

JewishTimes

VOL. XI. NO. 15 — PASSOVER 5772

Haggada

**Seder
Insights**

**Tell the Story
With Love**

**A Night of
Gratitude**

**Serving
God**

**WHY
THESE**

10
Plagues?

RELIGION of REASON

by Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim, Founder Mesora.org

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REVIEWS



RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi, Y. Israel of Phoenix; Founder, Masoret Institute; Menabel YBT

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has written extensively about the philosophy and Hashkafa of Judaism for many years. As the title of his book, "Judaism; Religion of Reason" indicates, his ideas are rooted in an uncompromisingly rational approach to Judaism. He follows the guidelines of the great rationalist philosophers such as Rambam and Saadia Gaon in his exploration into the values and ideals of Torah Judaism. He is convinced that all of the teachings of Judaism and the statements of the Sages make perfect sense and are amenable to the rational, inquiring mind.

He is absolutely opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition or are contrary to reason. This collection of writings covers a wide variety of topics that are of interest to contemporary Jews. It also contains insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the underlying significance and relevance of many mitzvot.

Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. Indeed he asserts that one can only understand and appreciate Judaism by analyzing it in a logical manner in order to elucidate its deeper ideas. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions because he is absolutely convinced that Torah is the Word of God and thus based on the highest form of wisdom.

Jews who have a profound desire to make sense out of their religion will benefit greatly from reading this book. One need not agree with all of Rabbi Ben-Chaim's ideas, but his questions, analyses and original thoughts will open your mind to a new appreciation of the wisdom and logical consistency of Torah Judaism.

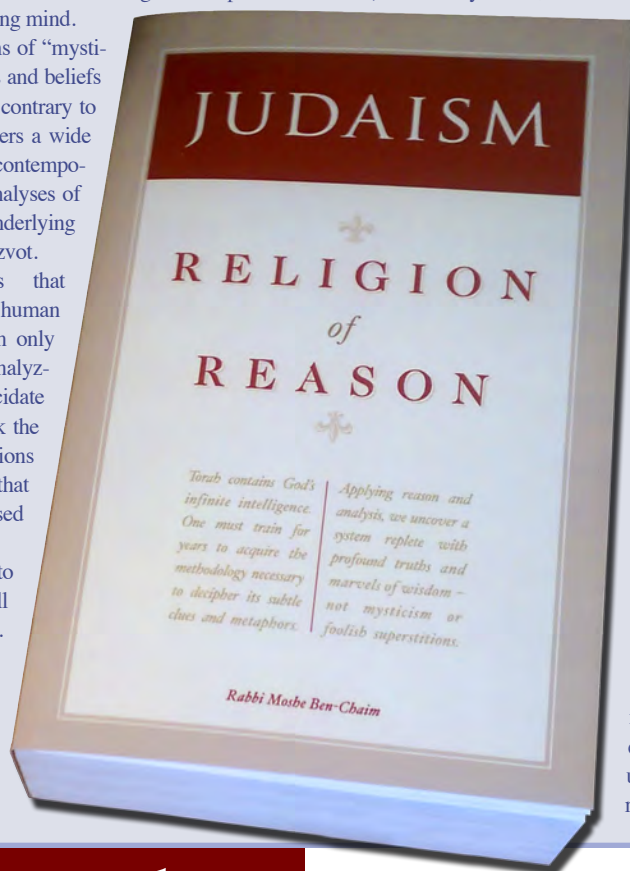


RABBI STEVEN WEIL

Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has followed in the footsteps of the great Medieval Rishonim (Rambam, R. Avraham ben HaRambam, etc.) in trying to explain, define and lay out the world outlook of Torah and the philosophy of Judaism in rational, logical terms. Rabbi Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. He is extremely critical of approaches to Judaism that superimpose external methodologies (such as mysticism, other religions) and project primitive emotions onto the

Almighty. Although one can disagree with some of the conclusions; his approach, his questions and method enable the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. When Chazal employ certain terms and convey certain images, the student is forced to conceptualize, extract and deduce profound psychological and philosophical principles. Unfortunately, many take Chazal at face value or project onto Chazal, motives and rationalizations they never meant. Rabbi Ben-Chaim following the method of the Rishonim, forces us to define, weigh and analyze each word and phrase of Chazal. Rabbi Ben-Chaim shows there is no contradiction between a serious investigation of Science and a serious investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking, seeking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike. Once again, one may not agree with specifics within the book but at the same time will appreciate it and gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



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God could have killed the Egyptians in an instant. With many plagues He offered them chances to realize the truth. One truth was God's protection of the Jews. This taught Egypt that religion has rules, penalties and reward.

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WHY THESE 10 Plagues?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

This week a Rabbi cited Maimonides' laws on the mitzvah of Sipure, the historical discussion surrounding the Plagues and the Exodus. Unlike the Haggadah's author, Maimonides' view of Sipure does not include "halacha" – Jewish laws – pertaining to Passover or the Seder. Instead, Maimonides says, *"On the night of the 15th of Nissan, it is a positive Torah command to discuss the miracles and wonders that were performed for our forefathers in Egypt (Laws of Chametz and Matza 7:1)."* He makes no mention of laws; the obligation is the sole discussion of the "miracles and wonders." This prompted me to review the Torah's verses in detail describing the 10 Plagues. I found in the details many clues for the purposes of the Plagues and wish to share my findings to enhance your own Seder this year.

I think most of us view the 10 Plagues as absolute. Meaning, "these" 10 Plagues were a

mandatory plan. This appears to be the understanding of Tosfos' Elders (Daas Zikanim m'Baalei Tosfos). Another possibility is that the plagues were not written in stone, but were responsive, and only decided based on Egypt's and Pharaoh's reactions. A third possibility, which I suggest herein, is that the 10 Plagues were a mix of mandatory and responsive miracles. According to this last approach, there might be a mandatory plague like Blood or Hail, but then subsequent plagues might be based on Pharaoh's responses or other considerations.

Blood

A Rabbi taught that we learn from Pharaoh's standing "above" the Nile (the dream of the 7 cows) that he viewed himself as greater than the Nile. Why was the Nile competition for Pharaoh, in that he desired to be "above" it? It would appear that the Nile

was held in great esteem by Pharaoh and his people...perhaps as a god. Thus, Pharaoh elevates himself in his dreams by seeing himself "above" the Nile god. Richard H. Wilkinson writes:

"The annual flooding of the Nile occasionally was said to be the Arrival of Hapi, a deification of the annual flooding of the Nile River in Ancient Egyptian religion. Due to his fertile nature he was sometimes considered the 'father of the gods' and was considered to be a caring father who helped to maintain the balance of the cosmos, the world or universe regarded as an orderly, harmonious system." (The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt, p.106 Thames & Hudson, 2003)

Based on his findings, we can appreciate God's first plague of transforming the Nile River into blood. God intended to educate Egypt away from belief in its primary deity. "What type of god cannot defend itself?" would have been Egypt's proper response. But we read how Pharaoh reacted: "And Pharaoh turned and came to his house (Exod. 7:23)." Be mindful that God purposefully included each Torah verse and idea. In this verse, God teaches us Pharaoh's intent to deny his god's defenseless nature by hiding at home from the Nile's bloody truth. With this detail, we can appreciate the next plague.

Frogs

"And the Nile will swarm with frogs and they will ascend and enter your house and your bedroom and on your beds and in your servant quarters and in your people and in your ovens and your kneading tables (Exod. 7:28)."

Imagine the unrelenting, deafening roar of frog swarms engulfing Egypt's borders and entering all chambers of Egyptian homes. Why might this plague have followed Blood? Pharaoh's attempt at denial was directly attacked. The details of Frogs appear as a response to Pharaoh's denial.

