**SALT – PESACH (2) 5782**

**PARASHAT ACHREI-MOT**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Toward the beginning of the *maggid* section of the *seder*, we introduce our fulfillment of the obligation of *sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim* (telling the story of the Exodus) by mentioning that even accomplished scholars are required to speak about the Exodus on this night. We state: “Even if we are all smart, and we are all wise, and we all know the Torah, there is an obligation for us to tell about the Exodus from Egypt.” As an example of this *halakha*, we proceed to tell the story of the five *Tannaim* who observed the *seder* together in Bnei-Brak and spent the entire night discussing the Exodus, until their students informed them that the time had come to recite the morning *shema*. These were the greatest sages of Israel, who were proficient in all areas of Torah, and yet, not only did they not absolve themselves of the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus, they devoted the entire night to this *mitzva*.

Rav Avraham of Slonim (*Beit Avraham*) offers an insight into the meaning and significance of this *halakha* – that even knowledgeable scholars are obligated to tell the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* on the night of the *seder*. He explains that every scholar brings his unique “*regesh*” (“emotion”) to the experience of *sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim*. No two minds or hearts are identical, and thus everyone who learns about the Exodus has a unique perspective, a unique feeling, and a unique outlook to contribute. This is why no one is exempt from this *mitzva*, not even those who are already very familiar with the information – because each person adds his unique angle, thus enhancing the other participants’ understanding of, and appreciation for, the miracle of the Exodus.

The broader message of this insight is that we have much to gain from other people’s perspectives, even on subjects with which we are already quite familiar. Regardless of our proficiency regarding a certain matter, we can learn from how other people approach it. We each contribute our unique understanding and perspective, and so it is to our benefit to listen to others with an open mind, no matter how knowledgeable we feel we already are, as part of our lifelong effort to grow and advance.

Sunday

As part of its introduction to the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the *Haggadah* famously envisions four different kinds of children who pose questions about the *seder*, and instructs how the parent should respond to each. The *Haggadah* describes the “*rasha*” – the “wicked” son – as asking, “*Ma ha-avoda ha-zot* *lakhem*” – “What is this service of yours?!” (Shemot 12:26). This question is understood as expressing the desire to be excluded from the service, and expressing contempt for the rituals performed by the parents. The *Haggadah* thus says that this son “*kafar ba-ikar*” – “denied the fundamental faith.”

Rav Chanokh Henoch of Alexander (*Chashavah Le-tova*) offers a creative explanation for the mistake made by the *rasha*, and for why he is considered to have denied the “*ikar*” (most important concept). Focusing on the word “*avoda*,” which connotes work which is difficult and demanding, the Alexander Rebbe suggests that the *rasha* denies his and his family’s ability to meet the Torah’s requirements. Living as God’s servants demands “*avoda*,” hard work and a strict level of commitment, and thus this child tells his parents that they are unworthy of this privilege, that their spiritual level is too low for them to qualify as servants of God. The *Haggadah* says that this child has denied the “*ikar*” – the primary element of the Exodus which we celebrate on Pesach. We celebrate not merely our ancestors’ liberation from bondage, but also the fact that God redeemed them despite the low spiritual depths into which they had sunken. As we know from Yechezkel’s prophecy (chapter 20) and other sources, *Benei Yisrael* were submerged in Egyptian paganism, and did not deserve God’s miraculous deliverance. But in His infinite mercy, and in fulfillment of the promise made to the patriarchs, God lifted our ancestors from the depths, rescuing them from Egyptian slavery before they fell any lower. The “*ikar*” of the miracle of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Rebbe of Alexander teaches, is specifically that we should never feel unworthy or incapable of being God’s servants. God commanded *Benei Yisrael* to offer the *korban pesach* on the night of the Exodus, despite their having worshipped idols for many years, because He wants us to serve Him regardless of our spiritual condition. As opposed to the “wicked” son, who denies our worthiness to perform the “*ha-avoda ha-zot*,” to meet the high standards demanded by the Torah, we firmly believe that to the contrary, God eagerly invites us and expects us to serve Him at whichever level we are, and to do the best we can under our current conditions.

Monday

Each night, during the section of the *arvit* service that follows the reading of *Shema*, we speak of the miracles that God performed for our ancestors at the time of the Exodus and then at the sea. We say about God, “He who struck all the firstborn of Egypt in His wrath, and brought His nation, Israel, from their midst for eternal freedom; who brought His children through the fragments of the Sea of Reeds.”

