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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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Covenant & Conversation

What has freedom to do with faith or religion or spirituality? Freedom, after all, is about politics and society, not about religion and the soul. Karl Marx used to argue that religion keeps us slaves by allowing us to live with our lack of freedom, seeing it as the will of G-d. He called it the opium of the people.

But that is not the religion of the Bible. The redemption brought about by Moses was not something that happened in the privacy of the soul. It was a political revolution, an event that changed the history of a people. They had been slaves in Egypt. Now they were free human beings, travelling through the desert on their way to their own land.

A free G-d wants the free worship of free human beings. That is the message the Bible sounds again and again through its verses. And because freedom is created or destroyed by the political system, G-d wants us to worship Him at least in part by die kind of society we build and the laws we enact. That is why the books of Moses are not just about miracles and revelation and faith. They contain laws, commandments and rules by which we build a just and free society.

G-d, as He speaks to us through the words of the Bible, asks us to take special care of the widow, the orphan and the stranger, those who are vulnerable and without power. He tells us to give part of what we produce to those in need and to cancel debts every seventh year so that no one becomes caught in the trap of poverty. These rules, first stated three thousand years ago, are still capable of moving us today even though we sometimes forget their origin in the story of the exodus.

Beyond them, there are laws whose simple purpose is to remind us of what it feels like to be free, none more so than the institution of the Sabbath. One day in every seven, no one was allowed to work or force anyone else to work. Everyone - servants, employees, even animals - was given a taste of absolute freedom. It is hard to overestimate what this did to keep the spirit of Jews alive.

My grandparents came to this country a century ago from Poland. They arrived in London's East End with nothing. They knew no English. They had no skills. They found themselves in the heart of London's poorest district, strangers in a strange land. I sometimes wonder how they and their many neighbours kept alive the burning hope that one day things would be different. But in my heart of hearts I know it was the Sabbath that was their inner strength.

However desperate things had been during the week, that day they would set the table with a shining white cloth and light the candles in their silver candlesticks and relax as if they were guests at G-d's own banquet. The Sabbath preserved their dignity and kept them from being crushed by the burdens life had loaded on their frail shoulders. The Sabbath - and Pesach itself with its declaration that 'This year we may be slaves, but next year we will he free'. You could taste the hope in those four glasses of wine, and from hope came energy and determination.

One of Judaism's most powerful messages is that redemption is of this world, and every time we help the poor to escape from poverty, or give the homeless a home or cause the unheeded to be heard we bring G-d's kingdom one step closer. The best way never to forget this message is every year to eat the bread of affliction and taste the bitter herbs so that we never forget what it is like to be unfree. 'Do not oppress the stranger', says the Bible, 'because you-know what it feels like to be a stranger. You were once strangers in the land of Egypt.'

Mah nishtanah halaylah hazeh mikol haleylot, 'Why is this night different from all other nights?' Those must have been the first words of Hebrew ever said. If I strain my memory I can still see my grandparents' dining table with all the uncles and aunts and cousins gathered round on those Passover nights in Seven Sisters Road in London many years ago. Pesach was the great family gathering and all very daunting to me, the youngest, three or four years old. But I quickly learned that it is in fact the youngest who has the best lines: the four questions with which the whole service begins. Why is this night different? Why the unleavened bread and bitter herbs? Why do we dip the vegetables and why lean when we drink the wine?

The answers came much later in the evening. But meanwhile there was much to keep a young child awake. My favourite part came when my grandfather broke the middle matzah in two and gave me one half to hide until the end of the meal. This kept me in a state of pleasant suspense for several hours because I knew that when the time came for us to eat the broken

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matzah, custom decreed that the adults would put on a show of searching for it, they would fail, and I would then be entitled to a present in return for disclosing its whereabouts. It was an elaborate charade, but it worked.

