

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI YAAKOV HABER

TorahWeb

Usually we introduce all mitzvot bein adam lamakom (commandments relating to Hashem) with a birchas haMitzva (blessing). The mitzva of sippur y'tziat mitzrayim (retelling the story of the Exodus) as fulfilled through the recital and exposition of the haggada seems to be a notable exception. Both the Rishonim and Acharonim offer a variety of fascinating solutions to this question each one with ramifications beyond the haggada itself. Among the answers: there is no b'racha on a mitzva without a defined limit (Rashba); no blessing is recited on a mitzva whose primary kiyum (fulfillment) is in the mind or heart (Maharal); the haggada itself is structured in a b'racha format ending with "boruch ata Hashem, ga'al Yisrael" and we do not recite a b'racha on a b'racha (Ma'asei Nissim, Chida).

Perhaps we can suggest another answer based on concepts developed by Avudraham and Rav Y. D. Soloveitchik zt"l. Avudraham questions why there is no blessing on the k'riat sh'ma. He answers that the purpose of a b'racha is to be m'kabeil 'ol malchus shamayim (acceptance of the rule of Heaven) upon us before we perform the mitzva. We perform Divine commandments as instantiations of accepting Hashem's sovereignty over the entire cosmos, of the world, of our nation, and our individual selves. K'lal Yisrael first had to accept the whole package of Torah through the declaration of "na'ase v'nishma" before actually dedicating their lives to Divine Service. In the language of Beis HaLeivi (Mishpatim), only after we offered ourselves as servants of HaKadosh Baruch Hu did we become bound in the totality of Torah for all generations. The prospective convert to Judaism must reenact the same process by first accepting the totality of Torah and mitzvos; only then can his conversion be valid and meaningful. According to Avudraham, we reaffirm this broader commitment each time we perform a mitzva. Hence, before reading k'rias sh'ma whose very essence expresses a commitment to the dual themes of kabbalas 'ol Malchus Shamayim and kabbalas 'ol mitzvos (acceptance of the yoke of commandments), no blessing is necessary. We need not accept Divine sovereignty in order to accept Divine sovereignty.

The same approach can be applied to the haggada. The third section of k'rias sh'ma contains

z'chiras y'tzias mitzrayim (remembrance of the Exodus). Rav Soloveitchik (see Haggadas Si'ach HaGrid) noted that Rambam (Hilchos K'rias Sh'ma) seems to include all three sections of the sh'ma in the Biblical commandment of reading the sh'ma. He explained that the Exodus is integrally linked to the theme of kabbalas 'ol Malchus. Through the entire experience of y'tzias Mitzrayim—beginning with Moshe's demand of Pharaoh in the name of Hashem to release His nation, moving through the cataclysmic overturning of the rules of nature by means of the ten makkos, and culminating with k'rias yam suf with the attendant Divine Revelation enabling the Jewish people to prophetically utter the "Az Yashir" in unison—Hashem demonstrated His Existence, His creation of the world as evidenced by demonstrating His utter mastery over nature which He created and manages, His Omniscience, and His Providence (see Ramban, end of Bo). These majestic events serve as the foundation of our acceptance of Hashem's rule over the world and our obligation of loyalty toward Him. Hence, remembering the Exodus brings to the fore the source of our acceptance of Divine rule and therefore His mitzvot.

In light of this, no blessing need be recited before the retelling of the Exodus for through its detailed and elaborate recounting on the night of the Seider we are reaffirming our loyalty to Hashem Yisborach. Therefore, there is no need to precede the haggada with the same theme through a blessing. Through our reacceptance of Divine sovereignty in the darkness of the world of hestier (concealment), may we merit the open Revelation of Hashem's Presence in the Third Beis HaMikdash—v'nochal sham min ha'Z'vachim umin ha'Psachim! © 2005 Rabbi Y. Haber & TorahWeb.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

With Erev Pesach falling out on Shabbos this year, and coming off of a leap year (where we had an Adar I and an Adar II immediately prior to Nissan), we have the relatively rare occurrence of reading Parshas Acharay Mos while already in "Passover mode." Most will daven earlier than usual in order to get home to (carefully) eat their last bites of chametz, or their egg matzoh, prior to it becoming forbidden to eat chametz; then finishing the rest of their Kosher for Passover meal(s). The last time we read this Parsha on Erev Pesach was in 5741, although unless

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things change - due to the Sanhedrin determining when Rosh Chodesh is (as opposed to the set calendar), it will occur again in 5768.