Lice

What is significant here is the Torah's record of Pharaoh's astrologers:

"And the astrologers did [attempted] the same with their sleight of hand, but the astrologers were incapable"; "And the astrologers said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God' (Exod. 8:14,15)."

Why are we told of the astrologers' failure? We read that during Blood and Frogs, the

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astrologers were ostensibly able to duplicate those plagues. However, we know that man cannot alter God's natural laws that were created long before man was created. As God made all laws, He alone governs these laws and no man or creation can alter them. Man is "created," not the Creator. Therefore, we must understand the astrologers' "duplication" of these plagues as Saadia Goan teaches: they used red dyes to mimic Blood, and they placed chemicals in the Nile to cause the frogs to leap from the polluted Nile, appearing like a plague of frogs.

We can explain the first three plagues as follows: God initially exposed the primary Egyptian God (the Nile) as false. But in response to Pharaoh's denial, God brings Frogs, and in response to the astrologers, God brings Lice. But had Pharaoh not turned to his home, and had the astrologers not tried to mimic the plagues, perhaps Frogs and Lice would not have been necessary.

Now the regular program of the Plagues resumes to expose their other idolatrous beliefs...

The Mixture of Dangerous Animals

Why was this plague a "mixture", and not simply one species of animals? Why did God send them to Pharaoh, his servants, his people and their houses? Why does God repeat that the beasts will "fill the Egyptian houses and the land they are upon?" God then says:

"For if you do not send forth My people, I will distinguish on that day the land of Goshen that My people stand upon; they will not experience the Mixture there, in order that it be known that I am God in the midst of the land. And I will place a salvation between My people and your people (Exod. 8:18,19)."

Three messages emerge: 1) Egypt is not favored by any animal species; 2) God Rewards and Punishes; 3) God is in the midst of the land.

Egypt deified animals, as evidenced in animal-shaped statues and idols uncovered in archaeological digs, and in the numerous wall paintings and carvings throughout ancient Egypt. The attack of animals rejected Egypt's primary belief in animal deities. Egypt could no longer maintain their view, since a deity – in their view – favors its worshippers. Many species attacked them so as not to allow them to retain any species as deity.

God also distinguishes "My people" from the Egyptians. This teaches Reward and Punishment. The Mixture woke Egypt to a new concept: there exist only one Deity. Egypt's polytheistic view was of an instinctual design. As such, they invented fantasy

gods that served their own motive to be favored. So the idea of a god disregarding or punishing was an alien notion. God now informed them that manufactured deities are a phantasm. In truth, there exists only one Deity.

Additionally, God holds accountable all violators. Their "people, servants, houses and land" carried the mark of "Egyptian", and not Jew. The Torah's emphasis of the beasts filling their houses and that Jews "will not experience the Mixture there" highlights God's system of Reward and Punishment. The true understanding of God is synonymous with a governing God who judges His subjects.

With this plague of the Mixture, Egypt was introduced to the concept that following a god is not up to human whims; there are incorrect considerations when accepting and serving a Deity. But in Egyptian culture, anything goes. This is seen in their numerous gods. There was no guiding principle in Egyptian religious life restricting them to one god. Upon examination, we witness a culture with religious beliefs that stem from human fears and desires. The fear of death and the desire for immortality propelled Egyptians to believe in reincarnation, so much so, that they labored at creating pyramids and burial sites housing numerous gear for the deceased to assist him or her in the next world. The dead were buried with farm tools, canoes and all other means to enhance their next life. Thus, the Egyptian religion was nothing more than fairy tales. They witnessed certain appealing behaviors in various animal species, and therefore deified them. For example, birds – animate existences that fly "close" to the sun – were connected with sun deities, as seen in Ra, the Egyptian sun god (below).



Another lesson was that "God is in the midst of the land." Evidently Egypt viewed deities as limited to their realm of control. This explains the numerous gods. Their infantile notion was that there are individual powers; one over water, one over crops, one over fire and so on regarding all other objects. The Greeks also carried on this view as seen in Apollo, Athena, Zeus and their many gods. The human instinct is identical across all cultural and generational divides. Without guidance through Torah or intelligent thought, instincts attach to specific desires and manufacture gods or fantasies that will cater to these desires. Thus, many cultures had many gods. It is only the intelligent mind that studies the world and recognizes a pattern that carries the signature of a single God, and a harmony and design that points to one Creator. God taught Egypt that although one, He does control all realms: "God is in the midst of the land."

Finally, we notice the term "sacrifice" employed six times in connection with this plague. God records this for a reason. Pharaoh is affected by this animal plague; he can finally utter the words "Go sacrifice to your God (Exod. 8:21)." Mixture is seen to have some temporary affect of releasing Pharaoh from animal deification. The repeated use of "sacrifice" throughout chapter 8 intends to teach the Torah reader which idolatrous notion Mixture intended to uproot.

Animal Deaths

The next plague also related to animals. As my friend Howard suggested, perhaps Mixture intended to remove Egypt's belief that animals favored them, while Animals Deaths taught Egypt that animals are defenseless, and cannot be gods.

We note the phrase "The hand of God will be against the herds (Exod. 9:3)". Why is God's hand more relevant here than other plagues? Additionally, Ibn Ezra points out that these two animal-related plagues did not include Moses' or Aaron's use of the staff like most other plagues.

Just as God said in connection with Mixture that "God is in the midst of the land", here also God says "The hand of God will be against the herds". Both indicate a greater focus on God himself, than other plagues. This could be required when God is eliminating the belief in animate beings as deities, unlike the lifeless Nile. In connection with the belief in animals, God emphasizes that He is the One at work performing these plagues, while animals are nothing. In essence, these plagues aim to replace false deities with the true God. And God must retain all focus when animate deities are exposed. Thus, Moses and the staff

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are omitted here as is done regarding the Mixture, for the Egyptians might replace their animal deities with Moses.

So alarmed at the death of only Egypt's livestock and not of the Jews, Pharaoh sends messengers to learn if this was in fact true. God records Pharaoh's act of sending messengers to teach us Pharaoh's disbelief that his animals were in fact false gods.

Boils

God instructs Moses and Aaron together to collect soot from the furnace. Moses alone is to cast heavenward the soot in front of Pharaoh. Moses does so and the soot falls upon all of Egypt's human and animal population, creating skin boils. What is this use of soot and throwing it towards heaven? Is this in anyway related to Ibn Ezra's point that Aaron performed three plagues emanating from the Earth's elements (soot), while Moses performed three plagues originating in the heavens (casting heavenward)? I believe so. Let's review Ibn Ezra (Exod. 8:12):

"Know, that by the hand of Aaron were the first three plagues and these signs were in the lower matter as I explained earlier, because two (of them) were in water, and the third was in the dust of the earth. And the plagues performed by Moses with the staff were in the higher elements, just as his (Moses) status was higher than Aaron's status. For example, the plague of hail and locusts were brought by the wind, and (so too) the darkness, it was in the air; also the plague of boils was through him (Moses). Only three (plagues) were without the staff; the wild animals, the disease of the animals, and the death of the firstborns. And one (plague) with no staff was through Moses, with a little connection with Aaron, and it was the plague of boils."

I believe Ibn Ezra teaches that God meant to show Egypt that the heavens are not as significant as they assumed. A Rabbi once taught that the Egyptians feared the heavens. The Prophet too states this:

"So says God, 'To the ways of the nations do not learn, and from the signs of the heavens do not fear, because from them the nations fear...' (Jeremiah 10:2-3)."

