come and bring them to Eretz Yisroel. One day, they stopped davening because they realized that if they truly went to Eretz Yisroel, the Cossacks would come and steal their chicken and their cow. They went to the Rebbe and the Rebbe pointed out that even if they didn’t move to Eretz Yisroel, the Cossacks were likely to steal their chicken and their cow. They might as well daven for Moshiach. The couple thought about this but came back after a few days. They told the rebbe that they had made a decision that they would continue to daven for Moshiach to come – but instead of asking to go to Eretz Yisroel, they would ask for Hashem to take the Cossacks to Eretz Yisroel so that they could continue to live safely and securely with their chicken and their cow.

Daru the slave represented the Mah Nishtana because he represented the questions of the Chacham and the Rasha. To the Chacham, Daru was crazy for celebrating and we too are crazy for celebrating our half-baked freedom. To the Rasha, Daru has a great life. He does not see why we are making such a big deal about moving from slavery to redemption.

The Chacham thinks that freedom is a hopeless cause because this world is so senseless and temporary; the Rasha thinks that he already has freedom because he doesn't understand what is truly important. We explain to both of them that without true Cheirus there is no freedom at all but with true Cheirus we can experience freedom right here in this world.

Achieving Freedom

We answer the Chacham by teaching him the Halachos of Pesach. We explain to him that we may not be truly free or in a great situation, but we are still celebrating. We are celebrating the fact that, with Hashem's help, we have the ability to hook up with something larger than ourselves and bigger the entire world that we live in. The Afikoman is hidden during the meal but ultimately it is the taste of the Afikoman that stays in our mouths after the seder. In the same way, the true freedom of Torah is not always visible to the eye, but it can and will last forever.

On Pesach we celebrate two types of freedom: our escape from the bondage of Egypt and our own personal freedom to act and think as ourselves and as Jews.

Before Yetzias Mitzrayim, people looked at the Jewish people as a slave nation. We had no aspirations or hope of ever becoming anything else. By leaving Mitzrayim we became so free that we became people that could never be enslaved again. There has

been plenty of persecution, suffering, and abuse throughout the years, but nobody can truly enslave the Jewish nation. We possess a neshama and a mission that simply cannot be subdued or neutralized. Hashem has made us free.

When I left home for the first time, my rebbe told me to stay away from bad friends. Friends have the ability to lock you up into something awful. Without realizing it, they force you to talk and act and think a certain way. This is just one example of how people can get into a rut and into a situation where they are not truly free. We become burdened by other people's expectations and our own hang-ups and mishegasen.

Pesach is our chance to recognize the areas where we are not free and we are not ourselves. It is our chance to free ourselves to come closer to Hashem.

We all want that freedom. It is the freedom from the feeling of jealousy that we feel when someone gets something that we deserve. It is freedom from the irritation that we know we shouldn't be feeling around certain people. We want to be free from our addictions, free from bad moods, and free from laziness. We want to break out and get on with our lives. The bracha of Pesach is the true Cheirus that we can imagine and attain each and every year.

Our Legacy

About twenty years ago, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks visited Windsor Castle and delivered a lecture in the presence of Prince Philip. Windsor Castle is the oldest inhabited castle in the world and has seen much of the glory of the British Empire as well as the expulsion of the Jews from England by Edward I in 1290 and other massacres and libels.

Rabbi Sacks began his lecture by speaking about the unique experience of growing up in a castle. A young prince or princess would have no choice but to take note of the deep history of their home and the expectations, protocols, morals, and obligations that came along with it.

“Jews don’t own buildings like Windsor Castle”, he continued, “We are not that kind of people. But we own something that is, in its own way, no less majestic and even more consecrated by time. The Jewish castle is built not of bricks or stone, but of words. But it too has been preserved across the centuries, handed on by one generation to the next, added to and enhanced in age after age, lovingly cherished and sustained. As a child I inherited it from my parents, as they had inherited it from theirs. It is not a building but it is nonetheless, a home, a place in which to live. More than it belongs to us, we belong to it; and it too is part of the heritage of mankind.”

As hard as people and events try to remove us from our Torah and to burden us with their prejudices and ideas, we remain free. We are free to feel and act and think as Jews. We are free to fulfill our role of being a light unto the nations and to make all of our decisions based on the will of G-d.

We often get ourselves trapped in situations where we do not belong. We need to be able to break free, to follow our hearts and to reset our moral compasses.

This Pesach we need to work to understand where we are stuck or locked in. We need to grab the bracha of Cheirus to free ourselves of those feelings and get on with our lives.

Are Miracles Good?¹⁰

Introduction

On Pesach, we fulfill the Mitzvah to relive and retell the story of our Exodus from Egypt.

Actually, we are obligated to remember the Exodus every single day¹¹ and every week. We mention Yetzias Mitzrayim in Shema and in Kiddush. On Pesach, Rav Chaim Soleveichik¹² writes that there are three added components to the mitzvah that make up a large part of the seder: We need to have a Question and Answer Format, we need to start with the bad and end with praise, and we need to mention Pesach, Matzah and Maror. We do this by asking the Mah Nistana, by answering with the stories of our physical and spiritual emancipation, and by discussing the items on the Seder plate.

There is a fourth distinction as well. Throughout the year we mention our Exodus from Egypt but we do not necessarily mention that it happened through miracles and wonders. We left Egypt like a child leaves school or a prisoner is freed from jail, or perhaps like our grandparents left Europe. It is something to be thankful for but not necessarily miraculous. It just happened with the help of G-d, and we are glad that it did.

¹⁰ Based on Darash Moshe Vol. 2

¹¹ למען תזכור את יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חייך

¹² חידושי הגר"ח על הש"ס סטנסיל

On Pesach it is not enough to just mention that we were slaves and are now free, we mention the fact that it happened miraculously. We speak about the Plagues and the clear involvement of G-d's strong hand and outstretched arm in the miracles and amazing wonders that took place.

This is reflected in the wording of the Rambam¹³ and in the Seder itself. We need to mention the miracles.

Seder?

The Seder is all about order, as is much of Judaism. The story is told that when Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm, wanted to find how his son Rav Nochum Zev was doing, he made a surprise visit to his room in yeshiva to see how neat it was. If someone had seder – if they were organized – he assumed that they were progressing well in other areas of their life too.

The Maharal¹⁴ writes that Seder is a sign of Chochma, of wisdom.

In Pirkei Avos¹⁵ we describe seven attributes of a Chocham.

שְׁבַע דְּבָרִים בְּגֵלָם וְשִׁבְעָה בְּחֻמָּם. חֹכֵם אֵינוֹ מְדַבֵּר בְּפָנָיו מִי שֶׁהוּא גָדוֹל מִמֶּנּוּ. בְּחֻמָּה וּבִמְנִין, וְאֵינוֹ נִכְנָס לְתוֹךְ דְּבָרֵי חֲבֵרוֹ, וְאֵינוֹ גּוֹבֵהֵל לְהַשִּׁיב, שׁוֹאֵל כְּעֵינָן וְיֹמְשִׁיב כְּהִלָּה, וְאוֹמֵר עַל רֵאשׁוֹן רֵאשׁוֹן וְעַל אַחֲרוֹן אַחֲרוֹן, וְעַל מֶה שֶׁלֹּא שָׁמַע, אוֹמֵר לֹא שָׁמַעְתִּי, וּמוֹדֶה עַל הָאֻמָּת. וְחִלּוּפֵיהֶן בְּגֵלָם:

“Seven things are found in an unformed person and seven in a wise man: A wise man does not speak in front of someone who is greater than him; does not interrupt the words of his fellow; is not impulsive in answering; asks to the point and answers as is proper;

¹³ הלכות חו"מ ז:א

¹⁴ דרך חיים ה:ז

¹⁵ פ"ה

speaks to the first point first and the last point last; and about that which he has not heard, says, "I have not heard"; and he concedes to the truth. And their opposites are the case with an unformed person."

