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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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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

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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?"

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 God "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 Gen37:3). 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.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

We usually think of Purim as being the Jewish holiday of the year that represents the opposites

of human existence. It is also thought of as being a time of wine and whatever else accompanies the consumption of that alcoholic beverage. But surprisingly enough Pesach also fits that template of opposites and wine consumption.

We are all familiar with the rabbinic law that ordains the consumption of four cups of wine (the more fainthearted amongst us use grape juice, if necessary) during the course of the Pesach seder. In that there is a striking example of the opposite attitudes that Judaism often introduces in contrast to general society. Most of the human race drinks wine in order to forget, to blot out troubles and cares and obliterate disturbing memories of the past.

Jews, however, drink four cups of wine on seder night in order to remember. The cups of wine are there to help us recall our centuries of bondage in Egyptian servitude and of the miraculous redemption that the Lord created for us. The Torah teaches us that Noach, after the tragedy of the flood, planted a vineyard and became drunk in response to the horrors that he witnessed as his entire generation was swept away by the punishing flood. So to speak, he attempted to drown his sorrows away in cups of wine.

His Jewish descendants would drink cups of wine in order to commemorate their slavery and tortures and mark their release from those evils. Pesach wine is remembrance while the wine of mankind generally represents the opposite – the desire to forget.

Another example of opposite values exhibited by the Pesach Hagadah is the fact that the name of Moshe, for all practical purposes, is missing from the entire Hagadah narrative. Imagine a description of the independence of the United States without the mention of George Washington or Thomas Jefferson! But the explanation for the absence of Moshe in the narrative of the Hagadah is firstly a confirmation of Moshe's outstanding attribute – extreme modesty. It can also be seen as a fulfillment of Moshe's statement to God to have his name erased from the book of the Torah and the narrative of Jewish history.

But I feel that perhaps the absence of Moshe in the Torah's story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt is to avoid the cult of the personality. The world usually ascribes great events solely to human behavior and actions. However, great events are part of the unseen hand of heaven guiding the fortunes of nations and individuals.

The absence of Moshe's name indicates that God took the Jewish people out of Egyptian bondage and not the greatness of any human being, even of the greatest of human beings, Moshe. Moshe is called "the servant of God" in the Torah. That is how Moshe always viewed himself. And that is how the Torah wishes us to also view him. When he was viewed as indispensable to Jewish existence, the trgagedy of the Golden Calf occurred.

A further example of the opposites that are part of the Pesach story and its commemoration is the constant reminder of the failures of the Jewish people that are intermixed in the Pesach holiday. Seder night is also the same night of the week as the ninth of Av, the day of the destruction of the Temples of Jerusalem.

Judaism commemorates its defeats and not only its victories and triumphs. In the general world, defeats are rarely remembered and certainly not commemorated ritually. But Judaism recognizes that failure is an integral part of human life and national existence.

The miraculous survival and resilience of the Jewish people is in no small way due to its ability to admit and commemorate its defeats and failures. It remains the key to the necessary self-analysis that is the precursor for correcting past faults and improving future behavior and actions. Someone who feels that he or she is never wrong, nothing is ever one's fault, is a sure recipe for further failures, disagreements and disappointments.

The Pesach opposite tempered the joy of deliverance and independence with the realities of life, which always includes the possibilities of failure and error. There is no escape from this fact of human existence. Pesach comes to remind us of this. It provides us with an opposite view that is so characteristic of Jewish values and the Jewish view of life and history generally.

My best wishes to all of you for a chag kasher v'sameach.

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. *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 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 at20 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 "Hakarot 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 Hakarot 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.

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!

JEWISH WORLD REVIEW

Wonder Bread

by Rabbi David Aaron

During the seven days of Passover we are required to eat only Matza- unleavened bread that looks somewhat like a cracker and is made of just water and flour. The Matza reminds us that we were slaves to the Egyptians who treated us as if we were subhuman and fed us brittle and tasteless unleavened bread. The Matza is therefore referred to as the "bread of affliction." However, Matza also reminds us of how we left Egypt in an astounding record time, faster than it takes dough to leaven into bread. How can Matza be both a sign of our painful affliction and our joyous freedom?

