

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Passover, which began on the night of April 22nd, continues this week. Presuming you survived a Seder or two with your extended family, now is the time to focus on the rest of the holiday.

As we shall see, it is also a time to focus and repair relationships. Even couples who have been married for a long time tend to find the weeks leading up to Passover stressful -- often leading to conflict and feelings of being unappreciated. Apologizing for one's behavior under duress is a must and learning to say, "I am sorry for what I did" goes a long way (though saying "I am sorry...I married you" doesn't).

Passover is unique in that it consists of two holy days; the first day and the last day. In other words, the first day is a holy day or yom tov, followed by five intermediate days (which have a lesser level of holiness), and then the seventh day is another holy day (outside of Israel they are observed as the first two days and the last two days of the holiday with eight days in total). Why are there two separate holy days?

On the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Nissan, the Children of Israel left Egypt, where they had served as slaves for hundreds of years. Despite his original stubborn refusal, after ten debilitating plagues Pharaoh relented and allowed the Children of Israel to leave Egypt for a three-day spiritual retreat in the desert.

When the Israelites failed to return after those initial three days Pharaoh realized that they were gone for good. Unsurprisingly, this did not sit well with Pharaoh. He marshaled his entire force of chariots and his fierce army to pursue his former slaves and return them to Egypt. The Egyptian army caught up with the Israelites at the banks of the Red Sea. The Israelites were trapped between one of the most feared armies in the world and the sea.

As usual, the Israelites met this challenge with equanimity and a calm demeanor. Just kidding! In what was to become a familiar pattern over the next four decades, the Children of Israel began to complain bitterly; "Are there not enough graves in Egypt that you took us out to die here in the wilderness? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt? Didn't we tell you to leave us alone and let us serve as slaves in Egypt?" (Exodus 14:10-12).

Of course, Moses was not-so-thrilled with the

reaction of the Israelites and their sudden pining for the "good old days" as slaves in Egypt. He urged them to stand fast and turned to pray to the Almighty for salvation. God answered Moses in a most remarkable way: "Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them travel forward!" Sometimes you have to stop talking and just take action.

As one might imagine, the Israelites were less than thrilled by the prospect of marching into the Red Sea. According to the Midrash, Nachshon the son of Aminadav, who was the head of the tribe of Judah (as well as the brother-in-law of Moses' brother Aaron) took the initiative and marched into the raging sea and was followed by his tribe. The royal line of Jewish kings and the eventual messiah are the descendants of Nachshon.

As the water surged up to their necks, Moses raised his staff and the wind began to blow. Miraculously, the sea began to recede and split in half allowing the Israelites to comfortably cross on dry land. When the Egyptians attempted to follow them across, the sea came crashing down on them. Chariots, riders and horses all perished in the churning sea.

The miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea happened on the seventh day of Passover. It is for this reason that there are separate "holy days" on Passover; the beginning of Passover celebrates the freedom from slavery and the end celebrates the miraculous escape through the splitting of the Red Sea.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, Moses led the Israelites in singing the Song of the Sea. Miriam, Moses' sister, led the women in an additional song of thanks, accompanied by tambourines and drums.

Because the holiday extends through the upcoming Shabbat, the Torah reading for this Shabbat is not part of the regular cycle of Torah portions. Instead, we read the story of the splitting of the Red Sea and the Song of the Sea.

In addition, for millennia synagogues in every Jewish community around the world have had the custom of reading Shir HaShirim -- Song of Songs -- on the Shabbat of Passover. What is Song of Songs and why is it read on Passover?

Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, is one of the five Megillot, or Sacred Scrolls, that are part of the Hebrew Bible. According to Jewish tradition, it was penned by King Solomon and is a timeless allegory of the relationship between the Almighty and the Jewish people, as described in terms of the love between a man

and a woman.

This love is deeply expressed in the most beautiful and poetic terms. Song of Songs is written in an unabashedly sensuous manner and is quite a paean to the intensity of longing for a beloved. It is an intensely beautiful tribute to love. Given the sensuous and sometime explicit nature of Song of Songs, its inclusion in the biblical canon was a matter of some controversy.

In fact, it likely would have been excluded from the Bible altogether, if not for a powerful champion. As the Sages debated which books were to be included in the Scriptures, the famous sage of the first century, Rabbi Akiva -- perhaps the most respected sage of his era -- argued that "while all of the sacred writings are holy, Song of Songs is the holy of holies!" (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5).