None of these have anything to do with knowledge. They are about Seder. They are about listening and clarifying.

The greatest Seder is the way Hashem runs the world. The words 'Seder' and 'Teva' – nature – are synonymous¹⁶. G-d could run the world in any way he wants, but he chooses to run it with Seder, with the laws of nature. Jiffy Lube used to advertise – "If you want a well-oiled machine, bring it to the place that runs like one". G-d's universe is a well-oiled machine.

Thus Chochma, Nature, and Seder are all interrelated and they are all reflected in the seder of Pesach, which is perhaps the most organized and choreographed meal that we have all year. Yet Yetzias Mitzrayim is anything but Seder. When we left Egypt, G-d suspended all of the rules of nature. The river turned to blood, the sun stopped shining, and our enemies started to drop dead. Miracles are the antithesis of Seder.

Which do we want in our lives? On the one hand, we are not allowed to rely on miracles. We need to be of this world. At the same time, the whole idea of Pesach is about making the miracles real, seeing ourselves as if we left Egypt reminding ourselves that G-d can and does do anything to take care of us.

¹⁶ מהר"ל

The Chocham

The Hagada did not invent the Chocham – the wise son. The Torah tells us in Ve'eschanan¹⁷ that we will have a son who will ask us:

כִּי־יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה הָעֲדוֹת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צֻוְּהָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְּכֶם:

"When your son asks you in time to come, saying: 'What is the meaning of the testimonies, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which Hashem has commanded you?'"

The Torah suggests that we answer:

וְאָמַרְתָּ לְבְנֶךָ עַבְדִּים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצִיאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה: וַיֵּתֶן ה' אוֹתוֹת וּמוֹפְתִים גְּדֹלִים וָרָעִים אֲנִי בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּפָרְעָה וּבְכָל־בֵּיתוֹ לַעֲיִיבֵנוּ: וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם לְמַעַן הָבִיא אֹתָנוּ לָתֵת לָנוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם: וַיִּצְוֵנוּ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לִּירְאָה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל־הַיָּמִים לְחַיֵּינוּ כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה: וְצִדְקָה תִּהְיֶה־לָּנוּ כִּי־נִשְׁמֹר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צֻוְּנוּ:

"You should say to your son: 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and Hashem brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And Hashem showed signs and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his house, before our eyes. And He brought us out from there, in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He swore to our fathers. And Hashem commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear Hashem, for our good always, so that He will preserve us alive, as it is at this day. And it shall be righteousness for us, if we observe to do this commandment before Hashem, as He has commanded us.'"

¹⁷ דברים ו:כ-כה

The Haggadah also quotes the question of the Chocham, but quotes a little bit of a different answer.

וְאַף אַתָּה אָמַר לוֹ כְּהִלְכוֹת הַפֶּסַח: אֵין מִפְטִירִין אַחֵר הַפֶּסַח אֶפִיקוֹמָן:

"And accordingly you will say to him, as per the laws of the Pesach sacrifice, "We may not eat an afikoman after the Pesach sacrifice."

The answer we give to the Chocham in the Haggadah needs to be understood.

The Nature of Miracles

Jews do not celebrate miracles. We thank Hashem for miracles but we do not have holidays to mark the Manna, Miriam's well, or the sun standing still for Yehoshua.

We also don't celebrate miracle workers. Even if a person would levitate six feet off the ground while predicting the future, his words would have no religious significance. If he tried to erase even one word of the Torah he would be excommunicated and possibly sentenced to death.

As Jews we celebrate milestones in our history as a people and we celebrate people who have exhibited strong faith in Hashem, love of Torah, and love of fellow Jews. Much of Christianity parted ways with Judaism when they began putting more emphasis on miracle workers and became less interested in the will of Hashem.

The Yaaros Devash¹⁸ writes that G-d's ability to perform miracles is far less impressive than His ability to make the world work within the laws of nature, which can be defined as a constant and consistent miracle. The fact that G-d's presence can be felt and

¹⁸ דרוש לז' אדר

manifest itself in this physical world is a much greater theological feat than a simple miracle.

Seeing the Chochma of G-d in the Seder and Teva of this world is far more impressive than a miracle. The Maharal writes that this is why we don't spend a lot of time discussing the Merkava and the Creation¹⁹. It's not just that they are hard to understand, they are actually below Hashem's dignity.

This idea is reflected in Jewish Law. There are two events that took place on the tenth of Nissan. One was the preparation of the Pesach lamb which was on the Shabbos before Pesach. The second was the splitting of the Yardein, which was on a weekday. The Taz writes that we mark the Shabbos before Pesach rather than the tenth of Nissan, to make clear that we are celebrating the Korban Pesach and not the splitting of the Yarden.

The splitting of the Yarden was a momentous event. Not only was it a miracle and our ticket into Israel, it also served to 'melt the hearts' of all of our enemies making (most of) them fearful of us and much easier to conquer. Still, Rav Moshe Feinstein²⁰ explains that we aren't proud that Hashem performed a miracle for us. It would have been better if we could have accomplished all that within the regular rules of nature.

When we hear about someone ill getting better, that is a 'big simcha'; when someone is just plain healthy, that is 'simcha'. We prefer regular Simchos to big Simchos and we prefer natural lives to miraculous ones.

The Gemara in Shabbos tells a story about a man who had no money and was able to feed his children through a miracle. Abayei

¹⁹ חגיגה יא

²⁰ דרש משה ח"ב

exclaimed, “How disgusting is this person for whom a miracle was performed”.

There have been people who constantly live above nature, the most notable being Rav Chanina ben Dosa, but those are exceptions. For those people miracles are their nature. And even Rav Chanina ben Dosa prayed to have a miraculous gift taken back because he knew that it was of the next world and should remain there²¹.

There is an expression in the Gemara that “Chacham adif Minavi”²². The Maharal explains that it refers to this very concept. A person who is wise and organized in the ways of this world is better than a person who is capable of prophecy. All prophets were both²³ but their Chochma was more important than their Nevuah.

The Mesillas Yescharim²⁴ writes that we were put into this world, specifically in the midst of some very ugly things, to fight our battles and become complete and developed human beings. We clearly were not created to escape this world and live supernaturally. For that we did not need to be born.

The Answer to the Wise Son

The Chocham in our Hagada presumably has the seven attributes of a Chocham. Unlike the other three sons, he was probably listening the first time his father explained the reason for the Seder. After witnessing and watching all of the Eidos, Chukim, and

²¹ Taanis 25a

²² בבא בתרא יב

²³ Gemara Nedarim

²⁴ Chapter One

Mishpatim, he asks an intelligent question. He does not ask what we are doing or why. That was already answered. His question is: why is everything reduced to laws and instructions? Why can't we just live supernaturally like we did when Hashem took us out of Egypt?

