

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

Appreciating the Good

In each of the first two books of the Torah we are introduced to the beginnings of the Jewish people. In the first book of Breishit, the focus is on the family; the three patriarchs and their families- the striving and the bickering within the families. The second book of Shemot begins with the emergence of the Jewish people as an entity, their rise to greatness and their perceived threat and eventual expulsion from the land. It is a story of love and hate, jealousy and adoration. Breishit in essence deals with the beginnings of the family of the Jewish people, while the book of Shmot stresses the initial stages of the formation of the great nation of Israel.

The bridge between both books is the dramatic account of Joseph and his brothers; his rise to power and his innovations in the land of Egypt. Because of his efforts, Shmot begins with the surfacing of the Jewish people as a powerful nation, and finally "there arose a new king of Egypt who did not know of Joseph"-or at least he pretended that he did not know-and the persecuting of the Jews leading to their final ouster from the land.

A dominant theme in the book of Shmot, is the attention to the importance of "Hakarat Hatov, recognizing the good. The Torah references times when Pharaoh did not recognize the good that Joseph had brought upon Egypt, while at the same time spotlighting the sensitivities of our teacher Moses in refusing to punish the Egyptians with the plagues of blood, frogs and lice, for the waters saved his life when he was cast onto the Nile as a baby, and the land rescued him by providing a place to bury the Egyptian that he slew, ultimately saving his life. This theme of "Hakarat Hatov" appears in other instances in this story as well and brings home the lesson of the importance of this attribute in a Jew's daily life.

An added display of the reaction of Almighty G-d when one denies "Hakarat Hatov" can also be seen in the way G-d punishes Pharaoh.

Pharaoh denies Joseph's existence. He rejects any good or benefit that the Jews of Egypt have bequeathed his land. He snubs their existence. G-d's response for this obvious lack of "Hakarat Hatov", recognition for the good, is that the land of Egypt would be inundated with plagues, each a symbol of how Egypt

would have appeared had Joseph not been there during the famine to save it.

The blood represents the lack of water; this leads to the frogs and amphibians engulfing the land in search for water. As a consequence of the lack of water, lice befell the people. Wild animals then ascended upon the land for there was no food to be found and they had no alternative but to seek their sustenance within the vulnerable population of humans. Further, when there is no food the cattle and livestock die (Dever, Pestilence). All these unsanitary conditions lead to boils (Shichin). Finally the hail and the Locusts destroy all the remaining food leaving the land barren and in darkness, ultimately leading to the death of children, the very future of Egypt's existence.

G-d needed to show Pharaoh how his land would have looked had Joseph and all the Jews not been there. The result was desolation and emptiness; total destruction.

In essence, this is also the cycle of Jewish History throughout the ages. Despite contributions of the Jewish people, and their work to better society, they are often taken for granted and are not given the proper Hakarat Hatov, recognition of the good, that they so deserve.

One has only to look at the amount of discoveries in science and medicine, the Arts and in education to appreciate the vital role that the Jews have played. Yet they are constantly ridiculed and blamed for all of the world's troubles, very often becoming the scapegoats for societies.

This is the story of the book of Exodus. And this story is the basis for all the stories of the Jewish sojourn in world history.

In each land that we visit we grace it with our knowledge and drive. We improve their society. When finally we are chased out, often the land we sojourned in is left void and empty. One need only look at the land of Israel after the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash. Only the Jews were able to eventually return in the late 1800's and till the soil and make it fruitful and beautiful; a land flowing with milk and honey.

The message of the importance of Hakarat hatov therefore becomes apparent. Its lack is a plague which also affects Jews as well. It stems from a feeling of entitlement and the wielding of power and influence.

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How many of us thank the schools that our children attend and receive such a fine education? How many of us thank their teachers, their Rabbis and the people who work so hard to keep the doors of the Day School or Yeshiva open? How many of us thank our parents for all their love and support? And yes, how many of us thank the simple person who performs menial tasks like cleaning the bathrooms at the airport or in our offices? A simple "thank you" would go a long way!

