



Seder Night Insights

We have brachot before performing many mitzvot; shaking lulav, Lighting Candles, etc. Why do we have no bracha before the mitzvah of recounting the Exodus in maggid on the seder night?

Answers:

- 1) Since there is no limit to the performance of this mitzvah [we say that 'the more one speaks about the Exodus, the better,'] there is no bracha.
- 2) There is a rule that we don't make brachos on mitzvos that are between man and man [bein adam lechaveiro], eg no bracha on giving tzedaka. Perhaps the mitzvah of recounting the Exodus also has an aspect of bein adam lechaveiro, for the obligation is 'to tell your child..' - you have an obligation to your child to let him know of our true roots and our true history and the miracles and kindness HaShem did for us.

Urchatz -- "Why do we wash our hands at this point in this Seder?" the Talmud asks. "Because it is an unusual activity which prompts the children to ask questions." The very name Haggadah means "telling," for the goal of the Seder is to arouse curious questions, and provide satisfying answers.

We've all felt the sense of awe upon meeting a fascinating person, or reading an enlightening new book. But as adults we may become enslaved by the idea that it's more sophisticated to "know it all." Passover teaches

that to be truly free we must approach life with child-like wonderment. "Who is the wise person?" asks the Talmud. "The one who learns from everyone."

Passover is the holiday of springtime, joy and renewal. Nissan is the first month. And the very word for "month" -- *chodesh*, has the same letters as the word for "new" -- *chadash*. The Seder is filled with unusual activities. Be curious. Be a student of life. Be free.

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On Seder night we ask the Ma Nishtana and its four questions. This kicks off the mitzva of Telling the story of the Exodus. Later we speak about the four sons and how they each react to the events around them. Why is it that the telling over the story on Seder night is based on question and answer from the children as opposed to all other mitzvot?

The Exodus is one of the pivotal events in Jewish history and the basis for many mitzvot. The foundations of our nation and our faith, hinge on events that transpired over 3000 years ago. It shows us that we have a Father in heaven who loves us and turns the world on its head when He so desires. He knows when to put us down and how to make us rise again from the ashes. All for our own good. That the Exodus happened with all its details is something that is passed down from father to son from generation to generation. At the Seder each father gives over this tradition to his child. Because of its importance it is crucial that it is given over with clarity and that the child understands it completely, without any doubts and without and questions. A good teacher explains things until his student fully grasps the material and has clarified everything that troubles him. The lesson is not over until the teacher asks, "Anymore questions?" If it is silent and there are no further questions only then is the lesson complete.

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The Four Cups

The cups parallel the four expressions in the Torah which describe our freedom from Egypt. The *first* cup, which also serves as Kiddush, parallels

"I will take you out," when Hashem helped us recognize that we were *Egyptian Jews*, and not *Jewish Egyptians*. This is the essence of Kiddush sanctification - the realization that the Jewish People play a unique role in this world. The Haggada, the story of our physical exodus from Egypt, is recited over the *second* cup, symbolizing our physical salvation, which is parallel to "I will save you." A person is a slave to his physical needs. When the people were fed by Hashem in the wilderness, as we are today in a less miraculous manner, they were liberated from the shackles of the physical world in order to concentrate on loftier matters. *Birkas HaMazon*, the blessings which remind us that Hashem provides for our sustenance, is recited over the *third* cup, paralleling "I will redeem you" - the goal of the Exodus was the formation of a unique relationship with Hashem. Hallel is recited over the *fourth* cup. Hallel is the praise we bestow on Hashem, recognizing that He said "I will take you to be My nation."

And it is This...which has stood for our fathers and for us; for in each and every generation they stand against us to destroy us, and Hakadosh Baruch Hu {G-d} rescues us from their hand." Exactly what "**This**" refers to is not immediately clear. We have here a unique insight into the phenomenon of anti-Semitism: **This**, that "in each and every generation they stand against us to exterminate us" -- **This** is what has stood for us. Hard as we may try to forget our Jewishness and adopt the ways of our host nation, sooner or later they rise against us, remind us of our uniqueness, and awaken our commitment to Judaism.

The main part of the mitzvah to relate the story of the Exodus is the ten plagues. So here are some things you might not have known about some plagues...

1)Frogs - Egypt at that time was at war with Kush over their borders. The frogs solved the problem by stopping on the precise border. And even

when the Egyptian magicians created their own frogs, they did not go over the border. According to R' Akiva there was one giant frog and every time the Egyptians hit it, it split into two, etc, until the land was full of them. So why didn't they stop hitting the frogs? Because anger throws logic out the window.

2) Hail - Moshe warned the Egyptians of the coming plague of hail and told them to bring their belongings indoors. Pharaoh sent messengers telling people to leave everything outside, but people still took things inside; they feared the word of HaShem more than Pharaoh. And HaShem made it so the hail only fell on things outdoors - it did not even fall on anything indoors.

3) Darkness - Normal darkness does not have an existence in and of itself; it is just an absence of light. And so, one candle knocks away much darkness. But this plague of darkness brought a new creation; an existence and reality of darkness which could not be removed by lighting candles.

