**SALT – PESACH 5781**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Gemara in Masekhet Pesachim (116a) establishes that the *mitzva* of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* – telling about the Exodus from the Egypt on the first night of Pesach – should be fulfilled through the process of asking and answering. Children are to be encouraged to pose questions to their parents, who are then to answer by explaining to them the story of the Exodus which is commemorated through the special practices observed at the *seder*. This is based on the Biblical sources for this *mitzva*, where the Torah speaks of children asking their parents to explain the observances of Pesach night, and the parents explaining their significance as commemorative acts to recall the miracles of the Exodus (Shemot 12:26-27; 13:14-15; Devarim 6:20-25).

The Gemara adds that if one does not have children posing these questions, then his wife asks, and if he is alone, then he asks himself. This *halakha*, which is codified in the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 473:7), clearly indicates that the purpose of the question-and-answer format extends beyond the interest in intergenerational dialogue. While this interaction may indeed be an important element of the *seder* experience, *Chazal* evidently wanted that we ourselves remember the miracles of the Exodus on this night specifically in the manner of answering questions, by asking and then explaining.

Rav Tzadok of Lublin, in his *Peri Tzadik* (Pesach, 2), explains that we are to recall the story of the Exodus in this manner because “on this night, a person must feel newness within himself.” The format of questions and answer highlights the experience of “newness,” the process of discovery, of obtaining new knowledge and arriving at a new understanding. When we introduce information by first posing a question, we not only gain knowledge, but appreciate its novelty, because we first put ourselves in the position of taking that information. And this experience of novelty, Rav Tzadok writes, is a vital component of the Pesach celebration. Rav Tzadok likewise explains on this basis the practice of *karpas* – dipping a vegetable in liquid – which the Gemara explains as intended to introduce something new and different at the *seder* for the purpose of arousing the children’s interest (Pesachim 114b). This practice, Rav Tzadok writes, underscores the theme of change and novelty. The point is not merely to draw the children’s interest as a practical matter, but also to highlight the theme of novelty, that things on this night are different than they normally are.

Rav Tzadok explains that as we celebrate our ancestors’ emergence from slavery to freedom, we are to acknowledge our own ability to “free” ourselves from our perceived constraints, to recognize and truly believe that we can change and be different from the way we are now. Just as there did not seem to be any possible way for *Benei Yisrael* to change their condition of slavery, we, too, often feel trapped in our circumstances and at our present level of achievement. The transformation undergone by our ancestors, from lowly slaves to a proud, free nation, and from people submerged in the pagan culture of ancient Egypt to faithful, obedient, devoted servants of God, must awaken us to our own ability to transform ourselves. The *mitzva* of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* is thus designed in such a way that we experience “newness,” novelty and change, because one of the primary goals of the *seder* is to realize our capacity to change ourselves and our lives. And we present information as solutions to vexing questions to assure ourselves that we are capable of finding solutions to at least some of our own vexing problems, that our undesirable conditions do not have to remain permanent. As we reflect on the drastic transformation undergone by our ancestors under circumstances which seemed unalterable, we are to feel encouraged and driven to initiate our own personal transformations and break free of our imaginary chains which we too often allow to hold us back.

Sunday

The second paragraph of the *hallel* text, which is taken from Tehillim (chapter 104), briefly describes the miracle of the splitting of the sea, stating how at the time of the Exodus, “*ha-yam ra’a va-yanas*” – “the sea saw and fled.” The Midrash (*Midrash Tehillim*) famously comments that when the verse speaks of the sea “seeing,” it means that it “saw” Yosef’s coffin, which *Benei Yisrael* brought with them out of Egypt, whereupon it split to allow *Benei Yisrael* to cross and escape the pursuing Egyptian army. This association between the splitting of the sea and Yosef is based on the word “*va-yanas*,” which is used in reference to the sea’s splitting and also in describing Yosef’s fleeing from Potifar’s wife when she grabbed his garment in an attempt to lure him to a forbidden relationship (“*va-yanas vayeitzei ha-chutza*” – Bereishit 39:12). The Midrash viewed this textual parallel as signifying a link between the miracle of the sea and Yosef’s resisting Potifar’s wife’s advances, that, in some sense, the latter facilitated the former. Many different explanations have been offered for the precise point of connection between this miracle and Yosef’s “flight” from Potifar’s home.