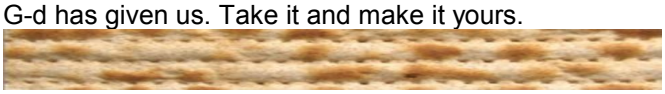
And then there were the rousing songs with which the evening ended, usually after midnight. The last one was my favourite, the one about the young goat that father bought, which got eaten by a cat, which was eaten by a dog, which got hit by a stick, which got burned by a fire, and so on in a manic crescendo until in the last verse G-d Himself came and defeated the angel of death. Mortality duly vanquished, we could go to bed.

Judaism has always had a genius for attracting the interest of a child, never more so than on Passover night. Nor is this accidental, because if you turn to the book of Exodus, you find that on the brink of Israel's liberation Moses repeatedly speaks to the people about children and how, in generations to come, they should be taught the significance of that event. Only slowly did I come to understand why. Freedom is not born overnight. it needs patience and training and carefully acquired skills It needs an education in freedom. Without it, a society can all too quickly lapse into chaos or conflict, rivalry and war.

The Israelites of Moses' day were unprepared for liberty, and the Bible faithfully records tier quarrels and disorders. It took a new generation to be ready to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. As the Rabbi of Kotzk put it: 'It took one day to get the Israelites out of Egypt. Rut it took forty years to get Egypt our of the Israelites.' That is why on Pesach we begin with the youngest child, as if to say to him or her: This is what affliction tastes like, and here, by contrast, is the wine of our hard-earned freedom. This is the heritage of our historical experience, and tonight we begin to hand it on to you.

No less importantly, the first lesson we teach our children is how to ask questions. Religious faith is not uncritical. It does not only ask us to take things on trust. It encourages us to look at the world, and ask, why are things as they are? Could they be otherwise? The great prophets took nothing for granted, least of all the injustices of the world. They asked questions of G-d, deep and searching questions. And G-d asks questions of us. Why do we allow evil to prosper? Why are we passive in the face of suffering? For G-d and mankind are partners in the work of redemption, and every step on the way begins with a willingness to question why we are as we are.

As I read the Bible I sense the link between Moses' two great passions, for justice and for teaching children. What we learn as children shapes the society we make when we become adults. And so on Pesach we turn to our children and say: Here is the freedom G-d has given us. Take it and make it yours.



Judaism tends to be a mystery to observers. It is a religion of the spirit, but it seems to be about very physical things. There is nothing abstract about Pesach. It is about the hard, dry unleavened bread, and the sharp horseradish of the bitter herbs, and about drinking wine and telling stories and singing songs. Nor is it about solitude, the lonely soul in communion with G-d. Go to a Pesach meal and the one thing you will not find solitude. You will find a table crammed with grandparents, parents and children, uncles, aunts and cousins. Even those who are lonely at other times are tonight here as guests, sharing in the crowded celebration.

The reason is simple. G-d created the world as a home for mankind and He wants us to create a world that will be a home for Him. There may be rare saints for whom suffering is spiritual, But for most of us, affliction turns us in upon ourselves. Slavery which begins by imprisoning the body can end by narrowing the soul, We need freedom, a sense of inner spaciousness, to be able to reach out beyond our own immediate needs and breathe the air of a larger reality. So, though it does nor end there, the religious journey starts in the here-and-now of daily life, the society we build and the relationships we make.

For many years I was puzzled by the first words we say on Pesach: 'This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in Egypt, Let all those who are hungry come and eat it with us. What kind of hospitality is it to offer the hungry the bread of affliction? Finally, though, I think understood. The unleavened bread represents two things. It was the food eaten by slaves. But it was also the food eaten by the Israelites as they left Egypt in too much of a hurry to let the dough rise. It is the bread of affliction, but it is also the bread of freedom.