If there is one theme running throughout Acharay Mos, it would seem to be the importance of sticking to the rules. We are reminded (Vayikra 16:1) of the death of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, who died because they deviated from the proscribed procedure - even if the deviation was ever so slight. There is no questioning their motives; they wanted to attain even greater spiritual heights by getting even closer to G-d. However, because they used the wrong fire - and didn't consult with their father or uncle (Moshe), or even with each other, to make sure that they were following the correct procedure exactly - they paid with their lives.

This reminder leads into the exact procedure through which Aharon - and every subsequent Kohain Gadol - could enter the "kodesh hakadashim," the holiest chamber of the Mishkan/Temple. Failing to follow the precise formula was also punishable by death (16:2).

After describing the Yom Kippur service (through which the Kohain Gadol entered the "kodesh hakadashim"), the Torah (17:3-4) warns against bringing an offering outside of the Temple/Mishkan, with the consequences of doing so being "cut off" from the rest of the nation. This prohibition is not limited to bringing an offering to anything other than G-d; even if one is trying to get closer to the Creator via this offering, bringing it outside of the Temple/Mishkan is problematic. Again, the importance of following the correct procedures is evident. After all, if one follows his own rules, then he is really serving himself. One who is truly and sincerely trying to serve G-d will do so under His rules and guidelines.

The latter part of the Parsha deals with illegal relationships, and here too we see that having consenting adults is not enough to make it a morally

approved relationship. Having a relationship with someone that is not sanctioned by the Torah's guidelines - whether it be who or when - can also lead to being "cut off" from the nation (18:29), as well as being "spit out" from the land (18:28).

As I alluded to earlier, after davening on Shabbos morning - during which we will have heard the underlying message that good intentions are not enough, that we must follow through by sticking to the precise guidelines set for us - we will head home to try fulfilling the obligation of having two more Shabbos meals despite being limited to finishing all chametz well before noon and not being allowed to eat matzoh on Erev Pesach. Do we really have a strict deadline to finish what we've washed on? Well, there has to be a point where you would definitely say that chametz is forbidden, and there is definitely a period of time when it is still permitted. When does the change occur? That moment in time is the deadline, and just "being in the ballpark" is not within the guidelines.

Similarly, we drink four cups of wine and eat matzoh and marror. The mitzvah is not to "taste" the matzoh, but to "eat" matzoh, and there are definitive parameters as to how much needs to be consumed within a certain period of time to be considered "eating." We don't just "sip" the wine, but "drink" it, and here too there is a defined volume for it to be considered "drinking" the four cups rather than just being served four cups.

The desire to be part of the Seder is a wonderful thing. But just as an offering brought to G-d outside the Temple was problematic even if the intention was to serve G-d, if we are going to fulfill the mitzvos that are part of the Seder we must satisfy the requirements of those mitzvos properly. By strengthening our performance of the mitzvos, we will be moving closer to the point where we can bring the Korbon Pesach in Yerushalayim - even when Erev Pesach falls out on Shabbos. Chag Kasher ve'Sameach. © 2005 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

This is one of those special years when the day directly preceding Passover (the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Nissan) falls out on Shabbat. During ordinary times and under ordinary circumstances, the day preceding Passover is by far the most hectic of our entire Jewish calendar year: the evening before is the final search with a candlelight to ferret out any bit of leavening (hametz) which may still remain in the house, a portion of hametz is then put away for the following morning meal which must be concluded by the end of the fourth hour of the day (approximately 9:30 a.m.), and then comes the final act of the burning of hametz as the symbol of the destruction of evil. Hametz, is after all, fermented and

puffed up matzah, thereby serving as a symbol of pride, materialism and hedonism which can readily lead to sin.

But what do we do this year when the day before Passover falls out on Shabbat? When do we eat our last hametz meal and when do we burn the hametz? The Bible prescribes, "... but on the day preceding Passover, you must destroy (tashbitu) the leaven from your homes. (Exodus 12:16) In what manner is the hametz to be destroyed? The Mishna teaches: "Rabbi Yehudah says that there is no destruction of hametz except than by burning. And the Sages say that you can even destroy the hametz by crumbling it and scattering it to the winds or by casting it into the sea." (Mishna Pesachim 2,1)