The commentaries suggest that Rabbi Akiva's affinity for the Song of Songs stems from his metaphorical understanding of its contents, reading Song of Songs as King Solomon intended, an extended allegory to the loving relationship between God and Israel. Indeed, the tradition of understanding Song of Songs as a metaphor for the divine love, rather than the human, is found in both Jewish law and Jewish mysticism.

Maimonides, the great medieval sage and philosopher and perhaps the greatest codifier of Jewish Law, writes, "What is the proper form of the love of God? It is that he should love the Almighty with a great, overpowering, fierce love as if he were love-sick for a woman and dwells on this constantly [...] And it is to this that Solomon refers allegorically when he says: 'For I am love-sick' (Song of Songs 2:5) for the whole of Song is a parable on this theme" (Hilchos Teshuvah 10:3).

Still, what does all of this have to do with Passover? Why did the rabbis establish that Song of Songs should be read on Passover?

Did you ever wonder why so many Jewish rituals mention the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt? Jewish tradition is rife with constant reminders of this. As an example, the sanctification of Shabbat over wine on Friday night includes the line, "(Shabbat) is first of the holy days and a remembrance to the Exodus from Egypt." What does that even mean?

When the Jewish people were standing at Mount Sinai and the Almighty introduced Himself to them at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, He said: "I am the Lord your God that took you out of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2). This seems very odd. A much better description of the Almighty would seem to be that He is the Creator of the world and everything in it. In fact, this would be a much stronger reason to owe Him fealty. Why did the Almighty limit Himself to the One who took them out of Egypt?

The answer is that God is informing us that the basis of our relationship is love. God took us out of Egypt because He cares about us and desires a relationship with us. This is why we constantly remind ourselves of

the Exodus: it's the basis of our relationship with the Almighty -- a relationship of love.

Now we understand why reading the Song of Songs is so appropriate for Passover. God's love for His people, as expressed by freeing us from slavery in Egypt and making us His own, is truly a love relationship. This is so eloquently expressed in King Solomon's sublime paean to love and most appropriate for the holiday of Passover.

True love is about the connectivity of two entities merging into a greater whole. The Hebrew language is both ancient and holy; it is the language by which the world was created ("And God said..."). The Hebrew alphabet also has a number system assigned to it. In its most basic form, the first letter (aleph) has the numerical equivalent of one, the second letter (beis) is the number 2, etc.

The numerical value of "ahava -- love" is 13 and the numerical value for "echad -- one" is 13, further expressing the relationship between the two concepts. In addition, in Hebrew the word for song is "shir," which is the root of the word "sharsheres," which is an interlocking chain -- because a song connects one to another, just as love is about connectivity.

It is for this reason that we constantly remind ourselves of the Exodus. It's like hearing the words "I love you" from someone who you care for deeply. As we know, hearing someone tell you that they love you never gets old. Now apply that lesson to your own life and let those in your life know how deeply you care for them as well. Happy Passover! ©2024 Rabbi Y. Zweig and shabbatshalom.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

At first glance, Chad Gadya is a kind of light hearted song whose sole purpose is to provide an entertaining ending to the seder. Yet, in order to truly understand its meaning an analysis of the structure of the seder is required.

In general terms, the seder is divided into two parts. The first half which precedes the seder meal deals with the past--a retelling and reenactment of the Exodus from Egypt. The second half, which follows the seder meal, deals with the future--words of praise and song that complete redemption come soon.

It is because of this separation that we break the matza at the onset of the seder. Matzo is the symbol of redemption. One half remains on the table as we recount the past event, and the second half-- not coincidentally the larger half representing the hope of the greater redemption which is yet to come--is set aside to be eaten at the end of the meal, the section that looks toward the future.

If you take a look at most haggadahs, the bulk of commentary focuses on the first half of the seder, and there is little discussion about the last half. But this

section deserves just as much attention. It begins with the eating of the afikoman, that second half of matza. This part of the seder is called tzafun. Tzafun literally means hidden, and is always associated with redemption whose time is unknown to us. The word tzafun sounds like tzafon which means north. It is said that the Messiah will come from the north.

Tzafun is followed by the Grace After Meals, the prayer of thanksgiving for food eaten during the main course. This prayer, that we recite after each meal during the year, interestingly includes the prayer that God send to us Elijah the Prophet who announces the coming of the Messiah.

