

The Nine Aspects Of The Haggada

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The Haggada is based upon and revolves around the section in the Torah known as the "Arami Oved Avi" portion, which appears at the beginning of Sidrat Ki Tavo (Devarim 26). This is the passage that each Jew recited upon bringing the first fruits, the Bikkurim, to the Temple in Jerusalem. It is clear from the Talmud in Pesachim 116a, and the Rambam's codification in Hilkhos Hametz u'Matza 7:1, 7:4, that the recitation of this passage is essential to the fulfillment of the mitzva of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim. Why in fact do our sages choose this passage as the focal point of the Haggada?

We must conclude that each Jew, in addition to offering the first fruits, was commanded to fulfill the mitzva of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim. Thus there are two times during the year that the Jew must relate the Story of the Exodus from Egypt; at the Havaat Bikkurim and on the night of the Seder.

The Torah presented us with the text for the Havaat Bikkurim. However, with regards to the Seder night all that we find in the Torah is the general commandment: "You shall tell your son on that day, saying, this is done (the Pesach observance) because of what the Eternal did for me when I came out of Egypt" (Shemot 13:8). A specific text is not mandated. ChaZa"L, however, concluded that the "Arami Oved Avi" text which fulfilled the requirement of Sippur at the bringing of the Bikkurim, would also be appropriate at the Seder.

The use of a common text indicates that the seemingly distinct rituals, in fact, have a common theme or purpose. That purpose is to give thanks and express gratitude to the Almighty. Both recitations are acts of Hakkarat haTov to the Eternal.

The essence of the Seder, and hence that of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim, is the expression of gratitude to the Almighty on the great liberation and miracles that he wrought for us in Egypt. As the Rambam states in Sefer haMitzvot: "We are commanded to tell the story at the beginning of the fifteenth of Nissan... and we are to thank Him for all the goodness He has bestowed upon us" (Mitzva 157). On the Seder night at the climax of Maggid we say: "Therefore we are obligated to thank and praise... exalt and revere Him who performed all those miracles and for us."

Similarly, the act of Havaat Bikkurim is an expression of thanksgiving and gratitude to the Almighty for granting the farmer and the people this holy land and its abundance after a history of wandering and suffering. The Jew recognizes that this land has come to him and his nation through a chain of miraculous and divinely ordained episodes throughout history. Therefore, the Arami Oved Avi passage contains a short synopsis of early history, with an emphasis on the enslavement in Egypt, the Exodus and the entry into the Land of Israel. The Jew, when bringing the Bikkurim states (Devarim 26:3): "I say today before the Lord, your God...". However, the Targum of Yonatan Ben Uziel translates: "I will give gratitude and praise this day to the Lord...". The passage was understood by ChaZa"L as a statement of thanksgiving and gratitude to the Almighty. (In fact, from this comment of the Targum it is possible to suggest that the word Haggada does not only imply the idea of "telling," but also the notion of thanksgiving and gratitude.)

1) Let us now analyze some of the various aspects of the Haggada. It will help us to begin with a comparison of the Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim that the Jew engages in at the Havaat haBikkurim and that of the Seder night. The common feature and first aspect of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim on both these occasions is the Sippur. We read and tell a story. This recitation must consist of the

biblical text of the Arami Oved Avi passage. In a word, we engage in Mikra. In this respect the Havaat Bikkurim and the Seder night are identical.

2) At this stage, however, the two rituals part company. In the act of Havaat Bikkurim, the Torah only required that a text be recited. There is no requirement that it be translated or elaborated upon. In contrast, on the Seder night there are additional demands. The Mitzva of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim at the Seder is basically an act of Talmud Torah. Talmud Torah involves within it elaboration and exegesis. The Mishna in Pesachim (10:4) mandates: "And he explains and elaborates from Arami Oved Avi until he concludes the whole portion." The Mishna speaks of "Limud," which involves translation, asking of questions and conceptualization. In fact, the core of Maggid is a systematic exegesis and discussion of every word of the Arami Oved Avi passage. We engage in a Torah sheBaal Peh analysis, of a Torah sheBikhtav text.

