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In loving memory of our dear wife and mother,
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ב”ר
Berl Bessin, Kobi and Shelby, Robert and Aliza

With gratitude to the Beit Midrash for all of the learning opportunities
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In memory of our dear uncle Bill Rubinstein z’l,
and in honour of our cousins Eli and Renee Rubinstein.
You are an inspiration to us all.
A heartfelt “yasher koach” to Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner.
May Hashem give you the strength to continue your tireless efforts for our community.
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in honour of the wedding anniversary of Choni and Aliza Fried
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and in memory of his beloved brother Jerry Kirsh z’l
בריאות מנו זהוד מסת מסקן י”ל

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Leith’s father, Leo Slomovits z’l
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in loving memory of Doris Rothman z’l, on her yahrzeit

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in memory of their parents
ｃנף קב ייב קיוי ורבע ל…” ורבע ל…”י קס מתייגין בן אבר الاخום צמח י”ל וה י把这个 מת בתחתובים במכו י”ל

Dedicated by Robbie and Brian Schwartz
in memory of their dear parents
Sara and Hy Hertz z’l
(Sara Baila bat Shalom Yitzchak haLaivi and Chaim Zalman ben Moshe)
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(Masha Leah bat Ze’ev and Ephraim ben Noah)

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and in recognition of the shiurim and classes given by the Beit Midrash

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In memory of our dear parents and grandparents,
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Ricky and Dianna Zauderer and Family
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Upon his Chag haSemichah

ON BEHALF OF THE ENTIRE MEMBERSHIP OF CLANTON PARK SYNAGOGUE

Congratulations to Rabbi Alex Hecht
on achieving this wonderful milestone

The Clanton Park community has already benefited
from Rabbi Hecht’s Rabbinic talents
through the many shiurim he has given,
particularly his regular post-Hashkama minyan shiur on Shabbos.
His presence has and continues to enhance our Shul greatly.

Our wish is that he should be able to go from strength to strength
as a Rabbi, role model and Marbitz Torah in the future.

§

To Rabbi Alex Hecht,

You have been a blessing to Shaarei Tefillah
and to all of Toronto.

May you spread your Torah and Middos
for all of klal Yisrael to benefit from.

MAZEL TOV
RABBI LIPNER AND THE SHAAREI TEFILLAH CONGREGATION

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Blessings:

Kadish: G-d’s Mission, or Ours?
Hillel Horovitz, hillel.michal@gmail.com
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Currently: Shaliach, Bnei Akiva Schools, Toronto, ON

The Nighttime Kiddush is the Main Kiddush

The Talmud asks: What is the rule regarding someone who did not recite Kiddush on Friday night? May one recite that Kiddush during the following day, or has the mitzvah of Kiddush been lost? (Pesachim 105a) The flow of the Talmud’s discussion indicates that one may indeed recite a make-up Kiddush during the day – but the right time was nighttime, and a mitzvah is beloved at its proper time.

Regarding the daytime Kiddush, the Talmud cites a baraita indicating that Shabbat day only requires a regular, borei pri hagafen blessing, and there is no mitzvah of reciting a full Kiddush. From the Talmud’s discussion, we learn that Kiddush during the day is rabbinic. According to the 12th century Rashbam and the 14th century Rabbeinu Nisim, the goal of this daytime Kiddush is to honour Shabbat, distinguishing it from weekdays; it is not a true Kiddush.

If the true Kiddush is at night, we must try to understand why this is so. Is it that Kiddush may take place throughout Shabbat but we prefer to do it as soon as possible, at the start of Shabbat? Or is it specifically at night, and the option of catching up with a make-up Kiddush during the day is just that - a make-up for a missed opportunity?

Kiddush: Descriptive or Creative?

Perhaps we could answer this question based on a fuller understanding of the essence and purpose of Kiddush:

- Does Kiddush describe the existing sanctity of Shabbat? Meaning, do we declare, “Today is the holy Shabbat,” so that we will recall that this day is already different?
- Or does Kiddush actively create the sanctity of Shabbat? Of course, Shabbat is holy regardless of our Kiddush; Shabbat receives its holiness from G-d on a fixed day every week, regardless of our calendar machinations. But perhaps our Kiddush adds to the sanctity of the day?

Examining the language of our Kiddush may provide a fascinating insight.

The first part of the nighttime Kiddush, before the blessing on wine, declares that Hashem created the world and halted on the seventh day. The Jewish nation is not mentioned. “And G-d completed, on the seventh day, the tasks He had performed. And He halted on the seventh day, from all of the tasks He had performed. And G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for on that day He halted His tasks, which G-d had created to perform.” Sanctity is created by G-d, and humanity has no role in that sanctification. Humans may benefit from it, but they have no portion in creating it.

On the other hand, the Jewish nation appears in the second half of Kiddush. “Who sanctified us with His commandments and desired us, and granted us His holy Shabbat in love and desire, a memorial for the deeds of Creation. For this day is the beginning of the holy convocations, a memorial for our exodus from Egypt. For You have chosen us, and You have sanctified us, from all of the nations. And Your holy Shabbat, with love and desire, You have given us.” Our exodus from Egypt is mentioned, and the role of the Jewish nation is also mentioned; we receive Shabbat as a portion, and we benefit from its sanctity. With the Exodus comes our role in the sanctity of the day.

Perhaps Shabbat holds dual sanctity – Divine sanctification since Creation, and sanctification tied to the Exodus. Therefore, Shabbat is mentioned with the Torah’s festivals, which we sanctify when we set the calendar. It is also called a “holy convocation”, because we play a role in this sanctification; it is the first of the holy convocations. And if this is so, then perhaps Kiddush is not only a description of the sanctity of the day, but also an action of adding sanctity to the day.

Kadesh!

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook stated what we have suggested here, that our exodus from Egypt elevated and empowered us, granting us the power to sanctify time. Based on this, we can understand why Kiddush should be at night, upon the entrance of Shabbat; the role of Kiddush is to activate sanctity. However, one who failed to recite Kiddush at the start may still recite Kiddush during Shabbat, for there remains time which we can sanctify.

We see the importance of Kiddush, and especially of the declaration of “Kadesh!” at the start of the Seder. On a regular Shabbat, the sanctity is established and fixed, and we only add sanctity, and yet it is important to start Shabbat with Kiddush and not to lose a moment of that extra sanctity. How much more so for Pesach, when we personally create that “memorial to the exodus from Egypt,” must we begin with an act of Kiddush! This Kiddush declares our capacity to sanctify time, to convert a mundane weekday into a day of holiness.

Let us absorb and implement the message of “Kadesh!” and sanctify the mundane, adding holiness to the holiness of Pesach and of every Yom Tov.

Did you know?
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Hillel Horovitz, hillel.michal@gmail.com
Avreich; Rabbinic Assistant, Bnai Torah; 5772-5773
Currently: Shaliach, Bnei Akiva Schools, Toronto, ON

Our Sages enacted that after Kiddush, before reciting Maggid, we eat something that requires a blessing of \textit{borei pri ha’adamah}, dipped in a liquid. The goal is to differentiate the Seder from normal meals; in normal meals, vegetables are dipped during the meal itself. This also leads to a second difference, as eating produce before the meal causes us to wash our hands twice at the Seder. (Rashi and Rashbam to Pesachim 114a; Tur Orach Chaim 473) It also lends the Seder an aura of importance, for important meals often begin with a course which is meant to stir the appetite, before we sit down to the meal. (Bach to Tur Orach Chaim 473)

So the children will ask?
We diverge from the normal order of meals in order to set up the children to ask questions about the Seder; this prepares them for the ensuing \textit{Maggid}. When children see that their questions are well-received and that the adults take them seriously and respond, and that the Haggadah itself continues with the questions of \textit{Mah Nishtanah}, then they feel that their own questions are valued. They then invest greater effort and energy into asking and trying to understand the flow of the Seder.

However, there is a danger hidden in this approach to Karpas as a trigger for questions. If the child asks why we do this, and we answer that the goal is so that the child will ask, then the child will feel frustrated! There is no good answer! Worse, he may feel that there is no purpose to asking questions, for the answer is, “We did this so that you would ask!” So let us consider the concepts behind Karpas, beyond triggering questions.

The Necessity of Unnecessary Eating
Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook contended that the sections of the Haggadah are not only technical components practiced on the night of the Seder. They represent \textit{stages} in our national and personal transition from slavery to freedom. (\textit{Olat Ra’ayah} on the Haggadah) Regarding Karpas, Rabbi Kook explained that the unique role of Karpas is to offer unnecessary consumption. Notwithstanding the comment of the Bach cited above, we don’t need Karpas to stir the appetite; a great deal of time passes between Karpas and when we actually eat. And Karpas does not satisfy the appetite, either; according to many halachic authorities, one must eat less than an olive-sized amount of food for Karpas. So where is the meaning in this “unnecessary eating”?

Proverbs 13:25 states, “A righteous person eats to satisfy his spirit.” Commentators explain that a righteous person eats in order to support her spirit and deeds; she does not seek to satisfy desires, or to create joy, but to receive the energy necessary for maintaining good deeds. [See Malbim to Proverbs.] This suggests that eating is meant to be a means, not an end.

Throughout life, we perform a range of actions as means to particular ends. Often, we drive in order to reach a destination, not to enjoy the ride. However, many activities could be either means or ends, depending on a person’s approach. For example: One might work in order to support one’s family, wishing to retire as soon as possible, but others enjoy their work. Some people exercise because they enjoy the activity, and for them the activity or sport is the goal; others suffer through every moment of exercise only so that they will be healthy.

What, then, is the goal of eating Karpas? Each Jew is instructed, on an annual basis, to eat this food \textbf{without any particular end in mind}. As we have observed, Karpas does not build an appetite for the meal, and does not silence our appetite either. It is eating for the sake of eating – and in this, it teaches us that even the act of \textbf{eating can be elevated, and can be an end in itself}.

As Rabbi Kook wrote, “In truth, being lowered [in Egyptian slavery] depressed the spirit to the point of the lowest immersion, to life’s nadir, at which one senses only the pleasure of the hungry stomach, ‘the fish, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the grass, the onions and the garlic. (\textit{Bamidbar} 11:5)’ But all of this was planned far in advance, to impress upon us the seal of the message that nothing in life is so low that it cannot be elevated, and that will not be pleasant in its elevation and its function in its place and in its time. That golden kiln removed the dross and established a great preparation, such that the refinement would be good enough to earn the land of desire, etc.”