Egypt feared the heavens, thinking it held some grand stature, propelling their belief in its supernatural powers in contrast to the Earth. But now Pharaoh saw Moses working with Aaron to bring about this plague. This meant to convey a relationship that exists between soot and heaven, between heaven and Earth. Heaven and Earth are on equal footing. The heavens are not to be feared any

more than Earth. All that occurs on Earth follows natural law, and the same applies to the heavens. Aaron working together with Moses, as well as the use of soot together with throwing it heavenward, aimed at this lesson. But Boils also targeted another Egyptian belief.

"And the astrologers could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt." (Exodus 9:11)

What is problematic with that statement? It says the astrologers couldn't stand before Moses. But we wonder: how do boils – a malady of the skin, not bones or muscles – affect posture? Also, of what relevance are the boils on "all of Egypt"? Why mention that "all Egyptians" had boils, if the verse's message concerns only the astrologers' inability to stand? Furthermore, of what significance is the astrologers' inability to stand before Moses, as opposed to standing before Pharaoh or others? And if they truly could not stand, let them sit. But "stand before" has another meaning...

Standing also means to "present" one's self...to appear before others. The astrologers attempted to reproduce the plagues, only to expose their inabilities. This is significant, since God records their feeble attempts. So significant is this point, that it appears from the very few words concerning the plague of boils, that the objectives of this plague included the disarming of their claims to superiority through astrology and magic. Torah verses are selective in their messages, not merely recounting every single historical occurrence. Our verse means to teach that boils purposefully targeted the astrologers.

"And the astrologers could not stand before

Moses because of the boils; for the boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt." This refers not to posture, but to their ability to sustain their dignity...they could not "appear" before Moses who outperformed them. They were ashamed. But why were they any more ashamed during the plague of boils? The answer is the second part of the verse: "...for the boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt". Here, God hints to us.

What might we derive from this latter half of the verse? These words appear to make a comparison. Both, the astrologers and the Egyptians possessed boils. We must now ask this: what about this comparison prevented the astrologers from appearing before Moses? Why was their "equal" status with all other Egyptians an embarrassment to them? We see the answer quite readily. It was the very equality of their condition to that of all other Egyptians that disarmed their claims to greatness. They were no better! They could not defend themselves from boils. What type of powerful astrologer allows painful blisters to afflict them over days? It is the liar who allows this to happen, since in fact, he has no more defense from boils than any other Egyptian. It was this diminution of status that was their embarrassment, and why they could not "appear" before Moses.

Hail

We touched on the Egyptian's idolatrous view of the heavens. Now God will show how they are under His control, and not a force of their own. God tells us that He will "send His plagues to Pharaoh's heart and unto his servants and his people (Exod. 9:14)." Sending plagues to his heart, means God will affect a deep fear. God also tells us His desire that "My name should be discussed through-



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out the land (Exod. 9:16)." Hail would spread His great popularity, a goal of the plagues in general, but more so in connection with Hail. As the heavens are out of man's reach and control, they are feared more, as Jeremiah taught above. When God manipulates what man fears most, God gains greater honor. His name will spread more through this plague than through others.

The Hail was mixed with fire, an unnatural meteorological phenomenon that fell on Egypt alone, not Goshen where the Jews lived. It would kill all life outdoors. It was accompanied by great thunder. It was unparalleled in Egyptian history.

We are told that those who feared God's word brought their servants and livestock into their homes for protection. Those who did not fear God's word left them in the fields. It appears that God is addressing the notion of "forecasts," as the Torah cites the Egyptians' reaction to God's "word", forecast.

Today, horoscopists continue as a major idolatrous belief, even among Jews. Security about the future is a strong emotion. Egyptian culture was focussed on the future, as seen in their preoccupation with the afterlife. Anubis is the Greek name for a jackal-headed god associated with mummification and the afterlife in Egyptian mythology. Anubis was the god of the dead. God now taught them otherwise. God alone manages the future, and the heavens.

Moses also calls Pharaoh's attention to additional physical aspects of Hail: stiff plants broke while softer plants did not. Moses mentions this to advise Pharaoh that God sent these Plagues specifically to address Pharaoh's stiffness. God is keenly aware of every human.

Finally, why was fire mixed with the hail? It would appear God desired to consume Egypt's crops, not merely break them down. Weather typically irrigates; this storm did the opposite. Egypt could no longer feel favored by their heavenly deities.

Locusts

The destruction of all crops was completed through Locusts, as stated in Exod. 10:5, 10:12, and 10:15. No vegetation survived this plague. (Exod. 10:15) Pharaoh too refers to this plague as death. (Exod. 10:17) If one lives without the true God, he cannot be assured of natural law providing his needs. Recognition of God means recognition of the One who controls all of creation, from the heavens down to the Earth and all therein. It is a mistake to divorce religion from nature. The disobedient Egyptians now learned that there is no quarter of Earth out of God's control. They also learned that animal life (locusts) are fully under God's will and act when He

desires them too. This plague could not be explained naturally, as the verses state this swarm was unparalleled both prior and subsequent in history. (Exod. 10:14) In fact, all these plagues were forecasted, which is impossible, had they not been Divine.



Darkness

"God said to Moses, 'Extend your hand heavenward and there will be darkness on the land of Egypt, they will feel darkness' (Exod. 10:21)."

"No man saw his brother and no man stood up for three days, and for all the Children of Israel there was light in their dwellings (Exod. 10:23)."

Commanding Moses to raise his hand "towards the heavens," God wished Egypt to witness His control over the sun, the source of light. And as "there was thick darkness in the entire land of Egypt three days (Exod. 10:22)" after Moses extended his hand, the cause of darkness was a lack of sunlight. Thus, "the land" of Egypt was dark. However, Jews had light "in their dwellings," but not in their land. Egypt's sun god was now dethroned from its imagined greatness.

Another powerful emotion was treated. As "no man saw his brother," each Egyptian sat in isolation. In such a state of mind, one views himself in a silent dialogue of sorts with the Creator. As he reflected over three days, he viewed himself persecuted individually. Each Egyptian viewed himself as God's enemy.

There is no one around who might allow one to feel "Us against Him". There is no support from social identification or teaming with others.

No individual wishes to feel wrong and attacked, so this might assist some Egyptians to repent.

Firstborn Deaths

A most primary concern is our own lives. With His final plague, God demonstrated His complete control, expressed as "I am God (Exod. 12:12)." No reason can be given for such a phenomenon, where only firstborns perish. Disease does not work that way. Egypt was clearly terrified but also astonished at this plague. This plague demonstrated a Creator of life, who is intelligent and can select individuals based on any parameter. He is not controlled by nature where disease must afflict all, but He controls nature and tells nature how to operate. This undeniable evidence of the true Creator is expressed as "I am God."

In that verse, God states He will smite all firstborns of humans and beasts, and that He will render judgments over Egypt's gods. A Rabbi once taught that the death of firstborns intended to end the transmission of Egypt's idolatrous culture. Firstborns were accepted leaders; their deaths ended the spread of Egypt's culture. Part of this end was the destruction of all deities.

In summary, to derive the Torah's messages, it cannot be read passively. We uncover many insights by remaining true to the verses, reading each word, detecting fine points, and many open statements and their implications. At times glaring and emotionally-charged events like the 10 Plagues can obscure finer points within God's wisdom. This is why reviewing our studies is crucial. It is only after we digest major points, that upon our return, other finer ideas are seen.

God intended to redirect Egypt away from its many detours from reality and teach of His unique role in the universe. Each plague contained many lessons.