And a simple "thank you" would bring our redemption that much closer! ©2009 Rabbi M. Weiss. Rabbi Mordechai Weiss is the former Principal of the Bess and Paul Sigal Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford and the Hebrew Academy of Atlantic County where together he served for over forty years. He and his wife D'vorah recently made Aliya and are living in Allon Shvut. All comments are welcome at rvmordechai@aol.com

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Are there four questions, or is it just one question? We don't need to look that closely to realize that it's one four-part question; "why is this night different than all other nights?" followed by four examples of how it is different than other nights (although my 5 year old daughter thought it was one question with four separate answers as to how "this night is different"). How do we answer this four-part question? Do we address each of the parts and explain why we do these things differently at the Seder, or do we just address the overall question of why the Seder night is different?

If mentioning the four differences is only a vehicle to call attention to the fact that some things we do are indicative of a state of poverty and our being tread upon (such as eating "poor-man's bread" and bitter herbs) while others indicate nobility (i.e. dipping and reclining), we never really finish giving the answer, relying instead on the ability of the questioner to understand that by relating our history we are recounting our transition from servitude to freedom. We do eventually explain the significance of the matzoh and the maror (bitter herbs), but no explanation is given for the reclining or dipping. (Could we even answer the dipping question by admitting it was really a ruse to get

their attention?) Do we rely on our eventually (after extolling the virtues of discussing the exodus at length) alluding to an overriding answer as to why we have a Seder when we say "therefore we are obligated to praise and give thanks to the One Who performed miracles for us, bringing us from servitude to freedom," etc. to satisfy the curiosity of the son we manipulated into asking the question(s)?

Okay, so I kind of framed the question unfairly, as the "four questions" were instituted as part of the liturgy in case the participants of the Seder had no questions of their own that would start the conversation about G-d taking us out of Egypt (see P'sachim 116a). But the form the question(s) and answer(s) take do raise questions about how we are supposed to deal with questions asked of us. Are we supposed to ignore some questions because the questioner is not really ready for the answer (similar to the way we avoid explaining why we "dip")? Are we supposed to delay giving a direct answer to either distract the questioner from the question or to first provide a full context for the answer (as we do for the reasons for the matzoh and maror)? Are we supposed to assume that the person asking the question can put two and two together without us having to spell it explicitly, as we do by expressing the reason why we recline (our G-d given freedom) without saying explicitly "this is why we recline"?

These questions about how to deal with questions are not a simple matter, but knowing how to respond to questions is primary for every parent and educator, as well as being important during discussions with friends and acquaintances. It is also important to realize that even questions that seem to be coming from a somewhat sarcastic, "wise-guy" perspective (been there, done that, throughout my elementary and high school years) often have a seriously inquisitive foundation, and anything less than a serious answer that fully addresses the question sends a message that there is no real response to the issue raised.

Unfortunately, not every person who is asked a question is fully prepared to answer it. Nevertheless, it is very important that questions aren't simply ignored or pushed off. (It goes without saying, or should go without saying, that simply jotting down good questions to include them in a school newsletter without providing an answer is unacceptable, and ultimately discourages students from asking questions since they learn not to expect any answers.) It should become common practice for parents and educators to have regular discussions with other parents and educators about how they deal with specific questions, as the shared knowledge base will benefit all involved. Administrators and community leaders need to have an open line of communication with the members of their community (including the educators they oversee) so that the latter know who they can speak to about answering

questions they aren't sure about how to answer. Getting a response of "that's a good question, let me think about it" or "let me look into it" is far superior to a weak or unsatisfactory answer (as long as a full answer is forthcoming in a timely matter). There is nothing shameful about not having "the" answer on the spot. The greatest "talmiday chachamim" (Torah scholars) often have to research things further before giving an answer; we can and should do the same. Once the student/son/daughter sees that we take their questions seriously and do come back to them with genuine responses, they will gain confidence in the responses we give them. And if we are confident that we can find an answer to relay to them, we can confidently respond that we will get back to them about it.