Rabbi Kook said that slavery itself, the Karpas that represents the onions and garlic we ate in Egypt, is not only an intermediate step along the path to our exodus from Egypt, but an end in itself. Karpas represents the enslavement which taught the Jewish nation that everything can be elevated.

This is our response to the child who asks. Karpas teaches us that we can learn and grow even from eating a few leaves. Crushing work and suffering, too, can lead to growth. We learn not only from our successes and celebrations, but from our difficulties and our stumbles as well.
A mishnah teaches that the Mah Nishtanah is to be recited at the Seder. (Pesachim 10:4) Prior to introducing the text of the Mah Nishtanah, this mishnah states: “and here the son asks the father.” Though the mishnah does not identify what the child asks, it is reasonable to assume that the child asks the Mah Nishtanah, which comes next in the mishnah.

According to this logical reading of the mishnah, the Mah Nishtanah is a set of questions. This is, in fact, how many rishonim (early authorities) understand our mishnah - Mah Nishtanah is a set of questions, to be asked by a child. Using this understanding, Don Isaac Abarbanel (Haggadat Zevach Pesach) explains the main point of the Mah Nishtanah: on the night of the Seder, we do certain things to remind us of freedom, and we do certain things to remind us of slavery. We eat matzah, which is "bread of affliction," and we eat marror, acts which remind us of slavery. On the other hand, we "dip two times," and we recline, acts which remind us of freedom. Thus, explains Abarbanel, the main point of the Mah Nishtanah is for the child to ask about a fundamental contradiction - why do we remember slavery, while simultaneously remembering freedom? Is that not contradictory? Parenthetically, Abarbanel uses his understanding of the essence of Mah Nishtanah to explain why there is no question relating to the four cups of wine: "sometimes slaves also indulge in wine." Since the drinking of wine is not inherently related to either freedom or slavery, it is omitted from the Mah Nishtanah.

According to Abarbanel, the Mah Nishtanah question (i.e. why are elements of slavery and elements of freedom highlighted in the Seder?) is answered in the very next paragraph of the Haggadah: “We were slaves in Egypt, and G-d took us out from there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm.” Abarbanel explains: “we were slaves in Egypt,’ so therefore, we do things that relate to slavery, and ‘G-d took us out from there’… so we do things that relate to freedom.” Therefore, according to Abarbanel, and many rishonim, the Mah Nishtanah is a list of questions.

There is, however, another way to read our Mishnah. Rambam writes, “And pour the second cup, and here the son asks. The reader [of the Haggadah] states ‘Mah Nishtanah’…” (Hilchot Chametz uMatzah 8:2). It is clear from Rambam that the child does not say the Mah Nishtanah. Rambam evidently read our mishnah as stating two separate requirements: First, a child must ask questions (which are not identified in this mishnah, and are not identified here by Rambam). Second, an adult reads the Mah Nishtanah at the Seder.

This explanation of Rambam is advanced by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (Hararei Kedem II:86). According to Rabbi Soloveitchik’s understanding of Rambam, the first requirement is for the child to ask questions. Although Rambam does not identify these questions, he noted earlier in his work that certain innovations should be made on the night of the Seder: For example, the children should be given roasted nuts, the table should be removed, etc. (Hilchot Chametz uMatzah 7:3) Having witnessed these and other changes, children will naturally ask about them. These are the questions that our mishnah refers to, when it states, “and here the son asks the father.”

The second requirement is for an adult to say the Mah Nishtanah. Rabbi Soloveitchik highlights the language of Rambam: “the reader says ‘Mah Nishtanah,’” as opposed to “the reader asks ‘Mah Nishtanah.’” Accordingly, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that Mah Nishtanah is not a question.

At first glance, this is difficult, because the word “mah” usually introduces a question. Rabbi Soloveitchik responds that there are numerous instances in Tanach where the word “mah” can be translated as “how,” and can be used to introduce a statement of wondrous amazement. For example: “How great are Your works, G-d” (Tehillim 92:6); “How good are your tents, Jacob” (Bamidbar 24:5); “How abundant are Your works, G-d” (Tehillim 104:24). “How,” as applied in these verses, is used to make a statement, not to ask a question.

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that Mah Nishtanah is a response to the child’s questions. The child asked about the changes that occur on the night of the Seder. We answer the child with the Mah Nishtanah. We explain that there are other significant differences on the night of the Seder, including the four things noted in the Mah Nishtanah. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that the Mah Nishtanah, therefore, is “an introduction and opening to the answer and story of ‘We were slaves…”’

Thus, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik’s understanding of Rambam, Mah Nishtanah is the introduction to the answer, for the spontaneous questions that the child asks about the roasted nuts, the removal of the table, etc. (Hilchot Chametz uMatzah 7:3).

In contrast to Rabbi Soloveitchik, who understands the Mah Nishtanah as an introduction to the answer that we give to the children, it is possible to understand Mah Nishtanah as an answer itself. The Lubavitcher Rebbe (Otsarot HaHaggadah pg. 39), in a different context, explains the Mah Nishtanah: matzah is a Torah obligation, marror is a rabbinic obligation (nowadays, see Hilchot Chametz uMatzah 7:12), reclining demonstrates our freedom from slavery, and dipping is a minhag (custom).

Based on the comments of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Mah Nishtanah basically encapsulates Judaism: Torah commandments, rabbinic decrees, and custom. The child, perceiving that there is something special about the night of Pesach, begins to ask about the Seder. We answer the child by saying Mah Nishtanah. To answer the child, we explain Judaism. We explain how G-d took us out of Egypt (reclining); we explain our obligation to follow the Torah’s commandments (matzah), the rabbinic edicts (marror), and our family/community customs (dipping).

Mah Nishtanah, then, can be understood as the ultimate answer. The child’s questions begin at the Seder, and the answer continues for life: Torah commandments, rabbinic decrees, and custom.
Every year we begin telling the story of the Haggadah with the words of “we were slaves” [avadim hayinu]. This following line in the Haggadah [vayotzi’enu] is a paraphrase of Devarim 28:6:

8 And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders. (JPS translation)

While this line makes it sound like the Exodus occurred in an immediate and quick fashion, the Bible portrays things somewhat differently. In Shemot 6:6-8, the Torah makes it clear that the Exodus did not occur in one step but rather through a number of stages and events which highlighted the reduced servitude and slavery of the Israelites, and a concurrent increasing of our self-identity as the people of Hashem:

6 Wherefore say unto the children of Israel: I am the Lord, and I will bring you out [vehotzetai] from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you [vehitzalt] from their bondage, and I will redeem you [vega’alt] with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments; 7 and I will take you [velakachti] to Me for a people, and I will be to you a G-d; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. 8 And I will bring you in unto the land [vehevetzi], concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for a heritage: I am the Lord. (JPS translation)

Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (Or HaChaim) to Shemot 6:6 notes that the four terms of redemption clarify and detail the kindnesses done by Hashem to the Jewish people. The first term, “and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians”, indicates the cessation of the yoke of burden, just as Hashem vowed to Moshe that the main servitude of the Egyptian slavery will end. This happened with the first plague of Blood at the Nile. The second term, “and I will deliver you from their bondage”, meant to promise that any work efforts by the Israelites would completely cease, even as many Israelites did continue doing light work for the Egyptians until that point. “I will redeem you” meant to assure that the Israelites would be physically released and freed from Egypt, which included all parts of the actual Exodus on Pesach and also the splitting and crossing of the Yam Suf. The fourth promise, “and I will take you”, was to occur at Mount Sinai, seven weeks after the Exodus, when we were to receive and accept Hashem’s Torah and mitzvot. It appears that Hashem divided the Exodus into different sequenced components to gradually allow the Israelites the ability to adjust to changed circumstances, in order to best be prepared for success.

However, Or HaChaim notes that there is a fifth term, “I will bring you in unto the land”, which was not only to be separated from the first four by 40 years in the Desert, but in fact was not delivered by Hashem as stated here! The Israelites released from Egypt, to whom this promise was made, were not the ones who actually entered the Land of Israel (after the Sin of the Spies)! This explains the discussion between the Rabbis as to whether we are to drink four or five cups of wine at the Seder (which are based on the terms of redemption), since it is unclear if this term is considered equal to the others. Or HaChaim then asks: How was it that Hashem assured the Israelites in Egypt that they would be brought to the land of Israel, when in fact they were not?

To answer this, he points out that the last promise was different from the previous four. While the first four terms were promised unconditionally, the fifth was subject to an important additional condition. Written after the fourth term, but before the fifth, Hashem inserted a telling phrase – “ye shall know that I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians”. We will merit the fifth promise, to inherit the land of Israel, only if we remember that it represents a gift from Hashem, that we remember He is our G-d who took us out of Egypt and that we must commit to follow His words, the laws of the Torah.

However, once in the desert, the Israelites began complaining and rebelling against Hashem. This continued even before the events of the story of the spies, which sealed Hashem’s decision that the fifth promise was not applicable, because the conditions set out were not fully met by the Israelites. Compare these representative lines from Tehillim 106 detailing the Israelite behavior in the wilderness:

Our fathers in Egypt gave no heed unto Thy wonders; they remembered not the multitude of Thy mercies; but were rebellious at the sea, even at the Red Sea... They soon forgot His works; they waited not for His counsel... Thus they exchanged their glory for the likeness of an ox that eateth grass. They forgot G-d their savior... (JPS translation)

Hashem indeed carried out his unconditional promises to the Israelites in Egypt, but was not able to carry out promise number five. Later in Jewish history, when our people turned away from Hashem to worship false gods, we were exiled from the land of Israel because we were not keeping our condition; yet Hashem never abandoned his promise to us as His people, which was given unconditionally.

The land of Israel is a gift, a promise from Hashem that requires our commitment to his Torah. Pesach is about remembering Hashem’s eternal promise to the Jewish people for the Exodus, but also serves to remind us that Torah is a necessary requirement for the sustainability of the land of Israel.
The Sages’ Seder: The Importance of Optimism

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Avreich, 5780

It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarphon were reclining [at a Seder] in Bnei Brak. They were discussing the exodus from Egypt all that night, until their students came and told them: "Our Masters! The time has come for reciting the morning Shema!" (Chabad tr.)

At first glance, this section of Maggid seems to contain an irrelevant detail – Bnei Brak. Who cares where this Seder was taking place? What is the significance of Bnei Brak in this story?

