

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## PESACH

### The Color of Seder Night

#### INTRODUCTION: REMEMBERING IN REAL TIME

One of the pillars of Seder night, and itself one of the six-hundred-and-thirteen mitzvos of the Torah, is recounting the story of the exodus from Egypt. For many commentators, the defining characteristic of this *mitzvah* is based on a famous passage that is found in the Haggadah, towards the end of *Maggid*:

*“In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he came out of Egypt”*

To this statement, the Rambam<sup>1</sup> adds a critical word, *“As if he came out now...”*

In other words, whereas throughout the year one is obligated to *remember* leaving Egypt as an event that occurred in the past, on *Seder* night the *mitzvah* is to *experience* it as something happening *in the present!*

This insight has many implications for the way in which we tell the story:

With all the extra things we recite on Seder night, it is easy not to notice things that are missing. On every occasion that we perform *mitzvos* commemorating a miracle, we recite the *blessing* **שעשה נסים לאבותינו** – *Who wrought miracles for our fathers*. This blessing is said on Purim prior to reading the *Megillah* and on Chanukah prior to lighting the *Menorah*. We would naturally expect that this *blessing* would likewise be recited on Seder night, when the greatest miracles of all occurred – yet it is absent!

Rav Amram Gaon was asked to explain this phenomenon, and he replied: *“It is a night of salvation and greater than miracles.”*

What do these words mean? The commentators explain that the blessing **שעשה נסים** commemorates a *past* event of a miracle performed for our ancestors. When a person experiences the miracle *himself* and is saved by it, this blessing is neither necessary nor appropriate. Thus, on Seder night, this blessing is not relevant to us, as surely as it was not relevant to the Jewish people leaving Egypt!<sup>2</sup>

Here we need to ask: why is it so important to tell the story as if it is happening to us now? Why is it not

<sup>1</sup> Hil. Chametz 7:6

<sup>2</sup> R' Velvel Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rav, explains that the idea of ‘seeing oneself as if he just came out of Egypt’ likewise bestows a unique status upon the *Hallel* which we say on Seder night. We do not recite it as a commemoration of a past miracle, but rather as a response to a miracle which has just now happened. Thus we call it **שירה חדשה** – *a new song*.

sufficient to recount it as something that happened long ago – which it did?

To understand why we tell the story this way, we need to consider what exactly the goal of recounting the Exodus on Seder night is.

## A NIGHT OF APPRECIATION

In the course of explaining the *mitzvah* of recounting the Exodus, the Rambam writes:<sup>3</sup>

*And the more a person adds in his retelling, and discussing at length to appreciate the magnitude of what Hashem did for us, and the way that the Egyptians oppressed us, and how Hashem exacted vengeance from them, and in thanking Him for all the kindnesses that He performed for us, the greater will be [the performance of the mitzvah].*

In these words, the Rambam has identified the element of thanksgiving as an integral part of Seder night. The goal of the retelling of the story is to bring us to a point of profound appreciation for Hashem having taken us out of Egypt to become His people.

Indeed, according to the Vilna Gaon, the theme of thanksgiving is the underlying basis for the four cups of wine. During temple times, there was an offering known as a *Todah* – thanksgiving offering. The Talmud<sup>4</sup> tells us that there are four experiences of salvation which would obligate a person to bring a *Todah* offering:

1. יורדי הים – *one who has crossed the sea.*
2. הולכי מדברות – *one who traversed the desert.*
3. מי שהיה חולה ונתרפא – *one who was sick and became healed.*
4. מי שהיה חבוי בבית האסורים ויצא – *one who was incarcerated and became free.*

Upon reflection, we will appreciate that the Jewish people are obligated to give thanks to Hashem on all four counts:

1. We crossed the sea (to put it mildly!).
2. We traveled through the desert.
3. We were rescued from the hazardous conditions of slavery.
4. We were released from bondage.

It is this four-fold obligation of gratitude which we express as we drink four cups of wine in appreciation of Hashem's kindness to us.

The theme of thanksgiving is the reason why, on this night, a person has to see himself as if *he* came out of Egypt.

What does this personalization add to the story?

The answer is: Appreciation! When I tell a story that just happened to me, I am emotionally involved on a different plane than if it was something that happened to others long ago.

In truth, our appreciation for 'old' events should really be no less than that of our forefathers, for we are as much the beneficiaries of that kindness as they were. Thus, to tell the story as a detached event that happened to others long ago would in fact be *emotionally false*, and would miss one of the main goals of the evening.