We emphasize Elijah's presence though at the seder immediately after the Grace, when we open the door for Elijah, symbolic of our yearning for the Messiah. For the Messiah to arrive, we cannot sit on our hands—we have to do our share and open the door.

What follows is the Hallel. Appropriately, the first two paragraphs of the Hallel, which deal with redemption from Egypt, are recited prior to the meal. The last paragraphs deal with the future, the hope that God will bless us (Ye-Varech Et Beit Yisrael) with redemption and hope. Thus, these paragraphs are recited after the seder meal.

And after reciting these words, we begin reciting the Greater Hallel. This Great Hallel contains prayers of hope that all of humankind will be redeemed. Included in this set of prayers is the famous Nishmat Kol Chai - may the soul of all living beings bless you O Lord.

With this we drink wine, celebrating the hope of future redemption just as we drank wine after telling the Passover story before the meal.

The seder has now officially come to an end as the statement - Chasal Siddur Pesach is read. But as in all powerful experiences, a feeling of exhilaration remains. In the case of the seder, this feeling is expressed through an ultimate encounter with God. The encounter, called Nirtzah, which means may God hear our words favorably, includes songs that allow our hearts and souls to soar heavenward.

One such song is Va-yehi Ba-chatzi Ha-laylah, literally and it was in the middle of the night. Night is the symbol of exile. The middle of the night represents the exile of the exile, the deepest darkness. As we sing these words, we're certain that somehow, no matter how dark, light will come. We continue with Adir Hu which speaks of the hope that God rebuild the Temple speedily. We move on with the famous Echad Mi Yodei'a which we proclaim some fundamentals of faith including the Oneness of God, so crucially necessary for redemption.

And here we conclude with the Chad Gadya, a playful story which demonstrates how, in the long chain of natural events, God prevails. The goat is devoured by the cat and the cat is bitten by the dog and the dog is slain by the stick and the stick is consumed by fire, and the fire is extinguished by water which is drunk by the ox,

which is slaughtered by the slaughterer whose life is taken by the angel of death. But in the end, it is God who overcomes that angel.

One wonders, why is this deep message written in metaphor. It may be to teach that so much in Jewish history cannot be understood as it occurs, it can only be deciphered in hindsight. And it may be that the Chad Gadya is written playfully and humorously to teach that to survive against the odds requires the ability to laugh. Our very existence is difficult to believe, and in that sense almost funny.

As we sit down to the seder this year, we will be focusing not only on past redemption, but on the hope for future redemption. And we will sing Chad Gadya, that funny little song to remind us to laugh. The Chad Gadya, the song written in metaphors to remind us that even though we don't understand—one day we will. ©2024 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"You shall blunt his teeth... he would not have been redeemed." (Passover Haggada) The wicked son says, "What is this work to YOU?"

He excludes himself. In response, we are told to "blunt his teeth" by saying that this is why Hashem redeemed us from Egypt but had he been there, he would not have been redeemed. What does the expression "blunt his teeth" mean? We suggest it means our response directly contradicts his claims. What we tell him, explains where he went wrong.

We tell him that if he had been in Egypt, G-d would not have redeemed him. Why? Because Hashem redeemed the people who would become the unified nation of Klal Yisrael. By seeking to exclude himself, the wicked person shows he did not identify or consider himself one of them. In fact, we find that when Dasan and Aviram were fighting, Moshe called the one who lifted his hand against the other a "rasha," a wicked person. His wickedness lay in not realizing that by harming a fellow Jew he was harming himself, and that is our answer to the one the Haggada calls the "rasha," the wicked one.

"Had you been in Egypt, Hashem would not have redeemed you." But you're not in Egypt and it's not G-d doing the judging. You're in our home now, and we will not exclude you even though you try to exclude yourself.

The "teeth" of his argument are that we are not a unified nation of Israel. We blunt those teeth by weakening his claim. We tell him, "I do what I do because this is what Hashem wants of me. Perhaps if you defied G-d in Egypt, He would have chosen to leave you behind. But that's not our role. To me, you are a part of

us. Without you, we are not complete, and you will always have a seat at the table.”

This is why we say, “Kol dichfin,” and invite anyone who needs a place to join us at the seder even though the seder is already starting and there’s little chance anyone will take us up on it. It’s not about bringing the people in, but being ready to do so. Pesach is the time to realize that we need each other, and no Jew will be left behind.