What about those questions that don't have an easy answer? Advances in the fields of astronomy, geology, archeology and the other sciences have brought with them challenges that previous generations did not have to address, leaving us without any real tradition regarding how to deal with them. But this can be communicated to them as well. When asked what the official "Jewish" position is about the figure at the center of the Christian religion, my response has been to explain how the traditional Jewish approach to anything stems from the discussions in the Talmud about it, and the volumes of subsequent commentaries on that Talmudic discussion. Since any such discussion, or any discussion that was thought to be about it, was excised from the Talmud by Christian censors, there was no Talmudic discussion for all subsequent generations to further expound upon, and no "official" perspective ever developed. The same can be said regarding questions that only arose because of recent scientific developments; how could the Talmud or the Rishonim (early commentators) have bequeathed their thoughts to us on a topic that wasn't known to them? It is incumbent upon the community and its leaders to acknowledge such questions and develop reasonable responses to them, but until they/we do, there is nothing wrong with explaining why a question is difficult to answer; doing so is much more satisfactory than giving a half-baked answer. In addition, the importance of learning that not every question has an easy answer might be the most valuable lesson of all.

Getting back to the Seder, we may not provide a direct answer to all four parts of the question, but hopefully, using the prescribed liturgy as a starting point for a wider, more complete discussion, enough of a context has been presented to encourage all those in attendance to ask further questions and seek even better answers. Ultimately, the responsibility for getting an answer falls on the person asking the question. We will not be held accountable for not finding answers, but we will be held accountable for not trying hard enough to find those answers. And that includes moving past

not being given satisfactory answers by others, whether it was when we were in school or as adults. Quite often, questions arise based on how we understood things when we were younger, or at least how we remember them being taught to us. We have to be mature enough to know that things may have been purposely presented in a simplistic manner at that age because many aren't ready to be taught things with their full complexity and nuances. (Or perhaps the teacher never grew beyond that mindset.) But that doesn't mean our level of understanding should be stuck at a grade school or high school level. We must keep learning, and constantly try to understand things on a deeper, more mature level. Since it is primarily the responsibility of each individual to search for (and do his or her best to find) answers, building a knowledge base, and constantly continuing to build upon that base, is the best, and for the long term only, way to fulfill this obligation. Only by being somewhat knowledgeable can we determine whose answers we can trust (and therefore whom to ask the question to). The more knowledgeable we become, the better we can assess which answers are more likely to be true, and which are fully consistent with our tradition. After building that foundation (and continually building upon it), and then putting in a full and sincere effort (all the while being patient, recognizing our own limitations and that we may not find every answer, at least not right away), with the help of the All-knowing One we will discover enough of an answer to keep searching. ©2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

No matter one's Jewish background, it is known that afikomen refers to that time in the Passover seder when we break the matzah, setting aside half for the children to find. This, as a process to keep the youngsters awake. Many of us have memories of looking for the afikomen—a sweet family tradition which evokes memories of our connection to our parents and grandparents. In truth however, afikomen has deeper meaning. On its simplest level it reminds us that we were slaves in Egypt. There we were given little to eat. Similarly, the matzah is split symbolizing that the food given us was never a full morsel—only a half.

On a deeper level, the broken matzah teaches that the seder has two parts. In the first, the portion before the meal, we re-enact the story of the exodus from Egypt. Hence, half the matzah remains on the seder table symbolizing that exodus. In the latter half, the part which comes after the meal, the seder speaks of future redemption. That story begins with the eating of the half of the matzah that had been set aside as a segue to direct our thoughts forward.

Note that the word *mitzrayim*, commonly translated as Egypt, really means straits or suffering. It not only

deals with a past event but with events in the here and now. As we were redeemed then, we offer hope for redemption in the future. There is another idea that deserves mention. We break the matzah to recall all those who are on an individual basis experiencing brokenness in their lives, whether it be family pressure, health or business challenges. In truth, is there anyone who is not experiencing some form of mitzrayim?

The challenge is to feel that pain and make our lives whole. In the words of the Kabbalah, "to fix the broken vessels."

As Rav Nahman of Bratslav once said: "In this world which is not yet redeemed, who is a whole person? The one who has a broken heart." ©2012 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The glorious holiday of Pesach is upon us once more. With all of its rituals and wonder, Pesach marks the uniqueness of the Jewish people -- a people delivered from centuries of bondage through miraculous Heavenly intervention. So, one of the main functions of Pesach is to connect us to an event that occurred millennia ago in a distant land.

The natural inclination of people is to feel disconnected to that event. This is implicit in the questions raised in the section of the Hagadah devoted to the four sons. Their basic question is: "What is the relevance of this long-ago event to me?" And this has remained the basic question in all of Jewish life throughout the ages.