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3 Sefer HaMitzvos, Positive *mitzvah* 157

4 Berachos 54b

## BITTER AND SWEET MEMORIES

This central theme of appreciation will help us understand other unique features of the way we tell the story this evening. Regarding the *mitzvah* of recounting the Exodus on Seder night, the Mishnah<sup>5</sup> states:

מתחילין בגנות ומסיימין בשבח – *We begin with the negative and end with the positive.*

Why is it necessary to recall all those unpleasant things? Why not just focus on the positive?

The reason we need to begin with the negative, is that without any sense of the negative which came first, we may well *understand* intellectually that we are now free, but we would not *appreciate* it emotionally. Human nature is such that appreciation is a function of contrasts. A person who is in a room where the temperature is pleasant will not appreciate it unless he has just come in either from the stifling heat or the freezing cold. Accordingly we need to put ourselves back into conditions as they were in Egypt, so that we will not only understand that we are free, but also appreciate and feel it fully.<sup>6</sup>

## FRUIT FOR THOUGHT

Another special feature of telling the story is one of the central components of the Haggadah: we expound the section of ארמי אוֹבֵד אֲבִי.

In Devarim, chapter 26, the Torah describes the *mitzvah* of bringing *bikkurim* – first fruits – to the Temple. As part of the *mitzvah*, one recites a paragraph consisting of five verses which are a retrospective look at our sojourn in Egypt, the persecution we endured there, and how Hashem took us out. The telling of the story of the Exodus within the *Maggid* section takes the form of explaining these verses. Each phrase is elaborated upon by quoting from the relevant Torah portions in Shemos which describe the events as they were happening.

Why do we tell the story this way, using this brief paragraph as a springboard for the story? Why not simply read the relevant portions of the Torah in order?

As we mentioned, the section of ארמי אוֹבֵד אֲבִי is recited when one brings *bikkurim* – the first fruits to the Temple. The recounting of the story in that context is as *an expression of gratitude* for the blessing that Hashem has bestowed upon the person. It is this atmosphere of gratitude which forms the backdrop for the telling of the story on Seder night, and thus the story takes the form of elaborating upon the words and phrases of that paragraph.

Indeed, a key feature of the paragraph of ארמי אוֹבֵד אֲבִי is that it is said in the *first person*. It describes the way the Egyptians persecuted *us*, how Hashem heard *our* prayers and how He delivered *us* from Egypt. The personal connection with the events described in this paragraph makes it the desired platform from which to tell the story, with the relevant verses (which are written in the third person) brought in for purposes of elaboration.

## THE MORAL OF THE STORY

The idea that emerges from the above sources is that the telling of the story of the Exodus should lead us to a feeling of gratitude towards Hashem for delivering us.

What should that feeling of gratitude lead us to?

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5 Pesachim 115a

6 Indeed, although the phrase “מסיימים בשבח” is commonly translated as “we conclude with the positive,” in contrast to the “negative (גנות)” mentioned earlier, the Ritva translates it simply as, “we conclude with praise,” for this is the goal of telling the story and its destination – to thank and praise Hashem.

At the conclusion of the third paragraph of *Shema*, the Torah expresses the purpose of the Exodus from Egypt:

*I am Hashem your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, to be to you as a God.*<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the reason Hashem took us out of Egypt is in order that He will be our God, and we will be His people. The culmination of the Exodus was in our accepting Hashem's sovereignty over us, and receiving His Torah with a full commitment to live by its Divine instructions.

The ultimate goal of re-experiencing the exodus on Seder night reflects the purpose of the original Exodus itself. The overwhelming feelings of gratitude which are the result of telling the story as if *we* came out of Egypt, must find realization in our own renewed acceptance of Hashem's Torah.

How do our feelings of gratitude lead to a renewed acceptance of Torah?

On a simple level, as a result of our appreciation of Hashem's kindness, we agree to reciprocate and accept His commandments.

On a deeper level, by reflecting on the ultimate kindness that Hashem bestowed on us by delivering us from Egypt, we come to appreciate that He has our ultimate wellbeing at heart, and wants nothing more than what is best for us. That being the case, if He led us from Egypt to Mount Sinai and gave us His Torah, it must follow that embracing the Torah and adhering to its precepts constitutes for us the ultimate way of living. Having established through the Exodus that Hashem wants us to succeed and thrive as a people, we will naturally respond by wholeheartedly accepting the path towards that success that He has charted for us in His Torah.

May our journey from Egypt this year through telling the story of the Exodus constitute a decisive step toward that story's ultimate conclusion – the final redemption speedily in our days!

B'VIRKAS CHAG KASHER VESEMEACH!

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<sup>7</sup> Bamidbar 15:41