The Talmud, in several places, tells us the various hometowns of the Rabbis who attended this Seder. Rabbi Tarphon was likely from Lod (Kiddushin 40b). Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah was the Nasi (Prince) at the time, so he probably lived in Yavneh, the center of Torah at the time (Berachot 27b). Rabbi Eliezer dwelled in Lod, Rabbi Yehoshua hailed from Peki’in, and Rabbi Akiva resided in Bnei Brak (Sanhedrin 32a).

So why did all the Rabbis travel to Bnei Brak, hometown of Rabbi Akiva? This question is strengthened due to the fact that Rabbi Akiva was Rabbi Eliezer’s student, and Rabbi Akiva would also refer to Rabbi Tarphon as his Rabbi (Rambam, Introduction to the Mishnah). One would expect that a student would travel to their teacher for the holidays, so why did all the great Rabbis of that generation convene in Bnei Brak, at the home of Rabbi Akiva, who was not the greatest amongst them?

In order to answer that question, we need to evaluate and examine who Rabbi Akiva was. One story that can shed some light on his character takes place at the Temple Mount. The Talmud (Makkot 24a-b) recounts an incident involving Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva. They were walking by the Temple Mount, and saw a fox come out of the Holy of Holies. The Rabbis began to cry while Rabbi Akiva started laughing. Rabbi Akiva turned to his companions, inquiring why they were crying. They responded that it was due to the current state of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash. They then asked him: how could he laugh at such a time? Rabbi Akiva answered that he was laughing because of two prophecies he was familiar with. The first one referred to the destruction of the Temple: “Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the Temple Mount like the high places of a forest.” (Michah 3:12, Chabad tr.) The second one he recalled spoke about the rebuilding of Jerusalem: “So said the Lord of Hosts: Old men and women shall yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each man with his staff in his hand because of old age.” (Zechariah 8:4, Chabad tr.) Rabbi Akiva explained that he was worried about the fulfillment of these prophecies, but after witnessing the fulfillment of the first one, he was sure that the second one would come true as well – Jerusalem would be rebuilt, and men and women would grow old in it. The other Rabbis responded “Akiva you have consoled us, Akiva you have consoled us”.

Rabbi Akiva had the power of optimism. He viewed reality in a different way than those around him did. It wasn’t the natural way of seeing the situation. He saw the ruins of the Beit HaMikdash and knew that even that was a step towards its rebuilding. At a time of complicated, confusing and difficult situations, Rabbi Akiva was able to uplift himself and those around him by interpreting those apparently negative occurrences as positive ones, instead of sinking into the seemingly impossible reality. He had his mind set to a better future, optimistically and wholeheartedly, so that when everyone cried, he laughed and cheered them up.

Another remarkable event took place shortly after the Seder in Bnei Brak. The Romans captured Rabbi Akiva for teaching Torah in public. (Berachot 61b) He was taken out to be executed, and it was the time for recitation of the Shema! While the Romans raked his flesh with metal combs, he began to recite Shema. His students asked him, “even now, at this time of great suffering [you are reciting the Shema]?! Rabbi Akiva answered, “my whole life I was sad I could not fulfill the verse in Shema ‘with your entire soul’ [bechol nafshecha, which is interpreted as] even if G-d takes your soul. Now that I can fulfill it, you expect me not to?” With that, he concluded his recitation of Shema and his soul left his body at the word “Echad”. This story as well captures who Rabbi Akiva was. He wasn’t bothered by the difficulties and challenges surrounding him. He was able to see everything as part of a larger plan. He took advantage of every possibility to follow Hashem and the words of the Torah.

At a time of Roman rule and persecution, learning and teaching Torah was punishable by death, reality was intolerable, and the future of the Jews seemed bleak. On Leil HaSeder, during the national holiday of redemption, the leading Rabbis of the generation wanted to gather at the home of the uplifting and reassuring force, who could see the beginning of the salvation even amidst all of the incredible difficulties. Not at the house of the greatest, but at the house of the most optimistic – Rabbi Akiva, whom they could lean on for inspiration at such a dark time, and who they knew could make the best of the situation. This is the essence of Pesach, the holiday of redemption. By looking at the big picture, and understanding that there’s a larger plan in play, we can fully appreciate the redemption of the Jewish nation even during seemingly darker times.

Did you know?
We offer daily chaburot and special classes for students at Bnei Akiva Schools.
The paragraph of Baruch HaMakom Baruch Hu serves as a transition between the introductory portion of Maggid, and the main part of Maggid. After beginning Maggid with rabbinic statements that emphasize the importance of the exodus story, this paragraph introduces the questions of the Four Children. Each “Child” references a verse in the Torah which describes how Jewish children ask (or don’t ask) their parents about the Jewish religion, and they respond by informing their children that Hashem took the Jewish nation out of Egypt.

However, although the author of the Haggadah’s intention to insert a transition seems clear, his implementation is difficult to understand. First, the beginning of the paragraph, a statement praising Hashem for giving us the Torah, seems out of place. To initiate the Seder’s main discussion, the Haggadah’s author should have started the paragraph with a reference to the Four Children. Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran, in his commentary on the Haggadah, suggests that since at this point in the Seder we begin expounding verses from the Torah, we recite Baruch HaMakom as a blessing on the mitzvah of learning Torah. This explanation isn’t completely satisfying. We have already quoted verses and engaged in Torah study earlier in the Seder. Why do we bless Hashem for giving us the Torah only now?

Second, why does the author use the word “HaMakom”, meaning “the Place”, to refer to Hashem, instead of the normal Tetragrammaton used in the text of most blessings? Finally, even when the paragraph does shift to a discussion with the Four Children, the transition seems to be a non-sequitur. The Haggadah states “k’neged arba’ah banim”, corresponding to the Four Children, but what, specifically, corresponds to them?

Rabbi Yehudah Loew (“Maharal”, Gevurot Hashem, Chapter 53) suggests an insight which I believe provides the key to understanding this cryptic paragraph. Based on the comment of a midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 68), the Maharal suggests that the title “HaMakom” refers to the idea that Hashem encompasses and transcends all of existence. Therefore, it is fitting that Hashem endowed the nation of Israel with the Torah, which includes every facet of wisdom within it. The Maharal explains that since at this point in the Haggadah we emphasize that the Torah has the versatility to address all Four Children, it is appropriate to praise and acknowledge the transcendence of both the Torah and its Giver.

Transcendence epitomizes the Seder experience. The notion of retelling the story of the Exodus indicates that the miraculous events that our nation witnessed thousands of years ago in Egypt transcend both time and place. As the author of the Haggadah poignantly relates later in the Seder, the story of yetziat mitzrayim is every Jew’s story, because every generation presents another oppressor, yet Hashem always saves us. The undercurrent of the Seder is that we continue to adhere to our tradition because that tradition has eternal relevance.

Our belief in G-d’s transcendence not only inspires us to cling to our tradition, it also obligates us to engage the aspects of our lives which we view negatively, and acknowledge that they are a part of the world Hashem granted to us. Since “G-d” is “HaMakom”, an all-inclusive cause of all existence, He is also the source of the challenges we struggle with. In light of this perspective, we can explain how “Baruch HaMakom” corresponds to each of the Four Children, and specifically the wicked child. Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin (Pri Tzaddik on Pesach, Chapter 8) suggests that we recite the word “Baruch” four times to attribute a blessing to each of the Four Children. “Baruch HaMakom” corresponds to the wise child who has the requisite intellectual capabilities and religious commitment to forge a vibrant connection with “HaMakom”, the source of all life. The second “Baruch” corresponds to the wicked child. Although the wicked child rejects his tradition and tries to separate himself from the nation of Israel, he retains the sanctity inherent to a Jewish soul. We praise Hashem for this phenomenon which escapes our understanding by simply saying “Blessed is He.” The third “Baruch” corresponds to the simple child. Although his intellectual capacity is limited, he can form a basic relationship with Hashem by learning Torah from his parents and teachers. Therefore, we praise Hashem “who gave the Torah to his nation Israel”. Last, the fourth “Baruch” corresponds to the child who lacks the intellectual capabilities to ask questions. Despite his inability to grasp any real ideas about G-d or Torah, we know that this child, too, has a holy Jewish soul. Therefore, once again we praise Hashem by saying “Blessed is He”, acknowledging that although our understanding of Hashem’s ways is limited, His kindness is truly limitless.

Finally, the idea of “HaMakom” provides an important answer to a difficult quandary we face on Seder Night. Since we are currently in exile, and the freedom gained after leaving Egypt is now compromised, what are we celebrating? The Aleksander Rebbe, Rabbi YerachmIEL Yisrael Danziger explains: “The Haggadah refers to G-d as HaMakom, “the Place”, to comfort and strengthen the Jewish people during their exile. Even though we have no place of our own during this time of exile, we are in “the place” of G-d, and there is no place from which G-d is absent. Also, in every Jewish soul there is a spark of G-d, so that G-d is present in each of our places.” (Yismach Yisrael Haggadah translation by Rabbi Mark Greenspan). On Seder Night, we celebrate our unique transcendent relationship with G-d which endures through both exile and redemption. As we retell the story of yetziat mitzrayim, may we appreciate its eternal relevance, and internalize the profound value of our relationship with Hashem and His Torah.
If you take turns reading the Haggadah around your table, like we do in my family, you may find yourself jockeying for position at some point, to ensure you have the chance to read the passage of the Wise Child, rather than getting stuck with a less noble role. The imagery of the four children in Maggid is one of the Seder’s most powerful passages, as it challenges us to think about family, education and inclusivity in a remarkably timeless way. Where did Chazal find the inspiration for this presentation? While it is certainly true that all four conversations have a biblical source, why did Chazal envision four people at the same table, at the same moment in history, looking at the Seder so differently? In fact, many artistic Haggadot throughout history have portrayed the four children as adults in different stages of life, perhaps not even related to one another, yet the dynamic of these children coming together on the same night seems like a plausible and powerful reading that the Haggadah wants us to explore. What is the origin of this image?

