

## Pesach : A New Approach (Edited Transcript)

[Listen to audio](#)

With Pesach just around the corner, I wanted to share with you an amazing question, which changes the way we think about Pesach. This coming Monday and Tuesday night we will all be sitting around our seder tables. The seder is such a highlight of the year. But what is it really about?

As we know, the atmosphere and purpose of the seder is thanksgiving to G-d for having taken us out of Egypt. It is a night of gratitude and acknowledgement of the great miracles - the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea - that we witnessed when we were taken out of Egypt.

What are we grateful for?

The Dubnah Magid, one of our great sages from 19th-century Eastern Europe, asked a very simple question, which necessitates taking a step back and re-examining everything we thought we understood about Pesach. He asks: what are we thanking G-d for? The Dubnah Magid, famous for his analogies, gives the following parable to explain: Suppose you break your arm, G-d forbid, and a doctor sets the bones, puts it in a cast, and helps you make a full recovery. You would be grateful and give thanks to the doctor. But what if it was the doctor who broke your arm in the first place? Would you still be grateful to him for healing you?

The analogy is clear: why, asks the Dubnah Magid, should we give thanks to G-d on Pesach if He put us into slavery in the first place? We were not taken into slavery by an invading army. We had been in the Land of Israel and G-d made a plan to get Jacob and his family to go down to Egypt. (Remember, Joseph was sold; then there was a famine, and Jacob and his family went down to Egypt and were reunited with him.) And even on the way down to Egypt, when Jacob was concerned about going down, G-d told him to go, that this was part of the plan and that He would be with him. G-d had even foretold this to Abraham in the famous vision of the Covenant Between the Pieces, where He said: "Your children will be strangers in a land that is not theirs. They will be enslaved and oppressed." G-d engineered events so that the Jewish people would end up in Egypt. If He put us into slavery in the first place, why do we thank Him for taking us out of it?

This question strikes at the heart of what Pesach is about. The Dubnah Magid provides the following analysis as an answer. On seder night we give thanks to G-d not only for our freedom, but for the slavery too, because it was the slavery, along with the resulting freedom, that made us into the Jewish people and changed the course of human civilisation with the giving of the Torah. The slavery was an integral part of the process of getting to Mount Sinai and becoming the Jewish people.

This is why we eat the maror, the bitter herbs, on seder night. The bitter herbs represent slavery. We don't set aside the bitterness; we talk about it because it was part of the process of becoming a great nation. The structure of the Haggadah, according to the Gemara, is *matchil bignut umesayem bishvach*, it begins with the negative part of the story - the fact that we were slaves in Egypt - and concludes with the positive - our freedom - because the whole story has to be told. It is all part of who we are.

Slavery in Egypt was a prerequisite to becoming the Jewish people

The Dubnah Magid says that we could never have merited to receive the Torah and become the great people who affected the course of history, nor could we have fulfilled our Divine purpose, without having gone through slavery first. Slavery was a necessary preparation, in two ways: firstly, going through suffering and calling out to G-d purifies a person. At times people have to go through difficulties, which elevate them to a much higher level. The Jewish people came out of the whole Egypt experience purified

and with a much greater closeness to G-d.

Secondly, their faith in G-d was strengthened because of the incredible miracles they had witnessed. These miracles - the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea - were only possible because they had been in slavery. Thus, the slavery in Egypt was the platform for these tremendous miracles, which overturned the laws of nature; had there been no enslavement, these miracles would not have been possible. G-d said (Exodus 10:1-2): ?I have made him [Pharaoh] and his advisors stubborn, so that I will be able to demonstrate these miraculous signs among them. You will then be able to tell your children and grandchildren how I did awesome acts with the Egyptians, and how I performed miraculous signs among them. You will then fully realise that I am G-d.?

Belief and knowledge

Interestingly, when G-d first spoke to the Jewish people as a nation, right at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, He introduced Himself with *Anochi Hashem Elokecha asher hotzeiticha me?eretz Mitzrayim mibeit avadim*, ?I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt.?

You can tell a lot by an introduction. When you introduce yourself, or when you introduce someone else, you say, ?this is so-and-so and he or she is ...?. That one-line introduction tells a lot about the person.