When we eat it alone, we taste in it all the suffering of the human condition. But when we offer to share it, we can taste in it something else: the sense of a freer world that G-d has promised us we can create. One who fears tomorrow does not share his bread with others. But one who is willing to divide his food with a stranger is capable of fellowship and hope. Food shared is no longer the bread of affliction. Whenever we reach out and touch other people's lives, giving help to the needy, and hope to those in despair, we bring freedom into the world, and with freedom, G-d.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them travel" (Exodus 14:15) The climax of the Festival of Passover, the festival's seventh day which we will be celebrating this week, commemorates the splitting of the Re(e)d Sea, which teaches one of the most important messages of our Exodus from Egypt. The Hebrews have been traveling in the desert for three days, distancing themselves from the Egyptians. G-d then gives a strange commandment to Moses: "Speak to the Children of Israel and let them turn back; and camp before the entrance to the Temples of Horus between the Tower and the Sea in front of the Idol Master of the North, encamping near the sea." (Exodus 14: 2)

Apparently, G-d wanted Pharaoh to believe that the Hebrews were lost in the desert, thus tempting him to pursue them and bring them back to slavery in Egypt. This is precisely what happens.

The Hebrews hear the Egyptian hordes-replete with 600 chariots-approaching from behind them, in front of them lies the Re(e)d Sea. The Hebrews are in turmoil. They seem to be in an impossible situation, devoid of any meaningful exit plan. Ibn Ezra argues that they could have assembled an army of hundreds of thousands, but this possibility did not even occur to them. Twice within the first nine verses of this chapter, the Bible identifies the names of their encampment. They are positioned before "Pi Hahirot," which we previously identified with the Temple of Horus, but which could well be translated as "Freedom Way" or "Bay of Freedom" (the Hebrew word herut means freedom and is closely allied to hirot, which can also be connected to the Egyptian god Horus). They face the Idol Master of the North.

The Bible may well be telling us that these newly freed slaves are standing on the cusp of freedom, literally between Egyptian enslavement and Jewish liberation.

Idolatry as a political philosophy removes the possibility of meaningful action from the hands of human beings; all they can do is to attempt to propitiate the gods by bribing them with petty sacrifices into effectuating whatever they need. Judaism, on the other hand, sees human beings as G-d's chosen partners within the cosmic drama with a mission being to perfect the world in the Kingship of G-d.

The Israelites remain strongly influenced by Egyptian idolatry. The possibility of waging war against their Egyptian pursuers doesn't even enter their minds.

The only thing they can do is cry out to G-d in prayer, saying, "Are there not enough graves in Egypt that you had to take us into the desert to die?" (Exodus 14: 11) Moses also seems to be insufficiently imbued with the true message of freedom and the necessity of fighting for it even unto death. He admonishes the nation not to fear, to stand by and watch the salvation of the Lord: "G-d will do battle for you; you must merely be silent."

The second half of this chapter - which is divided into two equal halves - has G-d chide Moses for his passive advice: "Why are you crying out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them go forward." (Exodus 14: 15) Rashi quotes a midrash which puts the following words into G-d's mouth: "This is not the time for a lengthy prayer, Israel is in such terrible trouble; speak to the Children of Israel and let them move on".

What is G-d telling them to do? If they jump into the Re(e)d Sea, they will most likely drown. Our Sages tell us that we dare not rely on miracles; we must always act to the utmost of our ability.

Clearly, G-d was asking them to demonstrate by their actions that they understood the value of freedom, and that they were willing to choose death over enslavement. For to live the life of a slave without the freedom to direct one's own destiny was worse than death itself. G-d was telling them through Moses that they must jump into the Re(e)d Sea and thereby publicly declare, "Give me liberty or give me death."

Our Sages teach us that "One who comes to purify [himself or others], will be helped from on High." (Shabbat 104a) That is not necessarily guaranteed - we are not to rely on miracles - but it can happen. In this case, after the first Israelites jumped into the sea, G-d miraculously divided it, enabling the Israelites to cross safely but drowning the pursuing Egyptians.

The Jews were only helped, however, when they demonstrated that liberty was more important to them than life itself.