We answer by reinforcing the laws. We explain that the miracles were necessary then for the shock and awe that we experienced. The miracles woke us up, got us out of there, and reminded us of G-d's existence. But life is not about miracles. It is about Eidos, Chukim, Umishpatim. About living in this world. About doing Hashem will when we don't understand it and understanding His will when we can. It is about finishing every single week of work by testifying to the world and to Hashem and to ourselves that this is G-d's world and that we were put here to sanctify it and to develop as human beings.

The son of the Chofetz Chaim was once asked to describe some miracles that his father had performed. He said, my father didn't tell G-d what to do. G-d told him what to do²⁵. And that is how we need to live our lives.

Conclusion

Our unique obligation on Pesach is to speak about the miracles of our exodus. This obligation is reflected in the verses, in the Mishna and Hagada, in the Rambam, and in the Maharal and Reb Moshe.

But the miracles that we discuss are not in the context of something we can expect or even hope to experience every day. Jewish people are only here because of miracles, but our day to day existence is through the constant miracles of nature, the rules

²⁵ נשמע מהר"מ סאקס שליט"א

which we are not supposed to break. We need to live our lives with a blend of Bitachon and Hishtadlus and serve Hashem in this world.

When we look for inspiring people and inspiration in general, we can't look for miracles and people who have found ways to overcome this world. We need to look for ways that people have mastered the art of living this world in a G-dly way with all of its ups and downs and twists and turns. If we look through history, the Tzadikim were not usually the ones who had miraculous, pain free lives. They did not ever get everything they wanted or prayed for. But they were immensely satisfied in their own lives and they were perfect examples of how Hashem wants us to develop ourselves in this world.

There was an editorial written by two Nobel Prize winners in 1996. It was called *Heart Attacks: Gone with the Century*. And it was supposed to be true. There was a sharp decline in the risk of heart disease throughout much of the '70s and '80s and into the '90s. That was because doctors were able to pinpoint the causes of Heart disease and develop medication to reduce cholesterol and procedures to fix broken and congested hearts. One miracle after another.

And then something frightening happened. Despite the miraculous advances in medicine, heart disease stopped going down. It stabilized and now it's just not going down anymore. It's actually going up. That is because people – as a whole - stopped developing good habits. Americans don't exercise and we eat the wrong foods. As a nation, the miraculous medicine got us nowhere because we couldn't change our habits.

This is the danger of miracles. They are lifesaving, we need them, and we thank Hashem for them every day, but ultimately we need to be working on ourselves. On our own hearts and our own souls.

We are taught²⁶ that we were redeemed in Nissan and that our future redemption will be in Nissan. Let's hope that this Nissan will once again be a year of miracles as we truly relive Yetzias Mitzrayim at the Seder.

But let's also hope that we can make those miracles an inspiration to live a miracle free life of Seder and Chochama throughout the year.

²⁶ Rosh Hashana 14

“Is it Our Story To Tell?”

Three Questions

1. There is a common theme at many seders to tell a personal story. For many, it is the story of their escape from the holocaust or their liberation from the camps. When I was younger, we had stories of Jews making a seder in Russia. Today, we have Jews escaping the Ukraine. We have Israeli and American soldiers who can speak of difficult situations and evil people they've seen. Even earlier, we had stories of Pogroms, the Inquisition and the Crusades. Pesach seems to have become a national day of telling stories of freedom. This practice is well sourced in the collective memory of the Jewish people. This custom was found in Volozhin, in Pressburg, in Eastern Europe, and in Sefardic countries. Yet, it would seem that the place for all of this in the seder is limited to one line of the “V’hi She-amda”: “Shelo echad bilvad amad aleinu...” “because it was not just one enemy that rose up against us...”. The rest of the seder is focused on Egypt and the events leading up to it. Other than brief references to Lavan and Terach, we do not find the haggadah addressing the entirety of Jewish history. Is the Seder really a time to tell personal stories? Is that part of the mitzvah?
2. Throughout the Seder, we find ourselves pouring wine, lifting cups, drinking wine, uncovering Matzah, lifting Matzos, eating Matzos, and covering Matzos. In general, we cover the Matzah when we are using the wine just as

we do every Friday night, so as not to “embarrass” the Matzah. We uncover the Matzah because the story of Pesach is supposed to be told with visual aids - “When Matzah and Maror are sitting before us”. Yet, at the aforementioned moment of personal storytelling - “V’hi She’amda” the haggadah tells us to cover the Matzah and lift the cup. Why? Isn’t this part of the story? Shouldn’t the Matzah be exposed?

3. A major theme of the Seder is “Shira al Hayayin” - Singing to Hashem whilst holding a glass of wine. During Magid, we lift the cup in a ‘toast’ to G-d at V’hi She’amda and again at Ga’al Yisroel. The Orchos Chayim writes that if one does not have wine for Pesach they may not make the bracha of Ga’al Yisroel. According to the Orchos Chaim, we cover the Matzah because we are focusing on the wine but the truth is that (unlike kiddush) the Matzah wouldn't even be an eligible substitute. We need to understand why for the bulk of Magid we have both wine and Matzah, but for parts of Magid we have only Matzah or only wine.

Differentiating between Sippur and Hoda’ah

The answer lies in identifying two themes at the Seder: Sippur and Hoda’ah. *Sippur* is the telling of the story. We start with our bad experiences and end in praise of Hashem. Maschil B’gnus U’mesayeim B’shvach. *Hoda’ah* is about four cups of wine which we intersperse throughout the seder to lift in thanks to Hashem. The Vina Gaon compares this to saying Hagomel after a trip overseas, a trek through the desert, a dangerous situation, or an incarceration. We aren’t telling the story at these points. We are just saying thank you.

Rav Moshe Feinstein makes an astounding point. In the Bracha of Ga'al Yisroel at the end of Magid we *thank* Hashem for both the past *and* the future. We see from here that while reminiscing and praising (sippur and shevach) are limited to the past, thanks can apply to the future as well. We do the same in the first paragraph of Birchas Hamazon: we thank Hashem both for giving us food *and* for the food that he will give us. This is all part of the thank you.

Hoda'ah, unlike *sippur*, encompasses not only what Hashem did for us in Egypt, but all of our lives and our futures. We are living the praise. We've been living it for thousands of years and we will continue to live it.

When it comes to Sippur we are focused on the story, the Matzah, the experience and the journey from bad to praise. When it comes to thanks, it's all about how we are feeling here and now. "Kos Yeshuos esah", "I will lift up a cup of salvation".

At the Seder, the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim inspires us to look at our own lives. It can be a painful experience, but at the seder it is about finding a way to say 'thank you'.

Taking It Personally

Several weeks ago, I met a man who had a difficult life. You could see it in his demeanor and in his scars. I was frankly scared of him - until he told me his story. His last seder was at age nine. He told me that there was an old man who used to sit quietly at the seder, perhaps it was his grandfather or great uncle. This old man had severe Parkinson's disease and he would sit at the end of the table in his own world. But at one point, he would yell out and start crying. The boy asked his family what was going on. They told him that this man went through the holocaust. He lost his family, his belongings and his home. He suffered greatly. When he came to

America he had no time to think about it. He picked himself up, got a job, and started a new family. But when he gets to this point in the Haggadah - they explained - he always cries.