Many Jewish philosophers ask, why does G-d introduce Himself as ?the Lord who took you out of the land of Egypt? rather than ?I am the Lord who created heaven and earth?? What is G-d's greater claim to our allegiance - the fact that He created the world or the fact that He took us out of Egypt? Surely the fact that He created the whole world and that we would not even exist were it not for Him is a greater claim. Why, then, does G-d say ?I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt??

In his philosophical work *Kuzari*, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi answers that the reason G-d introduced Himself with reference to Egypt and not Creation is because we witnessed the Exodus, while Creation we did not. Of course, we believe with unquestionable faith that He created the world, and we can look at rational proofs and see the brilliance of Creation; but nevertheless, the Exodus is something we personally saw. The Exodus established a personal bond between G-d and the Jewish people, and it establishes our faith for all future generations. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, another of our great philosophers, made a similarly important point generations later: Jewish belief is not based only on logical deduction. Obviously, there is logical deduction and analytical argument in Jewish thought, but it is based on historical facts.

To illustrate the point: we do not simply ?believe? Napoleon existed; we know he did, because that is an historical fact; one cannot invent history. G-d took us out of Egypt after we had been enslaved. He brought the ten plagues, split the Red Sea, and spoke to us at Mount Sinai. These are historical facts. G-d introduced Himself to us on the basis of historical facts which we saw and experienced. The people who stood at Mount Sinai had seen with their own eyes how G-d took them out of Egypt and they handed that down through the generations. Every year at the seder we reinforce those historical facts as if we saw them with our own eyes; like it says in the Haggadah: ?Each person must feel as though he himself went out of Egypt.? Handing down the historical facts is central to our peoplehood.

None of this would have been possible without the enslavement. Had we not been enslaved, there would be no way to take us out with miracles. This, says the *Dubnah Magid*, was all part of G-d's long and elaborate plan in order to lay the foundations of the Jewish people. We would merit receiving the Torah only by going through the process of suffering and purification, clarifying who we are and getting close to G-d through our pain. And it established the philosophical and ideological foundations for Jewish belief for all generations to come. It is all part of that process, and so when we thank G-d on seder night, we don't just thank Him for the liberation, but for the whole Egypt experience, including the slavery, because both were part of the unfolding process of Jewish destiny.

**Thanking G-d for the Torah**

This is how the Dubnah Magid explains the fact that in the Haggadah, we not only thank G-d for the liberation, but also for giving us the Torah. The Haggadah also mentions how our forefathers were idol worshippers and G-d took us out of that spiritual darkness as well. One might wonder why the giving of the Torah is mentioned in the Haggadah, but based on what we have said we can see that it is part of what we are grateful for on seder night. On seder night, we express our gratitude for how the experience of the slavery and liberation together prepared us to merit to receive the Torah.

Thanking G-d for everything

We eat the bitter herbs because we realise that the difficulty was part of the whole story. We don't set aside the bitterness and the pain, because they are part of the story and without them there would have been no liberation and inspiration. It's all interwoven. This is also true in our personal individual lives. Everything we experience in olam hazeh, this world: there is always a strand of pain and struggle interwoven with our lives. Bitachon, true trust and faith in G-d, is about seeing the bigger picture. It is about acknowledging that life is comprised of challenges and difficulties as well as liberation and the successes, and the things that we want to achieve in this world are bound up with difficulties and challenges that we have to go through.

Every part of Jewish history is part of G-d's plan. We have trust and faith in Him that whatever happens, bitter or sweet, is ultimately for the good - Gam zu letovah, "this too is for the good."

This is why, on seder night, we do not just thank G-d only for being free because, as the Dubnah Magid points out, there have been many enslavements since then. Rather, we are thanking G-d for the foundation of Jewish history and our becoming a people. When Jacob and his family went down to Egypt, they numbered a mere seventy souls. When they left, they numbered millions - an entire nation. They went to Mount Sinai and received G-d's vision for them as the Jewish people. What made all of that possible was the Egypt experience, the pain and the glory, the suffering and the incredible miracles, the struggle and the resulting liberation and inspiration. All of that laid the foundations for the Jewish nation, and for that we are eternally grateful.