

Parashat Va'era, 5781, 2021:

Rabbi David Etengoff

The Arba Kosot and Pirsumei Nisa

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains four words that refer to the imminent salvation of the Jewish people from their merciless Egyptian taskmasters:

Therefore, say to the children of Israel, “I am the L-rd, and I will take you out (*v'hotzati*) from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will save you (*v'hitzalti*) from their labor, and I will redeem you (*v'ga'alti*) with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will take you (*v'lakachti*) to Me as a people, and I will be G-d to you, and you will know that I am the L-rd your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (*Sefer Shemot*, 6:6-7, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105), Rashbam (1085-1158), and the *Ba'alei Tosafot* (12-14th centuries), among many others, labeled *v'hotzati*, *v'hitzalti*, *v'ga'alti*, and *v'lakachti* as the “four expressions of redemption” (“*arba'ah leshonei geulah*,” *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 99b). The earliest source for this concept, however, is the *Talmud Yerushalmi* in tractate *Pesachim* (10:1):

What is the derivation of the obligation to drink the four cups of wine at the *Seder* on the night of Passover? Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Banayah said: “They correspond to the four redemptions: ‘Therefore, say to the children of Israel, ‘I am the L-rd, and I will take you out (*v'hotzati*)... And I will take you (*v'lakachti*) to Me as a people... *v'hotzati*, *v'hitzalti*, *v'ga'alti*, *v'lakachti*.’” (Translation, my own. See *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 88:11 for a parallel presentation of this idea.)

Whether we follow the *Talmud Yerushalmi*'s approach and label our terms “the four redemptions,” or follow Rashi, Rashbam, and the *Ba'alei Tosafot* and call them the “four expressions of redemption,” it is clear they provide the Torah basis for the Rabbinic obligation of drinking the four cups of wine at the *seder*. This requirement is stated explicitly in the *Mishnah* at the beginning of the 10th chapter of *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 99b: “Even the poorest person from the Jewish people may not eat [on the night of the *seder*] until he leans [in a demonstrable sign of freedom]. In addition, there shall be given to him no less than four cups of wine — even if this must come from the public dole.” The Rambam (1135-1204) codified this *halacha* in the following manner:

Therefore, when a person feasts on this night, he must eat and drink while he is reclining in the manner of free men. Each and every one, both men and women, must drink four cups of wine on this night. [This number] should not be reduced. Even a poor person who is sustained by charity should not have fewer than four cups... (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chametz u'Matzah* 7:7, this and all *Mishneh Torah* translations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

It should be noted that all subsequent *poskim* (halachic decisors) follow this opinion; as such, the commandment to drink the *arba kosot* (Four Cups of Wine) is a constitutive element of the *Seder*.

The 14th century Spanish halakhist, Rabbi Vidal di Tolosa, known as the Maggid Mishneh, after the name of his commentary on the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, examines the underlying meaning of the *arba kosot* within the context of his explanation of *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chanukah* 4:12:

The *mitzvah* of kindling Chanukah lamps is very dear. A person should be very careful in its observance to publicize the miracle and thus increase our praise of G-d and our expression of thanks for the miracles that He wrought on our behalf. Even if a person has no resources for food except [what he receives] from charity, he should pawn or sell his garments and purchase oil and lamps to kindle them [in fulfillment of the *mitzvah*].

In his gloss on this passage, the Maggid Mishneh opines: “It appears that the Rambam learns this from that which is explained in the seventh chapter of *Hilchot Chametz u’Matzah*: ‘Even a poor person who is sustained by charity should not have fewer than four cups.’ The reason thereof is because of the obligation of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing the miracle) ...” Based upon Maggid Mishneh’s interpretation, we may conclude that the overriding significance and obligatory character of the *arba kosot* stem directly from their role as *mitzvah* objects in the grand drama of *pirsumei nisa*. As such, they join two other Rabbinic commandments that share this rationale, the lighting of the Chanukah candles and the reading of the Megillah on the night and morning of Purim.

The founder of the Sochatchover Chasidic dynasty, Rabbi Avraham Bornsztain *zatzal* (1838-1910), in his posthumously published work of Torah responsa entitled *Avnei Nezer*, expands upon the Maggid Mishneh’s analysis of the Rambam’s decision in *Hilchot Chanukah* and declares:

Perforce one must say that the *mitzvot* of the night of Passover are different [than other commandments in general] since they serve the purpose of publicizing [the wonders and miracles of Passover] to his sons and the other members of his family, as the Torah states: “And you shall tell your son on that day...” This matter is understood based upon what I have already explained as the rationale of the Rambam — namely, in all other commandments [excluding *pirsumei nisa*] one is not obligated to sell their garment in order to fulfill a particular *mitzvah*. [This is based upon the well-known Talmudic dictum found in *Talmud Bavli, Berachot 6a*, wherein it states:] “Behold if one has the intention to perform a *mitzvah* and does not do so [through no fault of his own], the Torah considers it as if he has done so.” This is not the case in instances of *pirsumei nisa* where the entire rationale for the *mitzvah* is to publicize [the miracles] to others... (*Orech Chaim, Hilchot Chanukah 501*, translation my own)

Rav Bornsztain teaches us that all the *mitzvot* of *Pesach* night, and not just the *arba kosot*, are an expression of *pirsumei nisa*. Moreover, while regarding other *mitzvot* it may well be

“the thought that counts,” in matters of *pirsumei nisa*, the commandment must be performed without exception.

With Hashem’s help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to live lives wherein we bring universal recognition to His great and awesome Name, reflecting the ultimate purpose of *arba kosot*.

May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.