

Compendium Of Pesach Articles

1. Article published in the Jerusalem Post

The World Needs More Seders

Going back to the beginning of things can be eye opening. The origins of an official schooling system where students come to learn in an organized and uniform way, are described by the Gemara (Bava Batra 21a), as being the initiative of one great revolutionary genius, Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Gamla, more than 2,000 years ago.

Until he emerged on the scene, home-schooling was the order of the day ? parents taught their own children. This system was built on the fact that parents have the primary mitzva to give a Torah education to their children. The Gemara notes that the problem of such a schooling system was that it had inconsistent success rates, and led to inequality of educational opportunities.

Those children blessed with parents who were able to teach them properly received a good education, and those whose parents were unable to teach them were never given the proper skills of Jewish literacy.

Following experimentation with different models, including centralized schooling in Jerusalem, Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Gamla led the way, together with the support of the great sages of that generation, in establishing a national school system in which every town and village had to have its own school.

Since then, every Jewish community has an halachic obligation to establish Torah schooling for its children, and the Rambam (Laws of Talmud Torah 2:1) ruled, based on the Talmud, that any community that does not fulfill its obligation is liable to be ex-communicated, ?because the world exists for the breath of the young children in school [learning Torah].?

Understanding the beginnings of our school system is important, because it reminds us of the fact that the primary obligation to teach Torah to children rests on the shoulders of parents, and that the school serves as the agent of the parents, assisting them to discharge their sacred duty. This has important practical and psychological implications. Parents need to feel a sense of ownership of the mitzva of giving their children a proper Torah education.

Embracing this responsibility means that parents should take every opportunity possible to learn Torah themselves with their children. The very transmission of our heritage, which was given to us by G-d at Mount Sinai, depends on the bond and relationship between parents and children, and how the values, wisdom, and learning of our Torah heritage is passed from generation to generation.

This theme is intimately connected with Pessah, where the transmission from one generation to the next of the origins of our people in the slavery of Egypt and G-d's liberation of us, with the attendant miracles, is at the heart and soul of the Seder experience. So much of the structure and content of the Seder is geared toward children, so that parents can transmit, in a relevant and interesting way, the essence of our vision of the destiny of our people as given to us by G-d.

And even if there are no children at your Seder, we should all engage in the learning process with a childlike wonder and appreciation for our Torah heritage. In this spirit, and as part of the Generation Sinai project, a program for parents and children to learn Torah together, a pack of Seder learning cards has been made available to print before Passover for use at the Seder at www.generationsinai.com.

The objective of these cards is to facilitate discussions and the sharing of ideas between parents and children during the precious moments of our Pessah Seders.

As one of the most successful institutions of Jewish history, the Seder provides a model for the Jewish world today, which confronts very high levels of assimilation, ignorance, and apathy. The Seder is essentially a grand Torah learning experience and shows that one very powerful answer to the problems we confront today is for parents and children to learn Torah together at home. Through this connection the values, history, and vision of the Jewish people are handed from one generation to the next.

Without Torah learning the Jewish world will be lost. Torah study gives us the inspiration and direction for the future. We can only begin to understand our lives and our purpose on this Earth through learning Hashem's wisdom. Often we are so busy with the immediate tasks in life that we don't see the full picture; we don't fully understand the values and the vision behind Judaism. But when we study Torah, we get to see everything in our lives with clarity and the right perspective.

We need to know why we are here and how we can achieve our purpose in this world, and the way to understand this that is through learning Torah. The lesson of the Seder is that such learning can and must be a cross-generational experience, something to be shared between parents and children.

The Gemara (Sotah 21a) compares this world to a walk in a dark forest, filled with confusion and spiritual and moral pitfalls.

The mitzvot, says the Gemara, are like holding the candle in the dark forest; they illuminate somewhat. Torah learning, however, is like the rising sun which illuminates the signposts, enabling us to see everything and know where to go.

The Seder also shows us how to study Torah together. The Seder is not a presentation; it is not a lecture, but a dialogue, a dynamic conversation.