On Shabbos Chol HaMoed, the prevailing custom is to read Shir HaShirim. Written like a love story, Chazal say it is the holiest of holies, representing the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish People. One phrase appears over and over in this Megilla. Three times, the author adjures the “daughters of Jerusalem,” not to arouse love until it is desired. The basic understanding is that it must be Hashem’s desire to redeem us and bring us to Him. At that time, He will inspire us to repent, either through troubles or some other means.

The word used, “ad she’techpatz,” means “until it is desired,” but can imply something else as well. The root of the word is CH-F-TZ, and cheifetz means an object. The Ramban in his work HaEmunah V’HaBitachon (19) explains that when one is struck with inspiration, he must act quickly on it before the urge to do good dissipates.

If one is inspired by some experience or words, and imagines various ways he will put it into action at a later time, it will likely lose its potency in a very short while and he will never act upon it. However, by doing some mitzva or concrete action immediately, he can give the inspiration life and staying power, because he has already begun to use it and it can take root in his soul and life. ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

“**T**en miracles were done for our ancestors by the sea” (Avos 5:4). One of them was G-d splitting the Yam Suf into 12 separate paths, one for each of the 12 Tribes (Bartenura, Rabbeinu Yonah and Rambam; see also Mechilta B’shalach 4, Pirkay d’Rebbe Eliezer 41, Midrash Rabba Esther 7:11 and Koheles 10:10, Tanchuma B’shalach 10, Rashi on T’hilim 136:13 and Rabbeinu Bachye on Shemos 14:21). Which leaves us wondering how the “Eirev Rav” – the mixed multitude of foreigners who left Egypt with the Children of Israel (see Rashi on Shemos 12:38) – got across; since they weren’t part of any Tribe, they had no path!

Some (e.g. Tosfos on Arachin 15a) are of the opinion that the Children of Israel came out on the same side they had entered, traveling in a semi-circle, so there was no need for the “Eirev Rav” to cross; they could have just waited until the Children of Israel re-emerged, on the same side. Nevertheless, it seems a bit awkward if they didn’t enter the sea when the Egyptian army was chasing

after the “deserters.” Besides, as I discussed in Parashas Beshalach (<https://tinyurl.com/yzkurfr>), the three reasons given why the Children of Israel must have come out on the same side are based on the mistaken assumption that the Yam Suf went west to east in a straight line, with Egypt to the south and the Promised Land to the north: (1) The Children of Israel were concerned that the Egyptians emerged unscathed on the other side; why were they concerned that the Egyptians survived if they were on the other side? (2) After the Children of Israel emerged, they ended up at Aisam, where they had already been before they crossed the sea. (3) They camped at the Yam Suf a few stops later; why would they return to the sea they had recently crossed?

We now know that the top of the Red Sea is “V” shaped, surrounding the Sinai Peninsula, with the Gulf of Suez to its west and the Gulf of Aqaba to its east. This explains (1) their concern – if the Egyptians emerged unscathed, they could resume their chase by traveling north of the Gulf of Suez, by land, even after the Children of Israel crossed through the Gulf itself; (2) how they were back where they had previously been – before they crossed they had entered the Sinai Peninsula by traveling north of the Gulf of Suez, turned around and went back to the west side of the Gulf in order to trick Pharaoh, and were back on the Sinai Peninsula after crossing the sea; and (3) why they were back at the sea a few stop later – as I explained in Part 3 of where Mt. Sinai is (<https://tinyurl.com/3jc83fpr>), they were traveling to the southern part of the Peninsula, and because of the peninsula’s shape (and terrain), camped on the eastern shore of the Gulf, farther south.

This not only eliminates the need to say that the Children of Israel came out on the same side they had entered, it also lays the groundwork to explain why there was no need for the “Eirev Rav” to cross the sea. Let’s retrace the steps the Children of Israel took to get to the Sinai Peninsula: (1) They left Egypt, along with the “Eirev Rav” (Shemos 12:37-38, Bamidbar 33:5); (2) they went from Succos to Aisam (Shemos 13:20, Bamidbar 33:6), with Aisam located on the Sinai Peninsula, traveling there by land, north of the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, going from its western side to its eastern side; (3) G-d told them to go back to the western side (and camp there), in order to trick Pharaoh (Shemos 14:2-4, Bamidbar 33:7). They did, going from east to west (the reverse of step #2), traveling north of the Gulf of Suez.

