

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Pesach

The Four Cups on Seder Night

BACKGROUND: THE MITZVAH

One of the central features of Seder night is the *mitzvah* of drinking four cups of wine. These cups are drunk at various key defining moments of the Seder.

Where does this *mitzvah* come from?

The four cups are a rabbinic *mitzvah*.¹ However, when we consult the words of the Rambam on the matter, we will discover an additional dimension within this *mitzvah*:

*“In each generation, a person must display himself as if he personally just left the subjugation of Egypt... and regarding this matter Hashem commanded us saying: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt”, meaning, as if you yourself were a slave and went out to freedom and were redeemed. Therefore, when one partakes of the festive meal on this night, he must eat and drink reclining in a manner which expresses freedom. And every man and woman must drink four cups of wine.”*²

The Rambam sees *displaying oneself* as if he came out of Egypt as a defining characteristic of the *mitzvah* of telling the story of the Exodus. The Torah does not detail exactly *how* one must display this. However, the Rabbis lent specific definition to the mode of display – reclining and drinking four cups. It thus emerges that the four cups have a dual nature. As an *obligation* they are rabbinic in origin, but they are nonetheless a *fulfillment* of a Torah *mitzvah* regarding how to tell the story of the Exodus.

PIRSUMEI NISA

These words of the Rambam will help us appreciate another special element within these four cups: *pirsumei nisa* – publicizing the miracle. With regards to the *mitzvah* of Chanuka lights, the Rambam writes:

*“The mitzvah of Chanuka lights is a most beloved mitzvah, and one must take care with it in order to publicize the miracle... even one who is supported by charity must borrow or sell his clothing in order to purchase oil and wicks with which to light.”*³

1 see Pesachim 117b

2 *Hilchos chametz u'matzah* 7:6-7

3 *Hilchos Chanuka* 4:12

From where does the Rambam derive this ruling that one must procure Chanuka lights at all costs? The answer is – the four cups on Seder night!

The Talmud⁴ states that even one supported by charity must take every measure to procure wine for the four cups. The Rambam draws an analogy between the four cups and Chanuka lights, for they share a common theme – *pirsumei nisa*! When a person drinks wine on Seder night to display his freedom, he is publicizing a miracle as surely as when he lights a menorah on Chanuka.

SYMBOLISM OF THE FOUR CUPS

The Rabbis⁵ explain the background to the four cups by associating them with the four expressions of redemption initially promised by Hashem:

1. *"I will take you out (והוצאתי) from under the crushing burdens of Egypt*
2. *and I will save you (והצלתי) from their servitude,*
3. *and I will redeem you (וגאלתי) with great judgments and an outstretched arm,*
4. *and I will take you (ולקחתי) to me as a people."*⁶

What is the meaning of these four expressions?

R' Azariah Fego⁷ explains. Oppression against the Jewish people can take one of four forms.

1. Financial: disproportionate taxation, looting etc.
2. Physical: inflicting injury or death.
3. Respect: vilifying or degrading the Jewish people.
4. Spiritual: causing the spiritual state of the Jewish people to deteriorate.

When we consider the oppression of the Jewish people in Egypt, we will see that it actually consisted of all of these forms.

1. Initial anti-Jewish measures took the form of excessive taxation to build royal cities. This is referred to in the verse "And he placed tax-masters over them, in order to afflict them with their burdens".⁸
2. The Jewish people underwent intense physical oppression, with back-breaking labor being their daily fare. Jewish children were thrown into the Nile, and later on slaughtered for Pharaoh to bathe in their blood.⁹
3. There is no greater assault on the national pride of the Jewish people than turning them into slaves, people of no significance or value.
4. The Jewish people were influenced by the pagan ways of their Egyptian neighbors, including idol-worship.¹⁰

It transpires that a full deliverance of the Jewish people from Egypt involved redeeming them from all of these four forms of oppression. This is the meaning of the four expressions:

1. *"I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt"* – refers to the crushing burdens of financial strain.
2. *"I will save them from their service"* – refers to the physically unbearable labor.