The nine year old was not convinced. This man was fine all year. He had moved past the holocaust years ago. His family said no - because we just read that "in every generation they rise up against us" - his pain is ongoing. This man told me that he never attended a seder again, and he never saw many of those people again. He suffered, he made mistakes, he got in with a bad crowd, and he has spent years trying to pick up the pieces. His doctors tell him that he is suffering from PTSD from his difficult experiences in life. He realized - fifty years later - that the old man at the seder must have been suffering from PTSD as well. He made it through life and was successful, but the seder triggered him - before triggering was invented. V'hi She'amda made him cry and yell, but it also gave him strength to go on because it was in the context of a Thank You. Amidst the tears, Jews for generations have been able to cry at the seder, but in the context of thanks. "Baruch Hashem vos iz" - Thank G-d for what we have. We have been able to stay close to Hashem and confident in Him. At the seder we can listen to the story and say, "I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but I know G-d is involved and He has gotten us this far." The Seder inspires us to thank Hashem.

Making it Practical

On a practical level, we need to experience the two parts of the Seder each year: The Sippur and the Hoda'ah. The cause and the effect. First, we tell the story of Pesach. Not our story - the story of Pesach. We use visual aids of Matzah and Maror and Karpas and Charoses. We talk about how each one of us needs to see ourselves as if we left Mitzrayim. But then we cover up the Matzos

and we look at our own lives. We look at our ups and downs throughout history and at our current ups or downs. We mention some of our hardships, perhaps we cry a little and tell some stories, but then we allow the inspiration of the Pesach story to affect how we look at our own lives. We feel sad, but then we say thank you. We thank Hashem for being with us when we left Mitzrayim, for staying with us now, and for the fact that he will be with us forever. It's not an easy process, but the Seder is designed to get us there.

The Medrash says that the four cups at the seder parallel the four exiles of the Jewish people. We are still in the fourth exile, brought upon us by the Roman and their successors. We pour the fourth cup and open our doors wide. We shout out Shfoch Chamascha and let the world know that they won't get away with what they are doing. We mention our hurt and even our desire for revenge, but we also pour a cup of wine for Eliyahu Hanavi. We feel the pain, but then we pour an extra big cup of wine - even now - for the salvation that we know He will give us.

Taking Control

The Egyptian people worshiped sheep. When the Jews first came down to Egypt we are told: “Toavas Mitzrayim kol Ro’eah Tzon”. There was nothing more despicable to an Egyptian than a shepherd. Egyptians are obsessed with the Nile and with its regularity. Their livelihood came from the Nile and their entire life and economy revolved around the Nile. The sheep seemed above it. They wandered around, finding grass wherever they could. They weren’t tied to one place. The Egyptians took that to mean that the sheep were greater than the Nile.

The Jewish people have a long history of Shepherding. Our forefathers were all shepherds and they took care of the sheep with love and concern. The Egyptians apparently believed that the sheep were taking care of them.

The Jewish people understood that it is Hashem bringing the water to the Egyptians and Hashem providing grazing for the sheep. There was nothing holy about the sheep itself.

As Jews in Galus we are generally taught to keep our heads down and to deal with the fact that we are in Galus. This comes at a price. We don’t always get exactly what we want and we don’t always remember our own customs and heritage. There were not too many Jewish Shepherds by the time we left Egypt.

But on Shabbos Hagadol we all got together and were shepherds again. We took the sheep and led them around. We ate them for dessert. We aren’t Egyptians with their idolatry and superstitions. We are Jews with our own proud traditions and beliefs.

Pesach is a time when we sit our children down, whether they want to or not and tell them the story of our history.

The Yaabatz writes that the story of Chad Gadya is a very sad story. It is the story of a young kid who gets attacked by a cat. After the cat come the dog and the stick. These are symbolic of the various stages of maturity and the challenges that come with them. As we get older we are tempted by fiery inclinations, cooled down, challenged by oxen and people, The angel of death, and finally we need to confront G-d himself. It is the lifetime of attacks by the Yetzer hora. So why do we sing it?

I once heard that the celebration is that we are able to break the cycle. We can stay pure. We can return to being that innocent kid. Following and trusting the word of Hashem.

Inclusivity

The Other Egyptian Slaves

The wicked son wants to know “What is this work to you?”, because he removed himself from the Klal - the Jewish people - he has denied the main thing. We blunt this teeth and tell him “Hashem did this for me when I left Egypt”. If he were there he would not have been redeemed.

I’d like to try to understand the attitude of the wicked son and our response to his questions.

The Torah tells us that when the final plague struck, it struck even the Egyptian slaves. Why? They were slaves and had no part in setting the policies of Egypt, enslaving the Jews or benefiting from their work. They just sat by millstones all day and milled. Why were they punished?

Rashi explains that it was because they heard about the enslavement of the Jews and they were happy with their misfortune.

This is odd. Pharaoh lived and many Egyptians survived, but these slaves did not survive because they were joyous in our suffering. They didn't do anything wrong. They couldn't. But they were happy.

The Maharal explains that the one thing that these slaves had in their control was their happiness. They heard the story of another people who were enslaved just like they were, and they sided with

the oppressors. This was true evil, and for this they were punished.

The Joy of Others

On a more positive note, we know that Hashem rewards us for good things far more than he punishes for bad. If there is a punishment for being happy with someone's misfortune, imagine the reward for being happy with someone's happiness or sad in their mourning.

This is something we lose sometimes. Reb Simcha Zisel Broide was known to say that our generation has trouble being happy for others.

Many years ago my father was asked by a woman to help her nullify a vow. She had been in Auschwitz and almost starved to death. She vowed that when she left she would never throw out a crumb. Every crumb was a diamond. And she stuck to it. But now she was older and her grandchildren were leaving crumbs around the house. She couldn't possibly save every crumb.

She continued to explain that she had a 'pesach' - a way out of the vow. The vow had been made under false pretenses, because when she was in Auschwitz she never dreamed that she would one day be an old lady with grandchildren running around the house.

We live in amazing times. It used to be a celebration when one boy would go away to yeshiva and come back eager to sit in shul and learn and teach. Every new baby was a big deal and every wedding was huge. But we got used to it.

We need to remind ourselves that we are no less happy just because we are used to something. This is still a great moment for the community, for the parents, for the bride and for the groom. I always tell the undertakers at H.D. Oliver that I hope to meet them at happier occasions, but of course we won't. They spend every day at a funeral. That shouldn't make it any less sad and tragic.

This is part of the Mitzvah of V'ahavta L'reiacha Kamocha. We need to be happy and sad with others as if we ourselves are experiencing their joy or sorrow. In fact we should be experiencing their joy and sorrow along with them.

The Baal Shem Tov famously stated that when someone sees something bad in their friend, this is a sign that he has a similar fault within himself. It is like looking in a mirror.

The Netziv once pointed out that this isn't just a chassidic idea, it is a Tosefta in Shavuot. He quotes in the Haamek Davar on Parshas Vayikra (Ch. 5) ' V'nefesh Ki secheta v'shama kol alah v'hu eid oh ra'ah oh yada'. The Tosefta observes: "Ein adam mischayeiv aleh im kein chata". A person doesn't become a witness to a sin unless he has a bit of that sin in him.

This was the problem with the Egyptian slaves. They saw the Egyptian slave masters and they agreed with them, they related to them. Our job is to be able to understand that everything that we see has a piece of us in it.