Before getting to the next step, let’s think about what happened in that third step. They had already escaped from Egypt, and were on the Sinai Peninsula, when G-d told them to turn around and go back to Egypt (as the land north of the Gulf of Suez was the corridor between Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula). Which the Children of Israel did. But did the “Eirev Rav” return with them? Or did they stay on the Sinai Peninsula, thereby avoiding the risk of being captured by the Egyptian

army? It seems much more likely that when the Children of Israel made a "U" turn to go back to the western side of the Gulf, the "Eirav Rav" chose to stay where they were, on the Sinai Peninsula.

Step (4): the Egyptian army trapped the Children of Israel between Egypt and the sea (Shemos 14:9); (5) the Children of Israel crossed the sea, emerging by the Desert of Aisam (Bamidbar 33:8), on the Sinai Peninsula.

Since only the Children of Israel crossed the sea, no path was needed for the "Eirav Rav." They were already on the Sinai Peninsula when the Children of Israel got there the second time, and rejoined them there.



Some propose that there was a separate miraculous splitting of the sea just for Dasan and Aviram, the perennial antagonists who gave Moshe a hard time from the moment he left Pharaoh's palace (see Rashi on Shemos 2:13) until the earth swallowed them up with Korach (Bamidbar 16:25-33, 26:9-10). The basis for this idea is that they were still in Egypt after the Children of Israel left (Targum Yonasan on Shemos 14:3), yet were with them in the desert; how did they get there if G-d didn't split the sea for them? Well, since getting from Egypt to the desert doesn't require crossing the sea, no miracle was needed. Besides, who says Dasan and Aviram didn't rejoin the Children of Israel until after they had crossed the sea? Maybe they went with Pharaoh to the sea, and rejoined their brethren before they crossed! This seems more likely, especially since there was a rebellion at the sea (Shemos 14:11-12), which they were no doubt a part of (see Mechilta Beshalach 2 in conjunction with Rashi on Shemos 5:20). According to Midrash HaGadol (Shemos 2:13) they actually led this rebellion (which is probably why Pharaoh let them rejoin the escapees), so were obviously at the sea before the Children of Israel crossed it, and didn't need a separate miracle. ©2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI TZVI KLUGERMAN

Baruch Hamakom

As we enter deeper into the recitation of the Passover saga, we recite Baruch Hamakom, Baruch Hu, Blessed is the Omnipresent. This paragraph concludes with Baruch Shenatan Torah L'Amo Yisrael, Blessed be the One who gave Torah to His nation Israel. This blessing is unique, as it is said without Shem u' Malchut, the Divine Name and Royal Appellation. A blessing usually signifies the liturgical division of a prayer service. This blessing, albeit without the Divine Name, sanctifies what may be the actual start of the Passover seder, the commandment to relate the Exodus from Egypt.

This possible beginning of the seder, is marked by the section of the four sons. Why would the seder begin with the four sons? Why not begin immediately

with the passage from the Midrash Mechilta "Yachol M'Rosh Chodesh, You might suppose that we should begin from the beginning of the month"?

If the motif of the seder is Chinuch Hayeladim, instruction of the children, then we have to establish pedagogical guidelines. We bring the example of the wise son, the Chacham, to reaffirm our obligation. Even if our children are more learned than us, we still have an obligation to transmit our heritage. The Rasha, evil son, reminds us not to discount the rebellious child without trying. The harsh response offered to this son is another attempt to show him the folly of his attitude. As we learn in the Torah, the Ben Sorer u'Moreh, rebellious son, was declared rebellious only after repeated attempts were made to teach him. The Tam, simple son, receives the simple answer. We are encouraged to be persistent in our attempts to teach him, even if he doesn't understand after the first time. The Sh'eino Yodea Lish'ol, one who doesn't even know to ask, reminds us not to disregard the quiet student, and not to assume that everyone present understands what is being said and done.

Yet, perhaps there is another meaning behind the placement of the four sons at this juncture. The saga of the Redemption of the Israelites as G-d's people, was an epic event that had many different facets. Witnessing the Otot u'Moftim, G-d's wonders and signs that were visited upon the Egyptians and retelling the Exodus can have profound reactions in the same person.

After learning about the Exodus, we should be able to see The Divine and search out G-d in the events. This spiritual revelation may overwhelm us, even inspire us to new heights, but even the sky is a limit. We must remember the seemingly inappropriate answer given to the Chacham, "Ein Maftirim Achar Hapesach Afikoman", nothing is to be eaten after the Afikomen". Regardless of the spiritual revelation achieved, the primacy of Halacha remains supreme.