In Dayeinu we say 'if You [HaShem] would have brought us to Mount Sinai but would not have given us the Torah that would have been enough.' But is that really true - what would we have gained from standing at Mt Sinai but not getting the Torah? The answer is that before one can accept Torah fully, one must have yirat HaShem - fear of HaShem. And this is what we got on Mt Sinai even before the Torah was given. We saw the lightning, etc and gained real fear of HaShem. It is this receiving of fear of HaShem that would have been enough of a gift even without receiving of the Torah.

A longer idea

Have you ever wondered why Pesach is called Pesach? We know why.... Pesach is from the word pasach - passed over, that Hashem passed over

the Jewish houses when the tenth plague struck Egypt. But is this enough of a reason to name the entire festival Pesach?! The other plagues also didn't happen to the Jewish People. When all of Egypt was dark the Jewish areas were light. When all of Egypt's water turned to blood, the Jews were drinking filtered mineral water. Why is it such a milestone that this plague was done only to the Egyptians, while the Jewish houses were 'passed over' by Hashem, and not afflicted by the same plague!

To add to the question, the main theme of Pesach is freedom. We are celebrating the fact that we went out of Egypt and received the Torah and Mt Sinai, and came to the Land of Israel. We are celebrating that we became a nation with a unique role and relationship to Hashem. Pesach should be called The Festival of Freedom, or Independence Week, or the Festival of Escape. Why Passover ?

All the other miracles that were performed during the Ten Plagues were done by Hashem, but not directly. He sent a messenger to do them for Him. However, if you look in the verses where Hashem tells Moshe about this final plague, that will really reveal His strength and finally cause Pharaoh to release the Jewish people from slavery, Hashem says: "And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and I will strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from man to beast, and all the gods of Egypt will I judge, I am Hashem."

It's all first person. The midrash says that Hashem is saying that this plague is done by "ani v'lo acher". Me and no other. Hashem did the tenth plague Himself, directly. This plague was much more powerful than any of the plagues preceding it. It fell on the entire land of Egypt, taking the life of every firstborn without discrimination. So how was it that the Jewish firstborn were not killed? Why did Hashem 'skip over' the Jewish houses?

We can see find our answer in the directions that Moshe gave the nation

just before the plague: Moshe called to all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Draw forth and take for yourselves one of the flock for your families, and slaughter the pesach-offering. You shall take a bundle of hyssop (Something similar to parsley) and dip it into the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with some of the blood that is in the basin, and as for you, you shall not leave the entrance of the house until morning. Hashem will pass through to smite Egypt, and He will see the blood that is on the lintel and the two doorposts; and Hashem will skip over the entrance and He will not permit the destroyer to enter your homes to smite. You shall observe this matter as a decree for yourself and for your children forever."

It is very clear that it was this mitzva that they were given on that night, of making a korban (sacrifice) to Hashem, is what saved them in Egypt and protected their homes. It's interesting to note that they were only protected in their homes! Hashem is very particular that they should not leave their homes, and that they should mark their homes with the blood of their sacrifice.

And here we begin to find some answers to all the questions we have been asking. When the Jews took a sheep from their flock that night, the exact animal that the Egyptians used to worship as a god, and instead of bowing down to it, used that animal to serve Hashem in the same way that their children would later do so in the Temple in Jerusalem our holy city, they turned their homes into little temples. They turned their homes into a shul. Into a mikdash me'at - a little temple. They put the blood of the sacrifice on the doorpost to mark at the entrance that 'this home is not just a room - it's a temple of G-d. It's a sanctuary in which we can connect to Hashem.' When we served Hashem in our homes on that final night in Egypt, the concept of the Jewish home was created as a place that is an embassy of Hashem.

Those homes were not in Egypt that night. They were in the Land of Israel. Of course they were not struck by a plague that was decreed upon the entire land of Egypt. Hashem saw the blood on the doorpost, and passed over. Not simply by choice, but because the plague did not apply to that house - it was not in Egypt. It was an embassy of Hashem, a holy place, linked to a holy land that had nothing to do with Egypt.

Why is Pesach called Pesach and not the festival of Freedom? Perhaps because this is the biggest lesson of our whole journey from Egypt - that our homes are embassies of Hashem. They are places through which we can connect to Him. Most of the mitzvot that we have are based in the home: Shabbat candles and meals, kashrut, all the festivals.... We do much more at home than at shule! Because the only way for us to survive is to connect to Hashem in our homes. That's our base. Our ancestors in Egypt put up the first ever mezuzah to mark their houses as a sanctuary of Hashem that was not linked to the depravity and immorality around them. They marked their houses as oases of sanctity and kedusha, and in doing so were saved from the downfall of the misguided people around them.

Let's hear the lesson of the festival of Pesach and realise how important it is to make our homes sanctuaries in which we can connect to Hashem, and anchor ourselves - at home more than anything else - in our tradition and heritage, so that we don't get lost in the world around us.

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**Have a great Seder**