A comprehensive study of Sefer Shemot reveals that tefillah (prayer) is a major theme in the story of the Exodus. It is in Sefer Shemot that we build a mishkan (a house of prayer), Moshe is taught the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (the language of prayer), and the Jewish nation celebrates with the Song of the Sea (prayers of thanksgiving). It is no surprise then that Shemot opens with a most primal form of prayer, a nation of slaves engaged in prayer for salvation:

During those many days, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out [vayiz’aku]; and their outcry for help from the bondage rose up to Hashem. Hashem heard their moaning [na’akatam], and Hashem remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. (Shemot 2:23-24)

If the above text is meant to convey any emotion in particular, it is a feeling of chaos. Exhausted, abused and desperate, Israelites, who might have had no understanding of their Creator or his ability to listen, cried out in despair. It just so happens that Hashem was listening and these prayers jumpstarted the redemption process.

Rabbi Ovadia Seforno focuses on the different forms of tefillah used in these verses and suggests that they highlight the diversity of religious personalities among the slaves. For those who did not know Hashem or were not inspired to repent, their prayers were rudimentary in nature (vayiz’aku), while the righteous who elevated themselves through the repentant process of prayer sought a meritorious response from Hashem himself (na’akatam). The Torah wants us to understand that while each of these prayers was different, each of them was heard. When a parent hears the cries of a child, he or she does more than listen to their words – they seek to understand the source of pain and find a way to alleviate that suffering. For our ancestors in Egypt, Hashem played that role; listening indiscriminately to the cries of a despondent people and offering complete salvation to a nation in need of a better life.

In our homes each year, the author of the Haggadah wants us to see how the tables are turned. As we look at the cries of those around us, we could discriminate between strong arguments and weak ones, between deserving children and undeserving, between righteous and wicked. Such would undermine the very origins of our story. The questions of the Four Children being placed together are the creation of a familiar symphony, one that mimics the original prayers of our ancestors. Some ask about statutes and laws, others argue from a place of pain. Some children will ask “mah zot – what is this” and others will ask nothing at all. Our job is not necessarily to answer or to distinguish, but to listen, as Hashem did, to all of them.

Perhaps then, the story of these four children is not just a story about family or education, but a meditation on prayer and cries for help. Hopefully, while reflecting on the voices around us we will do a better job of articulating our own prayers this year, and in the process, we may just get a little better at listening to the voices of those who desperately need to be heard. When it comes our turn to read at this year’s Seder, let us worry less about who is going to do the talking and think a little bit more about who will be there to listen.

Did you know?
We engage in internal learning until 12:30 PM daily; this year, we are studying Bava Metzia.
We read the same text every year on Seder Night. Therefore, it is very easy to go through Maggid on auto-pilot and assume that every paragraph belongs because it has always been there. However, this is not always the case. One section that requires further investigation is "Vhe She'amdah." In this paragraph, the author of the Haggadah describes how "this" has stood for us as our oppressors attempt to annihilate us in every generation. What has stood for us?

One popular idea is that each letter of the word "Vhe" [vav-hei-yud-aleph] has a special gematria, or numerical value. Therefore, "this" refers to the 6 books of Mishnah, 5 books of Torah, 10 commandments, and 1 G-d. While this suggestion does teach us that Torah, mitzvot, and belief in Hashem have kept us going, it is not a particularly compelling explanation of the true intention of the paragraph.

Another approach, found in the Kol Bo, is that the word "Vhe" links the paragraph to what came before it. In the preceding paragraph of "Baruch Shomer havtachato", the author of the Haggadah describes the brit bein habetarim, G-d’s promise to Avraham that He would do justice to the nation that oppresses Avraham’s descendants. While the brit bein habetarim did not specify that the exile and redemption would be in Egypt, this became clear three generations later. Throughout their time in Egypt, the Jews were able to hold on to G-d’s promise. This promise to Avraham has not just sustained our forefathers – it is "lanu", for us, as well. When we suffer through difficult times in our lives, the knowledge that Hashem has promised to save us gives us hope that He will save us again.

However, is that necessarily the case? Did G-d promise to save us from every enemy that would ever rise against us? On a simple level, the promise seems to refer specifically to our servitude on Egypt! However, we may suggest that even if the brit bein habetarim had a limited scope, we can nevertheless have confidence that it will stand for us as well. Pesach is a time for working on our emunah, faith in Hashem, so we should feel that we can rely on Hashem. Part of our faith in G-d is based on the promise He made to us. However, we also trust in Hashem because we have experienced persecution in our generation, and we continue to survive and persevere. By connecting our lived experiences to Hashem’s original promise, we reinforce our continued emunah from generation to generation.

Rabbi Aharon Perlow of Karlin offers a different approach. He suggests that it is not only the salvation from Egypt, but the suffering itself that has helped us continue. The purpose of galut (exile) is to purify us. Each exile presents a unique spiritual challenge we need to overcome, and a character trait we need to perfect. Therefore, the hardship of exile serves as an "iron-smelting furnace", ridding our souls of impurities. When we emerge from that struggle and Hashem eventually saves us, we continue forward as a more complete, upstanding nation.

A mishnah (Pesachim 10:4) writes that it is appropriate to conduct Maggid as “mat’chil b’gnut u’mesayeim b’shevach”, beginning with the shameful, lowly portion and concluding with praise. There are two ways of understanding this, as explained in the Talmud. (Pesachim 116a) Rav says that this refers to the fact that that originally our forefathers were idol worshippers, and that they then became a free Jewish nation. Shemuel argues that this means we are supposed to start off with “awadim hayinu”, a discussion of our slavery, and then proceed to discuss our freedom. We fulfill both opinions in the Pesach Seder.

This disagreement parallels the two approaches we presented to “Vhe she’amduh”. Rabbi Aharon of Karlin’s approach emphasizes the spiritual process of the redemption. His approach fits well with the opinion of Rav who argues that we begin by mentioning the lowly spiritual state of our idolatrous ancestors. On the other hand, the Kol Bo’s view that we are sustained by G-d’s promise emphasizes G-d’s role in saving us from physical persecution. Therefore, it is natural to recall our suffering as slaves in Egypt in accordance with the view of Shemuel and ultimately progress to an expression of gratitude for our freedom.

Why do we raise the glass of wine? Divrei Negidim, a commentary attributed to the Maharal of Prague, says that we are specifically lifting the second cup in order to link the promise “V’hitzalti etchem”, “and I will save you” (Shemot 6:6), to our continued troubles in every generation. We lift the cup in a similar vein to “Kos yeshuot esa uw’sheim Hashem ekra”, “I will lift a cup of salvation and call out to Hashem” (Tehillim 116:13). We seem to have a dual motivation at the Seder for raising our glasses. We are both praising Hashem and praying for His continued salvation in every generation. May we continue to see the Divine Providence guiding us in our struggles in life and be able to properly thank G-d for our eventual successes.
The centerpiece of the Haggadah is not, as we might have thought, the Exodus story from Shemot. Rather, it is Arami oveid avi, the brief re-telling of Jewish history recited by a farmer offering his first fruits, bikkurim, in the Beit HaMikdash. Unlike most sacrifices which are accompanied by either confession or generic praise, the offering of the first fruits was complemented by a highly ritualized declaration by the farmer, that provided the background for his current standing in the Temple. Many suggestions have been offered as to why this declaration was chosen as the text of Seder Night, including:

**Summary:** Malbim argued that the primary reason was length. This passage summarizes the story in a few verses, and thus is more manageable than the hundreds devoted in Shemot. (Remember that the Shemot story takes us over a month’s worth of parshiyot to read in synagogue!)

**Familiarity:** Daniel Goldschmidt argued that the Arami oveid avi passage was more familiar, although many have criticized this position, both because the Haggadah was compiled after the destruction of the Temple, when the bikkurim were no longer brought, and at any rate, it is unlikely that most people would have been familiar with all of the exegesis associated with the verses.

**Structure:** This unit includes several elements that make it particularly fitting. Abarbanel notes that it succinctly captures the requirement to begin with our national denigration and end with praise. Alhatorah.org notes that this text is responsive, as it was recited by the farmer in the Beit HaMikdash as part of a dialogue with the Cohen. This question-answer format is central to the Seder. The unit also ends with a celebration of reaching Israel, which according to some was part of the text until the destruction of the Temple (Shut Melamed LeHoi 3:65) or until Jews were centered outside of Israel.

**Point of view:** Rabbi Soloveitchik focused on the personal element of this speech. While the story in Shemot is told by an objective narrator, the declaration of the farmer is personal. This contributes to the experience of each person seeing himself or herself as having left Egypt. Rabbi David Silber adds that at both the Seder and the bikkurim offering, the personal element is heightened by combining recitation of texts with eating and other physical mitzvot, immersing the person in the experience. (For a summary of these views and original sources, see AlHaTorah.org.)

**Voice:** Another feature of this passage is that it seamlessly shifts from the personal to the national. The farmer says, “My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the Lord, the G-d of our fathers, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression.” (Devarim 26:5-7, JPS translation) While the farmer begins by referring to his father in the singular (my father), he transitions to saying that “the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us…” The duality of recognizing both the national story, as well as one’s personal significance in that story, frames the complex ways in which we are supposed to relate to history. The Avot are both our (personal) parents and national patriarchs. We were slaves in Egypt and our nation was oppressed.

However, to fully understand the relevance of this passage, we need to ask the opposite question. Instead of asking about the Seder, ask this: why does the farmer indeed need to tell this truncated story of Jewish history when bringing the bikkurim? Indeed, according to a small minority of positions (Raavyah 2:424 citing Rabbi Yehuda HeChasid, and Hagahot Maimoniyot, comments to Haggadah 2), the farmer did not only recite these verses, but he expounded on each verse in the exact way we do in the Haggadah!

First, it seems that in general, our experience as Jews is informed by our personal and national stories. Thus, after experiencing a successful agricultural year, the farmer must frame that success in its full context. Second, the place of G-d in the biblical miracles, the earthshattering moments, must point to His presence in the day-to-day wonders, such as putting fresh food on our plates. Third, it is critical for every person at the pinnacle of success to remember that there were many ups and downs along the way.

In short, many of the rationales that make this text perfect for Seder Night, equally explain why the entirety of this story was included in the declaration of the celebratory farmer in the Beit HaMikdash. By invoking this text on Seder Night, we remind ourselves that the lessons of the Seder can and must be carried beyond. The farmer teaches us how to experience the miracles on the one night when we turn back time, but he also teaches us that the power of the Seder is that it does not remain an isolated evening. Our immersion in the lessons of the Exodus must be constantly pondered, the inspiration consistently drawn upon, to shape the way we go through our daily lives.

May we learn the lessons of the Seder and transform not just our holiday, but the year that follows.
The Psychological Warfare of Arov

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The Mixture is Coming! The Mixture is Coming!