The enormous number of Jews who are completely disconnected from their faith and their people, from their homeland of Israel and from the values and observances of Torah, testifies to the intensity of doubt and difficulty posed by this question. If the Exodus from Egypt does not speak to me, then the rest of Judaism is pretty immaterial to me as well.

And that is basically the statement and question of the evil son in the Hagadah. In effect he is saying that the whole rite of Pesach as well as all of the other rituals of Judaism are meaningless because he has no connection to the Exodus from Egypt or to Jewish history generally. It is this disconnect that creates rampant assimilation and a constantly diminishing connection to the past and destiny of the Jewish people.

The answer of the Hagadah to the seemingly irrelevance of the Exodus from Egypt to our current world, three thousand, three-hundred, twenty-six years later, is difficult for us to understand. We tell that evil son that had he lived at the time of the Exodus from Egypt he would not have been redeemed and would

have died in Egyptian captivity.

Midrash teaches us that a majority of the Jews in Egypt did not survive, spiritually or physically, to participate in the Exodus. The clear message here is that Exodus denial means spiritual annihilation as far as the individual Jew is concerned. In order to be able to achieve freedom -- inner and lasting freedom -- as a Jew, one must first feel connected to the Jewish people and to its past and committed to its future.

Ritual is one of the proven methods to achieve such a connection. Every bite of matzo brings me closer to my people and to its eternal mission in world civilization. One of my grandsons when he was a little boy said to me at the Seder: "Zaidy, tell everyone to be quiet I want to hear what the matzo is saying to me." In his wise, childlike way he encompassed the message of Pesach to all of us.

We have to listen to what the matzo is saying to us. By so doing, we connect ourselves to the Exodus from Egypt and thereby to all of Jewish history and Judaism itself. Without listening to the matzo, we will be disconnected from our past and all of Judaism will appear to be irrelevant to us.

Pesach teaches us many basic lessons about life generally and Jewish life particularly. It teaches us that we are a unique people and therefore have to behave in a unique fashion. It teaches us that the past has to always live in our present and that memory is the key to wisdom and survival. It teaches us never to despair and to always hope and trust for better times and salvation. It teaches us of the power of an individual -- even one individual alone, such as our teacher Moshe -- to affect and alter all of human history.

It points out to us the inherent danger of Jews not feeling Jewish and distancing themselves from their people and their own individual destiny. It proclaims for us G-d's rule over nations and the omnipresence of His Divine hand, so to speak, in human affairs. Many times this guidance is an unseen force but there are times in history, such as the Exodus from Egypt and perhaps even in our time in the miraculous resilience of the Jewish people after the terrible events of the past century, when G-d's direction of events is more visible to us.

Pesach and its matzo have a great deal to say to us if we are prepared to listen and understand the message. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov was reputed to have said: "Every step that I take brings me closer to Jerusalem." We can also say that every bite of matzo that we take brings us closer to the experience of the Exodus from Egypt and to the great redemption of Israel that yet awaits us. ©2014 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

While the Passover Seder is still freshly on our minds and taste buds, allow me to suggest an important lesson that we are likely to overlook.

Fascinatingly, alongside Moshe who is not really mentioned by the Haggadah, there is another great Biblical personality who plays a major role in the Haggadah, but who is likewise overlooked. This personality is Joseph, first born of Rachel, favored son of Jacob-Israel and Grand Vizier of Egypt.

Let us start at the very beginning of the Seder. After we raise the first cup of wine and recite Kiddush, we wash our hands without a blessing before eating a vegetable, usually parsley, and we make the blessing to G-d "Creator of the fruit of the earth". The usual explanation for this is that karpas is the Greek word for vegetation, and Greco-Roman meals would generally begin with the vegetable hors-d'oeuvre together with a 'dip'. The seder is a reclining meal reminiscent of a Graeco-Roman feast and so we begin the seder evening with this vegetable hors-d'oeuvre /dip. For us, the vegetable is also a symbol of spring, Passover is called the Festival of the Spring – and the dip is generally salt water reminiscent of the tears of the Hebrew slaves.