It is fascinating to note that the first proposed seal for the United States of America-which was suggested by Benjamin Franklin-was a pictorial representation of the splitting of the Re(e)d Sea, the triumphant Israelites, the drowning Egyptians, and Moses with his arms outstretched over the waters. The caption beneath reads "Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to G-d." This great and universal message is especially important as the world stands by-mostly indifferent-to the enslaved peoples in Syria as well as in Iran. The message of Passover must yet be learned.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Although the Torah calls it "Chag HaMatzos," highlighting the mitzvah to eat matzah (and nothing leavened) for the entire holiday (seven days; eight where historically it wasn't always known on which day it started), the holiday is more commonly referred to as "Pesach," or Passover. One of the sweet

ideas we are taught as young students in yeshiva is that G-d refers to it based on what we do for Him (as it were), fulfilling His commandment to eat matzah, while we refer to it based on what He did for us, "passing over" the Israelite houses, thereby sparing our firstborn when He smote the Egyptian firstborn.

One of the questions I have seen posed recently (e.g. http://tinyurl.com/aykm7sv) is why we focus on G-d "passing over" our houses rather on the main theme of the holiday, that G-d took us out of Egypt. Wouldn't it be better to refer to is as the holiday of the exodus, or the holiday of freedom, or something that refers to the result of G-d "passing over" our houses rather than to the "passing over" itself--especially since, as important as it was, the "passing over" was only one in a long series of things G-d did for us in order to free us from our slavery and take us out of Egypt? Interestingly, after I had decided to research what the word "pesach" (in this context) really means, a co-worker (who, although technically Jewish, does not identify with Judaism more than any other religion) mentioned to me that even though he respects religious holidays, he has a difficult time with Passover, since it refers to killing others in order to be saved. Putting aside that his perspective might be different if he understood the depth of the slavery the Israelites were forced into, or how harshly they were treated as slaves, or how primary the role of the firstborn was in creating and maintaining the culture of Israelite slavery, as well as that the Egyptians were specifically warned that if they didn't let G-d's nation, His "firstborn son," go, He would kill the firstborn of the Egyptian (Sh'mos 4:22-23, http://tinyurl.com/bc4qe6e), he has a valid point about the essence of the holiday. We aren't celebrating that our enemies were killed (even if that was made necessary by their refusal to let us go peacefully), but what was accomplished by G-d taking us out of our "House of Bondage" and starting the process of fulfilling His mission. Why do we refer to it as "Passover" if that isn't the main thrust of our celebration? (Yes, I know that we add "Z'man Cheirusainu" the time (of the year) we became free, in our prayers, after mentioning the Biblical name of "Chag HaMatzos," but that is not how it is commonly referred to.)

It could be suggested that the holiday is called "Pesach" because the offering brought for the holiday is called "Pesach," and until the Temple was destroyed the offering was a primary part of the holiday service. Nevertheless, if the "passing over" wasn't considered so primary, the offering wouldn't have been referred to by that name either. What was it about the "passing over" that it became literally synonymous with the holiday that celebrates our freedom?

The commentators discuss what the word "pesach" means (in its verb form), and how it describes what G-d did the night before we finally left Egypt. The most common definition (see M'chilta, [Machberes] Menachem, Unkoles, Rav Saadya Gaon, Ibn Ezra, Ibn J'nach and Rashi) is "to have mercy or pity;" G-d had mercy upon us even though we didn't deserve to be saved from the "destroyer," so our firstborn weren't smitten when every other firstborn in Egypt was. Although a name signifying that G-d has mercy upon us is more alluring than one that signifies "passing over" us while destroying others (even if the two are connected, as the mercy led to the passing over), if that was the reason for the name (of the offering and/or of the holiday), a more direct term for "having mercy" could have/should have been used.

