

## Underlying Values and Concepts of Pesach

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel

***This essay is reprinted from the book, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values” published by Urim, or the upcoming books, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to Man” or “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d” to be published in the future. This essay is not intended as a source of practical halachic (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified posek (rabbi).***

The single most practiced Jewish ritual today, which outdoes any other Jewish activity in the cycle of Jewish holidays, is the Passover Seder that occurs on the first evening of Passover. Although this ritual takes many forms these days, with many different foods and customs (of which not all are traditional), it remains the most popular religious activity among Jews, and it is usually celebrated in a family setting. This chapter will try to discern and understand certain aspects of the traditional Seder, in order to point out the underlying Jewish values of Passover and of Judaism as well. (For an in-depth discussion about Jewish freedom, the central idea and reason for the celebration of Passover, see the chapter about the Jewish Concept of Freedom.)

### **NO SEDER/ORDER IN THE SEDER**

The name of the entire process for the first night of Passover, or Pesach, (and the second night as well, outside of Israel) is called the *Seder*, which means “order.” This name clearly implies that all of the mitzvot-commandments, rituals, symbols and *Tefillot*-prayers of the Haggadah are arranged in a particular and meticulous sequence, just as name for the Jewish prayer book, Siddur, also implies a specific order and arrangement.

Yet even a cursory analysis shows that there seems to be no particular organized arrangement to the events and process of the Haggadah, especially when compared to the “order” of the Shabbat evening meal, or all other Yom Tov Festival evening meals. Normally, at each Shabbat or holiday meal, the first ritual of the evening is the Kiddush recited over wine. Afterwards, Jews ritually wash their hands for bread, Challah, or for Matzah (which can be used by Ashkenazic Jews as bread during the entire year), and then recite a prayer over this ritual washing. The washing is followed by the *Beracha*-prayer over the Challah or Matzah, and the entire meal is then eaten in earnest. But on Pesach night, while the meal seems to start off in a similar manner -- with Kiddush followed by ritual washing -- there is no blessing at all following the washing. Moreover, the Matzah is not eaten. Rather, a green vegetable is eaten instead. Although one would normally expect the full meal to now be served, nothing more is eaten for an entire hour or longer. Rather, in the next paragraph, Jews invite people to join their Seder. Why invite them **now** when there is no chance anyone will join them at this point? This also seems to make no sense and is “out of order” of any logical sequence. The next order of business is the asking of the Four Questions, but not one of these questions is specifically answered at the Seder at all! Many verses are recited, but without any apparent order to join them thematically. What is really going on here? Why, then, was each of these steps in the structure of the Haggadah instituted by the Rabbis? Why does there seem to be no order, and no connection between the different parts of the Haggadah? Are these merely a series of rituals, prayers and verses, or is there any justification for the name “*Seder*”?

In order to understand that the entire evening is indeed arranged in a particular order – *Seder* – one must first be cognizant of four overriding fundamental principles that helped guide the Rabbis in assembling the Haggadah, its contents and sequence.

**Principle #1 – PASS IT DOWN TO THE CHILDREN** – Pesach is the only holiday in which the Torah itself commands that the children must be involved. While the Rabbis and parents have always found ways to involve the children in every Jewish celebration, Pesach is the only festival where the children are

mandated to be part of the action. The Torah commands parents to pass down the story and values of the Exodus to their children.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the Rabbis instituted many aspects of the Seder specifically in order to fulfill this commandment, and in order to keep the children interested and active participants in the Seder. The Talmud gives many examples of this: the importance of instituting certain actions and change from the regular routine – specifically so that the children will stay awake due to curiosity.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the Rabbis instituted certain rituals, such as eating the green vegetable and dipping it, only so that children will notice that tonight is different.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, certain actions are done only so that they will prompt the children to ask questions,<sup>4</sup> and even is the basis of allowing children to “steal the Afikoman”<sup>5</sup> is to insure their constant involvement and desire to remain awake throughout the proceedings. These ideas are codified as part of Jewish law.<sup>6</sup> The entire question and answer format that is the essence of the Seder was devised so that there will be dialogue between children and parents and so that the ideas and values of the Pesach story should be properly transmitted (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 473:7).

**Principle #2 – EACH PERSON SHOULD FEEL AS IF HE OR SHE PERSONALLY LEFT EGYPT** – For the Jew, it is not sufficient to merely understand the story of the Egyptian Exodus as a historical fact. Rather, every Jew must feel the Exodus story as well since this is part of the text of the Haggadah.<sup>7</sup> A person cannot possibly feel the exhilaration of freedom from slavery without first feeling the great pain of servitude. Thus, the words and rituals of the Haggadah are an attempt to elicit a visceral response and emotional reaction, and not merely a memory. If the Haggadah remains a history lesson or even a once a year re-creation of an event that occurred 3000 years ago, then the purpose of the mitzvah on Seder night has not been achieved. Although it is important not to forget what happened, the Haggadah experience is meant to be so much more than that. Thus, many of the texts and rituals were instituted specifically to help Jews feel the experience of slavery, followed by the redemption and of G-d’s miracles. These events did not only happen “then” to “them,” but are happening to each Jew today.

**Principle #3 – אָוֶלַח וְלִמַּד GO “OUT” AND LEARN** – The Haggadah says to “go out and learn.”<sup>8</sup> Go out from where? Some explain that we are obligated to go “out” of the simple meaning of the text of the Haggadah. It is not sufficient to simply say the words and understand the meaning of the Haggadah’s terminology. The Rabbis who wrote the Haggadah wished for Jews to delve deeper, and comprehend the values and ideas more profoundly. The Rabbis embedded hidden meanings in the Haggadah and the Seder. It is the responsibility of each Jew to delve into these ideas, discuss them, and discover a little more each year, in order to understand the concepts that are fundamental to our lives as Jews. These deeper lessons of the Haggadah impact Jewish heritage, day-to-day living and survival as Jews.