We begin this conversation with the four questions that ask why this night is different. This thread of questions-and-answers weaves its way across the telling of the Exodus. Clearly, this is not simply about imparting information.

Indeed ? as we learn in the Haggadah itself ? even if a person knows many of the answers, he or she must still engage in the dialogue.

The question-and-answer format promotes this dialogue, and that really is the art of a good Seder ? finding a way to draw participants into a discussion so that it becomes real and relevant to everyone present.

From a psychological perspective, this question- and-answer format engages participants and helps them take ownership of the narrative.

Having this sense of ownership is a very important concept when it comes to learning Torah in general, which is not just about absorbing information or grasping a set of instructions, but about internalizing, making it part of the way we look at the world.

The Seder shows that our homes ? not only our shuls and schools ? can be places of Torah learning. Parents need to embrace their primary mitzva to learn Torah with their children throughout the year. The Generation Sinai project has been established to assist parents with this sacred task at least at the times of the festivals (see generationsinai.com).

Together we can create a culture of Torah learning in our homes. The Seder points the way to how this can be done in a wonderful spirit of fun and fascination. We can extend the magic of the Seder so that families can share dynamic Torah learning experiences throughout the year, and watch our homes become beacons of light and inspiration for us all.

2. Bridge To A New World (Pesach article published 5774)

There is a mitzvah to remember the Exodus from Egypt every single day, not just on Pesach. But on Pesach ? and particularly on the Seder night ? this mitzvah has a number of defining features. Whereas during the year the mitzvah to remember the Exodus

from Egypt is fulfilled by just mentioning it in passing, on the night of the Seder we have to discuss the Exodus in great depth. The discussion has to take the format of question and answer, to allow for real dialogue to take place. This discussion revolves around the very important mitzvot of the Seder night ? the matzo and the maror; we do not just mention the Exodus but are really involved with it at every level, with the sensory activities of eating the matzo and the maror.

The question-and-answer format of the Seder

I would like to focus on one dimension of the Seder which makes it particularly special and that is that its structure is in the form of questions and answers. A Seder should not be a presentation; it is not a shiur or a lecture, but should really be a dialogue, a discussion. We all know that the highlight of the Seder is the MaNishtanah, the asking of ?in what way is this night different from all other nights?? We encourage the children to ask questions, as well as the adults. The question-and-answer format is used in telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt; it is not just a monologue. As we learn in the Haggadah, even if a person knows many of the answers he or she must still engage in a dialogue. It is not just about imparting information but about being engaged in discussion. The question-and-answer format promotes discussion and this is the art of a good Seder ? finding a way of drawing the participants into a discussion so that it becomes real and relevant to everyone at the Seder.

On a psychological level, this question-and-answer format draws people in and they gain a sense of ownership. Having a sense of ownership is a very important concept in general when it comes to Torah. Learning Torah is not just about leaning information or a set of instructions, but necessitates a dialogue and interaction. This is why Torah study is such an important part of Judaism. In learning Torah we discuss, probe, debate, ask, think things through and own the knowledge. People tend to take on things which they feel are a part of who they are. These things can only become part of who we are if we have ownership of them, and we can only have ownership if we actually get involved.

There is great wisdom in the Torah instructing us to do this mitzvah of recounting the Exodus in a question-and-answer format ? as the Chumash itself says, that on that day when your child will ask you, what is this? You will say this is what happened when we were taken out of Egypt. The whole discussion about the Exodus ? in the Torah and in the Haggadah ? is a question-and-answer format. The psychological benefit of this discussion format is that it makes us all part of the process.

But there is a philosophical rationale as well for why the discussion of the Exodus is in a question-and-answer format. There is a fundamental principle underlying the question-and-answer format of the Seder. In his book on Pesach, Rav Yitzchak Hutner, one of the great rabbinic scholars of the 20th century, offers a novel approach to Pesach and to the importance of the question-and-answer format.

The Three Important Tens

There are three events which are very important to us, which are expressed with the number ten. We have discussed in the past how the number ten is significant and how, according to the Maharal, ten is not a new number like the previous ones but is the number that brings together all the apparently disparate parts into one unit and represents a unified whole.