Another common definition, and the one most commonly associated with the holiday, is "to skip or jump" (M'chilta, Radak, Rashi, Metzudos). As Rashi puts it, "G-d skipped the houses of the Israelites [who were] between the houses of the Egyptians and jumped from Egyptian to Egyptian [so that] the Israelite in the middle was spared" (Sh'mos 12:11). This definition is the basis for the common translation of "passing over," although rather than the focus being on the smiting of the Egyptian firstborn, it is on the purposeful sparing of the Israelites while G-d followed through on His previously issues threat to smite the Egyptians. It could be suggested that these two definitions work together, as G-d deliberately "passed over" the Israelites because he treated them with mercy. Nevertheless, we are still left with a name for the holiday based on one aspect of how G-d took us out of Egypt rather than the taking out of Egypt itself.

The verse whose context is most similar to those that discuss the 10th plague in Egypt is Y'shayahu 31:5, where G-d tells the prophet that He will protect Yerushalayim when He smites the Assyrians. Rabbi Yosef K'ra explains the word "paso'ach" as "skips and jumps to avoid smiting those who dwell in Yerushalayim, who are near the Assyrian camp;" without G-d's "skipping and jumping," those who lived in Yerushalayim might have suffered collateral damage. Rabbi K'ra continues; "this means to say He smites these and spares those. When a person hits one and has mercy on another who is nearby and purposely avoids hitting him, it is called 'pasuach." Rather than the "skipping" being incidental to the smiting and only a function of pinpoint accuracy, it is primary, done purposely because of a desire to help the ones being "passed over."

Rabbi Yosef Kaspi takes it a step further, lauding the accuracy of Biblical Hebrew and telling us that the word "pesach" does not mean either mercy or skipping/jumping, but refers to a specific action of "resting by refraining from movement." Since G-d was described as "passing through Egypt" (12:12), His purposely not affecting the Israelites, i.e. not "passing through" them but "over" them, is described as "posayach." In other words, rather than being an expression of refraining from doing something that is being done to others, it is a deliberate action being done for the sake of someone. It is true that the motivation for

doing so might be having "mercy" on the person or people this action is being done for, and the way it is accomplished is by "passing over" the party upon whom there is mercy for, but taken as a whole, this act is an expression of differentiating between parties by giving one special treatment.

On Pesach we read "Shir HaShirim," the "Song of Songs" written by King Solomon which describes the special and unique relationship between G-d and His chosen nation. We might celebrate and relive His taking us out of Egypt at the Seder, but the point of the exodus was to give us the opportunity to build this special relationship with Him. If getting the Torah was considered our "wedding ceremony" (see Rashi on Shir HaShirim 3:11), taking us out of Egypt was the "engagement." There are three Biblical holidays (besides Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur); the focus of Succos is how G-d protected us (and protects us) after He took us out of Egypt, and the focus of Shavuos is His giving us the Torah, which formalized our relationship. It therefore makes sense for the focus of Pesach to also be about how what happened during this time period reflects an aspect of our relationship with Him. The start of this relationship occurred during the plagues, when G-d treated us differently than everyone else in Egypt (see D'varim 4:34). Therefore, there is no better word to describe the special way He treats us, which is a reflection of this special relationship, then the word "Pesach."

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 G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d. The encounter, called Nirtzah, which means may G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d, 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, G-d 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 G-d 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.

RABBI YAKOV HABER

History and the Jewish People

The main part of the Haggadah begins with the paragraph Avadim hayinu. There it is stated that had Hashem not taken us out of Egypt, we and all of our descendants would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. The commentaries note the obvious question. The pattern of history is one of constant changes on the world scene. Who is to say some subsequent Pharaoh would not have freed the Jews? Furthermore, Pharaoh and the Egyptian kingdom are long gone. How can the Haggadah claim that we still would be enslaved to Pharaoh? Many answers have been presented over the centuries of studying the Haggadah, some giving conceptual explanations, some allegorical ones. The Netziv in his Haggadah commentary, Imrei Shefer, presents a far-reaching answer interpreting this statement of the Haggadah quite literally.

(Elsewhere (see Save Us for Your Sake <http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2011/moadim/rhab_pesach.html>), we explored a different answer from the one we present here.)