This analysis utilizes all the elements that comprise Torah sheBaal Peh. For our purposes these elements may be subdivided into three different areas. The first is Midrash. This refers to the exegesis of biblical verses in accordance with the hermeneutical rules set down by our sages (e.g. the Thirteen Middot of Rabbi Yishmael, the Thirty-two Middot of Rabbi Eliezer).

The second category is Mishna. This refers to the set laws and statements cited in the Mishnayot and Memrot.

Finally, we have Gemara, which refers to halakhic analysis and conceptualization. Rashi in various places in the Talmud translates Gemara as – the Sevarot – the logical basis for the laws of the Mishna. However, the most full and eloquent definition is given by Rambam in Hilkhos Talmud Torah (1:11): "And one is obligated to apportion his time of study, so that he spends one third of his time studying Torah sheBikhtav, another third, Torah sheBaal Peh, and one third in understanding and trying to see the development from one step to another from beginning to end, and he should compare cases and derive one idea from another; these elements are called Gemara."

In the Haggada we find that all three areas of the oral law are used and applied. Firstly, we have

Midrash. As was quoted above, the Arami Oved Avi passage is interpreted and explained through the different devices of Midrash. Secondly, the Haggada includes a number of passages of Mishna, of set halakhot and statements. Examples include the passage taken from the Mishna in Pesachim (10:5) "Rabban Gamliel used to say, anyone who has not said these three things at Passover has not fulfilled his obligation, etc.," and the response to the wise son "And you shall even tell him, (all the halakhot including) "We do not eat any food after the eating of the Afikoman," which is a law found in the Mishna in Pesachim (10:8). Finally, the Haggada contains elements of "Gemara," of logical deductions and inferences. An example of this is the passage "Therefore, it is our duty to thank, praise..." which is a logical conclusion based upon the reading of the immediately preceding Halakhot (i.e. Pesach, Matza and Marror). Thus the Haggada not only involves Mikra, but also Limud. In fact the word Haggada and its root "Haged" imply not only telling, but also an act of study and Talmud Torah, as we find prior to Matan Torah when the Almighty commands Moshe, "Thus shall you say to the House of Yaakov and tell (vetaggid) to the Children of Israel" (Shemot 19:3).

3) It is not enough, however, for the Jew to be a student the night of the Seder; he must also become a teacher. This reflects the third aspect of the Haggada–Masora. The Jew must teach his children and others about the glorious event that occurred in Egypt long ago. The Haggada, before the passage about the four sons, included the portion "Blessed be the Omnipotent. Blessed be He who hath given the Torah to his people Israel. Blessed be He, etc." What, in fact, is this passage? In a word, it is a short version of Birkat haTorah –the blessing made on the Torah. If we carefully examine the Torah blessings, in general, we see that they, too, stress the aspect of Masora, the passing on of tradition. We state "And the house of Israel. And we and our children and our children's children should all be privileged to know your name, and be students of your Torah for its own sake." Moreover, at the close of the blessing we say, "Blessed by the Lord, who teaches Torah to His people, Israel." It is as if the Almighty himself becomes part of that Masora community. After this blessing, appears the passage about the four sons, which concretizes the notion of teach-

ing and passing on the Story of the Exodus to one's children each at his respective level.

4) The fourth aspect is the "question and answer" style dialogue that is found in parts of the Haggada. Why is it so crucial that the child ask questions; why do we prompt him? Simply put, Judaism insists that God reveals himself to the man who seeks after and thirsts for God. The verse in Devarim (4:29) reads: "But if you search there for the Lord your God, you will find him if only you will seek him with all your heart and soul." We want to initiate the child into the Masora community that seeks out the Almighty and yearns for his presence and illumination. We want the child to become a "Mevakesh Hashem"—"a seeker of God."