There is, however, an entirely different interpretation of the karpas suggested by Rashi in his commentary on the verse which mentions the coat of many colors (k'tonet passim, Genesis 37:3). Rashi links this source to the verse in the Scroll of Esther which describes the rich embroidery of the palace of King Achashverosh: "There were hangings of white fine linen (karpas, Esther 1:6), thereby identifying with the Persian word karpas which describes an expensive material or garment; the second syllable pas means stripe in Hebrew and evidently refers to an expensive material with stripes of many colors. The karpas would therefore refer to Joseph's coat of many colors, the gift he received from his father elevating him over his siblings and singling him out as the bechor (firstborn). Interestingly enough, there is a custom in many Yemenite communities to dip the karpas vegetable into the charoset, a mixture of wine, nuts and sometimes dates, which the Jerusalem Talmud says is reminiscent of blood. Hence, just as the brothers dipped Joseph's cloak of many colors into the blood of the goat claiming to their father that Joseph had been torn apart by a wild beast; we dip our karpas into the charoset.

What does this have to do with Passover? The Babylonian Talmud (B.T. Shabbat 10b) teaches in the name of Rav: "One should never favor one child over the other children in a family. It was because of an expensive garment bought for two sela'im that Jacob gave to Joseph – more expensive than anything he had given to any of his other children – he was envied by

his brothers and the issue 'snowballed' until our forefathers were enslaved in Egypt." Hence, the seder begins by warning every leader of the family to learn from the Joseph story the importance of showing equal affection and treatment to all of one's children so as not to engender causeless hatred and strife.

The seder's theme of the Joseph story continues with the cups of wine. Although the Babylonian Talmud (Pesachim 99b) links the four cups with the four (or five) expressions of redemption in the Book of Exodus (6:6-7), the Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 10:1) connects the cups of wine to the four or five times the word kos – cup appears in the butler's dream in the book of Genesis (40:9-13, 21). And of course Joseph's interpretation of the butler's dream is that he would be freed from his prison enslavement and would be able to once again serve his master. Since this source deals with freedom from slavery in Egypt and actually uses the word kos, it is certainly legitimate to see it as a source for the cups of wine that we drink in remembrance of our exodus from Egypt.

Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, (known as the Vilna Gaon, 1720-1797) identifies a reference to Joseph at the very end of the seder as well, with the Had Gadya song. He masterfully interprets the little goat bought for two zuzim as the goat whose blood was used to soil Joseph's coat of many colors: Jacob' acquired' the shock that he received upon seeing the bloodied cloak by virtue of the two sela'im he had spent on the expensive cloak which engendered the causeless hatred of the other brothers – a hatred unto death.

In a fascinating and parallel symbolic manner, the Jewish people are also the blameless goat whom our Father in Heaven bought unto Himself with the Two Tablets of Stone, the Decalogue He gave them at Sinai. Because of that gift, and the status of the Jewish people as the chosen people, we have been hated throughout the generations and persecuted unto death by cruel tyrant after cruel tyrant. And despite the causeless hatred against us, each of our attackers will be destroyed in turn until eventually even the angel of death will be destroyed by our Father in Heaven. At that time, Israel and the world will be redeemed and death will be destroyed forever.

May it be speedily and in our days. ©2014 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

One of the most dazzling insights of the sages was to connect the dots -- the three places in the Torah where children are spoken of as asking questions, and the fourth where we are commanded to "teach your child on that day" -- and turn them into the series of vignettes known as the arba banim, the four children of the Haggadah, one wise, one "wicked," one simple and one not yet able to ask.

Most fascinating and perplexing is the rasha. Today we would probably call him the rebel, the sceptic, the delinquent. I for one find it hard to describe any child as a rasha, hence the quotation marks. One puzzle is simply this: what is wicked or subversive about the question, "What is this service to you?" (Exodus 12:26). It seems straightforward. The child wants to know why his parents are doing what they do. That is what most inquisitive children want to know about the behaviour of adults.

The Torah itself does not treat the child as a rebel or the question as a provocation. The passage continues: "You must answer, 'It is the Passover service to G-d. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians, sparing our homes'" (Exodus 12:27).

This is a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. Nonetheless, the sages heard something discordant and dissident in the text, leading them to conclude that something is not quite right. What was it? To this, there are three main answers.