The Gemara (Yevamos 63a) records the statement of R. Elazar b. R. Avina: "ein pur'anus ba'a laolam ela bishvil Yisrael -- all punishments come to the world because of Israel." At first glance, this means that all tragedies such as wars or natural disasters are meant to awaken Klal Yisrael to return to their Father in Heaven. Indeed the Gemara quotes as a proof text: "I have cut off nations, their edifices have been laid waste; I said (hoped) that you would fear me, and take chastisement!" (Tz'fania 3:8). The Netziv interprets this passage in a more extensive manner. Ever since Klal Yisrael received the Torah at Har Sinai, Divine Providence managing not only Jewish history but World history would revolve around the Jewish people. The rise and fall of nations, persecutions, emancipations, scientific discoveries and all aspects of World history and its advances and setbacks would forever be bound to the preservation of the Jewish people and bringing them to their ultimate Destiny based in turn on their behavior. In turn, Am Yisrael serves as the kohanim of the world bringing all the nations to their perfection as well. I have read that Rav Kook (a student of Netziv) expressed a similar idea describing wars as Hashem's way of making massive changes on the world scene in a relatively short period of time in order to advance Jewish history.

(Specifically, I believe he noted that is was in the context of World War I that the Balfour Declaration, the first international breakthrough in the foundation of what was to become the State of Israel, was issued. The War also led to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain's seizing control of then Palestine. Ultimately, it was under the latter's rule that the Land was returned to the Jewish people. Others have added that it was in the aftermath of World War II and the awesome havoc it wreaked on the Jewish nation that the State of Israel was born serving as the framework for the massive rebuilding of the Land both physically and spiritually to the extent that currently almost six million Jews (kein yirbu!) have been enabled to return to their ancestral homeland and re-establish Torah observance including the mitzvos hat'luyos ba'aretz there.)

Had Hashem not redeemed the Jews from Egypt and brought them to receive the Torah at Har Sinai, this specialized Divine Providence guiding history would not operate. The world would stagnate and would not progress toward its ultimate Destiny for its main actors would be missing from its stage. The Egyptian empire would still exist, since the pattern of the rise and fall of nations would not be operative and the Jews quite literally would still be slaves there!

Mori v'Rabi Rav Hershel Schachter shlita presented a related idea. The first mishna in maseches Rosh HaShana relates that the reign of Jewish kings is reckoned from Rosh Chodesh Nissan. By contrast, the reign of non-Jewish kings is counted from Rosh Chodesh Tishrei, Rosh HaShana. Elaborating on the comments of Ran, Rav Schachter explained why this should be so. Nissan, the month of the Exodus, represents the miraculous, Providential intervention of HaKadosh Baruch Hu on the world scene. Tishrei, the month during which the world was created, represents the "natural order". The nations of the world follow the natural patterns of history. Jewish history follows a supernatural pattern. Consequently, the corresponding kingdoms count the years of their reign from the month that best represents the mode of their history. For the other nations of the word, this is Tishrei, the "natural month"; for the Jewish people, this is Nissan, the supernatural month. According to Netziv, although it

seems that the history of the umos ha'olam is following a natural pattern, the reality is that it is linked to the supernatural history of the Jews.

The Netziv's words demonstrate to us the intensity of the love Hashem has for his nation. He not only tends to them lovingly throughout history but machinates the entire world for its benefit and ultimate mission. His words should also awaken within us a sense of awesome responsibility indicating the enormous effects our actions have not only on our immediate selves and communities but, indeed, on the entire world. Perhaps, Pesach can be described then, as the holiday celebrating not only the birth of the Jewish nation but as the holiday commemorating the beginning of Jewish and World history!