Rav Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin, in *Takanat Ha-shavin* (6), explains that the ocean symbolizes the lack of satiation and contentment. As a well-known verse in Kohelet (1:7) says, “All the streams go to the sea, yet the sea is not full.” Rivers and streams continuously flow into the ocean, yet the ocean never becomes full to the point where it can stop receiving more water. Rav Tzadok thus suggests that the Midrash here contrasts the ocean, the symbol of unsatiable desire, with Yosef, who embodied self-discipline and restraint, resisting a woman’s advances as a seventeen-year-old boy. Yosef represents the force which opposes the sea, the symbol of perennial discontent. The contrast to the constant quest for enjoyment is the self-control embodied by Yosef.

Rav Tzadok further notes in this context that *Chazal* speak of sea travel as a tense, anxiety-ridden experience. Especially in ancient times, oceans were dangerous, and embarking on a voyage meant subjecting oneself to danger. Rav Tzadok writes that living like the ocean, with a constant need for more, breeds anxiety. If we cannot feel satisfied and content, we live in a constant state of worry, of concern whether our endless desires and wishes will be fulfilled. The antidote to the uneasiness and anxiousness symbolized by the ocean is Yosef, the quality of self-restraint, which enables us to live at ease with whatever we have despite our unfulfilled wishes. We avoid the stormy, unstable waters of the “ocean,” of the endless, frantic pursuit of physical enjoyment and material comforts, by following Yosef’s example of self-control, through which we can experience true inner peace and serenity.

Monday

The second chapter of *hallel* (Tehillim 114) begins, “When Israel left Egypt, the house of Yaakov from a foreign land, Yehuda became His sacred one; Yisrael, His dominion.”

The Radak explains this verse as underscoring the transformation wrought by the event of the Exodus. *Benei Yisrael* had spent hundreds of years in Egypt, which at that time was overrun by paganism and immorality, and yet, “*hayeta Yehuda le-kodsho*” – they emerged as a “sacred” nation. Despite having been submerged for so long in a corrupt, decadent society, they left as a people proudly and fervently committed to God. Moreover, “*Yisrael mamshelotav*” – they went from being subjugated to Pharaoh, to being subjugated to only the Almighty. After having lived under the dominion of Egypt and its tyrannical monarchy, they now lived under God’s dominion, bound exclusively to His rule and subjected exclusively to His authority.

Rav Moshe Chaim Litch-Rosenbaum of Kisvarda, in his *Lechem Rav* commentary to the *siddur*, adds that this verse speaks in praise of *Benei Yisrael*. The fact that this transformation was made demonstrates that the only hindrance had been their state of enslavement in Egypt. Once they were freed from bondage, they committed themselves to the ideals of *kedusha* and to the service of the Almighty – showing that this had been their desire and wish all along. And thus the verse here lauds *Benei Yisrael* for the fact that as soon as they left Egypt, “*hayeta Yehuda le-kodsho, Yisrael mamshelotav*” – they became a sacred, religiously-devoted people, because this had always been their aspiration, which had gone unfulfilled only because of their condition of exile and oppression.

This interpretation brings to mind the Midrash’s comment (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Beshalach, 234) that when *Benei Yisrael* found themselves trapped against the sea, the prosecuting angel came before God to argue against their miraculous salvation. The angel noted that *Benei Yisrael* had worshipped idols in Egypt just like the native Egyptians, and so they did not deserve to be miraculously saved. In the Midrash’s words, “Master of the world! Did Israel not worship a foreign deity in Egypt? And You are going to perform miracles for them?!” The Midrash proceeds to relate that God responded to the angel, “Fool! Did they worship it willfully? Did they not worship it due to subjugation and insanity?! You are comparing the unintentional to the intentional, and [an act committed] under duress to a willful [act]?!” God Himself testified that *Benei Yisrael*’s genuine desire even in Egypt was to faithfully serve Him, but the grueling conditions they suffered led them to worship idols. Indeed, once *Benei Yisrael* were released and left Egypt, they devoted themselves to His service.