The first is the approach taken by the Haggadah itself. On this reading, the key word is *lakhem*, "to you." "'To you,' he says, not 'to him.'" Famously the text continues, "By setting himself apart from the community, he denies an *ikkar*, a fundamental principle of faith." What exactly the fundamental principle is that the rasha denies is a question worthy of study in its own right, but one thing is clear. For the Haggadah the discord lies in the word *lakhem*.

R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk offered a second interpretation. He noted that the biblical text at this point says, "And when your children say to you..." (Ex. 12:26). This is unusual. The normal verb introducing a question is *lishol*, not *leimor*, "to ask" not "to say." To ask is to seek an answer. To say is to express an opinion. Hence, concluded R. Meir Simcha, what makes this child different is that he is not asking a genuine question but a rhetorical one. He seeks not to learn but to dismiss. He asks but is not interested in the answer. On this view the key word is *yomru*.

The Talmud Yerushalmi, though, takes a different view again. It understands the question of the rasha to be, "What is all this effort [*torach*] that you undertake each year?" According to one reading of the Yerushalmi the child is asking about all the effort involved in preparing the *korban pesach* (*Shibbolei haLeket*). According to the Ritva he is asking about the Haggadah itself: why delay the meal with so much talking, so many questions, answers and explanations? What is clear, though, is that for the Yerushalmi the key word is *avodah*. When the child says *Mah ha-avodah ha-zot lakhem*, he is not asking, "What is this service to you?" but rather, "What is this hard work to you?" This is a deep insight. I will argue that it goes to the very heart of the Jewish condition today.

To understand the power of the Yerushalmi's

reading we need to go back to a passage at the opening of the Torah's narrative of slavery. Here is the text in the Kaplan translation: "The Egyptians started to make the Israelites do labour designated to break their bodies. They made the lives of [the Israelites] miserable with harsh labour involving mortar and bricks, as well as all kinds of work in the field. All the work they made them do was intended to break them." (Ex. 1:13-14)

And here it is in Robert Alter's translation: "And the Egyptians put the Israelites to work at crushing labour, and they made their lives bitter with hard work with mortar and bricks and every work in the field -- all their crushing work that they performed."

What these translations fail to convey -- inevitably, because of the literary conventions of English -- is that these two verses contain the word *avodah* in one form or another five times. Translated more literally, they read: "The Egyptians made the Israelites labour with crushing rigor. They embittered their lives with hard labour, with mortar and bricks and all kinds of labour in the field: all the labour they laboured for them was crushing."

In total, the word appears seven times -- a significant number -- in the first two chapters of Exodus. So the Torah intends us to hear, as the motif of the Israelites' suffering in Egypt, the word *avodah* in its dual sense of hard work and slavery. Hence our surprise when, during Moses' epiphany at the burning bush, we hear G-d saying: "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship [ta'avdun] G-d on this mountain." (Ex. 3:12).

The Israelites will know that they have left Egypt and slavery when they arrive at the mountain and there engage in *avodah* to G-d. The same word is used to describe slavery and freedom, bondage and liberation, Egypt and exodus. That, according to the Yerushalmi, is the point the rasha is making. "What is this *avodah* to you? Nothing has changed. There we were *avadim*, here we are *avadim*. There we had to work for a master, here we have to work for a Master. There it was hard, here it is hard. All that has changed is the master's identity. There it was Pharaoh. Here it is G-d. But we remain *avadim*. Tell me, dear father, how we are better off now than we were. Why is being Jewish such hard work?"

As I write, the Jewish world has been reflecting on the Pew Report on American Jewry, showing that outside Orthodoxy the outmarriage rate has risen to 71 percent. 32 percent of young Jews describe themselves as "of no religion." Less than a third of American Jews belong to a synagogue. 48 per cent cannot read Hebrew.

More interestingly from a sociological standpoint, the report confirms an unusual feature of American Jewry. There used to be a saying in Yiddish: *Vi es kristels zich, azoy yiddles zich*. Jews adapt to the

coloration of the surrounding society. If non-Jews are religious, Jews tend to be religious. If they are secular, Jews tend to be secular.