The Mishnah says that G-d created the world with ten utterances or, in Hebrew, asara ma?amarot. This is the first set of tens. The second is the ten plagues in Egypt. The third is the Ten Commandments. The term ?Ten Commandments? is a loose translation of the Hebrew term Aseret HaDibrot, which correctly translates as ?the ten statements.? Although the Ten Commandments are commandments, if you tally up the number of detailed commandments that emerge from them you will see that there are actually more than ten, as many halachic authorities point out. Thus, the ?Ten Commandments? is not an accurate translation ? they?re not called Aseret HaMitzvot in Hebrew, but Aseret HaDibrot, the ten statements.

Rav Hutner points out the pattern here, ten, ten, and ten: ten utterances with which the world was created; ten plagues that broke the resolve of Pharaoh and the Egyptians and freed the Jews from slavery; and then the ten statements, Aseret HaDibrot, or as we know them the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. Rav Hutner asks, what is the link between these three big tens?

Two forms of communication

Rav Hutner asks another fascinating question. When describing how G-d created the world with ten statements, the Mishnah uses the term Ma'amarot, from the Hebrew word ma'amar, from the root aleph, mem, reish, whereas the Ten Commandments are called Dibrot, from the Hebrew word ledaber, with the root dalet, bet, reish. In Hebrew, we have two options for the verb 'to speak': lomar and ledaber. Asks Rav Hutner, why is it that when we talk about the ten statements with which the world was created the Sages of the Talmud use the word Ma'amarot and when we talk about the Ten Commandments they call them Dibrot? What is the difference between ma'amar and dibur?

Communication can take a soft form or a harsher form. In Hebrew the aleph-mem-reish root is the softer form of communication, amira. The dalet-bet-reish root, is the tougher, more demanding form of communication, dibur. Rav Hutner explains that the softer language, amira, is a one-way statement. Sometimes in a conversation you make a statement which does not require a response and is not demanding anything from the listener; it merely relays information. The term ma'amar conveys a particular position but does not require anything of the listener, whereas the term dibrot conveys a statement which does require a response.

Rav Hutner explains the difference between the ten utterances with which the world was created and the ten statements of the Ten Commandments as follows: when G-d created the world - and indeed, when he re-creates the world daily - He revealed Himself with great miracles and showed us His mastery of nature. These are his statements; the world is an expression of His creativity, an expression of His will in the world. Before the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, G-d's communication with the world was in that paradigm - the paradigm of revealing information, revealing His genius, revealing His creativity and His greatness without asking us to do anything in response.

The paradigm shift at Mount Sinai

With the giving of the Ten Commandments, says Rav Hutner, there was a paradigm shift. The world shifted into a different state of being where G-d was now speaking to human beings. He spoke to us at Mount Sinai and gave us the Torah and that is where a new kind of conversation between G-d and human beings began. From that point on G-d's statements were not just statements of fact, not just statements revealing G-d's genius but were now statements which came with certain demands of us.

The root of the word ledaber is related to the Aramaic word dabar which means to lead. Similarly, in Psalms we have the word yadber, from the same root, which means to push and to guide, to demand of people that they move in a certain direction. The term ledaber conveys a much stronger interaction, where G-d is expecting something in return. Hence the Ten Commandments are Aseret HaDibrot. Remember the Shabbos day to keep it holy; honour your father and mother; do not use G-d's name in vain; do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not covet - these are statements which require us to act in response to them.

This was a paradigm shift. Until the giving of the Torah, G-d's interaction with the world was limited to His revealing Himself, His genius and His ideas, but He did not make any demands. At Mount Sinai the nature of this interaction shifted.