I hope you have enjoyed these explanations, that they increase your appreciation for God's wisdom, and that during your Passover Seder and after, these ideas might imbue others with this appreciation for our God, His amazing Torah, and our lot as the freed Children of Israel. ■

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GRATITUDE

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



Quite interesting is the unique nature of Passover: it is the one holiday that's actually two holidays! There was the Egyptian Passover and the Passover for Generations. Succos and Shavuot did not have earlier holiday versions. Those two holidays recount events, not celebrations. But our Passover recounts the "First Passover" holiday. What's the idea behind God's design of this duality?

The Talmud discusses the requirement to recite the Haggadah, but we must commence the story with our bondage and only afterwards, recount our freedom. We eat the matza to recall the dry, hard bread fed to us in slavery, but we must also recline while eating it. Another contrast.

I believe the reason for all these contrasts is to generate a deep appreciation for the Creator who emancipated us. A true feeling of thankfulness comes about only through realizing our previous state of deprivation, and our ultimate redemption through God's miracles. To create this appreciation, God commanded a First Passover "in Egypt" highlighting our bondage; to be contrasted with the Passover today, as a freed people. The dual nature of Passover intends to present us with "before and after" snapshots. Eating matza recalls poor man's bread, but drinking four cups of wine highlights

our freedom, and our Redeemer: each cup correlates to a term God used describing His planned redemption.

The Rabbis taught we must commence with our history as slaves so when we finally discuss our freedom, we again personally appreciate what God has done for us. This expression of freedom

takes on the form of reclining, and our appreciation is expressed through singing the Hallel. We also have an obligation to view ourselves as if we each exited Egypt. Again, this drives at engendering sincere thanks to God for His many kindnesses.

This appreciation must be transmitted to future generations. So we take time at the Seder and explain to each child – on his and her own level – the story of the Exodus. In fact, so important is our appreciation, many Torah commands are "remembrances of the Exodus."

With this appreciation, we feel compelled to understand the goal of the Exodus: receipt of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. God took us out, so as to give us a system that will be most rewarding.

This Passover, let us attain this focus that our freedom was intended to offer us unburdened lives where we can engage in studying God's Torah and fulfilling its laws, realizing its benefit, and marveling at His great wisdom throughout our lives. Happy Passover!

Insights into the SEDER

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg



The unifying experience of the seder night is indisputable. Jews from around the world, regardless of religious background, gather together to mark the night of our exodus from Egypt. The centerpiece of the experience is the haggada, a guide to the main concepts one must internalize to make this night truly memorable. Within the magid section, where the story is brought to the forefront, we encounter different verses with explanations that seem to be the opposite of their intent. It is imperative to approach this material, analyze it and try to uncover the deep and formidable ideas lying underneath the words. In this two part series, we will analyze one section of verses and hopefully shed light on this momentous night.

The crux of the magid involves the interpretation of the verses from the Torah that begin with “Arami oved avi...” At the end of these verses, we see the following:

“The Lord took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and with a great manifestation, and with signs and wonders.”

We then see a dissection of this verse, with each phrase or word being explained. As we will see, it is difficult to remain satisfied with the literal explanation offered in the haggada.

The first of these interpretations seems to hone in on one point:

“The Lord took us out of Egypt,” not through an angel, not through a seraph and not through a messenger. The Holy One, blessed be He, did it in His glory and by Himself! Thus it is said: ‘In that night I will pass through the land of Egypt, and I will smite every first-born in the land of Egypt, from man to beast, and I will carry out judgments against all the gods of Egypt, I the L-rd.’ ‘I will pass through the land of Egypt,’ I and not an angel; ‘And I will smite every first-born in the land of Egypt,’ I and not a seraph; ‘And I will carry out judgments against all the gods of Egypt,’ I and not a messenger; ‘I- the L-rd,’ it is I, and none other!”

As we can see, the primary theme here is that it was God and nobody else that took the Jewish people out of Egypt. What is interesting is the tie-in to the last of the ten plagues, the plague of the firstborn. Why was it through this plague that this idea of God being the sole Cause of the exodus is emphasized? There is one other description of God that, at first glance, may not catch one’s eye. When describing how God performed these actions, we see the following: “...in His glory (bekvodo) and by Himself (uv’atzmo).” Why

is insufficient to just state that God did it by Himself? What is added by His glory?

The connection to the tenth plague is, of course, no coincidence. In fact, as we will demonstrate throughout these different explanations, the objective of this piece in the haggada seems to be about bringing out different insights about the ten plagues. In this first statement referencing God’s hashgacha, or relationship to the universe, we see an important point. One of the main ideas that emerged through the exodus, with the plagues serving as the vehicle for it, is God’s complete dominion and control over nature. All the plagues had this feature attached to them, revealing that there was a Being who could manipulate the laws of nature. At the same time, the plagues were immense aberrations within nature. The tenth and final plague, though, stood apart from the others. It was this plague that truly and ultimately demonstrated that it was from God, and no other explanation would suffice. At an exact time on a specific day, a tremendous number of people sharing a completely arbitrary characteristic (first born) would die from an unexplained cause. There was no rational explanation, no scientific basis, no turning away from the reality that God was in control of the natural world.

Within this idea lies the answer to the second question. God manifesting Himself in this manner served a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it was imperative that the world see God operate in a manner that refuted any intermediary. This was one of the original errors made by the “original” idolaters, believing in God but maintaining that there were sub-deities. In this instance, God needed to refute this possible distortion – “by Himself”. On the other hand, this was an opportunity, an event that would never happen again, that provided man with insights into God on a very high level. This was the other purpose of the plagues – “in His glory.”

To reiterate, the plagues demonstrated without question God’s control over nature. With this idea firmly entrenched, we can now continue with the next interpretation.

“With a strong hand,” this refers to the dever (pestilence) as it is said: ‘Behold, the hand of the Lord will be upon your livestock in the field, upon the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds and the flocks, a very severe pestilence.’”

What immediately jumps out here is the reference to dever, the fifth plague. Why are we focusing now on this plague? And there is nothing in the description that seems to tie the idea of “a strong hand” with dever. The Ritva offers an interesting explanation of this vague reference to dever. He explains that

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PART II

In Part I, we took up a portion of the Sifrei cited by the haggada, bringing to light different concepts about the makkos. Picking up from where we left off, the last part of the verses focusing on the exodus from Egypt seem to reveal deeper insights into the phenomenon of the ten plagues.

The next part of the verse goes as follows:

“And with a great manifestation’, this refers to the revelation of the Shechinah (Divine Presence), as it is said: “Has any God ever tried to take for himself a nation from the midst of another nation, with trials, signs and wonders, with war and with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and with great manifestations, like all that the Lord your God, did for you in Egypt before your eyes!”