Similarly, we may at times deny the Divine in the events of the Redemption saga. Like the Rasha, we might try not to see the hand of G-d in the events. The answer given to the wicked son makes us aware that had we denied the Divine during the actual plagues and not heeded Moshe's warnings to place the blood upon the doorposts, we would not have been saved.

However, there are times that we look at G-d's divine providence with some hesitation. Did He have to do it that way?, we might ask. The answer given to the Tam instructs us to look at the wonders and signs of The Almighty with Temimut, full acceptance. This is the approach of Nachum Ish Gamzu, who regularly stated "Gamzu L'Tova, this too is for the best". That is the approach of the Tam. Acceptance of G-d's will with Emunah She'leimah - complete belief.

Yet, there may be events of the Redemption that overpower us and our response is one of silence. We are too overwhelmed to respond. "At Petach Lo, you open

for him", is the response to the Sheino Yodea Lish'ol. The learning process must never cease.

At the beginning of our Kiyum Hamitzvah, the discharge of the commandment, of telling the Exodus saga, we need to be aware of others' and our own reactions. © 1999 Rabbi T. Klugerman

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, truly free. Pesach teaches us that "freedom" used just for the sake of being "free" is "dumb", and that it's only worth something when we use that freedom to do something good, and be constructive with our lives. © 2016 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI ARI WEISS AND YITZ WEISS

No More Questions

The Maggid section of our seder begins with the traditional asking of the four questions, or the Ma Nishtanah. The source of the Ma Nishtanah is a Mishna in Tractate Pesachim,¹ which lists for us the questions with few variations from the text that we use today. The Mishna explains (according to Rashi, an early medieval commentator) that after the second cup of wine is poured, the child should begin to ask on his own why there is a deviation from the norm and why the meal hasn't yet begun. However, if the child doesn't understand enough to ask, the father must teach him to ask the questions included in the Ma Nishtanah.

The Mishna adds in a line towards the end which states, "according to the son's understanding, the father should teach him." According to the Mishna, the son is not supposed to ask all of the four questions. Instead, only the question(s) that reflect the child's "understanding" should be taught and asked. This explains a common question among children who first learn their Ma Nishtanah; It seems that there is only one question, "why is this night different?" followed by four statements of why the night is different. However, according to the Mishna, it is almost as if there are four questions of "why is this night different?" and one need only "check off" the appropriate section that fits his or her perception of the difference.

The Hagadah, in speaking of four "sons," teaches us some important lessons about how to relate to our children and to each other. The four "sons" are really four different personalities. There is a wonderful book called *Who Do You Think You Are Anyway* by Dr. Robert Rohm which investigates personalities and determines that there are four basic personality types. Most people are actually a blend of all four types.²

The "D" type personality is an individual who is dominant, domineering, directed and driven. This person is outgoing and task oriented - one who is less concerned with the feelings of others he must work with (or through!) than in completing the job at hand. The "D" leads - and lets you know he is in charge.

The "I" type personality is an individual who is inspiring, influential and impulsive. This person is outgoing and people oriented - one who is more concerned with how others see him (his image) than with focusing on tasks or accuracy. The "I" isn't just the life of the party - he takes the party with him wherever he goes!

The "S" type personality is an individual who is soft-spoken, steady, supportive and stable. This person is reserved and people oriented - one who is more focused on being a part of the "team" and doing his share. He wants to be well liked by everyone and although not very driven, he is the type to stick something out and see it through to the end.

The "C" type personality is an individual who is competent, cautious and careful. This person is reserved and task oriented. He is most concerned with accuracy and correctness - he's never wrong!

Our chacham, the wise son, seems to fall into the category of the "C" type personality. He's an individual who is very interested in the "nitty-gritty" - he wants all the facts and figures. We are taught to respond in kind - tell him all the intricacies of the seder even to the final detail of the afikoman.

The rasha, the wicked son, seems to have a "D" type personality. The rasha is arrogant and obnoxious - "what does this service mean to you?" Our rabbis are

¹ 10:4

² For a more in depth discussion on this topic the book is available from Personality Insights, Inc. at 770-509-7113.

teaching us that to get through to someone who has such a strong personality sometimes you have to “punch him in the teeth” (i.e. get his attention) before he will listen.

The tam, the simple son, personifies the “I” type personality. He is an individual with a flair for the dramatic. The Hagadah tells us that to explain the Pesach story to a child with an “I” personality we must weave a graphic, flowery recount of how we were slaves in Egypt and Hashem redeemed us with lightning, thunder, clouds and pillars of fire!