The *Chatam Sofer* notes that in this passage, we refer to *Benei Yisrael* as “His nation” (“*amo*”) in the context of the Exodus, but as “His children” (“*banav*”) in the context of their crossing the sea. Additionally, our ancestors’ departure from Egypt is described as their attaining “*cheirut olam*” – “eternal freedom,” an expression which does not appear in this passage in reference to the miracle of the sea.

The *Chatam Sofer* explains based on the famous tradition that *Benei Yisrael* were unworthy of being brought out of Egypt, but rightfully earned the miracle of the sea through their faith in God. God rescued *Benei Yisrael* from bondage out of compassion for them and in fulfillment of His covenant with the patriarchs, not because they deserved redemption. At the sea, however, *Benei Yisrael* displayed their faith by following Moshe’s command to proceed into the water before it split, and in the merit of this great act of faith, they were miraculously saved. Now the Gemara (Bava Batra 10a) cites Rabbi Akiva’s teaching that the nature of our relationship with God depends upon our conduct: when we fulfill His will, we are considered His children; when we do not, we are considered His servants. The *Chatam Sofer* thus explains that at the time of the Exodus, when *Benei Yisrael* were as yet unworthy of God’s deliverance, they could not be called “His children,” and so we speak of Him bringing “**His nation**, Israel” out of Egypt, and not “His children.” At the time of the splitting of the sea, however, *Benei Yisrael* were, indeed, “His children,” as they had displayed unbridled faith and devotion. Hence, we declare, “*Ha-ma’avir* ***banav*** *bein gizrei Yam Suf*” – that God brought “His children” through the sea.

For this same reason, the *Chatam Sofer* explains, the phrase “*cheirut olam*” is mentioned only in reference to the nation’s departure from Egypt, and not in regard to the miracle of the sea. Our status as God’s servants is everlasting; at the time of the Exodus, God brought us from Pharaoh’s service into His service, where we remain for all time. We retain this status eternally and unconditionally, and thus the event of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* is said to have brought us “*cheirut olam*” – “eternal freedom.” Our status as God’s children, however, is contingent upon our conduct. It is only when “*osin retzono shel Makom*,” when we faithfully obey God’s wishes and fulfill His will, that we are considered His children. Therefore, the event of “*ha-ma’avir* ***banav*** *bein gizrei Yam Suf*,” when God brought “His children” through the sea, was not “eternal” the way the Exodus resulted in “everlasting freedom.” Whereas the Exodus made us God’s servants for eternity, the status of “children” attained at the sea is not guaranteed, and depends on whether we act in a manner that renders us worthy of this lofty position.

Tuesday

The *Shirat Ha-yam* song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after crossing through the sea begins, “*Ashira le-Hashem ki ga’o ga’a, sus ve-rokhevo rama va-yam*” – “I shall sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously; He cast the horse and rider into the sea” (Shemot 15:1). This refers, of course, to the Egyptian horsemen, who drowned when the waters which had split to allow *Benei Yisrael* to cross then fell down upon the pursuing Egyptian army.

Rav Yisrael of Modzitz (as cited by his son, Rav Shaul Yedidya of Modzitz, in *Yisa Berakha*, Parashat Beshalach) offers a creative explanation to this verse, suggesting that *Benei Yisrael* here in a sense “justify” their song of praise. Upon experiencing the great miracle of the splitting of the sea, *Benei Yisrael* were filled with gratitude, but were also overcome by awe. This display of God’s unlimited power and control over the universe gave them a newfound recognition of their lowliness, of the infinitely vast gap between us frail human beings and the Almighty. This awareness intimidated them, as they felt incapable and unworthy of opening their mouths and speaking to God, even to sing His praises. What allowed them to do so was the fact that “He cast the horse and rider into the sea” – God showed them how the mighty and powerful can be instantly lowered and defeated. Just as God overthrows the mighty, He also elevates the lowly. In His unlimited power, God brings down the strong and emboldens the weak. Hence, the fact that God “cast the horse and rider into the sea,” plunging the arrogant, powerful Egyptian military into the depths of the ocean, gave *Benei Yisrael* the confidence to sing before Him, because just as God lowers the mighty, He also strengthens the feeble.

Therefore, *Benei Yisrael* introduced *Az Yashir* by explaining that they sing to God because “He cast the horse and rider into the sea” – they have been shown that one’s current condition and status is not necessarily permanent. Just as God defeated the powerful Egyptians, so does He uplift us lowly human beings who wish to be uplifted and come before Him in a sincere desire to serve Him.