**Principle #4 – THE HAGGADAH IS A CLASS IN THE ORAL LAW** – The entire Haggadah is one long “class” in Oral Law. According to Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993), the mitzvah on Pesach night of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim*, telling over the Exodus story, is identical with the mitzvah and practice of Talmud Torah, the study of Torah, specifically *Derash* or Oral Law.<sup>9</sup> Like any Talmud class or page of Talmud, the format is one of question and answer, a format that must be adhered to even if no children are present.<sup>10</sup> If the commandment on Pesach evening had been the study of the Written Law, then the first four Torah portions of Shemot-Exodus would be read on this night. But the Rabbis chose not to

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 13:8

<sup>2</sup> Pesachim 108b

<sup>3</sup> Pesachim 114b

<sup>4</sup> Pesachim 115b

<sup>5</sup> Pesachim 109a

<sup>6</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 472:1, 16

<sup>7</sup> *Bechol Dor Vador* paragraph of the Haggadah before the second cup of wine is drunk

<sup>8</sup> Paragraph in the Haggadah recited right after “*Vehi She-amda*”

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Pick in *Avnei Mishpat* 3, recounting classes of Rabbi Soloveitchik, page 191

<sup>10</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 473:7

include these Torah texts. Rather, it is the exposition of Oral Law – deducing ideas and Jewish law based on specific wording and implications of the text – that is present in the Haggadah. One of the main foci of this is a rather obscure text, “*Arami Oved Avi*- A wandering Aramean was my father,”<sup>11</sup> which the Mishna requires Jews to “expound upon completely” on Seder night<sup>12</sup> in the classic language of learning the Oral Law. Thus, the many verses found in the Haggadah are a function of this principle. And like *Principle #3*, the study of Oral Law encourages the Jew to delve deeper, to add his or her own understanding, and to examine each point from various perspectives.

If a person approaches Pesach night by understanding these four fundamental themes of the Haggadah, then suddenly there is Seder, an order to the various components of the Haggadah. Each part of the Haggadah demonstrates one or more of these fundamental principles and weaves what should be an all-encompassing experience for the Jew at the Seder. In fact, the *Seder*, the order, that slow-build structure from the first step, *Kiddush*, to the fifteenth and last step, *Nirtzah*, is carefully constructed. This 15-step procession is not accidental. There are 15 parallel (physical) steps in the Temple that led to the inner courtyard. So, too, there are 15 steps, *Maalot* in Hebrew, written by the architect of the Temple, King David, in his 15 Psalms called *Maalot*-steps (Psalms 121-134). And finally, the 15 steps of the Exodus are enumerated in the most famous of Pesach night songs, *Dayenu*. Immediately before the singing, the Haggadah tells (or asks) us how many “*Maalot*-steps” took place in the process of the Exodus from Egypt. Immediately after the song, the Haggadah lists each step in the process from the Exodus from Egypt to the giving of the Torah.

Thus, we see that the Seder is indeed a proper and pre-planned structure with a definite order. If Jews let these four fundamental principles guide them through the Haggadah, then they will not only discover the order of the evening, but also discover much about themselves and their Judaism.

### **KARPAS – WHY THAT NAME?**

In the first essential act of the Seder that is unique to Passover eve (the Kiddush is recited on all Festivals and every Shabbat), the Jew washes his or her hands without reciting a *Beracha*-blessing and then eats a vegetable. This vegetable is called *Karpas*. As has been explained previously (in the introduction about Seder-order in the Haggadah), the true purpose of washing and eating a vegetable is to arouse the curiosity of the children to ask why we are doing this and why this is so different (since Jews never wash before eating a vegetable any other time during the year, and never wash without a *Beracha*-blessing before eating). Then Jews eat (with a *beracha*) less than an olive-sized vegetable, but do not continue with the meal. All this is strange and out of the ordinary. But the main focus here is the name for this ritual -- *Karpas*. WHY is it called *Karpas*? There are those commentators who say that *Karpas* is the name of a green vegetable in Greek (the language spoken by many Jews at the time when the Haggadah was composed). However, an investigation into the Greek language shows no word *Karpas* at all, much less a word meaning green vegetable. Other commentators say that the four Hebrew letters for *Karpas* (*Kaf*, *Resh*, *Pe* and *Samech*) are an acrostic of ס פ ר כ (which signifies 60, and the Hebrew word for back-breaking work). The *Samech*-60 represents 60 myriads (ten thousands) of workers for a total of 600,000 (Jewish adult males) who worked as slaves in Egypt. However, if this reasoning is correct, then if the Rabbis, in naming this ritual, wanted to allude to the slavery in Egypt, they should have called it *Saprach* (ספרך) – without having to alter the order of the letters to show the 600,000 slaves in back-breaking work. And why allude to this specific idea NOW at the very beginning of the Seder, even before we begin to tell the story? There are many references later in the Haggadah that describe this very concept. Why, then, is this ritual called *Karpas*, especially as the first action performed in the Haggadah relating to Pesach?

---

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 26:5

<sup>12</sup> Mishna, Pesachim 10:4

In order to answer this question, we need to discover the origin of the Hebrew word *Karpas* in the Tanach (the Jewish Bible). The only mention of this word in the entire Bible is in the book of Esther.<sup>13</sup> In describing the clothing worn by King Achashverosh, it says that one of the garments was made with a material and color called *Karpas*. Thus, *Karpas* is a type of royal garment with a unique color. How is this garment in the Purim story related to Pesach and the Haggadah? Rashi helps us out with his explanation of another word in the Book of Genesis. When Jacob gives his favorite son, Joseph, the Coat of Many Colors, the Hebrew term is *Kutonet Pasim*. Rashi comments on the word *Pasim* "This is a garment of fine wool like *Karpas* and turquoise."<sup>14</sup> Rashi, then, is telling us that the word *Pasim* in the Torah is actually a contraction of the word *Karpasim* or *Karpas*. Therefore, *Karpas* was the full name of the type of coat worn by Joseph. But how does this concept relate to the Haggadah?