America is different. Taken as a whole, the population of the United States is one of the most religious in the world, but the Jewish community is significantly less so. 56 percent of the general population, but only 26 percent of Jews, describe religion as an important feature in their lives. 69 percent of the general population believe in G-d; only 34 percent of Jews. 50 percent of the general population attend a place of worship monthly; only 23 percent of Jews. This is a longstanding phenomenon: it was already remarked on by sociologists in the 1960s. But it remains a striking anomaly.

Let me suggest one possible explanation. Throughout a century of reflection on how to sustain Jewish identity in an open, secular society, the case has often been made that we need to make Judaism easier. Why make the barriers so high, the demands so steep, the laws so rigorous and demanding? So, one by one, the demands were lowered. Shabbat, kashrut and conversion were all made easier. As for the laws of tehorat ha-mishpacha, in many circles outside orthodoxy they fell into abeyance altogether. The assumption was that the less demanding Judaism is to keep, the more Jews will stay Jewish.

To show that this is a fallacy, I once asked a mixed group of observant and non-observant Jews to list the festivals in order of difficulty. Everyone agreed that Pesach was the hardest, Shavuot the easiest, and Sukkot somewhere in between. I then asked, which festivals are kept by the greatest number of Jews. Again, everyone agreed: Pesach was kept by most, Shavuot by the least, with Sukkot in between. There was a pause as the group slowly realised what it had just said. It was counterintuitive but undeniable: the harder a festival is, the more people will keep it. The proof is Yom Kippur, by far the most demanding day of all, and by far the best attended in synagogue.

This is not an isolated phenomenon. Those familiar with the work of behavioural economist Dan Ariely, for example, will know of the experiment he performed in which he invited a group of people to make origami shapes. Their work was then demonstrated and participants and bystanders were asked how much they would pay for them. On average, the people who made the models were willing to pay five times as much as were the bystanders. He then did a second experiment, similar to the first but with one difference: this time there were no instructions as to how to make the models. The task, in other words, was even harder. This time the makers were prepared to pay even more. His conclusion? The tougher the challenge and the more skill and time we have invested into it, the more we value it. The sages said this long ago. Lefum tza'ara agra: according to the effort is the

reward.

A host of recent studies of outstanding achievement, among them Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, David Shenk's *The Genius In All Of Us*, Geoffrey Colvin's *Talent is Overrated*, Matthew Syed's *Bounce* and Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code*, have shown precisely this, that high achievement is the result of tireless dedication (at least 10,000 hours of it) and deep practise. That is why people strive to get into the great universities, or win an Olympic medal or a Nobel Prize. It is also the phenomenon that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow" or "peak experience," the point at which a challenge tests us to the limits, calling for total focus. To be sure, there are some challenges that are simply too hard and leave us feeling overstressed and inadequate. But in general we value most highly what tests us most deeply.

Sometimes of course the opposite is true. We appreciate the one-click buy, the one-stop shop, the instant communication and the computer search that takes microseconds. But this applies when we are seeking convenience, not when we are seeking meaning. If what we are looking for in a religion is convenience, no one in his or her right mind would recommend Judaism. But if we are looking for meaning, no religion has ever been more profound.

The Yerushalmi does not tell us how to answer the child who asks why Judaism is such hard work, such avodah. Speaking personally, this is the answer I would give.

"My child, you ask a good question and I respect you for that. Others may call you a rasha, but to me you are not that at all. You are being honest. You are telling it the way you see it. You are right to speak what is in your mind. We cannot empower children to ask questions and then get angry when they ask the wrong questions or the right questions in the wrong way. I cannot give you an answer that will end your doubts, but I can say what I have learned in the course of my lifetime."

"People are prepared to undergo a long and arduous training to earn a living -- to become a doctor or a lawyer or a therapist or an economist. Judaism asks us to undergo an equally long and arduous training in order to live: to be not just a doctor or lawyer or therapist or economist but also a human being who is bigger than his or her specific roles. That is because Judaism takes life -- the art of living in the image of G-d -- with absolute and ultimate seriousness."

"The ancient Egyptians enslaved whole populations to build monumental buildings, pyramids, temples and royal palaces. They saw buildings as the end and human lives -- the lives of the labouring masses -- as a means to that end. Jews, guided by G-d, believed the opposite. Buildings are a means to an end. What matters are lives. Lives are holy."