Wednesday

In one of the more famous verses in *Shirat Ha-yam* – the song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the splitting of the sea – they exclaimed, “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu, Elokei avi va-aromemenhu*” – “This is my God, and I shall glorify Him; the God of my father, and I shall exalt Him” (Shemot 15:2).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 43:9) draws a curious association between this verse and Avraham’s vow not to take any of the property of the city of Sedom. The city’s population and possessions were captured by the four kingdoms led by Kedarlaomer, until Avraham led a military offensive against the four kingdoms, rescuing the captives and retrieving the property. After the war, Sedom’s king offered to allow Avraham to keep all the property, as he was the one who saved it from the armies of the four kingdoms. Avraham, however, refused, proclaiming, “I raise my hand to the Supreme God…that I shall not take from a thread to a shoelace, anything that belongs to you…” (Bereishit 14:23). The Midrash cites a view describing Avraham’s pronouncement as a “*shira*” – a “song.” And, according to this view, when *Benei Yisrael* exclaimed after the splitting of the sea, “*Elokei avi va-aromemenhu*,” the word “*aromemenhu*” references Avraham’s declaration, “*Harimoti*” (“I raise”). They were saying, in the Midrash’s words, that they will sing “with the same words with which our forefather sang a song.” They proclaimed, “*Va-aromemenhu*” to express that they will sing just as Avraham “sang” by pronouncing, “*Harimoti*.”

The obvious question arises as to how Avraham’s vow not to accept any of Sedom’s possessions can be considered a “song,” and why the Midrash would draw a connection between this “song” and *Shirat Ha-yam*.

Rav Tuvia Yehuda Tavyumi, in *Tal Le-Yisrael* (pp. 45-46), suggests that the Midrash here seeks to convey the message that especially refined, Godly conduct can be described as “song.” Just as the emotional experience of song transcends physical sensation, the righteous live a higher existence, on a plane that transcends the ordinary human experience. The difference between a plain, ordinary life, and a life of spiritual meaning, parallels the difference between ordinary prose and beautiful lyrics sung to a stirring melody. Avraham’s selfless act, waiving his rights to the property which he rescued, reflected his “poetic” life, how he lived his life on a fundamentally different plane than ordinary people. After mobilizing an army and launching a daring assault on four powerful armies, knowingly placing himself in grave danger, he was fully entitled to every “thread” and “shoelace,” and every precious item, which he courageously rescued. But Avraham was a man driven by values and principle, not by personal interest, and so he turned down the king’s offer, refusing to enjoy material gain from the war he waged against the four conquering armies. This act epitomized the “poetic” life that Avraham lived, how he transcended the ordinary concerns and wishes that occupy the minds of most other people.

Rav Tavyumi explains that as *Benei Yisrael* sang to God after the miracle they experienced, they made a point of saying that they wished to sing as Avraham did – to “sing” not only in the literal sense, but through their conduct, as well. They pledged not only to sing beautiful words of praise, but also to turn their lives into “song,” to take the inspiration received from this dramatic experience and use it to elevate themselves and strive to live on a higher plane. The *Shirat Ha-yam*, which poetically describes God’s power and greatness, is thus depicted by the Midrash as a call to live “poetic” lives, to commit ourselves to a higher level of refinement, morality and spirituality, following the example set by our patriarch, Avraham, who laid the foundations of the values and character traits which *Am Yisrael* is meant to embody.

Thursday

The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (10b) famously relates that at the time of the splitting of the sea, when *Benei Yisrael* were miraculously rescued from the pursuing Egyptian army, “the ministering angels wanted to sing a song [of praise].” God did not permit them to sing, however, exclaiming, “My creatures are drowning in the sea, and you will sing a song?!” *Benei Yisrael* were miraculously saved, but the Egyptian horsemen were drowned, and the loss of life should not be celebrated, even if the people killed were our cruel enemies.

Many commentators set out to explain why God prevented the angels from singing, but allowed *Benei Yisrael* to sing. In response to the miracle of the splitting of the sea, Moshe led *Benei Yisrael* in the singing of *Az Yashir*, a beautiful song of praise which has been incorporated into the daily *Pesukei De-zimra* service which we recite each morning. Why were *Benei Yisrael* permitted to sing, whereas the loss of the Egyptians’ lives made it inappropriate for the angels to sing?

A parallel passage in the Midrash might, at first glance, lead us to a different reading of the Gemara’s comment. The *Midrash Tanchuma Yashan* (Beshalach, 13) states, “At the time when Israel encamped at the sea, the ministering angels came to give praise to the Almighty, but the Almighty did not permit them.” According to this account, the angels wanted to sing not after the miracle, but during the crisis, while *Benei Yisrael* were trapped against the sea by the pursuing Egyptian army. Indeed, the Midrash proceeds to relate that God reprimanded the angels, drawing an analogy to a group of citizens who brought a tribute to their king while his son was in captivity, before he was rescued. God said to the angels, “My children are in crisis – and you are praising Me?!” The Midrash continues that after God split the sea and *Benei Yisrael* crossed safely, both they and the angels wanted to sing praise. God told the angels to give deference to *Benei Yisrael* and allow them to sing first.