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, Z"l explains that the Rabbis intentionally wanted Jews to be cognizant of that coat of many colors when they begin the Seder in earnest. It was this act of Jacob's – his giving the coat to Joseph – that caused great enmity between the children of Jacob (or the children of Israel). This, in turn, led to the selling of Joseph by the brothers and Joseph's slavery in Egypt. Eventually, this caused all the brothers and Jacob to settle in Egypt, and the subsequent slavery by the Jewish people. Thus, the Rabbis intentionally wanted Jews to recall, even before they begin to tell the story of Jewish slavery in Egypt, how they arrived in Egypt in the first place. It was because one Jew hated another Jew, brother hated brother. Only once they recognize how the Jews came down to Egypt as a cause that led to their slavery, can the Seder participants begin to tell the story and explain how their ancestors left Egypt. By calling the vegetable *Karpas*, the Rabbis wanted Jews of today to recall that *Karpas* coat and the hatred it symbolized and what it led to.

It is partially for this reason that when the Jews left Egypt, they needed to show the opposite value – brotherly love, rather than brotherly hatred. Before the Jews could leave Egypt, they were asked by G-d to demonstrate that they had learned their lesson about Jewish (and family) hatred and love. Therefore, before the Jews could leave Egypt, they had to show themselves to be a united Jewish family by placing on the doorpost of their homes the blood of the Paschal sacrifice, the symbol of the Jewish family.<sup>15</sup> The Paschal sacrifice itself had to be eaten by the entire family (Exodus 12:3), demonstrating once again the unity of the family. And if the family was too small to complete the eating of the entire animal, the neighbors had to join in.<sup>16</sup> (These neighbors were usually the extended family of uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents.) In addition, another unique Jewish law regarding the Paschal sacrifice in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was that each and every Jew who partook in this sacrifice had to enter the Temple from the very same gate.<sup>17</sup> This further demonstrated Jewish unity every Pesach, even after the Jews left Egypt.

Until now, we have spoken only of the name of the *Karpas*. But the dipping of the *Karpas* itself symbolizes two of the dippings mentioned in the Torah regarding the entire Pesach story. In a defiant act, in order to fool their father,<sup>18</sup> Joseph's brothers dipped the multi-colored *Karpas* coat into an animal's blood, as a "proof" that Joseph was killed by a wild animal. This dipping of hatred and defiance is ultimately redeemed by the dipping of the Paschal sacrifice into the blood that is then put on the doorpost. The Jews who dip the *Karpas* on Pesach night recall both dippings – the dipping of hatred by the brothers and the dipping of love and unity by each Jewish family on the night before they left Egypt.

---

<sup>13</sup> Esther 1:6

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 37:3 with Rashi commentary

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 12:7

<sup>16</sup> Exodus 12:4

<sup>17</sup> Pesachim 91a

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 37:31-32

Therefore, by calling this first action of the Seder *Karpas*, the Rabbis wanted Jews to recall all of these ideas – the disunity and hatred of Jewish brothers that led Jews into Egypt, as well as the need for unity and Jewish love between families that redeemed the Jewish people from Egypt. Now that the stage has been set, the story of the Jews in Egypt and the *Seder* can begin in earnest.

### **MA NISHTANA**

One of the crucial and classic scenes at any Seder is the sight of little children asking their parents the Four Questions of the *Ma Nishtana*. This is a central component for the Seder in Jewish law, but is also an emotional moment that exudes Jewish values and ethical lessons. It is "common knowledge" that these four particular questions are the very ones that little children would "naturally" ask their elders – the details of why this Pesach night is different from any other night of the Jewish year. But is this really so? In examining each particular question, are these really the four particular questions that little children would actually ask at a Seder table? In examining each question carefully, are these actually the details that would bother a small child about Pesach night? A cursory examination of each of the Four Questions of *Ma Nishtana* will show that **these four questions could not possibly be asked by a small innocent child regarding the Seder**. One simply has to analyze the content of each question to discover this to be true.

**Question 1** – The child asks why is it that on every other night we eat Chametz (leavened bread) and Matzah, but tonight we eat only Matzah. How could a small child possibly know at this point in the Seder that he or she will only eat Matzah the entire night and not any Chametz? If this question were posed by a child after the Seder is complete, then it would make sense. But the Rabbis placed these four queries at the beginning of the Haggadah. This begs the question of how a young child could possibly be expected to know what will occur later on in the Seder.

**Question 2** – In this question, the child asks: "On all other nights we eat all kinds of vegetables, but tonight we eat only Maror-Bitter Herbs. Why?" How does this question make any sense at all? We just ate "another kind of vegetable" called *Karpas* a few moments ago. No one has yet eaten the Maror. So how would a child possibly say that we eat only Maror-Bitter Herbs tonight and not other vegetables, when this is simply not true? And how could a little child possibly know at this point of the Seder that we will eat Maror-Bitter Herbs later on?

**Question 3** – The child asks about the two dippings tonight vs. no dippings any other night of the year. It is true that the child just witnessed one dipping – of the *Karpas* vegetable in the saltwater. And if the child had asked about that one dipping, that would be logical. But why would he/she ask about two dippings? Is the child clairvoyant? Once again, how would the little child know at this point in the Seder that later on that the participants will dip again (the Maror in charoset)? And if we possibly try to explain that this child remembers from last year's Seder, then the child will probably remember the answers from last year's Seder as well, and have no questions at all tonight.