Let us now examine the Mishna (Pesachim 3,8) which specifically deals with our question: "When the fourteenth day of Nissan falls out on the Sabbath, all the hametz is to be destroyed before the Sabbath (that is, on Friday), says Rabbi Meir. The Sages say that the hametz is to be destroyed at the proper time (which means on Shabbat)". Logic would dictate that the difference of opinion between the Sages and Rabbi Meir is similar to the difference of opinion we have previously cited between the Sages and Rabbi Yehudah; since Rabbi Meir agrees with Rabbi Yehudah that the hametz must be destroyed by fire, this destruction is forbidden on Shabbat and so the hametz must be burnt on Friday. The Sages on the other hand, who believe that hametz can also be destroyed by casting it to the winds or by throwing it into the sea, can very well have us destroy the hametz on Shabbat; all you really have to do is flush it down the toilet. We would therefore expect that normative practice follows the Sages and that the last hametz meal along with its destruction take place on Shabbat before the end of the fourth hour.

However, the great scholar and codifier Maimonides does not see it this way. He rules (Laws of Hametz and Matzah3,3) that indeed the search for hametz this year must take place on Thursday evening; on Friday morning the hametz must be burnt. Sufficient hametz-or rather sufficient bread for 'hamotzi' for the two Sabbath meals-must be set aside and eaten apart from the "passoverized" dining area. He would suggest that four hallot (or rolls or pitas) be placed in a porch area or any suitable separate room which will prevent the hametz from coming into contact with the "passoverized" food; in other words, the "motzi" bread must be eaten separate and apart from the main "passoverized" Sabbath meals. The last bit of hametz must be eaten before the end of the fourth hour on Shabbat morning, which this year is at 9:53 (for Sephardim 9:26).

One would now expect Maimonides to rule that some last remaining hametz be destroyed by casting it to the winds or by flushing it down the toilet in order to fulfill the commandment of destroying hametz. However, Maimonides insists that no hametz be

physically destroyed on Shabbat. He insists that some hametz is to be burned on Friday and that, if there still remains hametz on Shabbat morning after 9:53 A.M., a covering must be placed over it so that it cannot be seen and it must be burnt at the conclusion of the first day.

Now why is Maimonides so insistent that the hametz not be destroyed on the Sabbath? After all, normative law should follow the Sages, and they maintain that hametz can be destroyed by casting it to the seas or-in our terminology-by flushing it down the toilet. Should we not physically destroy it on Shabbat and thereby fulfill the command of destroying hametz at its proper time on the fourteenth day of Nissan?

My teacher and mentor Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik provides a marvelous explanation based on the concept that hametz symbolizes evil. He explains that there are two ways to destroy evil or to destroy Amalek who represents evil: either by physically destroying him or by converting him to our side. After all, if Amalek were to accept the seven Noahide laws of morality, he would no longer be Amalek the symbol of evil! The festival of Passover tells us to destroy the hametz physically because at the dawn of our history we were not strong enough to influence evil to accept our ethical world view. Rosh Hashanah, which comes seven months later, is the festival which teaches us that our ultimate and highest goal is to perfect the world under the kingship of G-d and to influence Amalek to repent. The Sabbath represents this higher ideal of converting Amalek rather than destroying him. Therefore on the Sabbath we can never destroy hametz, not even by casting it to the winds or flushing it down the toilet. On Shabbat morning we can eat the hametz- and therefore utilize it to strengthen ourselves- but we dare not destroy it. Our goal is not to destroy but rather to convert and uplift-even evil! © 2005 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah, read in conjunction with Shabbos Hagadol, depicts the Jewish scene moments before the advent of Mashiach. Malachi, the last prophet before our first exile, shares with us the prevalent conversations during the final moments of our final exile. The masses of our people will reflect upon the generation's unprecedented affluence and conclude that Torah observance is a wasted exercise. Their argument will be, "What material gain has ever come from observing His commandments or walking the downtrodden path for His sake? We constantly praise the agnostics and the wicked who met much success and yet, escaped the wrath of Above." (3:14, 15) The impressive financial success of so many unaffiliated Jews will suggest an indifference on the side

of Hashem, almost to the extent of condoning their inexcusable behavior.

What will be the response of the righteous? The prophet continues, "Then the G-d fearing people will speak amongst themselves and Hashem will hear, listen and preserve the comments of those who revere Him and respect His name." (3:16) During those dark moments G-d fearing people will be scarce. However, those who will endure and persevere, despite the fierce influences of exile, will remain steadfast in their faith. They will gather and strengthen one another sharing their true perspectives on life. They do not seek tangible benefits from life and certainly do not expect a reward in this finite world (see Malbim to 3:16) Their service is based on reverence and respect rather than reward or material gain. To them, the absence of fame or financial success will not present serious challenge to their commitment. Instead, they will patiently await the era of redemption wherein the glory of Hashem will become revealed to all.