Rav Hutner explains that the paradigm shift that took place was actually an expression of G-d's kindness. In the book of Psalms - and we say this in the Haggadah as well - there is a chapter that starts with *hodu laHashem ki tov, ki le'olam chasdo* - give thanks to Hashem, for His chesed, His kindness, is forever. The chapter is a long list of G-d's kindnesses, and if you add up the number of times *ki le'olam chasdo*, 'His kindness is forever,' is repeated, you will find that there are 26. The Talmud says that the 26 times it says *ki le'olam chasdo*, in this chapter refers to the 26 generations from the creation of the world till the giving of the Torah. The Torah had not yet been given and yet He put up with the world for 26 generations. The list of 26 kindnesses refers to the 26 generations of His unrequited chesed, of kindness.

A deeper form of kindness

This does not mean to say that G-d's kindness ceased with the giving of the Torah; in fact, G-d's kindness deepened with the giving of the Torah. Rav Hutner gives the following analogy by way of explanation: when we want to help somebody, we can help them

by giving them something for nothing ? and there certainly is a chesed in that. Giving them charity, helping them with food, with clothing ? whatever it may be ? is kindness. But giving a person a job, a way of earning that money, is a much deeper level of kindness. On the surface one might think that this is a lesser level of kindness, that it is much better to give without making them work for it. But in truth we know that human beings are such that their dignity and self-esteem are so important that it is a much greater level of kindness to give a person a job so they can earn the kindness rather than just giving it for free.

This, says Rav Hutner, was the paradigm shift. With the Ten Commandments comes a new vocabulary. G-d is no longer just saying to us, well, here I am, and here's what I think. He is actually saying these are My instructions for what you must do and how you must lead your lives and this deepens the chesed. The first 26 generations was one level of chesed, where G-d gave unconditionally, no matter what people did. Once the Torah came into the world, things changed; we now have to earn His kindness by doing the right thing and this actually deepens His kindness. It is a kindness that comes to us with justice, not a 'freebie,' and because we have earned it, it can never be taken away from us.

The ten plagues as the bridge in the paradigm shift

In any paradigm shift, people need to go through a process; it does not happen overnight. How can it be that the world operated in one paradigm, the paradigm of amira, the ten utterances which did not place any demands on us, and then at Mount Sinai it shifted to the other paradigm, the dibur paradigm, where G-d's statements require a response from us? How did this paradigm shift occur? It could not just happen in one moment. There had to be a bridge between the two paradigms.

The ten plagues in Egypt are the bridge between the ten statements of Creation and the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. Rav Hutner gives a number of reasons why the ten plagues in Egypt serve as the bridge in this paradigm shift, one of which is that for the first time in history we as a nation started engaging with G-d. Prior to the giving of the Torah, when the communication paradigm was one-way, G-d spoke to us without making any demands of us as the recipients of His words. We were totally passive. Our identity meant nothing, just like when someone offers you kindness that you haven't earned. It is almost as if the recipient need not be there; the kindness just pours out, regardless of who is receiving it, and the recipients are totally passive in that relationship.

But when we shift into a paradigm of two-way communication, where G-d says I need you to do such and such, these obligations, duties and responsibilities meant that we became part of the conversation. We were no longer passive recipients; our actions now became important. Even though G-d is the King of all Kings and immortal and we are just flesh and blood, we stood up, so to speak, and became partners in a conversation with G-d. With the Ten Commandments G-d raised us from anonymity and passivity to the level of a mensch, to being someone important and directly engaged with G-d.

The importance of dialogue versus monologue

This is how Pesach becomes the bridge. And this is why, says Rav Hutner, the concept of dialogue and the question-and-answer format is so important on the night of the Seder. We recount how during the whole Exodus experience we were not just passive recipients of G-d's kindness. G-d said, I am going to give you the kindness on Pesach but you are going to have to do something. You are going to have to put the blood on the doorposts, you are going to have to bring the paschal lamb, you are going to have to join Me on this journey and you are going to have to teach your children about it. You are not just going to passively receive the kindness of Hashem. G-d says, you must be involved in it; you are not just passive passengers. Get involved, engage with what is going on and take responsibility for it. We are called upon to join Hashem in this process.