**Question 4** – We only recline all night tonight (when we eat) but not the rest of the year. While it is true that the child saw everyone reclining when drinking the wine a few moments ago, that is not the question the Rabbis composed. Had the question been, "Why do we recline when we say Kiddush only tonight?" it would make sense. It says all night we recline. But once again, the only explanation seems to be that we must ascribe special powers to this little child – i.e., that he or she already knows what will happen the rest of the night. This question, then, certainly does not make sense.

In fact, all four questions are not logical and not appropriate for a child 3-7 years old, the usually assumed age of "little children." What questions would make sense logically for a little child to ask? What

aspects of Seder night would a youngster notice and make him/her ask, "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION 1 – On all other nights we have different dishes, but tonight we have special (Kosher for Passover) plates, glasses and silverware. Why?

HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION 2 – On all other nights we have our regular friends and relatives who often come over. Why are so many other people here tonight, and who are they?

HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION 3 -- On all other (holiday) nights we wash with a Beracha after Kiddush, then make the *Hamotzi* blessing on bread or Matzah, and then eat the meal. Why didn't we do that tonight?

HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION 4 – On all other nights we never wash before eating a vegetable. Why tonight do we wash without a Beracha and then eat a vegetable?

Why didn't the Rabbis select these logical questions as the *Ma Nishtana*? What is really going on? Why did the Rabbis choose four questions that a little child would never ask?

In order to resolve this difficulty, we must, once again, return to something discussed earlier. (See the introduction to the Seder-order in the Haggadah.) *Principle #3* states that the Rabbis intentionally wanted Jews to understand the Haggadah on a deeper level. Therefore, they purposely imbedded deeper concepts within the Haggadah for adult Jews to learn new and more profound ideas each year. The *Ma Nishtana* is clearly an example of this. While there are numerous approaches possible to solve our problem and present underlying ideas, we will utilize two approaches.

Abarbanel (1437-1508) explains that these four questions are not four independent units. Rather, all four must be taken together and there is actually only one overarching question. This question is not "Why is this night different from all other nights of the year?" but, more accurately, "Why is this Pesach night different from every other Jewish holiday (night) of the year?"

Each Jewish holiday contains its special rituals and symbols, some from the Torah and some from the Rabbis. Rosh Hashana, for example, has the Shofar (from the Torah) and the customs to eat various foods (from the Rabbis). Yom Kippur has the fasting and four other prohibitions related to the body (from the Torah) and wearing the Kittel or white garments (Rabbinic). Sukkot clearly has two major Torah symbols of the Sukkah and the Four Species. Even Shavuot, which has no Torah symbols, has Rabbinic customs of eating dairy and learning Torah all night. The Rabbinic holidays of Chanukah and Purim also have their symbols and mitzvot. In each of these holidays, all of the symbols and rituals blend together into one theme, or two themes that complement each other. The food and Shofar on Rosh Hashana inspire *teshuvah*-repentance and a good year. This is similar for all the other Jewish holidays. On Sukkot, for example, the theme of relying on G-d and going outside to live in a Sukkah complements the idea that all the parts of one's body must come together to serve G-d (the Four Species) or, in an alternative explanation, all segments of the Jewish people need to come together as one.

But Passover night is different. It breaks the pattern. Unlike all of the other holidays, the symbols and rituals at the Seder contradict one another. The Matzah, a poor person's bread, is the symbol of slavery and poverty. So, too, the *Maror*-Bitter Herbs symbolize the pain of slavery. Yet, some of the other symbols and rituals of the Seder denote opposite ideas and themes. The dipping symbolizes wealth and freedom, the opposite of poverty and slavery. Similarly, it is only wealthy people who regularly recline. Therefore, the deeper question of the *Ma Nishtana* is precisely this: Why is this holiday night different from every other holiday night of the year? On all other holidays, the symbols and themes are clear, and they all work in consonance with each other. But on Pesach night, the symbols are contradictions between slavery and poverty (the first two "questions") and freedom and wealth (the third and fourth "questions"). Therefore, says Abarbanel, it is one long question: *Ma Nishtana*?

What is the answer to this question? One need only look at the very next words in the Haggadah to discover the answer: Pesach presents both diametrically opposed elements at the same time, on the same night. The words in the Haggadah say: "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt but G-d our Lord took us out from there." Since Jews are supposed to feel that they are slaves tonight and then feel as if they have achieved freedom (see *Principle #2* in the Introduction about the *Seder-Order*), they need all the symbols of slavery and poverty to help them first feel like slaves. But then they also need the symbols of freedom and wealth to help them feel later on as if they are indeed free people. Thus, while the symbols might seem contradictory, if Jews use each Pesach symbol and ritual in its proper time at the Seder, they are fulfilling the mitzvah and the goal that the Rabbis intended for them.

A second approach to help us understand the deeper meaning of the *Ma Nishtana* was taken by Rabbi Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619), author of the *Kli Yakar*. In an effort to explain the word "night" on a more profound level, the *Kli Yakar* says that night always symbolizes the darkest times in a person's life, and for the Jewish people as a group as well.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, "night" is the classic symbol for *Galut*-Exile in Jewish history. Therefore, the *Ma Nishtana* is not referring to Pesach at all, but rather is comparing the various periods of *Galut*-Exile throughout Jewish history.

Essentially, there have been three major periods when the Jews have left the Land of Israel for the Diaspora. The first occurred when all Jews in the world, Jacob and his family, willingly departed the Land of Israel and went down to Egypt, and then eventually the entire Jewish people became slaves there. This period lasted for 210 years. After the first Holy Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE, the Jews spent 70 years of exile in Babylonia before they were allowed to return to the Land of Israel. Then, after the Second Holy Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the Jews were forced to leave the Land. Since the Temple has not yet been restored, we are still in this *Galut*-exile, a period that has lasted for more than 1,940 years (and continues to the present day). If the "night" in the *Ma Nishtana* does indeed signify *Galut*-Exile, then the deeper question is: "Why is *this* Exile-night, so different (and so much more painful) than all other night-Exiles? Why is this Exile so long, spanning more than 1,940 years, while the other Exiles were of a much shorter duration (210 and 70 years)? What have the Jewish people done to deserve such a long *Galut*-Exile this time, as compared to previous Exiles?