What is most fascinating about this interpretation is the fact that the verse quoted here includes everything discussed in this entire section (i.e. strong hand, outstretched arm). In other words, the idea of the manifestation here is somehow inclusive of all the features previous discussed. What do we see from this? Rav Yitzchak Halevi Soloveitchik looks at the word “moreh”, which is interpreted by many to mean wonders, and comments on its other definition, awe. When it comes to a miracle that is outright, there is a natural feeling of awe. However, a hidden miracle, or *neis nistar*, does not necessarily elicit this feeling. Rav Soloveitchik is hitting on a crucial theme. The idea being brought out in this interpretation of the haggada is that there are two ways in which God’s *hashgacha* is expressed. One method is subtle, where the world of cause and effect is “quietly” manipulated in a manner that could only emanate from the Creator. The other is a more direct and open method, where the supernatural event is as clear as possible as emanating from God. One could then ask why it is necessary to have two methods? It would seem that each has a “disadvantage”. In terms of the latter, more obvious type of miracle, such as the splitting of Yam Suf, people cannot doubt the existence of God. However, people become attached to God based on the “wow” factor, which is an emotional type of relationship. Whereas the intent is to demonstrate the unequivocal reality of God, the very internalization of the event can morph into a belief solely sustained by the revelation of miracles. Such a precedent can lead to a breakdown in the relationship between man and God, as man slowly begins to base his belief in

dever was a clear demonstration of the hand of God. Yet it was not the “complete” *dever*, which was manifest during the tenth plague. What is the *Ritva* referring to with this comparison? How is one *dever* “partial” while the other is “complete”? As was stressed above, the main feature of the revelation of God through the plagues was His control over nature. But there were other ideas that came out as well. In this case, the common theme between the fifth and tenth plague has to do with the clear and undeniable result – death. In the fifth plague, the primary objective was the death of the cattle of the Egyptians. And with the tenth plague, it was the death of the Egyptian first born, the “complete” *dever*. That is not to say there was no death with the other plagues (although the Torah does not openly record it). However, if people died, it was an indirect effect of the plague, not an explicit result from the plague itself. Even with the most physically destructive plagues such as *barad* (hail), the Egyptians had the means to hide from the effects of the rain of fire and ice from the sky. Not so with *makas bechoros*. With *dever*, then, we see the introduction of a new idea. When the Egyptians saw the death of their cattle, they came to realize something deeper and of great impact, beyond “just” God’s being in control over the natural world. Within this idea lies God as Creator as well. Control is one thing, so to speak, but the ability to create and destroy life is a different quality of control, a characteristic of the Creator. The Egyptians came into contact with this at the time of *dever*, as they identified with the death of the cattle. The idea that our lives are

dependent on God became evident with this plague, culminating with the death of the first born. This, then, is the concept of the “strong hand” – it is the quality of Creator that is expressed, His ability to control life itself.

The next part of the verse deals with another important component of God’s manifestation of control.

“And with an outstretched arm,” this refers to the sword, as it is said: “His sword was drawn, in his hand, stretched out over Jerusalem.”

Again, we see here a vague concept, the “sword”. In what context is this to be understood? The *Ritva* offers another important insight. He explains that this is slang of sorts, referring to the revenge God brought to the Egyptians. We see this attribute expressed when the covenant between God and the Jews is in danger – “*nekom nikmas bris*”. What does revenge have to do with this? Once again, we see another important idea about God emerge with the ten plagues. In God’s manifestation of control, one should not think it was completely arbitrary in its effects, or that there was something unjust about its force. Instead, it reflects *schar v’onesh*, the overall system of God’s justice. There was a reason why the Egyptians were being pummeled with these different plagues. The concept of revenge is, in fact, the vehicle to seeing how God’s system of justice is being expressed. Therefore, we see through the makkos how God was expressing *schar v’onesh*, the Egyptians meriting these punishments. In the next part, we will complete these explanations.

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God on a presumed future miracle. The other method, the more subtle “neis nistar” way, is much more appealing to the intellect. In the story of Purim, we see events work out in a way where God’s influence cannot be doubted. But our focus is not on the display of supernatural might – instead, it is on the realization of how little knowledge we have of the world of cause and effect. At the same time, this type of discovery is not always apparent to everyone. It can be easy to miss it, and therefore the intended result, the realization of God’s knowledge of cause and effect, is never realized. When it came to the ten plagues, as well as the overall exodus from Egypt, God chose to manifest Himself in the manner of greatest supernatural effect. For the Jews, they were not on the level, at that point, to develop the necessary relationship with God without such a display. Over time, they moved from this realm into the more intellectual realm (such as the deep ideas revealed and internalized in shiras Yam Suf). And for the Egyptians, as well as the rest of the world, the only way they could encounter God was through this display. Therefore, we can now understand why this interpretation is inclusive of the different ideas surrounding the ten plagues. The “manifestations” are referring both to the character of how God revealed Himself, as well as the desired effect of awe, opting for the greater supernatural effect.

The haggada now takes up the “signs”:

“And with signs’, this refers to the staff, as it is said: ‘Take into your hand this staff with which you shall perform the signs.’”

Whose staff is this referring to? The Raavan states this seemingly obvious fact that this was the staff with which Moshe performed the signs. Why is this important to emphasize at this juncture? There was another crucial fact that was established through the ten plagues, both for the Jews and the Egyptians. Having Moshe use the staff was a clear validation of his shlichus. In other words, Moshe’s role as emissary from God, instructed to bring about God’s directives, was demonstrated as vividly as possible in his use of the match as charged by God. At the same time, it was the staff, and not Moshe, which signified the onset of the plagues. This was an essential distinction, as there was a natural fear that Moshe would be deified. Seeing Moshe make use of the staff, with the direct result of the plague, could only mean that Moshe was indeed the shaliach of God.

Finally, the haggada ends with the following:

“And wonders’, this refers to the blood, as it is said: “And I shall show wonders in



heaven and on earth. Blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke.”

One should already have a sense of what the next question is going to be. Why the focus on the plague of blood versus any of the others? Was the plague of blood the ideal plague to showcase the “wonders” of God? The Ritva offers a compelling explanation of why blood was chosen as the plague of “wonders.” He notes the plural “wonders,” rather than “wonder” when expressing this solitary plague. Of course the plague of blood was a demonstration of a wonder from God. The Nile River changed from clear water to blood! Even more so, the phenomenon of the Egyptian and Jew drinking from one cup while the side of the Egyptian was blood, and the side of the Jew was water.

Indeed, such an effect can only be described as wondrous. Yet is it any more wondrous than the fact that barad only

afflicted the homes of the Egyptians? Or that the frogs harassed the Egyptians exclusively? The first step, then, is to clarify why blood was chosen as the plague to demonstrate wonders. It was not that this plague “owned” the definition of being wondrous. Instead, the idea of being wondrous was contained within all the plagues, but was first manifest in the plague of blood. Now the question moves to what is the plural “wonders?” As we have been reiterating up to this point, the intent of the plagues was to demonstrate God as being in control over the natural world. The manifestations of these aberrations expressed this. Yet the extent and quality of control had to be demonstrated, and this was done through the manipulation of nature. An aberration would strike equally as hard to both Egyptians and Jews alike. However, to create within this aberration a preference for one individual over another, one population at the expense of another is a different degree of control, nature bending to the will of God. This idea was present in all the plagues, first showcased in the plague of blood.

The plagues demonstrated to all the clear reality that God is in control of the natural world. However, the haggada is telling us to look even deeper, to see the different ideas and concepts God revealed to us and the world through these different manifestations. At this year’s seder, look beyond the text of the haggada, search for the chachmas Hashem throughout, and experience the ultimate reward that comes with yediyas Hashem. ■

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The basic mitzvah of the night of Passover is that of “Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim” recounting the Exodus from Egypt. The story of our enslavement and redemption is of great importance to the Jews and all mankind. Many oppressed peoples through the ages have drawn inspiration from the liberation of the Jews from their bondage. The Haggadah emphasizes the supreme importance of telling this story by stating that “even if we are all wise, discerning and learned in Torah it is incumbent on us to engage in telling the story of the Exodus. And whomever engages in extensive discussion of Yetziat Mitzraim is praiseworthy.” To bolster this point the Haggadah proceeds to tell of the illustrious Rabbis who gathered in Bnei Brak and discussed the Exodus throughout the night. They became so engrossed in the dialogue that they lost track of time until their students reminded them that the time for the morning Kriat Shema had arrived.

While the general importance of knowing the story of the Exodus is easily seen, one may still ask, why must great scholars also engage in the mitzvah of sippur?

These people have already covered this area and know every aspect of the story. Is it not superfluous to review a story with which one is very familiar? Put a different way, let us ask, what is to be gained from telling a story that I already know?

The mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim has many dimensions. It is not just for one’s personal benefit but for others as well. The Torah says, “And you shall instruct your children on that night saying, because of this did Hashem take me out of Egypt.” This verse tells us that we must share the story with our children and, through it, convey to them the foundation of our commitment to Torah. Thus there is an altruistic aspect to the mitzvah. We must share the story and all of its lessons with others, first and foremost our children but by extension other Jews who are in need of learning. There is in addition, a very selfish dimension to the mitzvah. Each person says, “because of this Hashem took me out of Egypt.” We are obliged to view it as though we ourselves were slaves and were redeemed from Egypt. A person must recognize that he obtained his own freedom via the

Exodus, and that it is just as relevant to him as it was to his ancestors who were slaves in Egypt. As a result of the Exodus we became servants of Hashem who study His Torah and performs His mitzvot. The Torah is the gateway to true human freedom as it liberates the soul from enslavement to false philosophies and corrupt value systems which are contrary to human fulfillment. The objective of telling the story is to gain renewed appreciation for all the blessings Hashem has bestowed upon us by giving us His Torah and making us His people.

We can now understand why everyone, even the greatest sages must tell this story. We are all obliged to become teachers on this night and share this story with others who need to hear it. And we must recognize how important it is for ourselves. No matter how advanced we think we may be we must constantly renew our commitment to Torah and appreciation of its great value and beauty. We do not just communicate information to our children and guests on this night. We must also convey our gratitude to Hashem in giving us His Torah and choosing us from all the nations. To inspire others we must exude a certain love and enthusiasm for Torah and the Jewish way of life. This is not always easy to do as we get caught up in our daily routines and our religious observance can become perfunctory. The night of Pesach is a time of renewal, for as we delve into the story of our enslavement and redemption we gain a renewed appreciation for what it means to be a Jew, and we strive to impart that feeling to our children and fellow Jews. May our Seder experience be joyful and filled with meaning and love.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach

Maror, Avodas Parech, & Avodas Hashem

by, Agur bin-Yakeh

<http://kankannelam.blogspot.com>

Every year on the night of the 15th of Nisan we read Rabban Gamliel's explanation of maror in the Hagadah: "Why do we eat this maror? Because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our fathers in Mitzrayim." This raises a very basic question: What is the emotional experience of merirus (bitterness)?

The pesukim cited by the Hagadah contain a clue. Here are the pesukim in context: "The Egyptians enslaved the Children of Israel b'farech. They embittered their lives with harsh labor, with mortar and bricks, and with all labor of the field – all of their labors with which they enslaved them b'farech" (Shemot 1:13-14). It is clear from these pesukim that the emotional affect of merirus arose from one dimension of the Egyptian avdus in particular, namely, the avodas parech. The question is: What is avodas parech?

The answer to this question can be found in Parshas Behar. When detailing the halachos regarding the treatment of an eved ivri (Hebrew slave), the Torah says: "you shall not subjugate him b'farech" (Vayikra 25:43). In other words, there is an actual mitzvas lo taaseh to not force an eved ivri to do avodas parech.

Torah she'baal Peh identifies two types of avodas parech: a task which has no prescribed limit (e.g. commanding an eved to dig a hole without specifying its dimensions or providing a time frame for completing the task) and a task which has no real purpose (e.g. commanding an eved to dig a hole and then fill it up again immediately thereafter).

Since the Torah uses the term "avodas parech" collectively to refer to both types of tasks, they must share a common quality. What do both types of avodas parech have in common?

The answer is: avodas parech refers to a task which cannot be accomplished. Either the task cannot be accomplished by virtue of its scope (i.e. the activity itself is undefined or unlimited) or it cannot be accomplished by its very nature (i.e. there is nothing to accomplish because the task is purposeless).

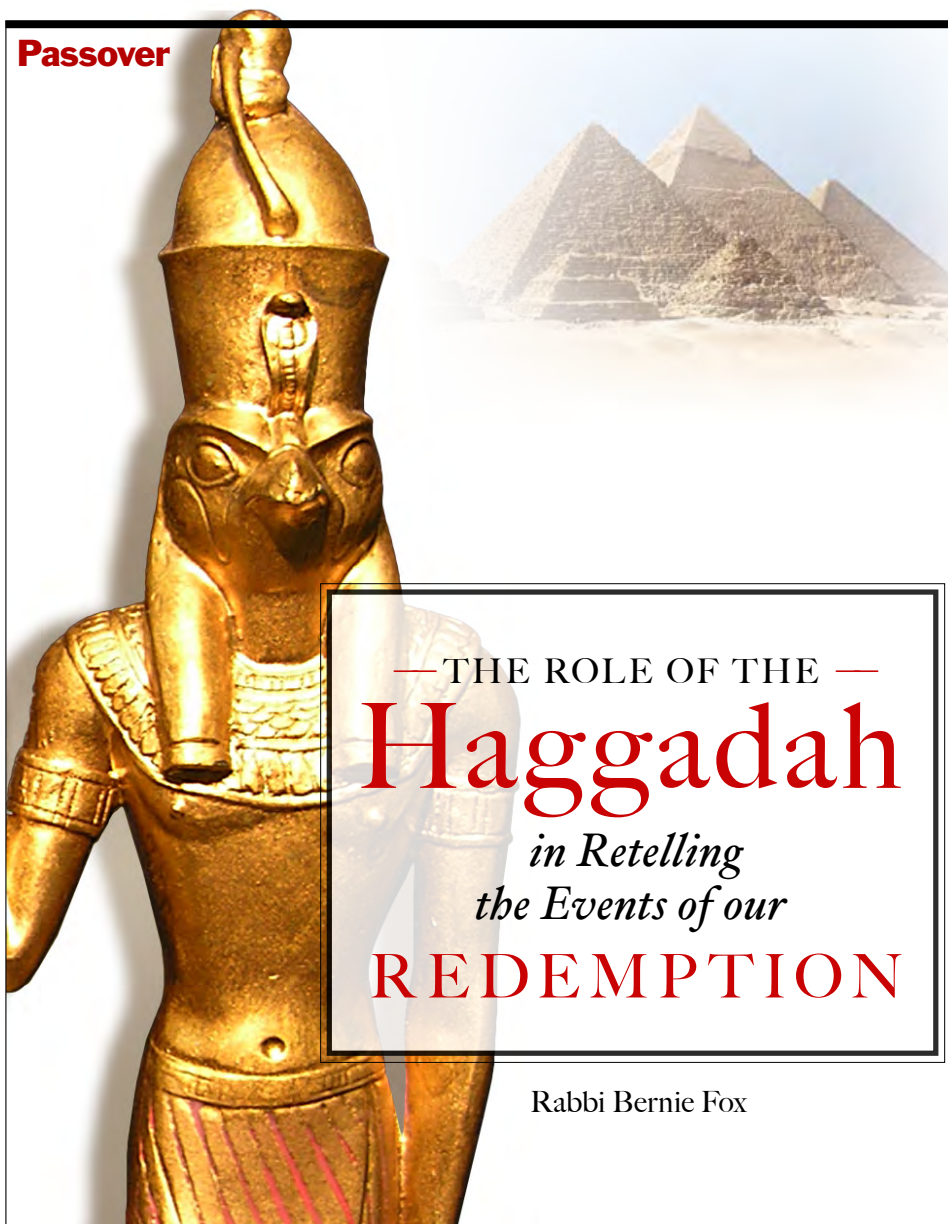
In light of this definition of avodas parech, we can now answer our original question. What, exactly, is the emotional experience of merirus which results from avodas parech? I believe the answer is: avodas parech is ego-breaking labor, and merirus is the experience of ego-depletion – the sense of utter worthlessness and meaninglessness which results from involvement in futile work. In order to feel that one's life has value, one must be involved in something real; one must be involved in a craft which produces an actual good, not a vague or meaningless activity which yields no real benefit. It is for this reason that avodas parech is experienced as the most oppressive type of slavery.