Starting a list of punishments with the word Blood is properly intimidating. Following up with Frogs and Lice may not seem as bold, but these words describe their threat clearly. Pestilence, Boils, et cetera all express explicitly what is about to befall Egypt. But the fourth plague is idiosyncratically named: Arov means “Mixture”. Mixture of what?? Indeed, Rashbam and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch looked for alternatives to the “Mixture” translation, perhaps because they could not understand how a plague could carry such a nondescript label. Warn people, “Locusts are coming,” and you would expect a strong reaction; warn them, “A mixture is coming,” and they wouldn’t know whether to head for the hills or the kitchen. Why, then, did Moshe identify this plague only as “a mixture” in Shemot 8:16-28?

Also, what was in this mixture? The rabbis of two thousand years ago debated this. Rabbi Yehudah contended that Arov was a mixture of wild beasts; Rabbi Nechemiah responded that Arov was a mixture of stinging insects. (Shemot Rabbah 11:3) Biblical verses may support either read; see Tehillim 78:45 and Yeshayah 7:18. But clarification of the mixture brings us back to our original question: why was the plague not named “Beasts” or “Wasps”? The answer may be that “Mixture” was not meant to be a description of the threat; “Mixture” itself was the threat.

This message emerges when we look at the Egyptian sin which Arov was meant to punish. Two midrashim offer different explanations of the sin:

- Reish Lakish said: G-d told [the Egyptians], “You made mobs and mobs against My children; I will also make the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the land mobs and mobs against you.” As it says, “Behold, I send against you… the mixture” – beasts and birds, mixed together. (Shemot Rabbah 11:2)
- Why did He bring a mixture upon them? Because they told Israel, “Go out and bring us bears, lions and leopards” in order for these creatures to pain them. Therefore, He brought upon them mixed beasts, per Rabbi Yehudah. Rabbi Nechemiah said: Types of wasps and gnats. (Shemot Rabbah 11:3)

These midrashim identify three facets of Egyptian sin:

- The Egyptians endangered us physically, with wild beasts;
- The Egyptians made us harm ourselves in collecting the beasts, much as they forced Jewish women to kill our own babies, and used Jews as overseers for other Jewish slaves;
- The Egyptians ganged up against us, in mobs.

These mobs came from all parts of Egyptian society, from Pharaoh’s advisers and magicians to his slaves and chariopteers, all of whom are described among our foes in the Torah’s text. As Rashi (Commentary to Shemot 11:5) notes, even the slaves ganged up against us. [For more regarding these mobs, listen to Rabbi Moshe Taragin, Makkot in Midrashim Part 4.] The mobs presented more than a physical threat. When Hashem warned Avraham about Egyptian slavery at brit hein habeterim (“the covenant between the pieces”), He predicted that Avraham’s children would be “strangers in a land not their own.” (Bereishit 15:13) The feeling of being a stranger – rootless, unsettled – brought with it psychological suffering.

This psychological dimension threatened the integrity of our community; who would want to identify with a vulnerable minority? Perhaps Yosef recognized this concern at the start of our stay in Egypt; this may have been part of his thinking in isolating his family in Goshen. But the Torah indicates that some Jews eventually moved beyond the Goshen ghetto, “filling the land” (Shemot 1:7 as read by the Netziv), having Egyptian neighbours and housemates (ibid. 3:22) and needing to mark their homes as Jewish (ibid. 12:23). Residing among the Egyptians, feeling how we were outnumbered, could have led to assimilation, as younger generations fled the fear of their parents. Egypt’s mobs constituted an existential danger.

Perhaps Hashem named the fourth plague “Mixture” because this aspect of the plague addressed the mob aspect of Egyptian slavery. Not only did waves of beasts or stinging insects sweep through the country, but they presented as mixtures, mobs, agglomerations of violent creatures attacking the Egyptians. The tables were turned on the bullies.

Further, according to the Torah’s account, Arov was the first plague to distinguish between Goshen and the rest of Egypt. (ibid. 8:16) Granted that Jews now lived beyond Goshen, that community seems to have retained its status as a Jewish stronghold. Arov demonstrated the special character of the Jewish community, and helped us to recognize that we were not vulnerable.

The Mixture was a form of psychological warfare. Yes, beasts and wasps could deliver a powerful punch, countering the physical harm Egypt had inflicted upon us, directly and by having us gather beasts ourselves. But Arov also punished Egyptian mob intimidation, reminding them that the power of their numbers was nothing compared with the might at Hashem’s disposal. As a result, Hashem pledged, the Egyptians and Jews would come to know that Egypt was not the “home team”. Instead, they would realize “that I am the Lord, in the midst of the land.” (ibid. 8:18)
A fun piece of trivia at many a Seder is that this section is the only and only part of the entire Haggadah in which Moshe Rabbenu can be found. It’s not much. Moshe is mentioned merely in passing, as Rabbi Yosi quotes a verse (Shemot 14:31) to demonstrate that the display of “G-d’s hand” in the splitting of the sea was five times as powerful as the plagues of Egypt performed by “G-d’s hand”:

“I will pass through the land of Egypt” – I, and not an angel – “and strike every firstborn” – I, and not a seraph – “and I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt” – I, and not the messenger – “I am the Lord” – I will do it and no one else.

Notice the usage of the definite article in reference to a messenger, and notice how in the Hebrew, that definite article, the letter hei, can be seen as the final piece of a coded message! Even when the purpose is to downplay Moshe’s involvement, his name can only be alluded to; it is never to be uttered. But why do we ignore and downplay Moshe in our Haggadah? What is the value expressed by doing so?

It would seem that the goal is to highlight, without the slightest hint of exception, that G-d’s will rules the day. At times, we speak of the role that man needs to play in the story of a redemption, and a mature religious perspective even highlights this. Just one month ago – the last month of our Jewish year – we read Megillat Esther, a text that could be considered the anti-Haggadah in this respect. In Megillat Esther, the very opposite phenomenon can be found – G-d is the One who is ‘absent’, who goes unmentioned, while our great leaders Esther and Mordechai are the ones strategizing and ensuring our salvation!

We know better, of course. Even as man acts, G-d needs to be understood as the guiding force behind all of his success, and that “the King” is the ultimate saviour working behind the scenes. But such a perspective doesn’t come naturally. Our natural tendency towards pride regularly has us believe that our success is our own, and that “the King” is the ultimate saviour working behind the scenes. But such a perspective doesn’t work. The only way to prevent such a way of thinking is to build the strongest of foundations within ourselves of its opposite, that G-d wills all.

In Nissan – the beginning of our Jewish year – on Pesach – the beginning of the holiday cycle that recounts our story as a nation – we must build that foundation anew, without the slightest imperfection or watering down of its message. Seder Night is absolutely and exclusively about G-d, not Moshe and not anyone else. Is there room for a spiritual maturity in Judaism, a philosophy that sees man’s role to be the vehicle for G-d’s will? Yes, and as the year progresses, we will progress closer and closer to that understanding. But we can only get there after building within ourselves a complete and overwhelming sense of G-d-awareness, through an experience that the Exodus story brings into our home like nothing else can.
An important part of the Seder is framing the Seder experience as if we, the Seder participants ourselves, left Egypt, as our ancestors did. This is understood to be an integral part of the Pesach experience; we interpret the Talmudic statement (Pesachim 116b) in an attempt to recreate the experience of being released from slavery in our own contemporary context. This gives us the opportunity to discuss the oppression of our own times, making issues like Soviet Jewry, the agunah crisis, or even climate change, a part of the religious discourse.

However, as much as B’chol dor vador is a beautiful idea, it is also quite absurd. Is halakhah demanding us to do something that is not actually true? And if so, what is the benefit in that? It is true that at times, there is a halakhic reality that differs from the scientific external world, however halakhah does not usually command us to experience something that has never been experienced in our own lifetime. Halakhah here seems to be asking us to do something that simply just isn’t true; we in the 21st century are not slaves, and G-d willing never will be. What then is halakhah asking of us when we are told to view ourselves as if we’ve left Egypt?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is probably one of the most well-known Modern Orthodox thinkers of the 20th century, being a true master of the Talmud but also holding a PhD in philosophy from the University of Berlin. There is a lesser-known work that he wrote early on in his career but only published later in his life called The Halakhic Mind. In Halakhic Mind, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes about the experience of the homo religiosus, the personality of a religious person who feels a need for an autonomous Jewish philosophy. According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, up until now, most Jewish philosophy has not been uniquely Jewish but has instead taken what the Greek or Arabic world has deemed true and then tried to adapt it. However, he does not feel that this is an appropriate way to approach the study of Jewish Philosophy, since it just seems like other people’s ideas, merely masquerading as Jewish. It would be better if Jewish Philosophy would come from Jewish sources.

Why is this a valid method of deducing philosophical truth instead of through the scientific method? Since the Enlightenment, the world has understood truth as coming from the scientific realm. Rabbi Soloveitchik challenges this assumption; can scientific method really explain the feeling homo religiosus has in religious experience, or how to live a good life? Rabbi Soloveitchik believes that there are different levels of truth. Science provides truth regarding quantitative properties which are phenomena deduced from scientific method (i.e. gravity). Religion can provide truth that is qualitative, which is meaningful and intentional. If B’chol dor vador stirs emotional significance or has religious meaning, then it is also true. Jewish truth should be pursued within the realm of Jewish text and religious experience. Rabbi Soloveitchik thinks that pursuing these multiple types of truth is the holistic human experience, and homo religiosus yearns for more than the scientific truth alone.

How does this connect to our original question? It is true that we, sitting at our Seder, did not leave Egypt and slavery, but it is also true that we can experience our own Exodus. The first truth is within the naturalistic realm, and the second within the religious. Rabbi Soloveitchik would analyze B’chol dor vador and understand that just because the statement isn’t true in the scientific realm, doesn’t mean it is untrue in every other way. If we cultivate a qualitative truth by making meaningful for us, then we have created truth according to the realm of the homo religiosus, where truth is not deduced through the scientific method.

Although this is one specific aspect of the Pesach Seder, maybe this orientation of seeing ourselves as if we left Egypt can actually be a justification for religious experience as a mode of understanding (many kinds of) truth in general. Religious experience and belief do not necessarily go hand in hand with a scientific understanding of the world, but Rabbi Soloveitchik believes that that is just fine; just because Judaism does not address scientific truths, it does provide other kinds of truths, about meaning and purpose, that are just as important. Gravity is important, yet so is morality; we in the 21st century are not slaves, and G-d willing never will be. What then is halakhah asking of us when we are told to view ourselves as if we’ve left Egypt?