After posing this thoughtful question, we can consider the following idea: the four paragraphs that follow the question stated above, which we normally believe are specific questions to expound upon the original question, are not questions at all, in the view of Rabbi Luntschitz! They are four answers, explaining why this Exile is so much worse and so much longer than the others. In fact, the Hebrew word "*Shebichol*", the first word of each of the 4 paragraphs, which is normally translated as a question ("Why on every other night...") is better translated grammatically as: "For this reason, every other night [Exile]..." This begs the question: What are the four reasons that we Jews have suffered for so long in this seemingly endless *Galut*-Exile?

**REASON #1** – All other Exiles (nights) had both Chametz and Matzah. Chametz is dough that binds together, and can be seen as the symbol of Jewish unity, while the word Matzah technically signifies "that which breaks or divides." Thus, in all the other Exiles we had both Jewish unity and some disunity. In Egypt, for example, the entire Jewish people came together by following Moshe and leaving Egypt. They were unified as Jews, as they kept distinctively Jewish names and language.<sup>20</sup> But there was some disunity as well, as we see one Jew about to strike another Jew.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in the Babylonian Exile, depicted most clearly in the story of Purim, there was Jewish unity, for example, when all the Jewish people fasted on

---

<sup>19</sup> See Psalms 92:3

<sup>20</sup> Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 32:5

<sup>21</sup> Exodus 2:13

Esther's behalf<sup>22</sup> and when they fought the enemy in a unified manner on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar. There was some disunity as well, however, as alluded to in the last verse of the Book of Esther. Despite all he had done, Mordechai was only accepted by most, but not all of the Jewish people.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, during the current *Galut*-Exile, there is only Matzah, only disunity. The names of the groups of Jews who fight among themselves change from generation to generation, from country to country, but this sad factor has plagued the Jewish people during this entire exile. There are Sephardim versus Ashkenazim, Chasidim vs. Misnagdim, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox factions pitted against each other. The examples of the hatred of Jews for each other are unfortunately numerous. The classic sad joke about "two Jews and three Synagogues" is a phenomenon of this *Galut*-Exile, not the previous night-Exiles. If Jews consider why this *Galut*-Exile is so much longer, Jews have only themselves to blame. It is a *Galut*-Exile of only Matzah, only strife between Jews.

REASON #2 – According to Kli Yakar, the bitterness of the *maror*-bitter herbs symbolizes the human frailty of greed, since it is greed and jealousy that leads to so much bitterness between people. During all night-Exiles there were "other vegetables" but not *maror*-bitter herbs, the trait of greed by Jews. In Egypt, for example, during the plague of Darkness, it would have been so easy for the Jews to simply take the valuables of their Egyptian neighbors. (The Midrash, in fact, says they went into the Egyptian houses and saw where these valuables were hidden.) It would not require much greed to justify taking the gold, silver and jewelry of the hated Egyptians who had tortured them. And, yet, the Jews did not take any of these valuables, but only later on asked their Egyptian neighbors for these items as a parting gift,<sup>24</sup> which they duly received. This shows that the Jews in Egypt were not greedy. Similarly, after having defeated the enemy, Haman's cohorts, in battle, the Jews in Persia could have easily and justifiably taken the booty, a common practice at that time. Yet the Megillah specifically says<sup>25</sup> that the Jews did not take any of the spoils of war. This, too, shows that they were not greedy. But in our *Galut*-Exile Jewish greed has been pervasive. It is that characteristic, more than any other, that antisemitic enemies of the Jews have used to stereotype Jews over the last 1900+ years. Why is this night-Exile different and longer than the other night-Exiles? This night is all *maror*-bitter herbs. This night is full of Jewish greed.

REASON #3 – What is the symbol of dipping? This is the characteristic of sensuality, which includes sexual promiscuity. During all the other nights-Exiles, we did not dip even once. One of the reasons that Jews remained Jews in Egypt and merited the redemption says the Midrash,<sup>26</sup> was that they were not promiscuous in Egypt. Rashi states<sup>27</sup> that in Egypt there were no illegitimate children at all within the Jewish people. And in the Babylonian exile, according to some Midrashim, the Jews invited to the feast of Achashverosh refused to eat the non-Kosher food, despite great peer pressure to do so. But during the present night-Exile, Jews dip twice. This is true today, more than at any time during the last 1,940+ years. Jews in the Diaspora often flaunt their wealth and use it to satisfy any and all urges. They indulge themselves in every physical pleasure life has to offer, adopting this Western value to the fullest. Why is this night-Exile so much longer? Jews in this *Galut*-Exile have committed the sin of sensuality.

REASON #4 – Reclining is fine for the Seder, and it fulfills the obligation to act like royalty and free people. But reclining can also symbolize laziness. Jews had many roles and displayed various character flaws throughout their history, but they were rarely lazy, though it is true that there were always some lazy Jews. Thus, on all other nights-Exiles, Jews both reclined and did not recline. But during this night-Exile "*kulanu misubim*" – Jews have been lazy (by and large) in their Jewish practice. In the

---

<sup>22</sup> Esther 4:16-17

<sup>23</sup> Esther 10:3

<sup>24</sup> Exodus 3:22, 12:35

<sup>25</sup> Esther 9:10

<sup>26</sup> Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 32:5

<sup>27</sup> Rashi commentary to Numbers 26:5



many years of this *Galut*-Exile, Jews did not display the same energy and commitment to Judaism as in the previous Exiles. Today, especially, it is far easier to be observant than in any other generation. And yet, it is a fact that fewer Jews today than ever before carefully observe Mitzvot, often due to laziness. While there are more Jews today eating Glatt Kosher, there are also many more Jews today eating non-Kosher than ever before, even though thousands of Kosher products are on the shelves of almost every supermarket. While modern inventions have made Shabbat observance far easier than any other time during Jewish history, the sad fact is that too many Jews are simply too lazy to keep Shabbat and its demands.