The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (17a) presents various supplications which different sages would recite after their standard prayer, one of which, recited by Rabbi Alexandri, was, “Master of the worlds! It is revealed and known to You that our will is to fulfill Your will. But what stops us? The ‘yeast in the dough’ and the subjugation of the [foreign] kingdoms. May it be Your will that You save us from their hands, that we may return to wholeheartedly perform the statutes that You willed.” What prevents us from acting as we should, from living lives of sanctity and genuine devotion to God, is “the yeast in the dough” – a euphemistic reference to our sinful impulses – and foreign influences. On Pesach, when we celebrate our freedom from foreign rule, we refrain from the “yeast of the dough,” from leaven, the symbol of our evil inclinations. We are to demonstrate – and, perhaps, ensure – that our innermost wish is to faithfully serve God. We express our wish to be freed from these two forces – external pressures, and our natural weaknesses – so that we can “wholeheartedly perform the statutes that You willed,” which is to be our primary objective and aspiration in life.

Tuesday

The book of Shir Hashirim, which is customarily read in the synagogue on Pesach, consists of an exchange between two lovers, expressing their love and affection for one another. Tradition teaches that King Shlomo composed this book as an allegory depicting the unique bond of love between God and *Am Yisrael*. Rashi, in the introduction to his commentary to Shir Hashirim, writes that King Shlomo wrote this book because he foresaw the long exile which *Am Yisrael* would suffer. By depicting the relationship between God and His people as comparable to the fierce love between a maiden and her beloved, Shlomo sought to encourage *Am Yisrael* during the years of exile and assure us that we are still loved by the Almighty.

In one verse in Shir Hashirim (1:14), the maiden says of her lover, “My beloved is for me a cluster of *kofer* [grapes] in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.” *Metzudat David* explains that these clusters produce an especially strong fragrance which can be enjoyed from a distance. This strong scent is enlisted as a metaphor for the miracles which God performed for *Benei Yisrael* which became known throughout the ancient world. Word of God’s greatness spread far and wide, like the fragrant scent of the grapes of Ein Gedi.

Rashi explains differently, citing a Midrashic tradition that the vineyards of Ein Gedi produce grapes four or five times a year, as opposed to ordinary vineyards, which produce grapes just once annually. These vineyards are mentioned here, Rashi explains, as a symbol of God’s forgiveness, which He repeatedly granted to *Benei Yisrael* in the desert. They betrayed Him on numerous occasions, and He forgave them each time – like the vineyards of Ein Gedi which produce fruit repeatedly, several times a year.

Just as orchards normally produce fruit just once a year, people in a relationship can ordinarily be expected to forgive infrequently. When one party has been betrayed multiple times within a brief period, it is natural for that party to lose his or her patience and react angrily, and to end the relationship. God, however, acts towards us not like an ordinary orchard, but rather like the vineyards of Ein Gedi, repeatedly extending to us His compassion and allowing us numerous opportunities to repent and improve. He does so because our bond with Him is unshakable, and because of His understanding of human weaknesses. His boundless patience, compassion and willingness to forgive sets an example for us to follow in our own lives, in all our relationships and dealings with other people. We should not be stingy with our forgiveness, but should rather extend it frequently, like the vineyards of Ein Gedi. Just as God Himself mercifully pardons our wrongdoings and patiently awaits our process of repentance, so must we be prepared to forgive those who have wronged us, even repeatedly, recognizing the fact that we all struggle with faults, and that change is gradual. We should strive to reach beyond the standard of ordinary “vineyards,” of infrequent forgiveness, and show others the kind of compassion that God shows to each and every member of His beloved nation.

Wednesday

In Shir Hashirim, which allegorizes God’s relationship with *Am Yisrael*, comparing it to the relationship between two lovers, the maiden says about her beloved, “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men; I delighted and sat in his shadow…” (2:3).