"The Greeks produced great works of art. Jews

believed that life itself is an art. Just as an artist invests time in perfecting his or her craft, so we invest time in perfecting our lives. Ancient Egypt and ancient Greece were great civilizations. They left us imperishable masterpieces of architecture and art. But neither valued life -- our lives as individuals possessed of inalienable dignity -- the way Jews and Judaism did."

"Judaism is hard work because freedom is hard work. Pesach is especially hard because it is the festival of freedom. Freedom is threatened in two ways: by individualism and collectivism. Collectivism -- worship of the system, the state, the nation, the race -- has produced the worst tyrannies of history. That was true not only in the days of Moses. It was true in the twentieth century in the form of fascism and communism. It is true in many countries today."

"Individualism represents the opposite danger. When individuals put private gain ahead of the common good, a society eventually collapses. That has been true of every affluent society in history. It has a brief flurry of success and then enters a long or short decline. You can tell in advance when a society is about to begin a decline. There is a breakdown of trust. Leaders lack stature. Divisions grow between rich and poor. There is a loss of social solidarity. People spend more and save less. In their focus on the present they endanger the future. There is less discipline and more self-indulgence, less morality and more pursuit of desire. Cultures grow old the way people grow old, and they begin to do so when they are at the very height of their powers."

"I once asked the non-Jewish historian Paul Johnson who wrote a great History of the Jews what had most impressed him in the years he spent studying our people. He replied that in his view no civilization in history had managed as well as Jews had done the balance between personal and social responsibility -- the road that avoids collectivism on the one hand, individualism on the other."

"That is what Pesach is about. It is about my personal experience of freedom: On Pesach we must each see ourselves as if we personally had left Egypt. But it is also about our shared experience of freedom as we tell the story of our people and hand it on to future generations. Judaism is about the 'I' and the 'We.' Without our willingness to encourage questions, argument, debate, and endless new interpretations of ancient texts, we would lose the 'I.' Without halakhah, the code that binds us together across centuries and continents, we would lose the 'We.' And yes, it's hard work. But I tell you from the depth of my heart that there is no achievement worth having that is not hard work."

What we need in Jewish life today is not ways of making Judaism easier. What costs little is valued even less. We need to find ways of showing how Judaism lifts us to greatness. When that happens people will not ask, Mah ha-avodah ha-zot lakhem,

"Why all the hard work?" Neither an athlete going for an Olympic gold medal nor a scientist trying a new line of research ever asks that question; nor did Steve Jobs at Apple or Jeff Bezos at Amazon. The pursuit of greatness always involves hard work. The real challenge of our time is to rediscover why Judaism, because it asks great things from us, lifts us to greatness. The rest is commentary.

In 2008 two teenage Americans, Alex and Brett Harris, wrote a book that became a best-seller. It was called, *Do Hard Things*, and subtitled: *A teenage rebellion against low expectations. We need a Jewish equivalent. That will be the answer to the question young Jews still ask, "What does this avodah mean to you?"* ©2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

As we sit down on Pesach (Passover) night at the Seder, we make a transition that we wouldn't realize unless we think about it. All day we prepare the food, making sure we don't have Chametz (leavened bread), making sure we have all the Marror (bitter plants) and eggs ready. The unleavened bread is to remind us that we're still poor, the Marror to remind us of the past exile, and the eggs dipped in salt to remind us that we're still in exile. Then, we start the Seder, and the first thing we say is how this is the "time of our freedom". We continue by telling the story of how we were freed, and we even act like we're kings by leaning when we sit! Are we slaves, or are we free kings?

R' Yerucham of Mir explains that the "time of our freedom" means that not only was it when we were freed from slavery many years ago, but it's the time when we can do the same TODAY! What does that mean? Aren't we free? And if we're not, how does Pesach 'free' us? That's where Pesach, Matzah and Marror come in. Those are the 3 things that remind us, especially when we're feeling like kings, that we were slaves, and that we're still in bitter surroundings. If you think about it, because we were saved from slavery by G-d, we are now indebted to Him, which means that we're still not, and never will be, really free! The point we have to take from all this is that although we're free to do as we wish, it's only worth something when we use that freedom to do something good, and be constructive with our lives. Pesach teaches us that "freedom" used just for the sake of being "free-" is pretty "-dom"!

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