The sh’eyno yodeah lishol, the child who doesn’t know how to ask a question is our “S” personality. He is shy, timid and content to remain in the background just watching and helping others enjoy the seder. To him the Hagadah says “at p’tach lo” you must initiate the dialogue. Not every child will ask questions - even if he doesn’t ask we need to be sure he learns of his heritage.

From our understanding of the Mishna, we begin to understand the statement of the Sfas Emes, a great chassidic leader in Poland in the beginning of the twentieth century, that each question of the Ma Nishtanah parallels one of the four sons.

The first question, “on all other nights we eat chametz (leavened bread) and matzah; on this night only matzah”, clearly belongs to the chacham. After all, the only difference between chametz and matzah is literally seconds. At 17 minutes 59 seconds it’s matzah, and at 18 minutes, it’s chametz. The wise son, who notices and asks about details, asks what difference a few seconds can make.

The “wicked” son, who asks in a negative, belligerent tone, is the one who asks, “on all other nights we eat any vegetable; on this night only bitter herbs.” His question is, “why do we have to go through this all again?” Or “why can’t we eat good tasting vegetables like we always do?”

The “simple” son relates to new *actions*. He has no interest in the philosophical difference between chametz and matzah, or why we *don’t* do something. When he sees an obligation to do something new such as dipping, he asks, “on all other nights we don’t have to dip even once; on this night we are obligated to dip twice?”

The sh’eyno yodeah lishol, though, logically shouldn’t have a question. After all, he’s defined as the son who doesn’t ask. The truth is that some Rishonim³ (medieval Talmud commentators) don’t list a fourth question. We can explain the question of reclining as having to do with the last son, in that reclining doesn’t involve any extra action or impetus. The question of the last son reflects his lack of motivation to do or ask about anything other than what he is always doing. Specifically, sitting. However, to understand the question of the last son more fully, we need to examine the four sons on a deeper level.

Rav Nachman from Braslav, the great chassidic rabbi and founder of Braslav chassidut, explains the four sons in a different light. Normally we view the wise son as the “good” son, the wicked son as the “bad” son, the tam as “stupid” and the last son as “really stupid.” Rav Nachman explains the sons a bit differently. The chacham, he says, is not wise but an intellectual. He constantly feels the need to probe deeper and doesn’t feel satisfied with the simple answer. The question of the chacham exemplifies his constant search for deeper understanding of the mitzvah. The answer to the chacham is “ain maftirin achar haPesach afikoman” - there is a time when one must stop. In this case, one must understand that there is a time when one cannot probe any deeper, and the rest must be accepted on faith. If the chacham does not understand that, then he may easily become a rasha.

The rasha, like the chacham, is an intellectual. This explains why the questions of both are so similar. The only difference between the chacham and the rasha is that the rasha probes deeper to find a way to disprove the Torah. The chacham looks for greater understanding. In actuality, the chacham and the rasha are really very close to each other and there is but a fine difference between them.

The tam is actually the greatest of the sons. According to Rav Nachman, tam doesn’t mean “simple” but “perfect” (tamim). The question of the tam is that of complete faith - “what is this?” The tam has what the chacham hasn’t achieved yet - complete, simple faith.

This explains an unusual gemara in Megillah⁴ which says that Queen Esther’s other name was Hadassah, because “Tzadikim (righteous people) are called hadassim (myrtle branches).” Why in the world would tzadikim be likened to a myrtle? Well, the myrtle is one of the four species taken during the holiday of Succot, and each of the species has its own special significance. The etrog has a sweet smell and taste, symbolizing a Jew who knows the reasons for the mitzvot and therefore does them. The lulav has a taste but no smell, symbolizing the Jew who knows the reasons but chooses not to do the mitzvot. The hadas has smell but no taste, symbolizing the Jew who doesn’t know the reasons for the mitzvot, yet does them anyway, and the aravah, with no taste nor smell, is the Jew who neither knows nor does the mitzvot. Isn’t it logical that the etrog is the chacham, the lulav is the rasha, the aravah is the sh’eyno yodeah lishol and the hadas is the tam? Based on the explanation of Rav Nachman, it is obvious that the tzadik is the embodiment of the faith of the tam, shown in the hadas.

But what about the sh’eyno yodeah lishol? To better understand Rav Nachman’s explanation, let’s first go back to our Hagadah.