This is why dialogue is so important. The difference between monologue ? Hashem broadcasting His statements in the world ? versus dialogue as we engaged in with the Ten Commandments is that in dialogue we are active participants. Up until the giving of the Torah, Hashem's interaction with the world was limited to a one-way kindness. It did not matter who the recipients were or what they did. With the Ten Commandments, however, G-d created a dialogue with us, making demands to which we have to respond. Thus, we became proper partners in this dialogue with G-d, where we have to respond to His requests and demands and get involved.

The ten plagues of Egypt are the bridge between the ten statements with which the world was created and the Ten Commandments, because it was in Egypt that we became active participants in history, and where G-d called upon us to debate and discuss. This is why dialogue is so important; when we debate and discuss the Exodus at the Seder, this serves as the bridge between the two paradigms. We are not yet at the level where we are engaging with a request and demand from G-d and have to actually do things ? that comes with the giving of the Torah ? but we are already moving from just being passive participants in a monologue to active participants involved in a dialogue.

This is why the active involvement, the debate, discussion and dialogue at the Seder is so important: it paves the way for us to stand on our own two feet and accept the mitzvot of Hashem, to do the right thing and make a difference in the world ? not as passive passengers but as active participants in G-d's plan. The Seder then becomes the bridge, the link to going to Mount Sinai.

Please G-d we should all have a good Yom Tov. I would like to take this opportunity to wish our entire community a Chag Kasher veSameach, a joyous and a kosher Pesach. May we all have wonderful Seders together which are meaningful and inspiring. A good Shabbos and a good Yom Tov to you all.

3. Pesach : Time Of Love (Pesach article published 5774)

On Pesach, we read Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, written by King Solomon with his prophetic insight and his renowned wisdom. Rabbi Akiva says in the Talmud ? and Rashi quotes it at the beginning of Shir HaShirim ? that Shir HaShirim is the Holy of Holies. It describes the relationship between us and G-d, and uses the analogy of the relationship between a husband and wife to describe the love between us and Hashem. I encourage you to read a midrashic interpretation or one of the many commentaries on the Song of Songs, so that the analogy is fully understood.

Pesach is the foundation of our relationship with Hashem. On Pesach we celebrate how He took us out of slavery and acknowledge that we are completely dependent on Him. On this festival we think about our relationship with Hashem. It's about conveying that our Judaism and our relationship with G-d are not just about what we have to do, but about love, devotion, passion, and enthusiasm.

But practically, how do we serve Hashem out of love and with passion?

Judaism: uniformity and individuality

The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, one of our great sages of the 19th century, who was the great Rosh Yeshiva of the yeshiva of Volozhin, says that Shir HaShirim gives the direction of how to serve G-d with love. On the one hand, Torah Judaism seems to be about uniformity ? we all have to keep the 613 commandments and follow the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, which instructs us on how to live our lives as Jews. It seems we are all doing the same things. On the one hand, the Netziv quotes a verse in the Book of Kohelet, in Ecclesiastes, also written by King Solomon, where it says in chapter 11 verse 9, vehalech bedarachei libcha, ?go after your heart.? He quotes a number of Talmudic sources as well which say that each one of us has to find the one mitzvah which speaks to us personally, and to do that mitzvah brilliantly.

This doesn't mean that we are exempt from the rest of the mitzvahs; rather, there must be a dual approach. On the one hand, we need to find that one personal mitzvah and do it well, with passion, and on the other hand we must serve G-d by keeping all the mitzvahs as contained in the Shulchan Aruch and within the framework of the halacha, and not step outside of it. The Netziv relates this to the verse we say in the third paragraph of the Shema, Velo taturu acharei levavchem, ?do not go astray after your heart.? The verse uses the word taturu, to spy, and not the usual telchu, to go after. The Netziv explains that the verse uses specifically the word taturu because taturu means to spy in order to find something new. The verse is warning us that when we come to serve G-d and are looking for something meaningful, inspiring and spiritual in life, we seek out a new way which is outside the framework of Torah. The Netziv points out that many of the mistakes of Jewish history are because people went to find a new way of serving G-d and their own brand of ethics outside of the Torah. The Torah is the full and only blueprint for how to serve Hashem.