5) The fifth aspect of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim is the central role that the meal and food play at the Seder. The drama of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim begins with Kiddush and closes with Nishmat and Yishtabach after the meal. In fact, this is the reason that the Shulkhan Arukh, O.C. 472:1, is so careful in specifying that the Kiddush on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan should be recited after astronomical nightfall. (On other festivals, one may usher in the festival and recite Kiddush earlier when it is still daytime.) Kiddush is part of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim, and therefore, must take place on the night of the fifteenth proper. Kiddush the night of Pesach plays two roles. One is the normal role of Kiddush as the introduction of the festive meal as on every festival. Secondly, it is part of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim. Kiddush contains within it the statement "who has chosen us from all nations," which is identical to the third language of Geulat Mitzrayim found in Sidrat Va'era (6:7) "Velakachti": – "and shall take you unto me for a nation."

Moreover, there is another more basic reason for Kiddush playing a role in Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim. Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim contains within it two elements. One is the recitation of certain passages. Second, is the element of performing certain actions, eating of certain foods, etc. When one eats Matza, Marror, and Korban Pesach on the Seder night one fulfills these specific mitzvot. However, in addition, through the eating of these foods one is able to teach and convey the messages of Geulat Mitzrayim. They function as audio-visual aids in our educational

scheme, namely, the Seder. This is what Rabban Gamliel was trying to convey. (in the Mishna "Whoever has not said these three things has not fulfilled his obligation" 10:5, etc.) He wanted the Jew, before he partakes of the foods, to explain their significance and message, to all who are at this table. Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim is a careful blend, then, of narrative, teaching and actions to get across a unified message.

Kiddush also opens the Seuda every Shabbat and festival. Kiddush puts the meal in a context of holiness, uplifting it from a mundane effort to satisfy biological needs to the realm of the sacred. The idea of "a meal before God" is a fundamental one in Judaism.

It is along these lines that our sages (Berakhot 55a) spoke of "an individual's table is an atonement for his sins" and "a dining table is similar to an altar."

6) As was previously stated, the Mikra Bikkurim involves praise and thanksgiving to the Almighty. However, this is an awareness that comes about indirectly. The farmer recites the Arami Oved Avi passage which in itself, when understood, expresses gratitude. It is almost a notion of "Kriyata zu Hilula (Megillah 14a)." The praise is implicit in the narration.

In contrast, on the night of the Seder we are enjoined not only to praise and give gratitude, but rather to break forth into spontaneous song – "Let us, therefore, sing a new song in his presence, Halleluya." The Jew's heart is overflowing with feelings of joy and thanksgiving. It is the night of the great romance between the Almighty and Knesset Yisrael—"I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me." It is these feelings that are expressed in the custom of reading the book of Shir haShirim the night of the Seder.

Philosophically, one can ask, who is lowly man that he should have the audacity to praise God? Is not man "dust and ashes"? How then does he have the right to praise the infinite being, the Almighty? The Halakha responds true, philosophically, there may be problems, however the Jew cannot contain himself. The Jew, on the night of the Seder, is overflowing with thanksgiving and song to God, and he cannot repress this authentic

need to express his gratitude to the Holy one, Blessed be He.

7) As the Jew approaches the Story of the Exodus, there may be a tendency to look at the event as remote and distant from the here and now. Therefore, the Haggada contains within it three passages that help us deal with this problem. First of all, before the recitation of the Arami Oved Avi passage, we say: "And if God had not taken our ancestors out of Egypt, we and our children and our children's children would still be enslaved in Egypt." We make a declaration of relevance. Why, in fact, are we discussing these events of history; what is their relevance to our present situation? And to this we respond that were it not for the redemption in Egypt, there would be no Jewish People today.

Secondly, before Hallel we recite that "in every generation a person should look upon himself as if he personally had come out of Egypt. Not our ancestors alone did the Holy One, blessed be He, redeem, but us also He redeemed with them." The events of Yetziat Mitzrayim are not only relevant to us, rather, we are actually re-experiencing history on the night of the Seder. It is a current as well as a historical event. This recognition enables us to recite Hallel and break forth into spontaneous song, because it is we who left Egypt as well.