I would like to thank Professor Daniel Rynhold, University of Toronto’s Shoshana Shier Distinguished Visiting Professor from Yeshiva University for teaching a seminar on Rabbi Soloveitchik, which inspired this dvar torah.
Was the splitting of the sea a miracle? Were the Ten Plagues really miracles? Or is it possible that they were operating through the rules of nature? And finally - does any of this really matter?

In 1996, the NY Times reported on Dr. John Marr, an epidemiologist who found scientific explanations for each of the ten plagues that occurred prior to our Exodus from Egypt. Dr. Marr’s theory is very extensive. It is based on a domino theory of natural causes – beginning with red algae that turned the waters to “blood.” It wasn’t really blood of course - it just looked like blood.

Dr. Marr believes that the algae became so intense, and so severe, that the frogs could no longer survive in the water and had no choice but to jump out of the water, and they ended up all over Egypt. This natural progression of events continues all the way through all ten plagues, until Dr. Marr finally explains the death of the first born. We think that Hashem killed the first born males in each family, right? Wrong, says Dr. Marr!

The three days of darkness happened because of an unbelievably strong sandstorm that blanketed Egypt, such that no one could see anything. The sandstorm also destroyed the crops and left them full of bacteria and mold, which only got worse and more dangerous as it baked under the hot sun. These crops then became poisonous. After three days of not being able to move, the Egyptians all rushed to get food. Who were the first Egyptians to eat the food? The heads of the households. They would have been the strongest to get to the food, and it was their honour and right to eat first. The top layers of food were most poisonous, so it is only natural and perfectly logical that all of the first-born males in Egypt died. The same would have been true for the animals. Dr. Marr points out that we are told that the first-born animals also died, and he suggests that this is because they would have been the strongest and best able to fight their way to the poisonous food first. Of course, this makes sense.

But before we write off the Exodus as happening without the hand of Hashem, let’s recognize that it is still pretty amazing that precisely when Moshe walks in and demands that the Jewish people be freed, a series of natural events (according to Dr. Marr) occur that actually bring about that freedom. I believe it is clear that the series of coincidences, and their timing, are themselves evidence of the Yad Hashem, the hand of G-d. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks so beautifully and poignantly explains:

“A miracle is not necessarily something that suspends natural law. It is rather, an event for which there may be a natural explanation, but which – happening when, where and how it did, evokes wonder, such that even the most hardened skeptic senses that G-d has intervened in history.”

In 1956, Rabbi Soloveitchik declared a wake-up call for the American Jewish community, summoning them to pay attention to the opportunities presenting themselves with the establishment of the State of Israel. This essay was published under the title, Kol Dodi Dofek, “The voice of my Beloved knocks”, a phrase from Song of Songs. In his essay, Rabbi Soloveitchik describes the miraculous events that led to the creation of the State of Israel, which in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s view were undoubtedly engineered by the Hand of G-d. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that the fact that both Russia and Western countries jointly supported the establishment of the State of Israel was undoubtedly a miracle. Rabbi Soloveitchik even suggests that the United Nations may have been created solely for the purpose of creating the State of Israel.

If one wants to live their life denying G-d’s presence in his or her life, it is likely and possible that they could explain every event and every occurrence through nature. But they would be ignoring the sometimes obvious ways in which Hashem operates through nature. And if we do not recognize G-d as present and constantly involved in our lives, then we won’t be able to realize when He is performing a miracle on our behalf, and we won’t be able to react.

Rabbi Soloveitchik said:

“When a miracle does not find its proper answering echo in the form of concrete deeds, an exalted vision degenerates and dissipates and the divine attribute of justice begins to denounce the ungrateful beneficiary of the miracle.”

Was the splitting of the sea a miracle? Were the Ten Plagues miracles? Was the creation of the State of Israel and our victory in the military battles that ensued miracles? Of course they were, and it is for that reason that we say Hallel. Hallel is the special tefillah in which we thank HaKadosh Baruch Hu for all the miracles that He performs for us – both overt and covert miracles.

Let us all strive to be more spiritually connected, and more tuned in to the right frequency to be able to notice and recognize the Yad Hashem when G-d is active in our own lives.

Did you know?
We offer approximately 20-25 public or private classes for adults each week, around Toronto.
Leil HaSeder eagerly awaits every gesture of love that we show Him. The time to strengthen ourselves and our relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the Living G
dominion over our Land, and the spread of the word of Hashem. Now is the ultimate redemption and the days of Mashiach are quickly approaching. We are in the final stages of our exile. We have witnessed miraculous victories, a flourishing of the produce of Eretz Yisrael, which we serve Hashem, while connecting with Him through the holiness and joy of the Yom Tov, and singing to Him in gratitude over our redemption.

The great Torah leaders of the previous generation have already taught us that the ultimate redemption is awaiting us. As soon as Hashem created the world, He envisioned a utopia with man as the beneficiary of all goodness, including the appreciation of the special times, and the concept of our redemption. While every mitzvah is exceedingly valuable in its own right, the bringing of the Korban Pesach is mentioned in the context of being the mitzvah avenue through which we serve Hashem, while connecting with Him through the holiness and joy of the Yom Tov, and singing to Him in gratitude over our redemption.

Mitzvot are not fuel for a machine or keys on a keyboard. HaKadosh Baruch Hu is sometimes referred to as the "Living G-d." We have a special relationship with the Creator who watches over us at all times and renews the entire creation every moment for each and every one of us. He shows us endless love and asks us to reciprocate, and it is so meaningful to Him when we do. When we fulfill mitzvot with the intent to reciprocate Hashem's love, the mitzvot are even more special.

When Hashem created the world, He envisioned a utopia with man as the beneficiary of all goodness, including the ultimate good of holiness and connection with Hashem Himself. This ultimate redemption is awaiting us. As soon as we, collectively as a community, are ready for that connection with Hashem, we will experience it. As Hashem says, “Today, if you will listen to My voice.”

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Berachot, Chapter 1), relates that Rabbi Chiya and Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta were walking together very early in the morning. When they saw the first lights of the dawn, Rabbi Chiya exclaimed, “the redemption of Klal Yisrael will be similar. It will begin slowly, a little at a time, and grow exponentially. As the verse says, ‘When I sit in darkness, Hashem is my light.’ The redemption of Purim was similar, beginning with ‘and Mordechai sat at the king's gate,’ followed by ‘And Mordechai emerged from the king dressed like royalty,’ and culminating in ‘the Jewish People had light and happiness.’” Such is the progression of our redemption. Our redemption from Egypt was in stages, our salvation of Purim was in stages, and our ultimate redemption will be in stages as well.

The great Torah leaders of the previous generation have already taught us that the ultimate redemption and the days of Mashiach are quickly approaching. We are in the final stages of our exile. We have witnessed miraculous victories, a flourishing of the produce of Eretz Yisrael, dominion over our Land, and the spread of the word of Hashem. Now is the time to strengthen ourselves and our relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the Living G-d, who loves us and eagerly awaits every gesture of love that we show Him.
While sandwiches may be a delectable and a convenient lunch item, what are they doing at our Seder? After consuming our matzah and marror, we then continue to eat these items as a sandwich, as Hillel did in the time of the Beit HaMikdash. Unlike most sandwiches, however, Koreich is packed with an inspirational message about the nature of Pesach and our roles as servants of Hashem.

The Talmud describes an argument between the Sages and Hillel regarding the manner in which the matzah and marror are eaten during the time of the Beit HaMikdash. The Sages maintain that the mitzvah of matzah and marror is fulfilled by eating these foods on their own. However, according to Hillel, one must wrap the matzah and marror together to fulfill his obligation. As Bamidbar 9:11 states, "Al matzot um'rorim yochluhu" which translates literally as "They shall eat it [the Korban Pesach] on matzah and marror." To satisfy both opinions, the Talmud concludes that we recite blessings and eat the matzah and marror separately, and then afterwards we create our matzah and marror sandwich without reciting a new blessing. (Pesachim 115a)

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook offers a powerful insight into the meaning behind Hillel's sandwich. He explains that the marror represents servitude, as we read in the Haggadah, "They embittered our lives with hard work." On the other hand, the matzah represents our freedom. It is the food the nation brought with them as they were leaving behind their slavery in Egypt - the bread of redemption. Rabbi Kook explains that just like we sandwich the matzah and marror together, we must also unite the aspects of servitude and freedom to serve Hashem. As recorded in Haggadah Olat Ra"ayah:

The overall goal will be realized only with the knowledge and recognition that these two forces are not contradictory, but are joined in creating the world's ultimate Freedom, the honour and the powerful desirability of which is not revealed unless it is crowned by exalted Servitude, servitude before the King of Glory, which is also the ultimate freedom. (Rabbi Torczyner tr.)

While boundaries and freedom may seem like two opposing ideas, Rabbi Kook teaches that they are in fact united in serving Hashem. Through recognizing our own humility and binding ourselves to the service of G-d, we can attain ultimate freedom.

Alexi Papas, an Olympian long-distance runner, provides a metaphor for this idea of service leading to freedom. She writes that she finds her sense of freedom within the rules and regulations of running. As she says, “[in a race] you might have a certain lane that you have to stay in or a certain number of laps or a course. But within those boundaries, there’s so much room for freedom and creativity and personality.” (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/olympian-poet-love-freedom-within-boundaries)

This idea is in the story of the Exodus as well. Moshe does not say to Pharaoh, “Let My people go,” as is often misquoted. Rather, the request is to let My people go “so that they may celebrate for Me in the wilderness.” The Exodus was not the beginning of total freedom, it was freedom to serve G-d. This idea is similarly seen in the Jewish calendar. Right after recounting the story of our redemption, we begin to count the days leading up to Matan Torah. We see that our freedom is inextricably linked to serving Hashem.

This idea further elucidates why, even though Pesach is called “Z’man Cheiruteinu” – the time of our freedom – it is probably the most restricting of all the holidays. We rid ourselves of a basic form of sustenance, and devote so much time and energy to ensure we do it properly. This teaches us that the freedom we celebrate on Pesach is found within the restrictions of being subservient to G-d.