Why is this night-Exile so much longer than the previous night-Exiles? Four reasons: Lack of Jewish unity, Jewish greed, Jewish sensuality and Jewish laziness. The lessons of the *Ma Nishtana* are clear. In order to end this long night of *Galut*-Exile, Jews need to reverse this trend.

### **RABBI AKIVA IN BNEI BRAK**

This paragraph describes the story of the five great sages of the Mishna who discussed the Exodus story all night until their students informed them in the morning that it was time to pray. This paragraph ostensibly was inserted into the Haggadah in order to give credence to the statement in the previous paragraph about the importance of expanding upon the telling of the Exodus story beyond the written text. However, in analyzing the words of the paragraph carefully, two questions come to mind: 1) Why was it necessary to tell us that this event took place in Bnei Brak? It does not seem to add anything to the story and thereby seems irrelevant. If the same story had taken place in Jerusalem, Teaneck, London, Beverly Hills, Melbourne or Boro Park (if these cities had existed at that time), the impact would have been the same. Why is it important to know that the story occurred, in particular, in Bnei Brak? 2) There is a specific obligation on each Yom Tov holiday<sup>28</sup> to visit one's Rebbe or primary Torah teacher. Historically, we know that of the five Rabbis present that night, it was Rabbi Tarfon who was the oldest and considered the teacher.<sup>29</sup> His home was in the city of Lod, not Bnei Brak. Why, then didn't these Rabbis fulfill their obligation and have Pesach Seder by Rabbi Tarfon in Lod, rather than Bnei Brak?

To begin to answer this question, we need to understand who these five Rabbis were, and what their relationship was, when they lived and what was special about Bnei Brak. On the final page of the tractate of Makkot,<sup>30</sup> there is a well-known story about these very same Rabbis, who lived in the generation immediately following the Destruction of the Second Holy Temple and apparently were very close to each other (there are numerous Talmudic stories that feature them). As these five Rabbis passed by the sight where the Holy Temple once stood (before Islam existed and built a Mosque on this area), they saw a fox running on that hallowed ground. They all began to cry, with the exception of Rabbi Akiva who smiled and laughed, showing happiness in contrast to their sorrow. When they asked him why he was happy, he asked them why they were sad. They said that to see an animal emerge from the place of the Holy of Holies was a desecration of G-d's name and reminded them of how empty Jewish life was now without a Holy Temple. Rabbi Akiva responded by claiming that this was precisely why he felt happy: Just as the prophet predicted the desolation of Jerusalem,<sup>31</sup> which was now fulfilled, so too the other predictions about Jerusalem by the prophets would eventually be fulfilled, as it says<sup>32</sup> that once again elderly men and women, along with boys and girls will fill the streets of Jerusalem. Thus, Rabbi Akiva was joyous, knowing that this, too (the future Redemption – *Metzudat Dovid*), would eventually become a reality. With these words, the Rabbis were comforted. Thus, Rabbi Akiva had the ability to face what was

---

<sup>28</sup> Rosh Hashana 16b

<sup>29</sup> Menachot 68b

<sup>30</sup> Makkot 24b

<sup>31</sup> Micah 3:12

<sup>32</sup> Zechariah 8:4

an ostensibly depressing experience, and see beyond the here and now to not only be optimistic, but also to give comfort to his fellow Rabbis. It is against this backdrop that the story in the Haggadah took place.

As noted, these five Rabbis who lived during and immediately after the Temple's destruction were particularly sensitive and sad regarding the lack of a Holy Temple. Their sadness was certainly highlighted at Pesach time when just a few years before, every Jew brought a sacrifice to the Holy Temple on Pesach eve. Thus, these Rabbis utterly dreaded the Pesach Seder without a Temple, where their "celebration" would undoubtedly be a depressing experience. Realizing this, they knew that they needed to turn to Rabbi Akiva to once again bring them cheer and optimism on this Pesach. Therefore, rather than go to Rabbi Tarfon's house in Lod, which was proper protocol and Jewish law, they decided they "needed" to go to Rabbi Akiva's house instead. It was Rabbi Akiva who lived in Bnai Brak. They went there for the Seder and indeed he did manage to make Pesach an uplifting experience for his rabbinic colleagues, despite the lack of a Holy Temple, so it was not the depressing encounter that they had feared.

This idea is further developed by a deeper reading of the paragraph with an awareness of its symbolism of night and day, darkness and light. As noted above (see Kli Yakar's explanation of *Ma Nishtana*), night and darkness represent *Galut*-Exile, life without a Holy Temple and general despair, while day and light symbolize the opposite feeling of optimism and happiness in Judaism. Thus, it was these five Rabbis who gathered "on that night," as it says in the Haggadah. It was that particular night of sadness, caused by the realization that Pesach would have to be celebrated without the Paschal sacrifice after the Temple's destruction. And it was Rabbi Akiva who lived in Bnai Brak, the name of the city that translates as "the people of the lightning bolt." Rabbi Akiva was that lightning, or strong light, who was able to remove the darkness that enveloped everyone around him, including his peers, these Rabbis. After experiencing that long night of depression and sadness with Rabbi Akiva, his students came to this group of Rabbis and declared, "The light of day has come." It was then that these Rabbis were finally convinced to see beyond the "night" in front of them and realize that there would be a day, a time when G-d's presence would again be manifest. It was then time to say the *Shema* and reaffirm their belief.