Our Chazal in Yalkut Shimoni (591) explain this unwavering faith with the following parable. The queen was once confronted by a maidservant in the midst of a dark night. The latter argued that she was more attractive than the queen herself! The queen responded calmly, "Say all you wish now because tomorrow in the light of day the truth will be revealed." In the same vein righteous people, during our dark exile, find themselves at a serious disadvantage. In the absence of Hashem's clear revelations anything can be presented and said. Allusions can easily be construed that promise eternal bliss for those who walk the unethical and immoral path. It requires men of great character and commitment to rise above public opinion and speak the truth. Their response to this senseless talk is, "The truth is around the corner." "Soon Mashiach will arrive and the clear revelations of Hashem will tell the real story." Regarding these devout, the prophet says, "And for you who fear Hashem a gracious and healing sun will shine upon you." (3:20) Those who firmly awaited the light of redemption will merit its light, the brilliant radiance of Hashem. The light of day will finally arrive and those clear perspectives of the righteous will become self evident truths.

In truth, these very same discussions took place in Egypt and served as an essential factor in the preservation of our people. The Midrash Rabba (Shmos 5:18) reveals to us that the Jewish people observed Shabbos long before they were commanded. In defense of his people, Moshe Rabbeinu approached Pharaoh and insisted on a day of rest. After being granted his request, Moshe conveniently dedicated the seventh day of the week for this purpose. The Midrash adds that the Jewish people effectively utilized this day to study scrolls of redemption. In the midst of heavy persecution the Jews maintained their faith in Hashem. Although no trace of Hashem could be seen they remained devoted to Him. They didn't question Hashem's lack of

involvement and were not influenced by the darkness of their exile. Although their wicked taskmasters enjoyed a comfortable life this could not seduce the Jewish people into straying from Hashem. They, too, gathered together and encouraged each other with the truths of Hashem. They understood that daylight would eventually arrive and, in the radiance of Hashem, the truth would become self evident. In this merit they did experience those long awaited results. Eventually, Hashem did shine His light upon them as it says, "For the Jewish people there was light in their settlement." (Shmos 10:23) May we merit to experience this light speedily in our days. © 2005 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

What is classically referred to as the "four questions" may actually be a misnomer. It looks more like one question, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" accompanied by "four observations". They can be synthesized into one observation about the uniqueness of the evening. We introduce Matzah as "poor man's bread" and then we meet the Marror reminding us of the bitterness of the slavery. It looks like this is one of those very sad "oy vay" days like Tisha B'Av.

Alternately, we notice the dipping which rich folks frequently do and the reclining which is more the custom of free people. There's a mixed signal here. Are we poor slaves or rich free people? The answer follows, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and HASHEM our G-d took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm."

Why do we bother to focus on the unpleasantness of the past? What does continually reenacting the ugliness of our historical experience do for us? This is the formula prescribed by the Talmud, "Begin with denigration and end with praise!" (Pesachim 116A) How does it work?

Here's a story I made up for a younger group of students years back: There was a little boy who was born blind. As he grew and matured he learned to read Braille and adapted himself to his handicap as best he could. However, the neighborhood kids mastered the ugly art of teasing. A day didn't pass that somebody didn't play a trick on him or say something offensive, assuming wrongly he couldn't hear them either, but he did. He felt more despondent each day. He would write in his Braille diary all the terrible details on a daily basis and sometimes he would cry onto the pages leaving them warped and stiff. One desperate day he began to express his wish that he had never been born. He cried out to G-d for help.

A doctor arrived shortly after and told him of a new procedure that could grant him the ability to see. He went into the hospital for months. The great day

arrived. With patches on his eyes, his parents waited anxiously that night. Soft candle lights bathed the room. The patches were removed, and amazingly he could see. Imagine the adulation. He looked deeply into the faces of his loving parents, the Doctor, and nursing staff. He couldn't sleep an entire night because of all the excitement. He wanted to just drink in everything he could gaze at. His curiosity and joy knew no limit.

Months passed and he became very much like other boys his age. One day he awoke to the sound of thunder and noticed rain beginning to pour from the sky. "Agggghhhh!" he exclaimed in disgust, "The day is already ruined by this ugly rain!" When he heard himself speak this way he became disgusted. He felt he didn't deserve to have the sight he had gained. He had lost that feeling! He called the Doctor and told him that he wanted to go back to being blind again claiming his unworthiness.