It is fitting that Hillel is the one who creates a physical manifestation of combining servitude and freedom at the Seder, with his sandwich. The Talmud contains numerous stories depicting Hillel’s devotion in serving Hashem. For example, the Talmud tells the famous story of how Hillel risked his life by sitting at the edge of the skylight when he didn’t have enough money to enter, so that he could learn Torah. (Yoma 35b) Similarly, his famous adage in Pirkei Avot states, “If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am [only] for myself, what am I?” (1:14) Hillel is teaching us that we all have the freedom to be responsible for our own actions. However, we are not meant to only serve ourselves. This Pesach, may we all use the feeling of being humbled and subservient to Hashem to attain true freedom and merit the ultimate redemption.

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In each and every Seder of my childhood at my parents, at some point, the negotiations with “coalition forces” (i.e., my siblings, random cousins and myself) and “the empire” (i.e., my father) reached the usual deadlock: the price demanded for the hostage matzah was firmly refused. At that very moment my father would quote the Rama (OC 477:2), telling us that if the matzah reserved for the Afikoman was eaten or had vanished in any other way, we could use any other matzah shemurah. At that point, when everything seemed lost, my mother would intervene, both for her own sake and for the sake of tradition, andbroker a deal by which we would be granted some of our requests, and the matzah hidden at the beginning of the Seder would be eaten at its end. How much, then, must one “pay”, in order to eat the hidden matzah, specifically, for the Afikoman?

Clearly, in order to understand why the original piece of matzah would be better for the Afikoman, we must first have a better understanding of the Afikoman’s raison d’être. Here we find three main approaches:

- **The mitzvah of matzah:** Rashi and Rashbam (Pesachim 119b) write that the matzah eaten at the conclusion of the Seder is the primary matzah by which we fulfill our biblical obligation to eat matzah on the night of the Seder.
- **The Korban Pesach:** Rosh (Pesachim 10:34) contends that we perform the mitzvah of matzah when we eat matzah at the beginning of the Seder, and the Afikoman only serves to commemorate the way we eat the Pesach sacrifice when the Beit HaMikdash exists.
- **A taste of matzah:** Rambam (Ḥilḥot Chametz uMitzah 8:9) implies that the Afikoman is eaten in order to end the Seder with a taste of matzah in one’s mouth.

Armed with this understanding of the concepts underlying the Afikoman, we can now try to answer our question of why the hidden piece of matzah would be preferred for the Afikoman.

**The mitzvah of matzah:** Rabbi Yechezkel Heller, in his Or Yesharim on the Haggadah (pg. 3b, note 6), suggests that we hide a piece of matzah because of the verse, “And you shall keep the matzot” (Shemot 12:17), which teaches that the matzah used for the mitzvah should be safeguarded for this purpose. Thus, while any matzah shemurah suffices, eating matzah that was explicitly designated and preserved for that purpose enhances the mitzvah. Therefore, the hidden matzah should serve as the matzah of the mitzvah at the end of the Seder.

**The Korban Pesach:** Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik (quoted by his grandson, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, as brought in Or Yesharim (51), suggests that we hide matzah as a reminder for the Korban Pesach, and hence should be eaten as the Afikoman.

**The taste of matzah:** A third approach is found in the Tur (OC 473): “We put [the hidden matzah] under the tablecloth, as a reminder of [the Torah’s description of our exodus from Egypt], their leftovers bound in their garments on their shoulders. (Shemot 12:34)” This view is further developed by the Magen Avraham (473:22), who records a custom of carrying the hidden matzah on the shoulders of the Seder participants. One may ask: why should the matzah of the Afikoman, specifically, be used to demonstrate carrying the matzah out of Egypt? Why not the matzah eaten at the beginning of the Seder?

According to the Rambam’s position we saw above, the Afikoman is eaten at the end of the Seder in order to ensure the enduring taste of the matzah. However, the taste left in one’s mouth after the Seder is very different from the taste of the first matzah of the Seder. As explained by the Maharal (Gevurot Hashem 51), matzah plays two different roles at the Seder. On one hand, it is the bread of affliction and a memorial for our enslavement; on the other, it is the bread of rushing to freedom. We may suggest that while the first matzah we eat stands for the affliction – and therefore it must be broken (Pesachim 115b) – the second matzah stands for the salvation. Therefore, this is the matzah that is wrapped up and carried on our shoulders, as our forefathers did with the matzah they took out of Egypt, on their way to freedom.

We may further suggest that the minhag to use the same matzah for both the first and last eating is in order to emphasize this very point: the taste may be similar, but the context and the associations it carries could not be more distinct. The difference between slavery and freedom is not in what you eat, but for what purpose you eat.

In conclusion, while it is correct that any matzah shemurah may be used for the Afikoman, using the matzah that was hidden for this purpose is better – from the point of view of halachah, custom, and most important, the educational lessons of the Seder. Learning these lessons, it seems, may be well worth a few gifts...


**HALLEL (AFTER THE MEAL)**

**Why is this Hallel Different from All Others?**

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It’s the middle of the night. After a good meal, you are exhausted. You can still feel the strain in your jaw from trying to eat an impossible amount of matzah in record time. Turning the page in the Haggadah, you are hopeful that the Seder is pretty much over. Instead, you find yourself faced with an onslaught of text. The Haggadah labels it as Hallel, but it’s like no Hallel you’ve ever seen. You feel an odd sense of *deja vu*, convinced that you remember already saying Hallel before the meal. Bracing yourself, you read on...

If you can identify with the above, you understand why Hallel remains a mysterious and somewhat neglected part of the Seder. Things were not always this way. The Talmud (Pesachim 85a) describes the practice of the Jews in the time of the Beit HaMikdash. After eating the Korban Pesach, families would go out onto the rooftops and sing the Hallel. The songs of praise to Hashem would fill the night.

Perhaps a better understanding of the nature of this unusual Hallel will allow us to experience it more fully.

Let’s consider some of the distinctions between the Hallel of the Seder and the conventional Hallel of Yom Tov:

- We do not say a berachah before reciting it.
- Women are usually exempt from saying Hallel, as it is a time-linked mitzvah. However women are obligated in the Hallel of the Haggadah, since it is part of publicizing the miracle of being saved from Egypt. (Tosafot, Sukkah 38a)
- The recitation is split into two; we say part of the Hallel before the meal and part after Birkat HaMazon.

How can we account for these differences?

**A Song, Not a Recitation**

In resolving the first distinction, Rav Hai Gaon (cited in the commentary of Ran on Rif, Pesachim 26a) posits that there are two ways that we say Hallel. Usually, Hallel is a *recitation of texts (keriah)*, but at the Seder, Hallel is said as a *song (shirah)*. As a result, it does not require a berachah.

Why should the distinction between song and recitation affect saying a berachah? The function of a blessing on a mitzvah is to contextualize an action as a religious one. We wash our hands all the time, and we may occasionally choose to light candles, or to wave palm fronds in the air. A berachah is a declaration that an act is being done as a response to G-d’s command – and when Hallel is a recitation, it may lack the context that demonstrates that it is a mitzvah. We might need such a berachah to demonstrate that this Hallel is a mitzvah activity.

Song, in its biblical manifestations, is a spontaneous reaction, and it is one whose cause is self-evident, and captured by the words of the song itself. At the Reed Sea, the Jews saw G-d involve Himself in history to save them, and their response was to sing about the event. Similarly, the Hallel song at the Seder emerges directly out of the Seder experience. It is a spiritual-emotional response to the other mitzvot of the evening, and no berachah is needed to demonstrate this.

**Our Song**

This connection is made explicit in the final passage of Maggid, where we state that we are obligated to see ourselves as if we had personally left Egypt. We are therefore obligated in turn to praise G-d who saved us. It is at this point that we begin the Hallel. This also explains why women are obligated in this Hallel. It is not a distinct mitzvah, but rather a natural outgrowth of the other mitzvot of the evening, in which women are obligated.

The notion of Hallel as a spontaneous song of praise highlights an important part of our duties on Seder Night. More than just reading the words, we need to transform our salvation from Egypt into a palpable and personal experience. Only then can the Hallel be elevated from rote recitation to heartfelt song. The need for a personal experience is indicated in the text of the Haggadah itself - we must see ourselves (or display ourselves, as some editions have it) as though we had left Egypt.

We summarize our obligation to praise G-d at the Seder as the need to recite a “new song” (shirah chadashah). This phrase, which immediately precedes the Hallel, acts as an apt title for it. The words of praise may not be new, but the enthusiasm and sense of personal meaning that drives them, and turns them in to a song, must be refreshed yearly.

The fact that this Hallel is split into two parts points to what is missing in our current Seder experience. It is clear from the structure of the Haggadah that we are meant to have two distinct triggers for song. The first, as discussed above, is the retelling of the story of the Exodus. The second is the Korban Pesach, which was eaten at the very end of the meal, just before Birkat HaMazon and the second half of Hallel. It is this experience which the Talmud links with the rooftop Hallel’s of Jerusalem. Today we can only guess what that was like, and the two-part Hallel remains as a reminder of what ought to be. With G-d’s help we will soon merit the full Seder experience, and we will return to those rooftops to sing the ultimate *shir chadash* of the Final Redemption.

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In his book, *Mind and Nature*, anthropologist Gregory Bateson recounts the story of a time he asked his daughter to describe a cat’s eye shell. Upon taking a closer look, his daughter remarked, “Oh, it’s got a spiral on it! It must have belonged to something alive.” Bateson asserts that patterns like that spiral are present throughout the natural world, the Fibonacci sequence being a prime example. In discussing this phenomenon, Bateson calls it, “the pattern which connects.”

While Bateson was engaging with a transdisciplinary exploration of how to understand and describe the world around us and our place in it, his emphasis on patterns can be helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of *Vayehi BaChatzi HaLaylah*. There are two primary aspects in which this can be applied: the physical layout of the text and the content of the text itself.

While *Vayehi BaChatzi HaLaylah* is a staple at the end of the typical Haggadah, the layout of this *piyut* varies from one Haggadah to the next and, as such, it would be incorrect to assume that the immediate message each of us receives upon first seeing it will be identical. There appear to be three primary ways of formatting the visual appearance of the *piyut*:

- First, as a series of paragraphs whose opening word is every third letter from the *aleph beit*, but lacking any emphasis or repetition of the phrase *Vayehi BaChatzi HaLaylah*. [See, for example, *An Exalted Evening*, and the Maxwell House Haggadah still given out in grocery stores in the US to this day.]
- The second style sets the *piyut* as an alphabetic acrostic with three-line stanzas, or tercets. Between each tercet, the phrase *Vayehi BaChatzi HaLaylah* is placed, as a call and response.
- The final style follows the second almost identically with one key difference - the word *laylah*, which every sentence contains, is broken off at the end of each line and placed opposite the bulk of the text. [See Koren and Mossad HaRav Kook printings.]