The great Kabbalist, Rav Moshe Cordevaro writes in his Tomer Devorah:

"All Jews are related one to the other, for their souls are united and in each soul there is a portion of all the others. ... When one Jew sins, he or she wrongs not only his or her own soul but the portion

which all the others possess in him. ...And since all Jews are related to each other it is only right that a man desire his neighbor's well-being, that he eye benevolently the good fortune of his neighbor and that his neighbor's honor be as dear to him as his own; for he and his neighbor are one. This is why we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourself. It is proper that a man desire the well-being of his neighbor and that he speak no evil of him nor desire that evil befall him. Just as the Holy One, Blessed is He, desires neither our disgrace nor our suffering because we are His relatives [and carry a piece of G-dliness in our souls], so too, a man should not desire to witness evil befalling his neighbor nor see his neighbor suffer or disgraced. And these things should cause him the same pain as if he were the victim. The same applies to his neighbor's good fortune."

Unity is the recognition that all of our souls are connected and that if we look far enough you will see that we are actually all one big soul. Our physical beings act in ways that are annoying, wrong, and even bad at times. But the recognition needs to remain that deep inside - where it counts most - we are one.

Making the Connection

Once we understand this idea laterally, we need to understand it historically as well. We are connected not only to the people around us, but to the people before us. Our collective souls were freed from Egypt. If our neighbor is happy then we are happy and if our great-great-grandmother was freed from slavery, then we were freed from slavery.

This is the Mitzvah of Pesach. We need to hear about the miracles that happened to our forefathers and see ourselves as if we personally left Egypt. We are all part of one nation, both

historically and currently. If we can hook into that Simcha, we can be a part of all of the Mitzvos and the miracles of the night. We are a great nation we are all in this together

The wicked son wants to know “What is this work to you”, and because he removed himself from the Klal he has denied the main thing. He doesn’t see himself as connected at all to the Jewish Nation with its joys, its sorrows, and its obligations. In separating himself he denies everything. We blunt his teeth and tell him: “Hashem did this for me when I left Egypt. If he were there he would not have been redeemed”.

The idea of blunting teeth is found as a curse in the book of Yirmiyahu (30:29). “כל האדם האוכל בוסר תקהינה שיניו” - The one who eat unripe grapes will have weakened teeth.

I found a similar language in the fourth chapter of Negaim. The Sages said that a certain type of Tzaraas would be impure, but “Rav Yehoshua Keha” - Rav Yehoshua was blunted. Obviously, Rav Yehoshua was not a Rasha. Why was he blunted? The Rambam explains that Rav Yehoshua was unclear of his position. The Chachamim said that the Nega was impure and he was unsure.

Our goal here is to weaken the position of the Rasha. We say, maybe you are right - this is all work to you and it is meaningless - but then you are on your own. If you can look at the happiness of our nation and not include yourself, you are just hurting yourself.

In this case he was Kofer B’ikar - he denied a basic tenet of Judaism. That is a scary thought. Part of keeping the Torah is being a part of the Klal.

Teaching Our Children

This brings us to our final point, the Mitzvah we have at the seder to teach our children.

I once had an opportunity to spend time with Rav Yitzchak Ezrachi and he shared the following concept:

There is a special bracha to be made when passing a spot where a miracle happened to a person or to his forefathers. The Betzel Hachochma is of the opinion that this bracha should be said by holocaust survivors and their children when visiting concentration camps, but it can be said for any sort of miracle.

Very few people get to make this blessing, but on Pesach we all invoke Hashem's name and thank Him for Redeeming us and our forefathers from Egypt.

The only reason we are allowed to praise Hashem in first person is because we are a part of the salvation that we received as a nation. Our connection to the miracle works because we tell this story every year - father to son. We inherit the miracle and the joy that comes with it. Every time a father tells his son the story he is joining that group of people who were redeemed and by extension the son is as well.

Rav Ezrachi told a story of a boy who was invited to his Rosh Yeshiva for the Seder. Since he knew that he was more knowledgeable than his father and less knowledgeable than his Rosh Yeshiva, he figured he would gain more from the Rosh Yeshiva.

Rav Ezrachi disagreed: If the father has an obligation to include his son in the story, it is guaranteed that Hashem will give him the

tools needed to tell the story. It doesn't matter if the father is otherwise ignorant or less versed in Torah than his son. This is the ongoing formation of the Jewish people and there is a guarantee from heaven that the father will be able to teach his son and inspire him to be a part of the Klal who is celebrating tonight.

In Sefer Shoftim we find that Gidon was visited by an angel and became the leader of the Jewish people after his seder with his father. His father was a documented ignoramus, but he was able to get the message across.

Be the One to Make Kiddush

The Chortkover Rebbe was once about to make Kiddush when he saw someone desecrating Shabbos. He was so upset that he couldn't make Kiddush, until he realized that this was exactly what he was missing - Kiddush.

This is the opportunity of Pesach. We are given the opportunity to be the catalyst for Kaddesh - to bring holiness and a connection to ourselves and everyone around us.

Let's go into Pesach by realizing that we are part of a greater nation. That applies to the generations before us and to the people around us. And we aren't just part, we are one. Everything that we see should speak to our essence. Their happiness should make us happy and their sadness should make us sad. When they succeed we can have nachas and when they fail we can wonder how we can improve.

If we can't do that, we are moving into Rasha territory. But if we can do it, we are given Siyata Dishmaya in which every parent has the ability to not only feel the happiness of being included but also to have the tools to include the next generation.

A Narrow Bridge (Pesach in Pandemic)

Planning Ahead

It is documented that for at least nine hundred years it has been the custom of Jews to congregate in shul on the afternoon of the Shabbos before Pesach to hear the Rabbi speak.

But that is not why this Shabbos is called Shabbos Hagadol. The Shulchan Aruch writes that this Shabbos is called Shabbos Hagadol because of the miracle that happened on it. Shabbos was four days before Pesach on the tenth of Nissan. On that day each Jewish family brought home a sheep and tied it to their bedpost. The miracle was that we had the confidence to do this and the miracle was that the Egyptians didn't stop us. They worshiped sheep and they hated us, but somehow we managed to each go outside and choose our sheep for the Seder.

The truth is that any time you brought a sheep as a sacrifice, the sheep had to be procured a few days in advance. It had to be observed and examined to make sure that it was healthy and kosher to bring as a gift to G-d. But the Pesach sheep was more stringent in an interesting way.

If I decided to bring a sheep as a sin offering or peace offering, I could go to the market and buy a few sheep. I could watch them and examine them for a few days and then – on the day of the sacrifice – I could choose one to use as my Korban. For Pesach, we are given no leeway. Four days before the Pesach Seder we had to know specifically with whom we would be eating the Seder and specifically which sheep we would be eating.

A lot of decisions were made on Shabbos Hagadol because whatever Seder plans we made were locked in and unchangeable.

I'd like to discuss why the Torah insisted on us becoming so decisive, particularly about pesach, but first I'd like to discuss the Corona virus for a moment.

Covid-19

I am not wearing rose colored glasses. I can't give a shiur on how great it is that we are all quarantined because people are lonely, people are suffering, and people are sick.

I can tell you that this has happened before. We have Responsa that address it. It happened during wars, during plagues, and during other dangerous times in our history. When it was anti-semites trying to close down our shuls and yeshivos, we've always fought to our last breath. But in a case where we ourselves shut down our shuls and yeshivos, we are simply following halacha in a very difficult way.

The Torah refers to Matza as Ugos Matzos – Cakes of Matza. The word Ugos is actually an acronym for Torah, Avoda, and Gemilus Chasadim. Torah, prayer, and kindness. These three items have always been the pillars of our existence as a people. Avraham embodied Kindness, opening his tent in the desert to anyone who wanted food or drink. Yitzchak embodied prayer; all of the stories we know about him involve sacrifices, blessings, and prayer. And Yaacov was a dweller of tents – he embodied the study of Torah.