In the Maggid section, we focus on four key verses that describe our exile and redemption from

³ The Rosh, for example.

⁴ 13a

Egypt. In fact, these verses from the parsha of bikkurim⁵ are the prototype for all exiles and redemptions that ever occurred and will occur to the Jewish people. The first of the steps is "Vayered Mitzrayma...." We went down to Egypt - for a good reason, mind you - and became great and successful there. The second step was "Vayareiu otanu haMitzrim vayaanunu...." We were afflicted in galut, making the exile suddenly uncomfortable. The third step is "Vanitzak el Hashem...." We finally cry out and pray to Hashem to save us until the fourth stage occurs, "Vayotzienu Hashem..." - Hashem saves us.

In truth, every galut and geula is the same - we go into galut for what seems like a good reason, the galut turns against us, we finally realize that we can't handle it ourselves and we need Hashem's help, at which time we daven and Hashem redeems us. Almost sounds simple.

But actually, these are our four sons at work again. The chacham understands that he can be as self-sufficient and successful in galut as he is in geula - sometimes even more so. (After all, what's the difference between chametz and matzah? Only a few seconds? Why should that matter?) He therefore goes out to galut, as the first posuk of Maggid indicates and he becomes very successful. That's why we answer the chacham with the halachot of Pesach. He needs to know the laws of what to do to remain Jewish in galut and not become a rasha.

The rasha feels the brunt of the exile, and how the galut turns against the Jews, as told by the second posuk. His shortcoming is that he blames it on his Yiddishkeit and Hashem. (Why does Hashem make us eat these bitter vegetables, anyway? Until now we could eat any type of vegetable.) He will stay in this phase until he can reach the level of the tam. That's why we answer the rasha "if you had been there, you wouldn't have been redeemed."

The tam is the one that has the simple faith to look to Hashem and daven for help which begins the redemption process. This is why we answer the tam, "with a strong hand Hashem saved us from Egypt." It's just a matter of time, then, until the redemption. In truth, the last two questions of Ma Nishtanah focus on freedom (dipping) and redemption (reclining) while the first two focus on exile (matzah) and bitterness (marror).

Now we understand the last son. It isn't that he doesn't know how to ask a question. It's that he has no more questions to ask. His phase in the four verses is that of redemption. When you see Hashem split the sea in front of you, I imagine there is little room left for doubt. That is why the fourth son has no questions. That is also why his is to the question of reclining, which is an expression of redemption and freedom. The last son just sits back, reclines and sees the redemption from Hashem. Rav Nachman writes that the last son refers to Yishmael who did teshuva before he died. As Rav

Nachman explains, someone who does complete teshuva is as though he has no more questions to ask.

The four stages of galut and geula as outlined in the Maggid have with them the four languages of redemption. Each son, just like he has his own question, has his own method of redemption. The chacham, who is doing well in galut, needs "vehotzaiti" - "I will take you out." Just as a person has the ability to walk out of a room on his own, so too the chacham has the ability to walk out of galut if he so chooses. The next lashon, "vehitzalti" - "I will save you" belongs to the rasha, who is definitely in need of saving. Just as one who needs to be saved can't protect himself against his oppressors, so too the rasha who is feeling the brunt of the galut needs to be "saved" by Hashem. The tam, though, has merited being "redeemed" - "vegaalti." He cried out to Hashem and thereby deemed himself worthy of a redemption. Finally the last son, the last stage, who has lived to see the final redemption, watches as Hashem "takes" - "velakchiti" and makes us His nation once more.

But where do we stand? At what stage are we? Perhaps we need to ask ourselves this question before we recite the Ma Nishtanah. Which question is ours? Do we notice the difference between chametz and matzah - the difference between exile and redemption - even if the distinction now may seem slight? Maybe we can only see the bitter herbs that we're commanded to eat, and long for regular vegetables. Possibly though, we can see the green vegetable that is dipped into the salt water of our tears - and is then taken out and enjoyed. We can see how the bitter herbs of our suffering are dipped into the cooling charoset - maybe the mortar of our future bais hamikdash. Hopefully we will merit sitting back and witnessing the final redemption G-d willing, as we mimic on Pesach with our reclining. © 1998 by Rabbi Ari and Yitz Weiss. This dvar torah was developed during the course of several Pesach seders around the table of Rabbi Mordechai & D'vorah Weiss, now of Efrat.



חג שמח וכשר!

⁵ Devarim 26 (specifically verses 5-8)