### **TZE ULEMAD**

The first two Hebrew words of this paragraph are highly enigmatic: "*Tze Ulemad*-Go out and learn." Where are Jews supposed to go out from – their homes? Why must they study only this paragraph and these words? Isn't the entire night an exercise of Torah study? (See the Introduction to the Order of the Seder, *Principle #4*.) What is so special about this paragraph that it is the only text in the entire Haggadah that the Rabbis tell Jews to go out and to study it?

As mentioned above, the Rabbis desired for Jews to learn the entire Haggadah on a deeper level each year (*Principle #3*). It is this particular paragraph that is the paradigm of this principle, as the ideas expressed in these sentences cannot be found or understood through the simple reading of the Torah text, and Lavan's evil side cannot possibly be comprehended without a deeper study of the Torah. The "going out," then, signifies leaving the simple meaning of the Haggadah and the Torah and going out of the accepted *Pshat*-simple reading to think "out of the box" in order to grasp what the Torah and Rabbis are actually teaching. Every passage of the Haggadah should indeed be studied with the same depth and analysis, but this paragraph, more than any other in the Haggadah, shows why without this in-depth study even some of the straightforward messages of the Haggadah will not be properly understood. What is that message and deeper understanding?

This Haggadah passage asserts that Laban (Lavan), brother of Rebecca and father-in-law of Jacob, was the worst villain in the entire Torah. He was worse than Pharaoh, who killed Jewish babies and tortured the enslaved Jews. But this idea seems to make little sense based on what we know about Lavan

from the Torah itself: It was Lavan who opened his home to Jacob when he came to a strange country as a young, single man. Lavan gave his two daughters, Leah and Rachel, in marriage to Jacob. Jacob lived in Lavan's home for 20 years. Lavan also gave Jacob employment and Jacob became a rich man as a result. So how can this man, Lavan, be characterized as evil at all? And why is he considered worse than Pharaoh? Only by analyzing the true nature of Lavan and the ideas of the Haggadah on a deeper level can we begin to comprehend the words of this paragraph and the true wickedness of Lavan.

Throughout history, continued Jewish existence has repeatedly been threatened in one of two ways – either through attempts at physical annihilation, or by attempting a spiritual destruction of the souls of the Jews. The physical destruction is symbolized by the actions of figures like Pharaoh, the Amalekites, and the Hamans of the world. In the past 100 years, this threat was most obviously demonstrated by Nazi Germany. The holiday that symbolizes this threat and the Jewish attempt to overcome it is Purim. But there is another threat to Jewish existence which is more subtle. It is the spiritual threat by regimes that allow Jews to live (ostensibly) normal lives as human beings, but try to remove from the Jews their Torah learning, Jewish culture and any vestige of Judaism. The Syrian-Greeks and later the Romans tried to do this to the Jews. In the past 100 years, this threat was most clearly exhibited by the Soviet Union, who tried to wipe out all remnants of Judaism while (for the sake of appearance) giving Jews full rights as Soviet citizens. The holiday that symbolizes this threat and the Jewish attempt to overcome that peril is Chanukah. In the Torah, the physical threat is most symbolized by Pharaoh, while the spiritual threat is most symbolized by Lavan.

While it is not readily evident in the Torah's text, the Rabbis understood Lavan's actions at the end of his twenty years with Jacob to be a deliberate attempt to uproot and tear apart Jacob and his family (who comprised the entire Jewish people at that time). Had he succeeded, says the Haggadah, there would have been no Jewish people. What exactly did Lavan do? When Jacob wanted to take his family to the Promised Land and fulfill his destiny, Lavan tried to stop him, first with words and later with threats. Lavan did not want his children and grandchildren to become the Jewish people. Jacob was so afraid that Lavan would not let him return to the Land of Israel<sup>33</sup> that he actually had to run away and sneak out of his home.<sup>34</sup> When Lavan found out and tried to overtake Jacob, they eventually decided to part with a peace treaty. But even here, Lavan attempted to "paper over" the differences between the heritage and values of his family and Jacob's family. At the signing of the treaty, Lavan intentionally recalled both the G-d of Abraham and the gods of Nachor (Terach's father) as equals who live side by side,<sup>35</sup> thereby trying to create a parallel, a bond and a continued relationship between the two families. Jacob did not let this attempt go unanswered, but sealed the treaty by mentioning only the G-d of his father Isaac, who has no blood relationship with Lavan at all. Thus, while not trying to kill Jacob physically, Lavan attempted to destroy the Jewish people from within, by preventing their return to the Land and destroying their uniqueness as a people.

It is no accident that Targum Yonatan<sup>36</sup> and the Midrash<sup>37</sup> say that Lavan and Bilam were one and the same person (figuratively). These are the only two individuals in the entire Torah who tried to destroy the Jewish people spiritually. Lavan's attempt is described above. Bilaam tried to harm and eliminate Judaism first by cursing the Jewish people and, when this was unsuccessful, he orchestrated sending the daughters of Moav to seduce the Jewish men and commit acts of idolatry with *Baal Peor*. Without Pinchas' act of zealotry in killing the perpetrators, Bilaam might have indeed succeeded. It is then no

---

<sup>33</sup> Genesis 31:2-3

<sup>34</sup> Genesis 31:20

<sup>35</sup> Genesis 31:53

<sup>36</sup> Targum Yonatan commentary on Numbers 22:5

<sup>37</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Vayetze 13 and Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 2:247

accident that G-d specifically chose to bury Moshe opposite *Baal Peor*.<sup>38</sup> Why did G-d choose this particular place (even though the exact spot is unknown)? In doing this, G-d is signaling to us that it is the spiritual threat of *Baal Peor* that is the greatest challenge to Jewish survival, and therefore Jews “need” Moshe to symbolically “guard” and protect them from this threat. With all the physical battles in the Torah, it is *Baal Peor* and the spiritual threat that is the most dangerous. The Haggadah, as well, is echoing this idea, and telling Jews that when faced with these two threats to Jewish existence, it is the spiritual danger that makes Jewish survival precarious, much more than the physical threat. In this paragraph, the Haggadah therefore says that while Pharaoh killed the Jewish male babies (a physical threat), had Lavan succeeded in carrying out his plan, he would have destroyed all of Judaism. Thus, Lavan is, indeed, much worse than Pharaoh.