Now we are in a position to tackle a larger question: What relevance does the theme of merirus have to our daily lives? There are many answers to this question, but we will focus on only one.

Pesach is not only about our physical servitude and freedom, but our "spiritual" slavery and redemption as well. This is reflected in the conclusion of the berachah at the end of Maggid: "al geulaseinu ve'al pedus nafsheinu" ("for our redemption and for the redeeming of our souls").

Unfortunately, many of us relate to avodas Hashem as avodas parech. We view halacha as a hodgepodge of vague, meaningless activities which serve no real purpose in our lives. It's no wonder that so many Jews – especially teenagers – experience the life of mitzvos as a toilsome burden.

Perhaps merirus was chosen as one of the main themes of Pesach for this very reason: to encourage us to reflect on our lives and ask ourselves, "Do I relate to avodas Hashem as avodas parech?" If so, then there is only one path to redemption: striving to achieve a clear understanding of what we are doing and why we are doing it. Only by pursuing knowledge of halacha and taamei ha'mitzvos (the reasons for the mitzvot) can we redeem ourselves from "avodas parech mode" of mitzvah observance and truly appreciate the life of freedom afforded by avodas Hashem. As Chazal teach: "Ein lecha ben chorin ela mi she'oseik b'Talmud Torah" ("The only person who is truly free is one who involves oneself in learning Torah"). ■



— THE ROLE OF THE —
Haggadah
*in Retelling
the Events of our*
REDEMPTION

Rabbi Bernie Fox

It is a positive commandment of the Torah to recount the miracles and wonders that occurred to our fathers on the night of the fifteenth of Nisan as it says: Remember this day that I took you forth from Egypt. (This should be understood in a manner) similar to that which it says: Remember the Shabbat day... (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Chametz u'Matzah 7:1)

1. The Torah source for the commandment to recount the story of our redemption

With the above comments Maimonides introduces his discussion of the commandment to recount, on the Seder night, the story of our redemption from Egypt. Maimonides suggests that a passage in Sefer Shemot is the source for this mitzvah. In this passage, Moshe instructs the nation to remember the day that they were redeemed from slavery in

Egypt and that on the days that commemorate this event – the festival of Pesach – they should not eat chametz – leavened products. Maimonides explains that the first portion of this passage, in which Moshe instructs the nation to recall the day of its redemption, is the biblical source for the commandment to retell the events of the redemption at the annual Pesach Seder.

Maimonides adds that the meaning of the passage's admonition to "remember" the day we were taken out of Egypt can be understood by comparing this passage to another in which we are instructed to "remember." We are commanded to "remember" Shabbat.

Maimonides' intention in these comments is not clear. He seems to acknowledge that the specific obligation engendered by a commandment to "remember" our redemption is unclear. What do we do in order to

remember? What is required of us? He responds to this problem by directing us to the term "remember" in reference to Shabbat. By understanding the meaning of the commandment to "remember" Shabbat, presumably, we can understand the meaning of the commandment to "remember" our redemption. But Maimonides does not explain the meaning of the term when used in reference to Shabbat. So, he seems to be explaining one enigma by referring us to another enigma.

2. The connection between remembering our redemption and remembering Shabbat

Actually, Maimonides elsewhere does explain the meaning of the commandment to "remember" Shabbat. He explains that this passage requires that we verbally sanctify Shabbat upon its arrival and departure. This is accomplished through recitation of Kiddush at Shabbat's onset and Havdalah at its ending – short paragraphs that describe the sanctity of Shabbat. Now, Maimonides' intention is somewhat clearer. Our understanding of the admonition to "remember" our redemption should be informed by our knowledge that this term, when used in reference to Shabbat, engenders the obligation to recite Kiddush and Havdalah. So, Maimonides is telling us that there is a similarity between the commandments to "remember" our redemption and the obligation of Kiddush and Havdalah. However, he does not seem to provide any indication of the nature of this similarity.

Rav Aharon Soloveitchik Zt"l suggests that Maimonides is dealing with a very specific problem. The Torah obligates us to remember various events. Maimonides maintains that in some of these instances no specific obligation is engendered by the admonition. For example, we are admonished to remember – or more specifically to not forget – the events of Sinai. According to Maimonides, this does not generate a commandment to regularly engage in a specific activity of recalling Revelation. In other instances, the admonition does generate a specific obligation. For example, we are commanded to remember the evil of Amalek. This nation attacked us without cause in the early stages of our journey from Egypt to the Land of Israel. In this instance, the instruction to remember Amalek is interpreted as a commandment. It requires that the episode be recalled through verbalization. However, according to Maimonides, this mitzvah does not include specific ideas or themes that must

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be recalled and reviewed. We are merely required to recall the incident and to feel an appropriate degree of anger and animosity towards these enemies of Hashem and His nation., The instruction to remember Shabbat is also a commandment. However, it requires a far more specific performance. Maimonides explains that this mitzvah requires that we describe the exalted nature of the day and its distinction from the other days of the week. A vague utterance acknowledging that Shabbat has arrived or departed is not adequate.

In short, the Torah includes various admonitions to remember. Some do not generate a specific commandment. In the instance of the commandment to remember Amalek, a loosely formulated obligation is generated by the passage. In the case of Shabbat, a more specific obligation to recite Kiddush and Havdalah is engendered. Now, Maimonides' comments are more easily understood. The Torah tells us we must remember the events of our redemption. Maimonides' intention is to explore the meaning, in this instance, of the admonition to remember. He explains that in this case, our Sages understood the term "remember" to communicate a commandment. Furthermore, as in the case of the commandment to remember Shabbat, the commandment requires we remember through verbalization and that we recall with this verbalization specific events, themes, and ideas.

And you should tell to your son on that day saying: For this reason Hashem acted on my behalf when I went forth from Egypt. (Sefer Shemot 13:8)

3. Sipur or Haggadah

Maimonides describes the commandment to retell the events of our redemption with the term sipur. However, the Torah uses a different term in describing the commandment. The above passage is discussing the commandment to recount the events of our redemption and it uses the term ve'hegadeta. This is a form of the same Hebrew root from which Haggadah is derived. In other words, in describing this mitzvah, Maimonides and virtually all other authorities use the Hebrew verb sipur. However, the Torah itself uses the verb ve'hegadeta. Both of these verbs communicate the process of recounting the events. However, the two verbs are not synonyms. The difference between these two verbs is evident in the Torah's account of Yosef's two dreams of dominance.

Yosef had two dreams. In the first dream he and his brothers were in a field. They were binding grain into sheaves. Yosef's sheaf arose and stood. The brothers' sheaves surrounded Yosef's sheaf and bowed to it. Yosef told his brothers of his dream. The Torah tells us that the brothers' hatred for Yosef was heightened by this dream.

Yosef's second dream involved the sun, moon and eleven stars. Yosef envisioned these bodies bowing to him. Again, he related the dream to his brothers. He also retold the dream to his father. The Torah tells us that after hearing this second dream the brothers were jealous of Yosef.

Apparently, the brothers had different reactions to the two dreams. They hated Yosef after the first dream. After hearing the second dream, they were also jealous. Why did the dreams evoke these different reactions?