Rashi and *Metzudat David* explain that the image used here by King Shlomo is that of a lone apple tree in a forest of a large, barren trees. Most people are drawn to the large trees because of the copious amounts of shade they provide, and so they prefer those trees over the small apple tree, which offers little shade. The maiden announces to her beloved that while many girls would be drawn to other men, who outwardly appear more impressive, she prefers her beloved because of his “fruit” – his substance, his wisdom and character. Similarly, most people are attracted to faiths and lifestyles which offer an abundance of “shade” – comfort and enjoyment, and so they eschew the “apple tree” – a relationship with God and a commitment to His laws – in order to bask in the comfortable “shade” of the other “trees.” *Am Yisrael*, however, prefer the “apple tree” – the substance and truth of God’s Torah, over fleeting, vain worldly delights.As *Metzudat David* explains: “The Congregation of Israel says: Although the enjoyment of sin and of idol-worship comes swiftly in this world, like the shade of a tree, from which enjoyment comes instantly once a person sits underneath it, nevertheless, I have withdrawn from sin and from idol-worship and adhered to You, because the ‘fruit’ of reward in the next world is more pleasing to me, even though it comes later.”

According to this understanding, King Shlomo here warns against the lure of instant gratification. Generally speaking, that which appears most enticing and offers immediate enjoyment is “barren,” bereft of true meaning and substance. The “fruit,” real happiness and fulfillment, is often found in the small, modest “trees,” in pursuits which do not provide immediate enjoyment, which do not outwardly seem appealing, and which are not convenient or comfortable. The world we live in is like a forest full of barren trees – all around us, we are lured by pursuits which offer “shade,” instant gratification, but have little or no real value or substance. We must ensure not to be misled by the large, impressive “trees,” and instead focus our attention on the “apple tree” – on living a life of Torah commitment, which might not seem exciting or attractive, but ultimately provides us with the greatest long-term benefits.

Thursday

In Shir Hashirim (2:14), the young man compares his beloved to a dove hiding in the crevices of a rock, and calls out to her, “Show me your appearance, let me hear your voice, for your voice is pleasant and your appearance is beautiful.” *Metzudat David* explains that the man expresses his anticipation that he and his beloved can find a place where they are alone and hidden from public view – “the crevices of the rock” – so he can then enjoy his beloved’s beautiful appearance and pleasing voice. The analogy, *Metzudat David* writes, is to the time when God led *Benei Yisrael* into the desert, away from all civilization, to Mount Sinai, where He and His beloved nation were “alone,” and *Benei Yisrael* proclaimed their unbridled commitment to Him, announcing, “All that the Lord has spoken, we shall do and obey” (Shemot 24:7). It was there, in the intimate “privacy” of the Sinai desert, that *Benei Yisrael* displayed their beauty, proclaiming their unwavering devotion to God.

Rashi, however, understands the verse differently, explaining that it speaks of *Benei Yisrael*’s condition when they found themselves trapped against the sea by the pursuing Egyptian army. At that moment, Rashi writes, *Benei Yisrael* resembled a helpless dove that flew into a small crevice in a rock to escape the eagle, and sees there in the crevice a venomous snake. Like the dove, who is endangered by the eagle outside the crevice and by the snake inside, *Benei Yisrael* had the Egyptians behind them, the ocean in front of them, and the inhabitable desert on either side. What God wanted from *Benei Yisrael* at that time, Rashi writes, was, “Show me your appearance, let me hear your voice.” Rashi explains: “Show Me your appearance – your proper behavior, to whom you turn in a time of trouble.” God expected *Benei Yisrael* to show their “beautiful” appearance by demonstrating their faith, that in situations of crisis, they turn to Him for help – and to sound their “voice” in prayer. Indeed, as we read in Sefer Shemot (14:10), *Benei Yisrael* responded by crying to God for assistance – “*va-yitz’aku Benei Yisrael el Hashem*.” According to Rashi’s understanding of the verse, the value of prayer in times of distress lies not only in the prayer itself, but also in the faith it expresses, our demonstrating that we rely on God and trust that He is able and prepared to solve any problem and extricate us from any predicament.