Rather than explore what could be gained from each of these printing options (not to mention which one is true to the composer’s original), let us focus on the third one, as it enables the reader to see two patterns within *Vayehi BaChatzi HaLaylah* that are otherwise obscured in the text.

The first pattern is the fact that the *piyut* is structured as an alphabetic acrostic. This creates a sense of order and of gradual progression. Furthermore, it hints that this progression is all-consuming - it is akin to Bateson’s “pattern that touches everything.”

The second pattern is the repeated word, *laylah*, at the end of each line. While every single line in the poem contains this word, its exact format is not identical in every case. In fact, every tercet has its own pattern in regard to whether or not the word *laylah* carries a prefix and, if so, which prefix. For example, the first tercet is, “balaylah - halaylah - laylah,” whereas the second tercet is, “halaylah - laylah - laylah.” The remaining stanzas utilize seemingly random patterns of “ba,” “ha,” or no prefix. The striking exception is the sixth stanza which contains “milaylah” at the end of its middle line, a change that jumps out at the reader.

These two patterns take on extra meaning when the content of the *piyut* is considered. From the second through fifth stanzas, *Vayehi BaChatzi HaLaylah* telescopes the reader from their current time context across the expanses of Jewish history. By using linguistic and thematic material from Tanach, each line holds a specific event before the reader and makes note of their common thread - miracles performed for our ancestors at night. The struggles of Avraham (Bereishit 14, 20), Yaaakov (Bereishit 31, 32), Bnei Yisrael (Shemot 12), Devorah and Barak (Shoftim 4-5), Yeshayahu (Melachim Il 19, Yeshayahu 46), Daniel (Daniel 2, 5-6), and Esther (Esther 3) suddenly become members of a cosmic pattern that is hinged upon midnight of the night we left Egypt. As the *piyut* recounts these stories, the prefixes attached to “laylah” shift, again not seeming to follow a discernible pattern. Suddenly, in the middle of the sixth stanza, the prefix “mi” appears. Not only that, but from that point forward the verb tense used changes from the past to future tense. The *piyut* has now shifted from showing the reader the past to describing an even more exalted future - a future in which we no longer live enveloped in night, but rather we move forward from night.

When these seemingly disparate patterns are woven together, the result is a pattern that connects the reader to a storied past of Bnei Yisrael as it has existed in the deep night of the various national struggles it has faced. As the alphabetic acrostic gradually progresses through each letter, it simultaneously spans generations of history. This drives home a powerful message - while each line describes a time of trouble, each ends with salvation by G-d. Through every moment and aspect of Jewish history, G-d’s presence is felt and acknowledged. This fact is then catapulted into the future, transformed from an expression of gratitude and praise to one of hope and yearning. We, in our own lives, hope to experience the exact same pattern.
Two of the joyful songs that we sing at the end of the Seder open with an identical description of Hashem as an “Adir”, generally translated as “mighty”:

- **Ki Lo Na’eh** opens by describing G-d as Adir Bimeluchah, and talks about the praises that are offered to G-d.
- **Adir Hu**, a listing of some of G-d’s infinite wonderful attributes intertwined with requests to rebuild the Temple, starts with the same descriptor.

However, the placement of these songs on our Passover playlist seems strange. The earlier songs of Nirtzah were Pesach-themed, either discussing the exodus from Egypt (Vayehi BaChatzi HaLaylah, Uv’chen Va’amartem Zevach Pesach), or the Seder itself (Chasal Siddur Pesach). Additionally, there are many other songs of praise that were not added to the Haggadah. Indeed, Dr. Meir Bar Ilan (http://old.piyut.org.il/articles/835.html) even cites evidence that these songs were both sung at other times during the year before they became part of the Nirtzah liturgy. So why were these songs added to the end of the Seder?

**Adir at the Sea**

Perhaps it is their shared opening of “Adir” that makes them a good addition to the Haggadah. Of the four times that this root [aleph-daled-resh] appears in the Torah, three of them are in Shirat Hayam, the song thanking G-d for saving the Jewish people from the Egyptians.

**Adir of Redemption**

But it goes further. The Talmud (Menachot 53a, modified Davidson Edition translation) writes:

> Rabbi Perida taught a homily to comfort Rabbi Ezra. He began and said an interpretation of the verse: “I have said to the Lord: You are my Lord; I have no good but in You [tovati bal alekha]” (Psalms 16:2). The congregation of Israel said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, give me credit, as I made Your Name known in the world. G-d said: I give credit only to the three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were the first who made My Name known in the world, as it is stated: “As for the holy that are in the earth, they are the excellent [ve’adirei] in whom is all My delight” (Psalms 16:3).

When Rabbi Ezra heard Rabbi Perida say the word: Excellent [adir], he too began a homily, and said: Let the Adir come and exact punishment for the adirim from the adirim. Let the Adir come, this is the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is written: “The Lord on high is mighty [adir]” (Psalms 93:4). And exact punishment for the adirim, these adirim are the Jews, as it is stated: “The excellent [ve’adirei] in whom is all My delight” (Psalms 16:3). From the adirim, these adirim are the Egyptians, as it is written: “The mighty [adirim] sank as lead in the waters” (Exodus 15:10). In the adirim, these are the waters, as it is stated: “Above the voices of many waters, the mighty [adirim] breakers of the sea” (Psalms 93:4).

The word “Adir”, as expressed above, has a special connection to Pesach – it is representative of G-d’s freeing the Jewish people from the Egyptian oppression, as spelled out by these uses of “Adir” selected from Tanach. Therefore, how fitting it is that the twin songs beginning with this term, which reference back to the Exodus, be part of our Seder Night playlist.

**Adir of the Future**

While this explains the connection between the “Adir” songs and Pesach, there is one added detail that is present in Tanach, and echoed by the song: a call for future redemption. Following the description of the waters and Hashem as “Adir” (Tehillim 93:4, as referenced above), we are told (Tehillim 93:5, JPS 1985 translation): “Your decrees are indeed enduring; holiness befits Your house, O Lord, for all times.”

We know that with Hashem’s great strength, it is only a matter of time before He returns to openly rule over the world once again, in His Beit HaMikdash, not just in the Heavens, but down on earth. We therefore call out “Kel, b’neih beitcha bekarov”, “G-d, build Your house soon”, when we will merit to see Hashem, the true “Adir”, forevermore among us.
The song *Echad Mi Yodea* (and the ubiquitous English version “Who Knows One?”) is a favourite among children. Its responsive structure creates the atmosphere of a trivia game, and its popular upbeat melodies induce a second wind in energy-sapped participants at the end of a long evening. In his commentary to the Haggadah, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes: “This medieval song has no known author. Humorous songs and riddles have no particular connections with the Seder Night, or even Jewish culture, for they are found throughout the world. Apparently, one of the reasons for its inclusion was to wake up the sleepy, especially the young children, with a song of riddles to which everyone knows the answers. It is thus in some ways paralleled to the ‘Four Questions’ at the beginning of the Seder.” (*The Passover Haggadah: Commentary* by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz ad loc.)

Others, however, note more significant reasons for the inclusion of *Echad Mi Yodea* in the back of the Haggadah:

**Clarifying dogma**

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Maimon suggested that *Echad Mi Yodea* may have been originally incorporated into the Haggadah during the Geonic Era (~7th to 11th centuries) as a means of strengthening fundamental Jewish beliefs, which were being challenged by Christianity, as well as by the Karaites, a sect of Jews who rejected Torah sheB’al Peh (Oral Torah):

Responding to Christianity:
- G-d is one; two and three are the tablets and patriarchs, respectively - and are not part of a trinity.
- There are only four matriarchs: Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah.
- Shabbat is on the seventh day of the week, not on the first.

Responding to Karaism:
- The Written Torah consists of five books, and is distinct from the Oral Torah, which includes the six orders of the Mishnah.
- There are thirteen rules - received orally from Hashem at Mount Sinai - through which the Torah and its laws are expounded. Many of our laws are derived exclusively from these principles.

Rabbi Maimon explained that a creed-promoting *Echad Mi Yodea* is a most appropriate song for the end of the Seder: After recounting the story of our redemption from Egypt, we strengthen our belief in the absolute oneness of Hashem, and in the eternity of Torah law, as interpreted from teacher to student, since received at Mount Sinai. (*Chagim uMoadim*, pp. 191-192)

**Appreciating wisdom**

Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz of Lublin interpreted the response, “I know one, etc.,” as an assertion of our ability to comprehend the Torah and follow its laws, as opposed to the heavenly angels, who can neither amass knowledge of the world, nor exercise free choice (see Bereishit Rabbah 17:4). When the angels objected to Hashem that mankind was unworthy of receiving the Torah, He asked Moshe to respond. Moshe demonstrated that the Torah’s laws are not relevant to angels, who were not redeemed from slavery in Egypt, do not perform any work from which to refrain on Shabbat, do not have parents to honour, and do not possess evil inclinations that tempt them to murder, steal, and commit adultery. (Shabbat 88b-89a) Thus, after we finish discussing the Exodus, we express that the Torah is ours to learn and to follow, and that it was for this purpose that Hashem took us out of Egypt. (*Shaarei Armon*, pg. 233)

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter explained that *Echad Mi Yodea* is also meant to remind us that any wisdom we may have is not due to our own accomplishment. Even though we may have gained new insights during the Seder, and even though our ability to answer the song’s thirteen questions reflects considerable Torah knowledge, Hashem is the source of all wisdom. By declaring, “one is G-d,” we avoid falling prey to the haughtiness of thinking that we can accomplish anything independent of Hashem. (*The Pesach Haggadah with Ideas and Insights of the Sfas Emes*, pp. 233-234)

*Echad Mi Yodea* fulfills the author of the Haggadah’s charge: “Even if we were all men of wisdom, understanding, experience, and knowledge of the Torah, it would still be an obligation upon us to tell about the Exodus from Egypt.” (Artscroll tr.) A person is never finished learning. There is always greater depth of understanding that can be achieved, even when the question has been asked before, and we think we know the answer.
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