Finding a sense of individuality within Torah

Within the framework of the Torah, says the Netziv, each of us has to find his or her unique mode of serving Hashem. Every person is unique in his service of Hashem and we need to find the one mitzvah which speaks to us personally. Some people are moved by learning Torah; others are moved by the mitzvah of chesed, of loving kindness; some are moved by the mitzvah of Shabbos; for others it's keeping kosher; for some it's tzedakah, charity. Each person is moved by a different mitzvah which appeals to him or her individually. This doesn't exempt us from the other mitzvahs and we cannot pick and choose. We have to keep all of them, but he says we have to choose our specialty, the one thing which our neshama, our soul, is naturally drawn to. If you are inclined toward a particular mitzvah, says the Netziv, that indicates that that mitzvah is part of your divine destiny. Even within a particular mitzvah, there can be specific aspects which appeal to you more than others. For example, within the mitzvah of loving kindness, some people are drawn to bikur cholim, visiting the sick; others are drawn to helping with funerals and comforting the mourners; others are drawn to helping the poor; and others to giving advice or financial assistance. Or, as another example, within Torah learning there are some people who love learning Chumash, some who love learning Gemara and others who love learning philosophy. Within each one of the mitzvahs as well there is a lot of individuality that can be expressed. The message is, says the Netziv, follow your passion. Do that one mitzvah which is your passion and make it perfect because that is part of your individual mission in the world, as indicated by your natural inclination to it. And from the passion invested in that one thing, your whole life will be uplifted.

The Netziv quotes a verse in Parshat Balak, in chapter 24, verse 6, where it says *keganot alei nahar*, 'like gardens on the banks of a river.' The Netziv explains that the difference between a garden a *gan*, and a field, a *sadeh*, is that a field is uniform, only one crop is planted - perhaps wheat, or barley, or an orchard of oranges or bananas. But our service of G-d is not like a field, it has to be like a garden, which contains many different plants and flowers. So too our service of G-d, to use the analogy of a garden, has to contain all of the plants, meaning all 613 commandments; but it must also contain a unique personal feature. For example, some gardens have a prominent magnificent rosebush; another might have a huge tree or a special kind of creeper. Every garden is unique. The Netziv explains that likewise, our 'gardens' of serving Hashem have to have all the plants - the 613 commandments and the Code of Jewish Law - but there is the one plant we are drawn to, the one flower, the one tree which belongs to us and is unique to our garden. We each have one mitzvah which belongs to us more than any other.

This is how the Netziv explains the verse in Devarim, chapter 6 verse 1 where it says *Vezot hamitzvah*, 'This is the mitzvah,' the statutes and the laws that G-d has commanded you to keep. Says the Netziv, why does it say *Vezot hamitzvah*, 'this is the mitzvah,' in the singular rather than *mitzvot* in the plural? What about all the other mitzvahs? He explains that this verse refers to the duty of taking on one mitzvah and making it personal and special, and from that the love and passion for G-d will develop.

The difference between Chametz and Matza

This is the theme of Shir HaShirim - our love and devotion to G-d. On the one hand we must be careful not to look for ways of expressing our love for G-d outside the framework of the Torah; on the other hand we must find our unique expression of it. Each one of us has unique gifts and talents, and a distinct passion for a certain area. Passion and love come from doing something that you really want to do, and you are only good at things that you really want to do. As with any endeavour in life you need to try and find something that you really want to do. And, even more importantly, in our service of G-d we have to find that one mitzvah which speaks to our neshama, to our soul, and do it well. When that passion comes through, it uplifts everything else in our service of G-d.

Shir HaShirim encapsulates what Pesach is all about - our love of and relationship with Hashem. The Netziv connects this to the mitzvah of matza. He says the difference between matza and chametz is that matza is just flour and water, while chametz necessitates the addition of human ingenuity to the basic natural products to turn it into something more elaborate. Matza is a basic, elemental food, representing what G-d has given and the fact that we are totally dependent on Him. We eat the matza, the bread of humility, to say that what G-d has given us is all we have, without adding our own elaborate efforts to it. We show our complete dependence on G-d, Who gave us our freedom. We have an obligation to view things as if we ourselves went out of Egypt, because without the Exodus, we wouldn't have freedom, our Torah, our identity and our very life.