The same dichotomy between these two types of threats and choices faced the Jewish people again much later in their history. In the early 1800’s Napoleon’s army was battling the Russians for domination of Europe. Napoleon represented the new democratic ideas of freedom and modernism that were a becoming challenge to a traditional Jewish lifestyle, while the Czar and the Russian government represented classic antisemitism, with pogroms that had killed many Jews. As the French army was about to invade Russia, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe was asked by his Chasidim who they should root for to win this battle, not only between armies, but also in the battle of ideas. Which kind of lifestyle would be “better for the Jews” – that is, more conducive to traditional Judaism? Although the Lubavitcher Rebbe knew from personal experience what it meant for Jews to live under an antisemitic Czar, nevertheless he told his Chasidim that they should pray for the Russians to be victorious. The Rebbe understood the idea expressed in this paragraph of the Haggadah -- i.e., that the spiritual threat of assimilation, which would follow emancipation by Napoleon, was a far greater threat to the future of the Jewish people than the physical antisemitism in Russia under the Czar. Jews are witnessing the same phenomenon today, unfortunately. Somehow, Jews were able to survive as a people despite all the pogroms and antisemitic threats against them, even the Holocaust, when one in three Jews in the world was brutally murdered. But in the latter half of the twentieth century, when all the doors of Western Culture were cast wide open to Jews and all barriers to becoming full citizens in society were totally removed, there have been more Jews leaving Judaism in the past 50 years than all the Jews lost in the killings of the previous 50 years. Once again, it is the spiritual threat that is the far greater challenge to Jewish survival than the physical threat. This was first explained by the Rabbis in the Haggadah, by showing (in this paragraph) that beneath the surface, Lavan was worse than Pharaoh. Jews must heed the words of the Rabbis in the Haggadah and face this challenge to our survival, which began with Lavan’s plot.

### **RABBAN GAMLIEL OMER**

In this paragraph, Rabban Gamliel describes the minimum actions required by each Jew on Pesach night to fulfill his or her obligations at the Seder. Since the Torah requires the Jew to eat the Paschal sacrifice (when the Temple stood), the Matzah and Maror,<sup>39</sup> we would have expected Rabban Gamliel to state: ‘Anyone who has not eaten from the Pesach, Matzah and Maror has not fulfilled his or her obligation on Seder night.’ But this is not what this paragraph says and what Rabban Gamliel declared. Rather, he states: “Anyone who has not spoken (about) these three things (Pesach, Matzah and Maror) has not fulfilled his obligation (on Pesach night).” This is indeed strange. We know that, in general, mitzvot-commandments that are action commandments can be fulfilled merely by doing the action, without saying any words, or even without any specific thoughts while doing the mitzvah-commandment.<sup>40</sup> As long as a Jew does not have any intention not to fulfill the commandment, it will be fulfilled by merely doing it correctly. And, aside from this passage, there is no mention in any of the Codes of Jewish Law of discussing the idea of Matzah, in order to fulfill the obligation on Seder night. Therefore,

---

<sup>38</sup> Deuteronomy 34:6

<sup>39</sup> Exodus 12:8

<sup>40</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 60:4, 63:4

if a secular Russian Jew who just came to Israel and knows nothing about Pesach eats a piece of Matzah on Seder night because he cannot find any store selling bread in the country on that day, he has completely fulfilled his mitzvah to eat Matzah. Why, then, does Rabban Gamliel say that a Jew is obligated to speak about Pesach, Matzah and Maror in order to fulfill the obligation? Why did the Rabbis include this passage in the Haggadah, although it seems not to follow Jewish law regarding the mitzvah of eating Matzah and Maror?

Rabban Gamliel's words are not at all referring to a Jew's obligation to eat Matzah or Maror on Pesach night. A Jew can indeed fulfill this obligation merely by eating the minimum amount required. Rabban Gamliel is speaking about the mitzvah-commandment on Pesach night to tell over the story of the Exodus. He is saying that it is not enough to merely "go through the motions of eating" or even to say all of the words of the Haggadah. In order for Jews to fulfill the obligation to feel as though they actually left Egypt (*Principle #2*), they are obligated to understand the meaning behind all the customs and rituals of the Seder. To understand and feel the Egyptian experience, it is not sufficient to recite the Four Questions, to dip, to lean and to eat. Without understanding the ideas behind the rituals, there is no meaning to them. And without meaning, one cannot fulfill the essential obligation of the Seder. While it is true that normally in Judaism, *Kavana*-intention and understanding is not a requirement in performing a mitzvah-commandment, there are certain commandments where understanding and *Kavana*-intention is an essential part of the obligation itself. Thus, a Jew does not fulfill the mitzvah-commandment of prayer or the verse of the *Shema* without understanding what he or she is reciting. Rabban Gamliel is stating that the mitzvah-commandment of the Seder follows the same principle. Without understanding the meaning behind the words and actions, one cannot fulfill the essential mitzvah of Seder night. According to Rabban Gamliel, to feel and understand the Exodus experience at a minimum, a Jew has to understand why Jews eat the Pesach, Matzah and Maror.

---

*Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.*