The wise doctor prescribed a therapeutic plan. The anniversary of the operation was arriving. A table was set. The patches were placed on his eyes again. The candles were lit. His parents and dear friends and the doctor stood near. His old Braille diary was placed before him and he was made to read aloud. The tears began to flow as he reviewed the horrors of those early years. Then he reached that desperation point and he felt it again as he had before. Then he read hopefully the entry about the doctor and his proposal for an operation. The patches were lifted. He looked again into the faces, drank in the beauty of the sumptuous meal before him and he became intoxicated with ecstatic joy. The doctor told him, "Do this same dramatic exercise each year at the same time and then the pleasure of your newly gained sight will be with you "all the days of your life."" © 2005 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

“Where is God?" asked Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, one of the great Hasidic masters. "Everywhere," replied his students. "No, my children," he responded, "God is not everywhere, but only where you let Him enter."

The Kotzker's answer reinforces a distinction that Rabbi Ahron Soloveitchik makes between two terms of redemption-hatzalah and yeshuah. Both terms relate to being saved. Hatzalah requires no action on the part of the person being saved. Yeshuah is the process whereby the recipient must do one's share and help one's self.

In the beginning of the Book of Exodus, the Torah describes how the Jewish people, emerging from Egypt, experienced the process of hatzalah. (Ve-hitzalti, Exodus 6:6) God and God alone, says the Haggadah, took us out of Egypt. Just as a newborn is protected by its parents, so were the newborn Jewish people protected by God.

Having left Egypt, much like a child who grows up, the Jewish people were expected to assume responsibilities. This explains the splitting of the sea that we read about on the seventh day of Passover. While Moshe thought that the process of hatzalah would be extended into the future, God declares no-the sea will split, but only if you do your share and try to cross on your own. (Rashi on Exodus 14:15) Hence the sudden shift in expression from hatzalah to yeshuah as the Jews stand by the sea. (Va-yosha Hashem. Exodus 14:30)

At the Passover seder table, we re-enact the past redemption from Egypt, even as we stress the hope for future redemption. Appropriately, we begin the latter part of the seder experience with the welcoming of Elijah, who the prophets say will be the harbinger of the Messianic period. But, says Rav Kook, we cannot expect Elijah to come through the door on his own. Sitting on our hands is just not enough. We must do our share and open the door to welcome him in.

From my earliest days in the rabbinate, I have heard people ask, how can you believe in a God who permitted the death of six million Jews? A question that has no answer.

But, the thought of Rav Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik ought to remind us, that the question is not only where was God, but where was man, where was woman.

The real challenge is that we do our share and to paraphrase the Kotzker, let God in. © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

The Torah commands every man "who slaughters an ox, a sheep, or a goat" [Vayikra 17:3] within the camp or outside not to do so unless he offers it as a sacrifice to G-d. The commentaries do not agree if this specifically refers to an animal which has been set aside as a sacrifice or if it includes animals that are simply meant to be eaten. The simplest approach would seem to be that of the Ramban. He feels that the prohibition is valid for all meat, and that the animals must be offered as a Shelamim sacrifice, in which case some of the flesh is eaten by the owner. Later on, when Bnei Yisrael were about to enter Eretz Yisrael, the Torah permitted eating meat that is not related to a sacrifice (Devarim 12:20-21). Why was it forbidden to slaughter animals that were not sanctified while the nation was in the desert?

The Torah gives two reasons for this law. "If he does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to offer it as a sacrifice to G-d in the Tabernacle: (1) This will be considered blood with respect to that man, he has spilled blood, and he will be cut off from his nation; (2) In order that Bnei Yisrael bring the sacrifices

that they offer on the fields to G-d, at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, to the Kohen." [17:4-5]. The second reason is clear. It implies that the purpose of the prohibition is to avoid idol worship. This is explicitly stated in the following verse, "And let them no longer offer their sacrifices to the demons towards which they turn" [17:7]. However, the first reason given above is somewhat problematic. Is killing an animal for the purpose of food to be considered spilling blood? Weren't Noah and his sons given permission to eat meat (see Bereishit 9:3)?