When it came time for the Jewish people to re-establish themselves in the land of Israel with the rebuilding of the Second Temple, there was a body of scholars and prophets known as the Anshei Knesses HaGedola. Shimon Hatzadik was the last surviving

member of this group and he reminded us of these three pillars, Torah, Avoda, and Gemilas Chasadim.

When Nechemia was given permission to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem he brought a group of people to Jerusalem to reestablish a Jewish presence. The leader of Jewry at the time – Ezra Hasofer – was noticeably missing. This is very strange. He should have been the first to return to Zion, and – if he had – he would have been the ideal Kohein Gadol – the High Priest in the newly established Temple.

But Ezra stayed in Iraq because his teacher Baruch ben Neriah was too old to travel. Ezra understood that while Nechemiah went to Jerusalem to work on the Pillar of Prayer in rebuilding the Temple, he had to stay behind to work on the Pillar of Torah which would be equally as important. And when Ezra finally did join Nechemia in Israel, their first message to the people was one of Gemilus Chasadim, of kindness.

On that first Rosh Hashana back in Israel they encouraged everyone to give Mishloach Manos – gifts to one another. At that time they also ordained that the Torah should be read together as a community three times a week. Synagogues and communities as we know them were formed. Because Ezra understood that by coming together to pray, to study Torah, and to help one another the Jewish people would survive.

That's why the past few weeks have been so difficult. We are a socially connected people and we were designed that way. It's been our survival through the ages, and it will be our key to survival once all this is over.

So where does that leave us right now?

First, I want to mention an idea attributed to Rav Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk who lived in Teveriah during an outbreak of disease about two hundred years ago. They too were limited in their ability to gather together or even leave their homes in service of Hashem. His message was to quote the verse “I am Hashem who dwells among them – even in their impurity”. In other words, he didn’t try to idealize the situation. Instead, he chose to use it as an opportunity to remember that Hashem is with us in every situation – ideal or not.

My second point is to let you know how proud I am of the Jewish people and our community. Three thousand years of incubation in our shuls and yeshivos has worked. We know that because when we all retreat to our homes, it is with the Torah, the Prayer, and the kindness that we have cultivated and made a part of our DNA. We haven’t stopped learning, we haven’t stopped davening, and – incredibly – we haven’t stopped thinking about and assisting each other. It’s not just because of Zoom and Whatsapp. It’s because we truly care.

A Narrow Bridge

But let’s talk about the challenges of quarantine. Many of us are exercising muscles that we didn’t know we had. They are muscles of patience, of kindness, of faith, and of perseverance. We are imbuing the walls of our houses with unprecedented volumes of prayer and Torah study.

We are all growing, but at the same time we are limited. So many of our avenues of connection to Hashem are closed. I did not choose the Rabbinate as a career so that I could daven by my bookshelf at home and talk to a tape recorder twice a day. Since the day I moved to Norfolk, one of my top obligations was to make

sure that the shul never missed a day with Shacharis, Mincha and Maariv. I thought that was my role in life but - at least for the next few weeks – it isn't.

I've been thinking about Rav Nachman of Breslov a lot. He writes some famous words in Likutei Moharan that are worth reading in their source:

וְדַע, שְׁכָל הַתְּנוּעוֹת וְהַהֲעֵתָקוֹת, שֶׁאַתָּה נִתֵּק וְנִנְעָתָק בְּכָל פֶּעַם אִיזָה מַעֲט מִן גִּשְׁמִיּוֹת לַעֲבוּדָתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ, כָּלֵם מִתְקַבְּצִים וּמִתְחַבְּרִים וּמִתְקַשְּׂרִים וּבָאִים לַעֲזָרְתְּךָ בְּעֵת הַצָּרָה, דִּהְיִנוּ כְּשִׁישׁ, חֵס וְשָׁלוֹם, אִיזָה דַּחֲק וְעֵת צָרָה, חֵס וְשָׁלוֹם.

"You should know that every move and every change that we make in our lives is preserved and collected and put into a special place. And when, Chas Veshalom, we are in a tight spot or under duress all of those actions and all of that work that we've done comes back to us to guide us and give us strength".

וְדַע, שֶׁהָאָדָם צָרִיךְ לַעֲבֹר עַל גִּשְׁר צָר מְאֹד מְאֹד, וְהַכָּלָל וְהַעֲקָר – שְׁלֹא יִתְפַּחַד כָּלֵל:

"And you should further know that a person needs to cross a very very narrow bridge. But the main thing is not to be afraid."

Many of us know the song, but let's think about this seriously. We aren't talking about a bridge over troubled water that gives us a feeling of confidence and safety. We are talking about a bridge in Breslov in the Ukraine. The ones we wouldn't walk over if you gave us \$1000. The ones that are so shaky and rickety that you need to balance on the beams while holding onto a rope and hope that either the beam or the rope stays intact long enough for you to get across. It's a very narrow bridge.

And that's where we are right now. We were all on paths to our future, our careers, our personal development and our relationship with Hashem, and suddenly that path got very narrow. The way we looked at Prayer, at Torah, and at helping others, isn't really working. But it isn't gone either. Our Torah opportunities became narrower, our outlets for prayer are more limited and our opportunities for kindness aren't what they used to be. Our job now is to use everything that we've worked on our entire lives to find the narrow path we've been given and to put one foot in front of the other and make it across.

Conclusion

Maybe that's what our grandparents had to do in Egypt. On the one hand, we were going free. We were given those Ugos Matzos the Torah, Prayer, and kindness that would help us survive for millennia. On the other hand, we were given a very narrow path. Pick the sheep you are going to use and that's the only one you'll have. Pick the people you are going to have the Seder with and don't add anybody else, and when the night of that very first Seder came, we were told to choose a house and enter it and not leave until the plague was over and it was our turn to move on to better and more varied experiences.

We need to find our very narrow bridge this Pesach and embrace it, value it, and walk across it with confidence.

In this merit we will all emerge healthy and stronger to once again come together as a community devoted to Torah, Prayer, and caring for one another. If not here in Norfolk, then together in Jerusalem where the lamb we eat will be a lamb that was slaughtered in the courtyard of the Temple and roasted in our new

homes in a world that is full of health, and holiness, and knowledge of Hashem.

Hilchos Pesach

Practical considerations for Pesach in Pandemic

Selling Chametz: With Hashem's help, I will be selling Chametz this year and have a backup plan if one of the involved parties is unable to participate. You can appoint me as an agent in selling your Chametz by emailing the form or dropping it off in my mailbox or at shul before Monday. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity to sell Chametz. Rooms and closets that are sold do not need to be checked, saving a lot of energy in these stressful times. Products can be sold so that they will be immediately available after Pesach without needing to rush to the store. Please don't hesitate to call with any questions.

Burning Chametz: We will not be having a communal Chametz burning this year. I recommend you sell most of your Chametz and put the remainder in the Garbage, which I will sell for you as well. Keep the ten pieces from Bedikas Chametz and burn them in your home. If this isn't practical, you can destroy them by bringing them to your restroom and flushing them away.