One reason may be that Yosef himself had a different response to the two dreams. Yosef retold both dreams. However, the Torah uses different verbs for the two instances. In Yosef's retelling of the first dream, the Torah uses the verb vayaged – a conjugation of the same verb from which ve'hegadeta and Haggadah are derived. In the second instance, the Torah uses the verb va'yesaper – a conjugation of the same verb from which sipur is derived. Both of these verbs communicate that Yosef retold his dreams to his brothers. But these verbs indicate different forms of retelling. A few examples will illustrate the difference between these verbs.

Eliezer returns with Rivka. He tells Yitzchak of the wondrous events that led to the selection of Rivka. He wants to communicate that he has experienced an encounter with providence. We can expect that he spoke to his master with enthusiasm and shared with him the details of his adventure. The Torah uses the verb va'yesaper to describe Eliezer's retelling of the events.

Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, joins Bnai Yisrael in the wilderness. Moshe tells Yitro of all the miracles experienced by Bnai Yisrael. He wants to impress Yitro with these events and their implication. He must have spoken with enthusiasm and provided colorful detail. Again, the verb va'yesaper is used.

Va'yaged communicates a different meaning. This verb describes a person delivering a brief, to-the-point account or report. Avraham's nephew Lote was captured in war. A refugee from the conflict reported the capture to Avraham. The Torah uses the

term va'yaged to describe the refugee's delivery of the report. Avraham did not require a detailed account of the battle or of the experiences of the refugee. He required a brief, even concise, account of his nephew's capture.

Bnai Yisrael are at Sinai awaiting Revelation. They declare their commitment to do all that Hashem commands. Moshe reports their commitment to Hashem. Again, Moshe's report is described with the verb va'yaged. Moshe did not provide a detailed account of his communications with the nation or attempt to communicate the process through which the nation determined that it would enter into a commitment to obey Hashem's Torah. A precise report of their decision was required. The verb va'yaged is appropriately used.

In describing Yosef's relating of his first dream the verb va'yaged is used. Yosef retold the first dream in a brief and concise manner. The term va'yaged does not imply the speaker has any particular attitude or attachment to the information. In describing his retelling of the second dream the verb va'yesaper is used. This term also means to tell. However, it is used in the Torah to indicate that the speaker is recounting the events in detail and with enthusiasm.

Apparently, Yosef did not attach tremendous importance to the first dream. He viewed it as an interesting curiosity. The brothers perceived the dream as an expression of a latent desire to dominate and they resented Yosef's egotism. However, the second dream made a much greater impression upon Yosef. He felt this dream had meaning. He carefully, eagerly, and in detail described it to his listeners. Yosef's enchantment with this second dream – as expressed in his impassioned recounting of its contents – suggested to the brothers that Yosef took seriously this second dream of dominance. This evoked the brothers concern and their jealousy.

The Torah uses the term ve'hegadeta in describing the requirement to recount the events of our redemption. This term communicates an obligation to recount events in a concise and precise manner. However, when Maimonides and others describe the commandment, they use the term sipur. This term has a different meaning. It communicates an obligation to recount the events with vigor and in detail. Why did these authorities adopt a term that seems to communicate a description of the commandment that differs from the Torah's description?

(continued next page)



Anyone who does not recite these three things on the night of the 15th does not fulfill his obligation. These are the things: Pesach, Matzah, and Maror... These things in their entirety are referred to as Haggadah. (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Chametz u'Matzah 7:5)

Even great scholars are required to recount the exodus from Egypt. Anyone who discusses at length the events that occurred and that which happened is praiseworthy. (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Chametz u'Matzah 7:1)

4. The meaning of the term Haggadah

Maimonides explains that the mitzvah of sipur is only fulfilled by a discussion of the redemption that includes specific components. Maimonides carefully lists all of the elements that must be included in the discussion in order for the commandment to be fulfilled. For example, the discussion must include a description of the obligations to eat the Pesach sacrifice, matzah, and maror. These mitzvot must be discussed and their meaning and message communicated. He concludes his delineation of the required elements of sipur with the comment that these elements – taken together – are referred to as Haggadah. Why is the term Haggadah used to describe this body of information?

Before responding to this question, it will be helpful to consider another law regarding sipur. Maimonides explains that although the mitzvah of sipur requires a discussion that includes certain fundamental elements, these elements represent a minimum standard for the discussion. The discussion has no upper limit. In other words, there is no point at which the discussion of our redemption has been exhausted and further consideration of the events is irrelevant to the mitzvah. The more one discusses the redemption, the greater the magnitude of the fulfillment of

the mitzvah of sipur. In short, the mitzvah of sipur requires that we discuss our redemption. The Torah establishes a minimum content for this discussion but there is no maximum. The more content added to the discussion the greater the fulfillment of the commandment.

Now, Maimonides use of the term Haggadah can be understood. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt"l explains that the term Haggadah aptly describes this minimum content requirement. The elements that compose Haggadah form the basic framework for the discussion. Because these elements are the essential components and the framework for the discussion it is appropriate to describe them as Haggadah. Haggadah communicates a recounting of events in a minimal presentation that is limited to the fundamentals.

5. The messages of the terms ve'hegadeta and sipur

The Torah uses term ve'hegadeta to describe the mitzvah of recounting the events of our redemption. This term communicates that specific fundamental information must be imparted. We do not fulfill the commandment by simply relating any detail or aspect of the events that comes to mind. A specific body of information must be communicated. The term sipur communicates an additional message regarding the mitzvah. What is this message?

Maimonides and others consistently describe the mitzvah of retelling the events of our redemption as lesaper (sipur) be'yetziat mitzrayim. This is a very unusual grammatical construction and somewhat enigmatic. The use of the prefix be following a form of the verb sipur is uncommon. The term sipur – in its various conjugations – appears frequently in the Torah. It is usually followed by some form of the word et. What is the significance of the replacement of the more common et with be?

The term et identifies the material that is the subject and content of the sipur. Yosef recounted – et – his dreams. The dreams are the content of his account. Moshe described to Yitro – et – the events that had befallen Bnai Yisrael. These events were the substance and content of his account to Yitro. The term be literally means “in”. The phrase lesaper (sipur) be'yetziat mitzrayim means to engage in a discussion “in” or regarding the topic of our redemption. In other words the phrase used by our Sages to describe the mitzvah communicates an important idea. According to Rav Soloveitchik, the mitzvah is not to merely recount specific events – albeit in detail. The mitzvah is to engage in a discussion regarding the topic of our redemption. These finite events are not the content and substance of our discussion. They are the topic of a discussion that can be virtually endless.

An illustration will help clarify this distinction. A contract contains an account of an agreement. The agreement is the content and substance of the document. It provides a complete description of all aspects of the agreement. The contract can be said to recount et the agreement. In contrast a biology text – even a very thick one – can only be said to discuss the topic of biology. It is an account be biology. Biology is the subject discussed but the text makes no attempt to exhaust this immense topic. The conventional description of the mitzvah as lesaper (sipur) be'yetziat mitzrayim conveys the message that the mitzvah is not to merely recount a specific set of events. The commandment requires that we engage in an unbounded discussion on the topic of our redemption.

Now, the Sages use of the verb sipur – rather than Haggadah – in describing the mitzvah is understood. As explained above, the term Haggadah communicates that the discussion is not completely open-ended. It must include fundamental elements that form its framework. However, the mitzvah is not to merely identify and review these elements. The commandment is lesaper (sipur) be'yetziat mitzrayim. We are commanded to engage in a discussion that is about these elements. However, these elements only form the topic for the discussion. The exploration and analysis of these elements has no limit. Every additional observation, comment, and insight on the topic contributes to the fulfillment of the mitzvah and increases the degree to which the mitzvah is fulfilled. ■

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