Evidently the first reason is not based on a vegetarian approach to life, which was appropriate for Adam, but rather is related to what we are taught further on in this chapter with respect to the prohibition of eating blood:

"For the soul of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the Altar to atone for your souls. For blood atones for the soul." [17:11]. The blood of an animal is a tool to be used for atonement, and it is not proper to use such important material for a purpose that is not holy. That is the reason that this command was only given after the Tabernacle and the Altar were constructed, since before the existence of the Altar the blood of an animal did not yet have such spiritual significance. In view of this approach, it is clear why this prohibition appears at this point, since in the previous chapter we were taught about the power of mankind, in the form of the rituals performed by the High Priest on Yom Kippur-

"And he shall slaughter the goat of the Chatat belonging to the people and bring its blood to the area of the curtain. And he shall do to the blood what he did to the blood of the bull, let him sprinkle it on the curtain and in front of the curtain. And he will atone for the holy site from the impurities of Bnei Yisrael and from their sins..." [16:15-16].

This also explains why there is a difference between the blood of a domesticated animal and that of a wild one, since the latter is never brought as a sacrifice, and the blood of a bird, which is not sprinkled on the Altar (see, for example, Vayikra 1, 5, 11, and 15). The Torah permitted slaughtering wild animals and birds for everyday needs, since their blood was in any case not used for atonement. Since the blood is linked to the "soul," the Torah commanded that it must be covered by earth and not eaten (17:13-14), but there is no problem in killing a wild animal or a bird for private use.

Which is the Best One of the Four Sons?

by Rabbi Yosef Carmel, Head of Eretz Chemdah Institute

"Even if we are all wise, all full of understanding, all elders, and all have complete

knowledge of the Torah-We have been commanded to talk about the redemption from Egypt." [Hagada].

The Four Sons who are discussed in the Torah present a challenge to the commentators and the illustrators of the Hagada. Here are some of the difficulties that this passage presents: Why do most of the "sons" not seem to be highly successful? What is the significance of the order in which the "sons" appear? Why is there no "righteous" son? What is the difference between the simple son (according to the Talmud Yerushalmi, a "foolish" son) and the one who does not (even) know how to ask a question?

One way to answer these questions is to emphasize the phrase in the Hagada, "the Torah discusses" four sons. Let us try to determine the essence of each son, based on the specific passages in which they appear. We will look at the sons in sequence of their character, from the worst to the best.

The evil son asks, "What is the point of these rituals for you" [Shemot 12:26], referring to the command to bring a sacrifice on Pesach. The offering of the sacrifice was already a test of faith in the Almighty in the generation of the redemption in Egypt, and it remained an annual test of faith for every Jew. Anybody who did not bring the sacrifice was punished by "Karet," and he was cut off from the nation. The evil son is an apostate, one who does not want to make a covenant with the Almighty and who does not want to remain within the Jewish nation.

The wise son is only one stage higher than this. His question, which appears in Devarim (6:20-25), is the query of an intellectual. He knows the difference between different kinds of laws, but in his reserved manner he asks, "What are the laws... that our G-d commanded you?" If he does not receive an answer, he will remain with one foot on the outside.

The simple son is at the next highest level. In the language of the Torah, the word "tam" refers to one who is complete and perfect, one who believes without any doubts. This appears in the Torah both in relation to commands and as a compliment: "Go before me and be whole" [Bereishit 17:1]... "You shall be whole with your G-d" [Devarim 18:13]. The son's question, "What is this?" [Shemot 13:14], refers to the mitzva of redeeming a firstborn donkey. Even one who has reached such a high degree of holiness does not understand the meaning of this mitzva. He wonders, "What does a donkey have to do with holiness?"

The best of the four sons, the most righteous of them all, is the one who asks no questions at all. This is one who serves his G-d in utter silence. Rabbi A.Y. Kook described the essence of such a person in a wonderful way: "When the master of silent thought is engaged in his high level of silence, many different worlds are being constantly built..." [Orot Hakodesh, Derech Hakodesh, page 474]. This extremely righteous person is mentioned in the Torah in relation to eating matza. This is described as "lechem oni" [Devarim

16:3], interpreted in the Talmud as "bread around which many things are discussed" [Pesachim 36a]. On the Seder night of Pesach, even this "son" is required to observe the mitzva of telling about the redemption from Egypt, and whoever talks at the greatest length deserves the most praise.

RABBI YEHUDA PRERO

Daf HaShavua

“Give thanks to Hashem for He is good - His kindness endures forever!” So begins Psalm 136, a psalm recited during Hallel at the Seder. The psalm consists of 26 expressions of acknowledgment of Hashem's mercy and kindness toward us, all concluding with "His kindness endures forever."