Eggs and Milk: Many people have a custom to buy all of their eggs before Pesach. The truth is that the reasons for this custom no longer apply and – particularly this year – it is ok to buy eggs on Chol Hamoed. Milk is a bit more of an issue. Halachically, milk does need to be bottled before Pesach and it is worthwhile to return to the store several times so that you can stay within the posted limits but also have enough milk. According to my research, milk from Pet Dairy is generally processed several days before it hits the stores so you can buy Pet Dairy milk on the Sunday of Chol Hamoed. Milk does not need special Kosher for Pesach supervision.

Siyum: If you are a first-born and required to fast, you can break your fast by making a siyum on a volume of Talmud or Tanach. Since not everyone can make a siyum and it is not responsible to attend one, I recommend – for this year only – that you attend a siyum by phone. I will be making a siyum at 8:30 am Wednesday morning on Zoom. If you are a first-born and would like to call in or are looking for a later siyum, please be in touch.

Tevilas Keilim: Our Mikvah is currently closed to dishes. If you have new metal or glassware that needs to be dipped in the Mikva, I recommend using either the ocean or a lake, like the lake at Mt. Trashmore. Another option is to have

me sell the dishes when I sell your Chametz. That will allow you to borrow the dishes from the non-Jewish purchaser and use them over Pesach.

Prayers: On Shabbos, we have been reading the Parsha from a Chumash at home in lieu of the Torah Reading at shul. This is not necessary over Yom Tov, although it is certainly a nice thing to do.

Hallel: The custom of the shul is to say Hallel at Maariv on the first night of Pesach. This custom does not apply when davening at home. All other Hallel's should be recited.

Yizkor: In a situation like this year, Yizkor can and should be said at home by anyone who would have said it in shul.

Guests: The most difficult part of the Seder this year will be when we raise our broken Matzah and invite everyone who is hungry or lonely to join us. Many of us will be saying this while feeling intense loneliness; those who aren't lonely will have broken hearts thinking of those we uninvited or turned away. Let's make a goal of raising that Matzah knowing that in the days leading up to Pesach we have taken a moment to call at least one person who will be on their own.

The very word Mitzrayim means narrow and we are living in very narrow times. Our options are limited and our choices are few. But we left Egypt because we care about one another and with that merit we will once again join together with strength and health and happiness.

Please, have a beautiful Yom Tov and do your best to enjoy all the gifts that Hashem has given us.

Acceptable Risk in Halacha²⁷

Introduction

Since our youth we have been taught that the Torah values human life above all else and more so than almost any culture. We have also been taught that 'Pikuach Nefesh' - 'Saving a life' takes precedence over any of the 613 Mitzvos. We fight for every last breath of an elderly individual and we break shabbos and Yom Kippur at the slightest hint of danger. We have been taught not to question those premises.

The past year has brought those concepts under attack. We have been forced to acknowledge that we don't always err on the side of saving a life. Sometimes we take risks with our own lives and with others. Concurrently, we have concluded that it is unreasonable to give up minyanim, funerals and simchos just because a health risk is in the air. Orthodox jews around the world are taking risks and fighting to keep shuls open.

My personal opinion is no secret. I believe that the role of enforcing public health lies squarely in the domain of government. I believe this has been true throughout history and that it is particularly true when the government acts on the consensus of medical professionals. In Virginia specifically, our governor is a medical professional. In addition, unlike other states, Virginia prioritizes religious needs and is more lenient with religious institutions than with other sectors.

²⁷ Based on available information as of Pesach 5782

But even within an approach of compliance, we are clearly taking risks. Where does the primacy of human life end and the need to go about our lives begin?²⁸

Acceptable Risk

The easiest approach to this question is a statistical one. Halacha is replete with statistics. Non Kosher food is generally nullified in sixty. Holy food is nullified in one hundred. Many items in Judaism are judged by majority. In our case the barometer would seem to be, in the language of the Talmud, 'shchichi hezeika' or 'likely risk'²⁹. In numbers that is called a Miut Hamatzui - a significant minority.

In Jewish law a significant minority is generally characterized as 10% or more³⁰. For example if 10% or more of strawberries are known to contain bugs then strawberries need to be checked for bugs. If only 1% of strawberries have been found to contain bugs then you can assume that the strawberry you are eating does not contain a bug. Similarly if 10% more of recycled fiber is found to contain wool and linen mixes then you wouldn't be allowed to wear recycled fiber without checking it; but if only 1% or 2% of Recycled Fiber is found to contain shatnez then you would not be required to check. The role of the various kashrus agencies is to

²⁸ It should be noted that Medical and Military personnel deal with these questions on an entirely different level. They are putting themselves at risk to save others and may be beyond the scope of this conversation.

²⁹ Pesachim 8b. See Mesillas Yesharim Ch. 9

³⁰ Rivash (#191) writes that it is close to fifty percent. Mishkenos Yaakov (#17) writes ten percent or more based on Gittin 31a. Shevet Halevi (4:81 and 8:180). Rav Elyashiv zt"l is quoted by Rav Moshe Vaya as holding that seven percent or above is considered a prevalent minority and that one should be stringent at 5%. This is also cited as the view of Rav Chaim Kanievsky shlita (Hilchos Orlah in Sefer Levushei Yoseph).

determine whether something is a significant minority or less than a significant minority.

We can also apply this concept to recreational activities. Someone who wants to go skydiving or bungee jumping would need to do the research on whether there is more than a 10% casualty rate. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are elective and non-elective surgeries that carry a certain degree of risk. In determining the permissibility of a surgery we need to look at whether there is a 10% mortality rate or lower. Anything below a 10% rate of risk would be permissible and perhaps even recommended; anything above a 10% rate of risk would be unrecommended and perhaps even forbidden.

This is the general approach used when establishing protocols in the above mentioned areas of halacha.

Sack Racing

One thing that motivates me in life is the fact that there's something to learn from everybody. Sometimes it takes getting a little deeper into the conversation and sometimes people volunteer their unique and special qualities early on. We once had a worker who enjoyed discussing his truck and racing. We talked about his motorcycle a bit but he shared with me that his real passion was sack racing. I had a hard time envisioning this fellow putting his legs into a sack and jumping across a field, so I asked him to elaborate. He proudly explained to me that he is involved in a sport where they put a sack over his head and tie it tight. He then sits in the driver's seat of a car and when they're sure he can't see anything at all he starts the car and goes forward at high speeds. To keep things safe, he has a friend without a sack over his head watching him from the side of the track. The friend

dictates the stops and turns through an earbud that was placed in his ear before he donned the sack. This particular fellow's expertise was reverse sack racing where he does the race in reverse without ever opening his eyes.

I did a little bit of research on the internet and it doesn't look like a lot of people die sack racing. It's probably safe to say that less than 10% of people engaged in sack racing actually died during a sack race. Would sack racing now be considered a safe activity?

I think the answer is clearly no. This is because we need to add another factor to our calculus. Beyond percentages and statistics there are certain things which are considered dangerous and stupid and are other things that are considered safe. Sack racing is considered dangerous and stupid; standing still while somebody lobs a baseball at your face at 90 miles an hour is considered to be safe and acceptable. This is despite the fact that a much higher percentage of baseball players are injured than sack racers.

I believe we are forced to acknowledge that we need to look at more than just the statistics when trying to assess what is considered to be acceptable and unacceptable risk according to Jewish law.

Sensibility

I'd like to take a few minutes to examine the concept of 'Shemira' which I would like to translate as "responsibility". When the Torah tells us to guard our health, we are told "Venishmartem Me'od Lenafshoseichem" - "and you should watch your lives very carefully"³¹. G-d gave us a soul when we entered this world and it is our job to be the guardians - to be responsible - for our souls.