The Zohar, the Kabbalah classic, refers to

Matza as the "Bread of Faith." In other words, when we eat the Matza, we are internalizing the message of faith that it embodies. That message is - know that even if you hit rock bottom and feel far and alienated from G-d, G-d is right there to help you and free you from your enslavements, addictions and obsessions. Even when you feel that it's been years that you are trapped in your personal Egypt and it would seem that it will take years to get out - just know, as the Psalmist put it, "The salvation of G-d is within the blink of an eye."

Although Matza is the very bread of affliction and exile, at a blink of my eye, it can become the bread of freedom and redemption. Revolutionary transformation is available to us all, as long as you believe it can happen. The paradoxical symbolism of the Matza teaches us that G-d Himself, at any moment, can do a miracle for you. Even if you reach the bottom, never despair, never give up. Therefore, Matza, the "Bread of Faith," is an antidote to despair and nurtures within in us faith and hope.

The Exodus from Egypt assures us that if the Jewish people could get out of Egypt, then we could get out of any situation. Certainly G-d could have orchestrated the Jewish people's liberation through some kind of worthy deed that they would do to earn them their freedom. However, He precisely arranged it to be without merit so as to instill forever within us the confidence that His love is unconditional. Therefore, no matter how low the Jewish people or any of us may fall, we should never despair.

The paradoxical symbolism of the Matza also teaches us that in the very bitterness of affliction and exile, lays the sweetness of freedom and redemption. The great Hasidic Master, Rabbi Nachman of Breslav taught, "Being far from G-d itself is for the purpose of coming close...the downfall can be transformed into a great ascent."

It all depends on the way you look at it. The Matza itself is basically tasteless. If you want, you can taste the freedom and redemption that lies at the core of affliction and exile.

Perhaps this is the meaning of G-d's response to Abraham when he requested a sign that the land of Israel would be an eternal inheritance for him and his descendents. G-d showed him the future history of exile. Abraham experienced a great darkness and fear. But G-d comforted him saying, "Know that your offspring will be strangers in a strange land. There they will be enslaved and afflicted for four hundred years. Also the nation that will afflict them I will judge and your children will leave with great assets." In other words, although your offspring will endure much suffering, they will survive and even profit from it. So don't worry, don't lose faith. Even the darkest hours are the very seeds of growth, transformation, renewal and redemption.

Rav Nachman of Breslav also taught, "Sometimes when you want to come close to G-d, you encounter new and even greater obstacles than before. However, don't let that discourage you. G-d is only challenging you so you will try even harder and thereby come even closer. It's really all for the best."

The Gerrer Rebbe, another great Hasidic Master, taught that on Passover we can achieve a huge leap forward in our spiritual evolution. In other words, in general, great feats take much time. However, on Passover, we can accomplish great moves at a "beyond-time" pace.

The Hebrew word for Egypt is Mizraim, which also translates as "narrowness." Indeed, Egypt represented the deification of the narrow confines and limitations of nature, time and space. To leave Egypt also meant to leave this narrow and confining attitude. It meant leaving the world of nature, science, logic and reason and enter into a new worldview - the world of faith and unconditional love.

There are many people who own mansions and yet there is never enough space in their lives for others. And even when they are free of any obligations of time, they never have time for others. These people live only in the world of time and space. However, in the world of love, time and space are not obstacles.

Passover is the birthday of the Jewish people. It is a time to remember that we are children of G-d, born with an innate Godliness. Our relationship to G-d is similar to a parent and child relationship. From the child's perspective he and his parent are two separate beings. However, the parent sees herself and her child as one. Therefore, the parent loves the child with the same unconditional love that she has for herself. Sometimes parents give to their children not because their children deserve it but simply because they are their children - an extension of their own selves. However, with all the love a parent may shower on her child, it is up to the child to acknowledge and thereby enjoy the ecstasy of that connection.

The Torah refers to the Jewish people, so to speak, as the firstborn child of G-d. This is because the Jewish people are the first nation in history who believed that G-d is like a loving parent and they are His beloved children. And His love is unconditional and forever.

May everyone in the world realize that they too are beloved children of G-d.