The first verse, Rav Nissim David Azran explains, is in actuality a dual acknowledgement and expression of thanks. He explains by means of a parable:

Reb Avraham was known for his deep devotion to the study of Torah. He learned day and night and was encouraged to do so by his wife. In order to enable him to learn Torah with deep devotion, she took upon herself the responsibility of providing sustenance for the household. More often than not, money was short, and the dedicated wife found herself unable to purchase basic provisions. The local storekeeper, aware of the dire situation, allowed the woman to purchase on credit. Every day, the woman would buy that which she needed for the day, billing the sum to her account.

The storekeeper, while wanting to help the family, saw a bill growing every day with no payment in sight. One morning, he mentioned to the woman that the time to pay the balance was approaching. The woman was extremely troubled; she had no money to pay for the day's food, let alone that for the past few months. She returned to the store the next day, hoping to buy some more time until she was able to pay. Unfortunately, only a few days later, the storekeeper strongly hinted that he could no longer sell her anything on credit. The bill was due and had to be paid.

The distraught woman, who still had no money, had only one idea. She found a new store, and asked the proprietor for a line of credit. Knowing the family and their situation, he gladly acquiesced. The woman started shopping at the new store on credit. As one might expect, over time, the bill grew and amounted to a sum that approached the balance owing the first storekeeper.

One day, the woman opened her mail. To her surprise, she found inside the envelope a sum of money. The money, from an anonymous benefactor, was intended to support the holy man and his family. The woman was happy - she finally had money to pay bills. However, she was faced with a dilemma: whom was she supposed to pay? She only had enough money

to pay one of the storekeepers in full. Which debt should be retired first?

She presented this dilemma to her husband. She was of the opinion that the second storekeeper should be paid first. In this way, he would be placated and continue extending credit when it was needed. Her husband, however, was of different mind. He believed the first storekeeper should be paid. He had extended credit for them initially, over a lengthy time period, and for that he was owed not just a debt of money, but a debt of gratitude as well. Therefore, the husband suggested that the first storekeeper be paid in full.

Which approach was correct? Rav Azran suggests that both were correct. The best-case scenario, obviously, would be one in which both were paid in full. However, how is one to decide this dilemma - a conflict between thanking someone for kindness done in the past versus the importance of those good actions to be done for us in the future? Although there is no clear-cut answer for the couple, we are not faced with this dilemma. Hashem has provided for all of us. We have been sustained and blessed by the actions of Hashem. For this, we owe thanks. Yet, we must also acknowledge the kindness and mercy that we know will be shown to us by Hashem in the future. We are capable of praising for both, and we indeed do such. "Give thanks to Hashem for He is good," for He has done so much for us in the past. "His kindness endures forever," and for that reason, we must praise Hashem as well.

The holiday of Pesach, and particularly the Seder night, is filled with remembrances and acknowledgements of Hashem's divine providence. For example, we were taken out of Egypt in the spring, a time neither too hot nor too cold. We acknowledge this kindness with the consumption of a green vegetable. And we conclude our Seder by saying "Next Year in Jerusalem," an affirmation that we know Hashem will continue to bestow kindness upon us, by freeing us from this long period of exile. Our Seder night is truly the embodiment of "Give thanks to Hashem for He is Good, His Kindness Endures Forever!" © 2005 Rabbi Y. Prero & torah.org

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

This parsha presents Klal Yisroel with numerous mitzvos. Rashi notes that many of these mitzvos are introduced with the words: "... Ani HaShem Elokeichem." ("I am HaShem, your God." (See Rashi's comment on the pasuk (18: 2).

Rashi is echoing a remark by the Mechilta, which notes another case where mitzvos are presented the same way that they are presented in our parsha. Where? The Aseres Hadibros (the Ten Commandments) are also introduced with the same

prefatory phrase (Shemos, 20:2): "Anochi HaShem Elokecha..." ("I am HaShem, your God").

The Mechilta there comments: We can understand this introductory statement in terms of the following mashal.. A king entered the capital city of a country that had just become part of his kingdom. His courtiers advised him to promulgate decrees to his new subjects. The king replied: there is no point in issuing my commands now. First, let my subjects accept my kingship; only then will it make sense to issue my decrees.

I have presented this Medrash in accordance with its plain/simple meaning (pshat pashut). But the Sfas Emes reads this Mechilta very differently. As he sees it, the world does not function in a two-stage process like the one just proposed.. (That is: Stage 1. People accept the king's rule; and then;

Stage 2: People agree to abide by his decrees.)