³¹ Devarim 4:15

To give a simple example: if I have a mechanical pencil and I'm in a fidgety mood there's no problem with me dismantling my pencil into ten different pieces and then putting it back together. On the other hand, if I borrow my friend's mechanical pencil and I find myself in a fidgety mood there is no excuse for taking that pencil apart and putting it back together. The risk that I am willing to take with my own belongings is not a risk that I'm willing to take or allowed to take with somebody else's belongings.

It would emerge that rather than comparing the Mitzvah to guard our lives and our health to the mitzvah not to mix meat and milk or not to mix wool and linen, we would be better served comparing it to the mitzvah and obligation of a 'Shomer' - a caretaker - to take his or her job seriously. Just as I might need to watch my friend's pencil or my friend's goat or my friend's house, I have an obligation to watch my soul. To quote the Radvaz "A person's soul is not his property; it belongs to G-d".³²

When it comes to Chametz I may need to look at ratios and statistics to figure out whether or not there is Chametz in my milk, but when it comes to infectious disease I need to look at my responsibility as a guardian of my soul and decide whether *as a guardian* it is responsible for me to take a soul which is not mine and subject it to risk.

Based on this approach, I would have to take any question related to my health and the risk of my life and put us through the filter of "would I be allowed to do this with my friend's cow". For example, if I'm allowed to throw my friend's cow out of an airplane with a parachute, then I'm also allowed to throw my body and soul which has been entrusted to me by Hashem out of an airplane with a parachute. If I can allow my friend's cows to wander through a

³² Hilchos Sanhedrin 19:6

minefield, then I'm also allowed to allow my soul which has been entrusted to me to wander with me through a minefield.

To complete the analogy, we need to acknowledge that there are certain risks that a watchman is entitled to take because they are considered “normal”. We should be allowed to take those risks as well. If it's considered normal to walk a cow along the side of a certain road, we will be allowed to lead the cow there and to walk there ourselves. If the cow gets injured we can report back to the owner of the cow without feeling guilty. If G-d forbid anything happens to us, we can stand before Hashem and assert that we did not neglect our responsibility to guard our soul.

This is reflected in a pasuk in Mishlei 22:3: “A wise person (*arum*) sees hidden danger while a fool (*pesi*) rushes forward and is punished”³³. Our job is to be wise people. A wise person in this context is called an ‘Arum’, which the Malbim defines as someone possessing innate wisdom. We need to trust our (collective) innate instincts in making safe decisions.

What about the Fools?

Based on all of the above, it would seem reasonable to say that anything we do as human beings must be both within the metrics of acceptable risk and also considered safe and ‘normal’ activity. Anything abnormal or unsafe would be a dereliction of our duties as guardians of our souls.

Fortunately, the Talmud disagrees with me. When it comes to certain foolish behavior, the Talmud utilizes a quote in Mishlei that ‘Shomer Psaim Hashem’. Hashem guards fools.³⁴ The word ‘Pesi’,

³³ “Arum Ra’ah Ra Nistar; U’pesayim avru v’nenashu”

³⁴ Tehillim 116:6

used to describe a fool, is the same word used in Mishlei to describe someone who unwisely rushes forward into danger.

I may have been foolish in ignoring the signs for the minefield or jumping out of a perfectly safe airplane, but G-d guards fools.

On the surface, we should try to avoid being categorized as fools. Rav Moshe Feinstein, for example, wrote many decades ago that smoking couldn't be forbidden because 'G-d guards fools'. I always questioned whether it was worthwhile to be considered a fool by Rav Moshe Feisnstein and G-d just to justify smoking a cigarette.

But the truth is that it is. The Gemara tells us that in the case of normative activity, even activity that seems to exceed the statistical threshold for acceptable risk, it is permissible to rely on G-ds guardianship.³⁵

I think the reason is clear. Our job is to guard our souls, but we have a backup guard. G-d is willing to chip in and help out when we do something foolish.

Conclusion

It emerges that our role in guarding our health is to recognize that we have been entrusted with a valuable and unique soul. We need to avoid risking our lives or the lives of others. Our life isn't ours to risk.

Statements that we hear so much like "I'm willing to take the risk" or "I don't mind getting sick", are meaningless. The Mitzvah to guard our health has nothing to do with what we are or aren't willing to risk. It has to do with what we are obligated to do as responsible stewards of our souls.

³⁵ Shabbos 129b and other locations

The only exception we have is when we engage in normal but foolish activity. In a case like that, Hashem is willing to 'take over' our obligation to guard our souls. He will guard our souls for us.³⁶

Shemira

I like the concept of Shemira because it is so integral to pesach. We have a Mitzvah to watch the Matzo - Ushmarten es hamatzos. We do this to remember that when we left Egypt it was on such short notice that our bread did not even have time to rise³⁷.

This applies to 'Venishmartem me'od lenafshosaichem" as well. We need to watch our souls with the understanding that despite our best research and our best efforts, Hashem could change things in ways that we never saw coming.

While we were busy watching our neshamos and our matzos in Egypt, Hashem was busy watching something else. The night of Pesach is called 'Leil Shimurim' because it is a night of miracles that Hashem watched and kept safe for four hundred years before gifting it to us on the night we left Egypt. He promised it to Avraham and he never forgot his promise. Leil Shimurim hu Lashem. While we were so intent on our shemira down here, Hashem had a whole different plan just waiting to be carried out.

Finding the Shemira

I want to end on a very practical note. We have a job to watch our very precious souls. They have been entrusted to us. We acknowledge this responsibility every morning upon awakening

³⁶ In the context of Covid-19, it is obviously important to differentiate between normal activity in 2018 and normal activity during a pandemic. As stated above, the medical and regulatory community would seem to be the rightful arbiters of 'normalcy' in cases like this.

³⁷ Haggadah shel Pesach

and finding that Hashem has returned our souls to us for another day. We are given some leeway when going about normative activity. Hashem promised to take over and watch us when we act foolish at times. We are even permitted to act foolish if what we're doing is considered to be normative in general society.

But we can never forget that while we are so busy watching and being careful and doing the very best we can, Hashem is busy at His end watching and safeguarding and preparing miracles they can come to us in the blink of an eye and at every moment.

And if I may go out on a limb, we have already experienced some of those miracles and salvations. A year ago there were no cures. People would come to the hospital and they would undergo experimental treatments. They often simply didn't have a specific protocol or data on the virus. A year ago there was no vaccine and nobody knew if a vaccine would ever be found. There are many viral illnesses in this world for which vaccines have never been found and may never be found.

It becomes our obligation, alongside the obligation to guard our souls, to keep a sharp eye out for Hashem's salvation and Hashem's miracles. If Hashem is giving us the ability and confidence to open our schools and shuls in a legal and safe way, how can we ignore that great gift from Hashem?

Our job isn't to predict or even necessarily to understand. Our job is to guard our health to the best of our ability, never forgetting that Hashem has His own plans that he can introduce at any given moment.

This is obviously something that's very personal and depends on each person. This year at the seder, we need to remember the 'Leil Shimurim' - that night that Hashem kept protected and

hidden from us throughout our toil in Egypt - only to reveal it on Pesach and change our lives forever.

May we have a year of good health and a year in which we can experience and recognize that miraculous role that Hashem plays in our lives.