According to this tradition, the angels were, in fact, permitted to sing praise to God after the miracle, after *Benei Yisrael* sang. It was during the crisis when God reprimanded them and said it was inappropriate for them to sing.

The question becomes, according to this version, why did the angels wish to sing praise to God when *Benei Yisrael* were threatened? Why would they want to give praise to God during this grave crisis?

The likely answer is that the Midrash here refers to the standard, daily *shira* (song of praise) sung by the angels each morning. Indeed, the Midrash cites as a textual source for this episode two verses – one from the context of the miracle of the sea, and one describing the daily praise sung by the angels.

The Torah tells that as the Egyptians pursued *Benei Yisrael*, God placed an obstruction in between the two camps, such that “*lo karav zeh el zeh*” – they could not approach one another (Shemot 14:20). The phrase “*zeh el zeh*” appears also in reference to the angels’ daily song, as described by the prophet Yeshayahu (6:3) and as mentioned in our *kedusha* service (“*Ve-kara* ***zeh el zeh*** *ve-amar*…”). The common expression “*zeh el zeh*” in these two verses is the source of the notion that the angels wanted to sing at this time, when *Benei Yisrael* were trapped at the sea.It seems quite likely, then, that the Midrash speaks of the angels preparing to sing *shira* at dawn just as they do each morning, until God explained that *shira* was inappropriate when His beloved children were in danger.

At first glance, we might assume that this is the Gemara’s intent, as well. God’s response, “My creatures are drowning in the sea, and you will sing a song?!” could be understood as referring not to the Egyptians who drowned, but rather to *Benei Yisrael*, who were trapped against the sea by the Egyptian army. “My creatures are drowning in the sea” could mean that *Benei Yisrael* faced the prospect of being drowned at sea, and for this reason, singing was inappropriate.

In truth, however, this reading seems difficult to accept, because the Gemara brings this passage as an example of the principle, “*Ein Ha-kadosh Baruch Hu samei’ach be-mapalatan shel reshaim*” – “the Almighty does not rejoice over the downfall of the wicked.” The Gemara clearly understood this statement as expressing God’s displeasure when evil people die, and how celebrating in response to their demise is inappropriate. We must therefore conclude that the account brought by the Gemara speaks of the angels’ desire to sing in celebration of the drowning of the Egyptians, and not of their desire to sing their regular *shira* when *Benei Yisrael* were trapped against the sea.

(Based on Rav Asher Wassertheil’s [*Birkat Asher*, Parashat Beshalach](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Birkat_Asher_on_Torah%2C_Exodus.14.20.2?vhe=Birkat_Asher,_Asher_Vasertil,_Jerusalem_2010-2012&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en))

Friday

Parashat Acharei-Mot begins with the commands regarding the special service which the *kohen gadol* is to conduct in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* each year on Yom Kippur. Among the unique features of this verse is the offering of two goats, one of which is brought as a sacrifice, and its blood sprinkled inside the inner chamber of the *Mikdash*, and another which is sent out “*la-azazel*” – to the wilderness, symbolic of the banishment of the nation’s sins. The polar opposite fates of these two goats were determined via a lottery – the *kohein gadol* was given two pieces of paper, upon which was written “to God” and “to the wilderness.” The *kohen gadol* then blindly placed one over each goat, thereby designating one as a sacrifice and the other for the role of being brought into the desert. The Mishna in Masekhet Yoma (62a) teaches that these two goats should be similar in appearance, size, and even price (though the service is valid even if they are not).

Rav Yaakov Yosef of Spinka (*Siach Yaakov Yosef*) finds it especially significant that the two goats should ideally be valued at the same price. Symbolically, he suggests, these goats represent our various expenditures, the way we allocate our resources. Many of us, unfortunately, tend to prioritize “*azazel*” – vain pursuits, over “*le-Hashem*” – our service of God. The lures of physical enjoyment and material comforts lead us to commit the majority of our time, attention and assets to unnecessary luxuries, at the expense of far more meaningful matters, such as charity, extending help to those in need, and spiritual engagement. The requirement to spend the same amount of money on each of the two Yom Kippur goats indicates to us that we must ensure not to prioritize “*azazel*” over “*le-Hashem*,” to remember at all times to make our service of God our highest priority, rather than waste the bulk of our time, energy and resources on vain, valueless pursuits.