Our vulnerability and utter dependence on G-d and the fact that we have nothing without Him should not create a relationship merely of submissive obligation; rather one of love. Realising that whatever we are is because of Hashem is the foundation of love.

And we show that love by doing what He told us to do ? not only because we have to, but because we really want to ? and by finding that one mitzvah which speaks to us personally and doing it with passion. This is what we need to work on during Pesach. We need to feel the joy, excitement and the privilege of being able to serve Hashem and to live a life of meaning following the Torah and the personal calling of our souls.

I want to wish you all a Chag Kasher VeSame'ach, a kosher and joyous Pesach. Some people are good at celebrating a kosher Pesach. Others are good at celebrating a joyous one. Our celebration should encompass both, the kosher and the joyous, so that we can feel the incredible joy of this festival, and rejoice in our Torah and our individual role within it.

4. Pesach : A New Approach (Pesach article published 5773)

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.

5. Pesach : Celebrating Our History And Destiny (Pesach article published 5773)

This is in continuation of last week's discussion on the festival of Pesach.

Last week we discussed the Dubnah Magid's perspective on this festival, namely, that it is not just about thanking G-d for our freedom but about thanking Him for the slavery and the oppression as well. It is the total Egypt experience ? the suffering and the liberation, the pain and the miracles ? which made us who we are as a people, establishing the very essence of Jewish destiny and identity.

This idea is captured in a magnificent image, in the verse which describes how Moses, Aaron, and the seventy Elders were on the mountain and saw G-d. Of course, they did not really ?see? G-d, because G-d has no physical form; G-d's incorporeality is one of the basic tenets of Judaism. Rather, what they saw was a representation of G-d, in the form of *livnat hasapir uch?etzem hashamayim letohar* ? ?the brickwork of sapphire and like the essence of the heavens for purity? (Exodus 24:10).

What was this ?brickwork of sapphire??

Pain with a purpose

This verse is key to understanding the whole Egypt experience. The Jerusalem Talmud explains that this brickwork, which was right under the heavenly throne, represented the bricks and mortar which the Jewish people had been forced to make during their enslavement. It was a sign of G-d's solidarity with the Jewish people, that G-d remembered their pain and was with them in their suffering. This concept is encapsulated in a beautiful verse which says *Imo Anochi betzara*, ?I am with him in his suffering? (Psalms 91:15). There are times in life that we go through great difficulties and suffering and through it all G-d says *Imo Anochi*

betzara, He is with us. We have to go through that suffering for a higher purpose and for a greater good ? for us and for the world at large ? and G-d is with us in that pain and suffering. The brickwork conveyed to the people that G-d was with them and had felt their pain.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, one of our great sages of the previous century, asks the following: if the purpose of showing them the sapphire brickwork was to demonstrate that He was with them, why did He only show it to them on Mount Sinai, after they had been liberated? If He wanted to convey His solidarity with them while they were in pain, He should have done so during their enslavement. The Divine Presence was in the entangled Burning Bush, which represented the slavery and that He had not abandoned the people. So, asks Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, why did G-d only show them the vision of the sapphire brickwork after their liberation, once they were already on Mount Sinai?

Rav Sorotzkin explains that with the sapphire brickwork, G-d was showing them what they had achieved. The sapphire, as it says in the verse, was *k'etzem hashamayim letohar* ? like the essence of the heavens for its purity.? It represents the highest spiritual level, the refinement and greatness that a person can attain. With these bricks G-d was showing the people what they had achieved while they were in Egypt. While they were enslaved, they thought that their pain and suffering was pointless; in their minds they were simply working with bricks and mortar, and they could not see any higher purpose to their suffering. When they got to Mount Sinai, however, they realised that, in retrospect, their suffering ? along with their faith, prayers, growing connection to G-d and the tremendous miracles they had witnessed ? had refined them and made them into great people who then merited receiving the Torah.

