

PREPARING FOR PESACH, I: NOT JUST TALK - ACTION!

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

The holiday of Pesach begins with a night where Jews all over the world, throughout the generations, gather together to conduct a festive meal at whose center is the story of Pesach -- the Redemption from Egypt -- being told to the next generation of Jews. Many techniques -- gimmicks -- were added to the ceremony in order to arouse the curiosity and the inquiries of the children in order to involve the young ones in the entire process of reliving the Exodus. We dip vegetables into salt water, we eat bitter herbs, we dip into a brick colored dip called haroset and we lean like kings as we eat our massa. On other holy days we do commemorate great events in our spiritual history but none compares to Pesach in detail. The night is named after the orderly progression from slavery and idol worship to freedom and allegiance to the Torah -- Seder.

Why so much symbolism? Why so much acting out the message? Wouldn't telling the story do the job just as well?

The Sefer Hahinukh asks a similar question about the misvot. Why is it we have so many commandments to remind us of one historical event -- the Exodus? He answers, "Ha Adam nif-al kefee pe-ulohtav" -- a person is shaped by his or her external actions. In other words -- behavior molds the psyche. If a person repeats a good deed many times over that person is drawn closer to good and similarly, if someone were to repeat a wicked deed that person would become more wicked. The action forms the personality of the person.

On the night of Pesach a person is required to reach a level of actually feeling as if he or she came out of Egypt and not that it was a historical event that our forefathers experienced. In order to assist the individual in achieving this feeling the Sages instituted a night of acting out the emotional events of the time gone by. Feel the salt of their tears and eat a bitter food to feel the bitterness of their lives in bondage. On the other hand, eat the food that they prepared in haste as they left as free people in a hurry and drink four cups of wine -- reclining like royalty. If one does the misvot of the night with feeling and understanding then one will feel the ecstasy they felt 3300 years ago. The Jew will feel as if- I came out of Egypt and I want to express in praise and song the joy and gratitude I feel towards my Savior. That is the climax of the night -- Hallel -- a song of wild praise evoked through acting out the phases of my development from slave to free people. Our night of freedom -- acted out -- brings the genuine emotion needed to properly climax the night with a royal "thank you" to our G-d our Savior. Prepare and enjoy.

TABLE TALK --QUESTION FOR THE SEDER TABLE

We do many things differently on the night of Pesah than on other nights-- why are the four questions specifically about Matsah, bitter herbs, dipping and reclining? Also, how does the answer "we were slaves in Egypt and Hashem freed us" answer the four questions?

The Abarbanel answers, "We ask about two things that represent slavery, why do we eat the bread of the poor Matsah and why do we eat bitter herbs and we also ask about two things that represent freedom why do we dip our foods like aristocrats and why do we recline like royalty? In Jewish law it takes two witnesses to establish a fact and so we bring two proofs for each of the conditions -- slavery and freedom.

Then we answer, "We do these things because --fact one -- avadeem hayeenu- -we were slaves in Egypt and we do the contradictory rituals because -- fact two --vayoseaynu Hashem Elohenu me sham-- "Hashem our G-d-freed us from there."

DID YOU KNOW THAT

One who will be away from home for Pesah, but who is still at home on the night of the 14th of Nissan must do a search [Bedikah] with a blessing at this time, and the next day he should check his new quarters without a blessing (unless the new quarters were checked previously).

If a person is leaving his home before the night of the fourteenth, the search should be done the night before he leaves --without a blessing--and the search should be done on his new abode on the night of the fourteenth with a blessing. On the day of the fourteenth --he burns his hames wherever he may be. When spending the holiday in a hotel one must search the room carefully and must not rely on its cleanliness. The berakha follows the time when the search is done as outlined above. [Gateway to Halacha p. 23 -- based on Shulhan Arukh Siman 431:1]

NOTE: In the days remaining until Pesah our daily "minute" will be replaced with a brief thought on Pesah and a question for discussion at your Seder. The minutes will return to our regular format after Pesah.

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