Rav Natan of Breslav, in *Likutei Halakhot* (*Shilu’ach Ha-kein*, 4:5), cites Rashi’s interpretation of this verse, and applies this teaching to the spiritual challenges which we face over the course of our lives. Noting the famous pronouncement of the *Haggadah*, “In each and every generation, a person must see himself as though he left Egypt,” Rabbi Natan explains that we must all strive to undergo our own personal “Exodus,” to leave our vices and negative behaviors, just as our ancestors left the sinful culture of Egypt and entered into the faithful service of God. And, just as Pharaoh and his horsemen chased after *Benei Yisrael* after they left, so can we expect to confront difficult challenges and obstacles as we set out to leave behind our bad habits and grow. Moreover, just as *Benei Yisrael* felt trapped, with no escape, so will we occasionally feel “trapped” by our habits, our natural impulses, and the lures of the world around us. When this happens, Rabbi Natan teaches, God calls to us, “Show me your appearance, let me hear your voice, for your voice is pleasant and your appearance is beautiful.” Our response must be to turn to Him for help, to show that we trust in His compassion and in His unlimited ability to assist us. We display our “beauty” not when we achieve perfection, but when we appeal to God to help us in our pursuit of perfection, as we struggle with our vices in a genuine attempt to grow.

Friday

The Torah relates that as *Benei Yisrael* found themselves trapped against the sea by the Egyptian army, Moshe assured them that they had no reason to fear, as God would rescue them (Shemot 14:13-14). God then spoke to Moshe, saying, “Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the Israelites that they should journey!” (14:15). He instructed Moshe to command *Benei Yisrael* to move forward, into the sea, promising that He would split the waters, allowing them to pass through.

Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, comments that Moshe, apparently, was praying to God at that moment, which is why God told him to stop praying and to instead move the people forward into the sea. God asked, “Why do you cry out to Me,” Rashi explains, as if telling Moshe, “Now is not the time for lengthy prayer, as Yisrael is beset by crisis.” As many have noted, it is unclear why that moment of crisis was not an occasion for prayer. To the contrary, it would seem that such a situation was precisely an occasion for impassioned prayer to God.

Another question addressed by the commentators is why Moshe was crying out to God in the first place. After all, God had previously informed Moshe that Pharaoh and his army would meet their downfall after pursuing *Benei Yisrael* (14:4), and Moshe himself, as mentioned, assured *Benei Yisrael* that they had no reason to fear, because God would save them. Why, then, was he pleading to God for help?

Seforno (14:15) offers a creative explanation for why Moshe prayed, and for why God told him to stop praying. He writes that Moshe was praying on behalf of the people because he feared they would refuse to journey into the sea. As the Torah tells several verses earlier (14:11-12), the people turned to Moshe and shouted, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the desert? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not what we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone and we will serve in Egypt, for we are better off serving Egypt than dying in the desert!’?” Seeing the people’s lack of faith, Moshe assumed that they would not be prepared to move forward into the water, placing their trust in God, and so he prayed on their behalf.

God responded by informing Moshe that he was incorrect in his assessment of the people. According to Seforno, when God said to Moshe “*Daber el Benei Yisrael ve-yisa’u*,” this means not, “Speak to the Israelites, that they should journey,” but rather, “Command the Israelites, and they will journey.” God here guaranteed Moshe that contrary to his suspicions, *Benei Yisrael* will obey the command to journey onward, and that, despite the complaints they had just voiced, their faith in God was strong and they would trust in His salvation.

Seforno’s interpretation of this verse perhaps teaches us of the need to pause before rushing to conclusions about people, and specifically, not to judge people based on things they say during moments of fear and tension. *Benei Yisrael* indeed spoke inappropriately as they saw Pharaoh’s chariots pursuing them, but Moshe was wrong for assuming that their inappropriate reaction bespoke a lack of faith. We should not be trying to reach definitive conclusions about people on the basis of their speech or conduct in periods of stress. *Benei Yisrael*’s angry outburst did not mean that they had lost faith in him or in God; it meant simply that they did not handle the crisis properly. We must avoid rashly passing judgment, and continue giving the benefit of the doubt when the people around us speak or act improperly in moments of tension.

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