Through their unrelenting pain and suffering, their blood, sweat and tears as they worked with bricks and mortar, they were actually building the heavenly sapphire brickwork, which reflected their greatness. Therefore G-d only showed it to them at the end, once they got to Mount Sinai; He wanted them to see that it was the entire process ? the slavery and the resulting freedom ? which elevated them and enabled them to receive the Torah.

Pesach, as we discussed last week, is not just about the liberation at the end, but about the whole process leading toward it. This is an important lesson for life: Sometimes we go through very difficult times and we may think the suffering is pointless. But as we go through it, there is a growth process whereby we become better people and get closer to G-d. We are building incredible heavenly edifices of merit in the next world, which sometimes we are not even aware of. Pesach is about building the heavenly brickwork ? in our personal lives as well ? just as the people did in Egypt in preparation to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Jewish nationhood is Divine in origin

The other dimension of Pesach ? that it lays the foundation for Jewish history ? is expressed in the writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of the most dynamic leaders of nineteenth-century German Jewry. One of his famous books, called *The Nineteen Letters*, was written in response to arguments put forth by the sceptics of his time, many of whom were leaving Torah Judaism. In the first letter in the book, Rav Hirsch puts forward all the arguments that people had against Judaism at the time, and in the remaining eighteen letters he refutes each argument. In letter number eight he sets out the course of Jewish history and explains the role of the Egypt experience in that context.

If you think about the origins of Jewish history, you will see that it does indeed have a very unusual beginning. Normally, the birth of a nation results from people living together in a particular area; borders are drawn and cultures are created. But we, the Jewish people, were born in exile, not in the Land of Israel. Jacob and his family went down to Egypt a mere seventy individuals, and we emerged a nation of millions.

Why was our birth as a nation so unusual?

Rabbi Hirsch explains that the purpose of creating the Jewish people was so that G-d could disseminate His message to the entire world as to what life is about and that there is a Divine purpose ? namely, that humankind was placed on this earth in order to serve Him and do good. G-d created the Jewish people so that we would carry this message. We were born as a people with the purpose of upholding G-d's word. This is why we were born in Egypt, in the midst of the exile, as a nation without a land, without freedom and

without dignity; we lacked all the basic building blocks of nationhood. G-d took us out of Egypt, straight to Mount Sinai where we received the Torah just a few weeks later. It was there, at the foot of Mount Sinai, that we were born as a people, when G-d gave us the Ten Commandments and all of the values and principles of Judaism as contained in our Torah.

G-d did not come to a nation already established in its land and say, 'here are the laws, here is a value system and a way of life.' Rather, he took a nation that had none of these things and gave us a Torah, saying, 'this is your defining essence, this is your very purpose.' And then, after he gave us our value system, He put us back into the Land of Israel, within the borders which had been promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, warning us that our claim to the land would be dependent on our loyalty to Him and to His Torah. The land was given to us in order to promote and strengthen the Torah's values; without this purpose, our claim to the land is weakened.

Rabbi Hirsch explains, in *The Nineteen Letters*, that the Egypt experience forms an integral part of Jewish history. The Divine plan was that the nation would be born into slavery, without its independence and freedom, and without its own dignity; G-d would then give us our freedom and dignity, and all of the markers of nationhood. They were not something that we created for ourselves, but something that He gave to us and thereby created us as a people. We emerged from that experience and went straight to Mount Sinai where we were given our founding values. We were born as a nation in a completely different way, in that our national identity comes directly from G-d.

Pesach is about the gratitude we have to G-d and the faith we have in Him, but it is also about the essence of Jewish history, and how it began in the most unlikely of places and circumstances, so that we would realise what our purpose is in this world. This is why Pesach is not just about celebrating our freedom, but about celebrating the whole process ? the slavery combined with the freedom ? which makes us who we are and ensures that we can fulfil our true purpose and destiny on this earth.