Finally, we recite the "Vehi sheAmda" passage: "For not only one tyrant has risen up against us to destroy us, but in every generation tyrants have sought to destroy us and the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivered us from their hands." Not only do we relive the experience of Egypt, but also we realize that danger and annihilation threaten the Jewish people in every generation and locale. We move from the historical events to a better understanding of our current situation. The custom is that at this point in the Seder, one lifts up his cup of wine. Why is this done? The cup is the symbol of Jewish destiny and eternity - Netzach Yisrael, as the verse (Tehillim 116:13) "A cup of salvation I shall uplift, and call on the Almighty's name" indicates. At the Seder we speak of the relevance of historical events, the reliving of those events and the cycle of danger and redemption that is characteristic of Jewish history.

8) The Mishna in Pesachim (10:5) dictates "and he explains the Arami Oved Avi passage until he

completes it." However, in our Haggada we do not complete the passage in its totality. We do not recite and discuss the last verse and a half, which read: "He hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, a land flowing (with) milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruits of the land which Thou hast given to me, O Lord..." (Devarim 26:9-10). The farmer bringing the Bikkurim would include these verses and then set down the fruits "before the Lord your God." It is understandable why the Haggada did not include the last verse that discusses the actual bringing of fruits, as that is out of place on the Seder night. However, why was the verse discussing the entry into the Land of Israel not included in our version of Haggada? A number of approaches exist to resolve this problem. First of all, if we included this reference to the Land of Israel, we would convey the impression that there are five languages or references of Geula and not four (as we maintain). We would include "veheveti" as one of the references of Geula, and ChaZa"L felt that this would not be appropriate on the Seder night. Why is this the case? Firstly, the four references of Geula that were stated by the Almighty to Moshe in Sidrat Vaera, were new ideas that had not been expressed to the Patriarchs. However, "veheveti", "and I shall bring you into the land..." was already promised to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov in their respective Brit Avot. They were already promised that their descendants would inherit the Land of Israel. Secondly, although the Jewish people did enter into the Land of Israel subsequent to the Exodus from Egypt this was not the primary goal of Yetziat Mitzrayim. It was their destination but not their destiny. The direct goal of Yetziat Mitzrayim was the revelation at Sinai. The goal was the transformation of a subjugated people into "a nation of priests and a holy nation." It was not just to grant them political and economic freedom, but also to create a sacred people. Moshe, at the episode of the burning bush, asked the Almighty: "Who (am) I that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the Children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Shemot 3:11). And the Almighty gives an answer that seems at first to be a bit difficult: "Certainly I will be with you and this shall be unto you the sign that I have sent you: When thou has brought forth the people out of Egypt they shall serve God upon this mountain." What was the Almighty saying to Moshe; how did this answer his query? The Almighty was

stating,— know, Moshe, that the purpose of Geulat Mitzrayim is not political and social freedom. For that task, I would not have picked you. I did not pick you to be a diplomat or a king or political leader. Rather, the purpose of the Exodus is to create a holy nation, to make them a Torah nation. For this purpose, God says, I need a Rebbe, a teacher and mentor who will lead and guide this people. And for this role, you are the best candidate. Pesach is the holiday of Yetziat Mitzrayim and leads into Shavuot and Matan Torah. These two festivals do not focus on the Land of Israel as a central theme. According to Rambam in Moreh Nevukhim (3:43), it is Succot, rather, that is the holiday which celebrates the Land of Israel.

Thirdly, it is possible to suggest that during the time the Temple still stood, the text of the Haggada did include the last verses relating to the entry into the Land of Israel. Upon the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile, ChaZa"L amended the text in order to conform

to the new reality in which Am Yisrael found itself.

9) Finally, on the night of the Seder, the Jew mentions all the wonderful things that the Almighty has done and is doing for him and his people. This, in fact, is the thrust of Birkat haMazon and, therefore, it also functions as part of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim (in addition to its role as Grace after the meal.) After discussing God's special relationship with the Jewish People we move to the Hallel haGadol, which contains a recognition of God's benevolence to the whole world. We recognize and express gratitude for this, as we state, "Who giveth food unto all flesh, for His kindness endures forever." This leads us to the climax of the Seder, "Nishmat", when we speak of the future, the Acharit haYamim, when all living beings shall give praise to the Almighty—Nishmat kol chai tevarekh..." These portions add a glorious eschatological dimension to the Shevach and Hoda' a sections that are so essential to the Haggada.