4 Pesachim 99b

5 Talmud Yerushalmi Pesachim 10:1

6 Shemos 6:6-7

7 *Binah Le'itim, drush 26*

8 Shemos 1:11

9 See Rashi Shemos 2:23

10 See Rashi Shemos 12:6

3. *“I will redeem them with great judgments and an outstretched arm”* – We note that, unlike the first two expressions, this expression does not mention from what they will be redeemed, but rather how. When we think about it, the Exodus from Egypt could have taken place on a much lower key, and in a much less supernatural way. What is achieved by orchestrating the Exodus with great judgments and an outstretched arm? The honor of the Jewish people is restored! It is displayed for all to see that Almighty God has chosen us to be His people. We are a significant enterprise!
4. *“I will take you to me as a people”* – refers to the giving of the Torah, the ultimate program for Godly living, and the rehabilitation from the spiritual damage incurred through our sojourn in Egypt.

These four aspects of redemption find expression in the four cups.

1. *Kiddush*: celebrating our sanctification, spiritual redemption.
2. *After Maggid*: having left the work of Egypt behind.
3. *Birkas Hamazon*: a blessing over material prosperity.
4. *Hallel*: A song of celebration over our status as Hashem’s nation.

THE FOUR CUPS AND THE BUTLER’S DREAM

Another explanation of the significance of the four cups is given by the Rabbis.¹¹ The four cups on Seder night correspond to the four times the word כוס (cup) appears in the dream which Pharaoh’s butler recounted to Yosef.¹² How does that dream have any relevance to us on Seder night?

According to the Maharal,¹³ Yosef’s personal experience in Egypt had a direct bearing on the national experience of the Jewish people later on.¹⁴ In a sense, Yosef paved the way for a positive outcome. The roots of the Exodus from Egypt could be said to be found in the ascendancy of Yosef all those years ago, and that began with his accurate and auspicious interpretation of the butler’s dream. Therefore, when celebrating our Exodus, we remember the four cups mentioned in that dream. [It is interesting to note that the dream of the baker featured three baskets of bread one on top of the other. Seder night is the only night that we have three breads one on top of the other.]

A VISION OF FREEDOM: TWO DREAM SCENARIOS

R’ Eliyahu Klatzkin of Lublin¹⁵ offers a fascinating interpretation of the above connection between the butler’s dream and the Seder. Upon hearing the two dreams, Yosef told his two cell mates that in three days’ time the butler would be restored to his former position, and the baker would be hanged. How did he know that they would suffer such different fates?

Aside from the Divine inspiration with which Yosef was endowed, R’ Klatzkin explains that their different fates may actually be perceived within the dreams themselves. A person’s dreams are an expression of his innermost desires. Both the butler and the baker had dreams, but what did they dream about? In the butler’s dream, he is once again placing a cup of wine in Pharaoh’s hand. This indicates that even after having been incarcerated by Pharaoh, he remains a faithful servant and would like nothing more than to return to his former position of service.

The baker, on the other hand, has no such desires. In his dream there is no mention of Pharaoh, there

11 Talmud Yerushalmi Pesachim loc. cit.

12 See Bereishis 39:11-13

13 Gevuros Hashem chap. 11

14 This idea is similar to the concept of *maaseh avos siman le’banim* – the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the sons, as referred to by Chazal in the Midrash.

15 *Chibas Hakodesh*, drushim

is only him, and the birds. Yosef intuits that that Pharaoh will reciprocate to each of his servants in kind. In the butler, he will recognize someone who is ultimately a faithful servant; he will overlook his misdemeanor and reinstate him. In the baker, he will see no such sentiment, and will not be inclined to spare him from the full weight of his crime.

Why is this idea of such importance to us on this night? The reason, explains R' Klatzkin, is that tonight we are celebrating our freedom, and freedom is a commodity whose value needs to be assessed correctly. To what end did Hashem give us our freedom, and what are we to do with it? On this very special night, we need to take a lesson from the butler as to what freedom is for. It is to dedicate ourselves to the highest service, to aspire to the highest levels of human existence, and not be held back by more mundane restrictions. It is this appreciation of the value and goals of freedom which will endow it with ultimate meaning.

As we mentioned, the four cups feature at key junctures in the Seder. Specifically, they all feature in the capacity of *kos shel bracha* – a cup that accompanies a blessing. The Talmud expresses the formulation of this enactment.

“The Rabbis instituted four cups as an expression of freedom. They said: let us perform mitzvos with them.”¹⁶

There is a profound lesson in this statement. The Rabbis took cups of wine (which are an expression of freedom) and harnessed them to become cups of bracha in order to achieve ultimate realization of what they are celebrating. In a sense, elevating these cups of freedom to become cups of *mitzvah* is a template for how we are to relate to the entire idea of freedom itself.

B'virkas chag kasher ve'sameach!

16 Pesachim 117b