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Hebrew Dictionary

The Hagada details the story of our exile in Egypt and our redemption. It bases a large portion of the narration on four verses in Deuteronomy 26:5-9 that summarize the entire episode. The first verse mentions that Lavan the Arami afflicted his son-in-law Yaakov, who eventually sojourned with few in number to the land of Egypt. The next verse begins in an unclear manner by stating that "the Egyptians made evil of us." The Hebrew conjugation that is used for the words "made evil of us" could mean a few different things. It may mean that the Egyptians acted cruelly towards us. It also can be interpreted that the Egyptians made us into bad people by creating a system where Jews became kapos and mistreated Jews. Yet, the Hagada seems to interpret the verse in a third and wholly different light.

The Hagada quotes the verse in Deuteronomy, "the Egyptians made evil of us," and elucidates it by adding, "as it is written: (Exodus 1:11) 'come let us devise a plans against them, lest they will increase, and if a war breaks out they will join our enemies and drive [us] from the land.'"

How is the verse in Exodus an explanation of the words, "the Egyptians made evil of us"? It seems the Egyptians were worried about the increasing Jewish population. But the verse does not mention that the Egyptians, at that point, actually inflicted any suffering upon the Jews. Nor does the verse prove that the Egyptians affected our own brotherhood and made us evil to each other. That also happened during the later stages of our exile. How, then, does the Hagada understand the words in Deuteronomy, "the Egyptians made evil of us?" And how is the fear of insurrection a proof of the Hagada's interpretation of the words, "the Egyptians made evil of us"?

About two years ago, Peter Kash, a young venture capitalist in the field of bio-technology, came across a very demeaning definition of the word Jew in a modern dictionary. "Jew:(joo) Slang (an offensive usage) 1. To persuade to take a lower price by haggling 2. To get the better of in a bargain."

In addition to the conventional definitions, the dictionary also mentioned that the use of the term Jew as a moneylender is obsolete.

Peter was shocked. He set out to change the dictionary. He was informed by a number of major Jewish organizations which half-heartedly sympathized with him, that his effort would be futile unless tens of thousands wrote letters.

He was not deterred. After arduous efforts, he finally got the opportunity to discuss the matter with the editorial director of the publishing firm responsible for Funk & Wagnall's and several Webster dictionaries.

His request fell on deaf ears until he said to the woman, "imagine, you have the opportunity to influence the course of civilization. You can influence beliefs about an entire race by either retaining or deleting the repulsive and asinine definition. Your decision will affect a generation of youngsters who read the dictionary and formulate indelible opinions. And those youngsters may shape the course of history.

She needed no further convincing. The abhorrent definition was removed and never appeared again.

The author of the Hagada knew that history has no new ideas. The tactics of the Der Sturmer or the Protocols of the Elders of Zion were not devised in this century. They began in Egypt. The Hagada interprets the verse, " the Egyptians made evil of us" to mean that they slandered us. They claimed we were not loyal citizens and would become a fifth column during a war. Oppression begins with character assassination. The rest is child's play. No matter who we are, we must remember that on every level—from individuals to entire nations—words destroy.

May Hashem let our light unto the nations shine clearly, as our actions represent all that is dear to the Torah.

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 may 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.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Since the second day of Pesach, we've been counting Sefira. But the days between then and Shavuot, which we're counting down towards, weren't always the happiest days in our history. As most of us know, Rebbi Akiva's 24,000 students died during this time, and a lot of commentaries say it was because they didn't treat each other with enough respect. But is it a coincidence that they died during these 7 weeks? Could it be that the countdown to us receiving the Torah had something to do with their untimely death? Even the possibility of that being true should scare us. If this is true, it means that not only do we anticipate getting the Torah by counting, but that we also have to change our actions, which is what the 24,000 students failed to do. They didn't suddenly become uncaring. Rather, they failed to grow to be MORE caring. Besides, the whole purpose of counting is to make us realize that once we pass a number, it's gone. But maybe we can all start by first realizing what we're counting down for. If we realized how special the Torah is, and how lucky we are to have it, then how can we not work on making ourselves more deserving of it? And we do that by learning from it, and adhering to it as best we can, but ALWAYS trying to do more!

חג שמח וכשר!