Rather, issuing the decrees-and having them accepted-is itself the process by which the subjects accept the king's sovereignty. The Sfas Emes explains that the purpose of the mitzvos is precisely to give us an opportunity to accept HaShem as our ruler. That is, one may ask: why do we do mitzvos? The Sfas Emes's answer is: because HaShem commands us to do them. Thus, performing mitzvos is-so to speak-our way to place a crown on HaShem's head.

Following up on this thought, the Sfas Emes addresses a question that the Torah leaves unanswered. That puzzling issue is: what did Nahdav and Avihu do that was wrong (Vayikra, 10, 1-2)? The Sfas Emes explains that they went off the track because they did something "ahsher LO tziva..."-that HaShem had NOT commanded (Vayikra, 10:1). In other words, their misbehavior lay in their performing a religious act that was not an expression of their subordination to HaShem.

This perspective on Nahdav and Avihu is supported if we take a careful look at the text. The Torah recounts the story of Nahdav and Avihu after it presents a lengthy series of things that Moshe and Aharon had done "ka'asher tziva HaShem". That is, Moshe and Aharon did what they did solely for the sake of being in accordance with HaShem's will. The contrast with Nahdav and Avihu is clear.

Why does the Sfas Emes give this topic so much attention? First, because it clarifies the episode of Nahdav and Avihu. Second, because this discussion leads to an interpretation of the meaning of mitzvos. And finally, because this context gives the Sfas Emes the opportunity to discuss the connection between two key features of Yiddishkeit-our relationship with HaShem and our commitment to perform mitzvos. As the Sfas Emes has explained, mitzvos are the means by which we develop and maintain our relationship with HaShem.

Continuing, the Sfas Emes discusses a famous pasuk (Vayikra, 18, 5): "... asher ya'aseh osahm

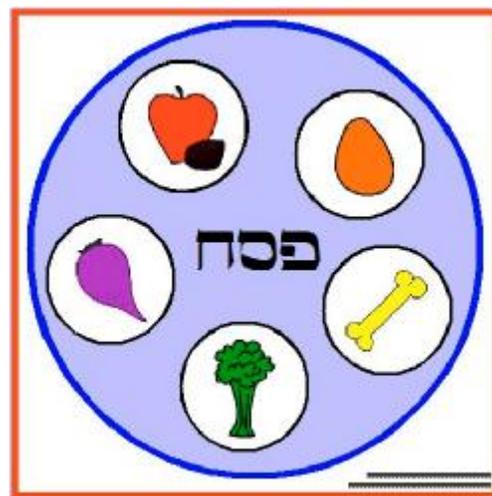
ha'ahdam vachai bahehm." (ArtScroll: "You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live...") The Sfas Emes reads this text in a non-pshat mode as follows. He understands the phrase "va'chai bahem" to mean "he shall give life" rather than "he shall live". (That is, he reads the word "vachai" as a transitive verb-po'al yotzeir rather than as an intransitive verb-po'al omeid). Thus, the Sfas Emes reads this pasuk as telling us that by doing mitzvos, we give chiyus-a concept that includes joy as well as life-to the whole world.

How does this work? We know-from the earlier part of the ma'amar-that doing mitzvos is the way we accept HaShem's kingship. Now the Sfas Emes adds that mitzvos encompass all human activity. Hence, by doing mitzvos we can bring all creation closer to HaShem. By doing HaShem's will-i.e., accepting His authority-we can bring life and joy to the world.

For a brief comment on a key issue, we go now to the Sfas Emes of 5635, paragraph 1:

(Vayikra, 18, 3) "Ke'ma'aseh Eretz Mitzrayim... lo ta'asu... u'be'chukosei'hem lo tei'lei'chu". (ArtScroll: "Do not perform the practice of the land of Egypt... and do not follow their traditions".) The Sfas Emes reads this last phrase ("u'be'chukosei'hem...") as follows. The root of "u'be'CHUKOsei'hem" is the same as the root of the word "chuka". A "chuka" is a practice or behavior that has no meaning. Thus, the Torah is telling us that the people of Egypt live their lives with "chukos"-i.e., behavior without meaning.

Why? Because they do not have mitzvos, and thus they lack access to life's inner content-the pe'nimiyus. We can do the same things that they do-the mechanics of living-but since we have mitzvos, our lives have meaning. The mitzvos enable us to form a relationship with HaShem, a relationship that gives structure and content to our lives. © 2005 Rabbi N. C. Leff & torah.org



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