

PREPARING FOR PESACH, II: CONTRADICTION

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

The night of the Seder is known as a night for questions. The most famous are the four questions with which we open the Haggadah-- the story portion of the evening's ceremonies. Throughout the evening we do other things in order to arouse the curiosity of the fertile minds of the young people to whom we are required to pass on our heritage. On all other holidays we pour a Kiddush cup, say the blessings, drink and proceed to eat. On Pesach as soon as we are done with the first cup we clean it and refill it even though we are not ready to eat as yet. We lean like royalty eating our massah to express our freedom yet we eat marror -- bitter herbs -- to represent our bitter lives of bondage. Why is it that we do so many things that contradict each other? Are we now free and celebrating freedom? Why then do we highlight the pains of servitude?

There was once an infant who was abandoned by his mother. A rich man was riding his stallion in the forest when he heard the baby's cries. He not only saved the infant, he adopted the child and brought it up as his own. The best of everything from education to physical comforts was provided as the child grew to adulthood. The philanthropist home paid for even the marriage and the setup of a new.

Another individual was a successful, respected businessperson in his community. Unfortunately, the wheel of financial fortunes took a turn for the worse and this man was left destitute and in poor health. A kind benefactor heard of the man's plight and arranged for the best medical treatment to bring him back to health. Then he provided capital for a new venture, which put the man back on his feet.

Who of the two recipients felt a stronger debt of gratitude to his benefactor? The businessman who had once tasted success and then lost it appreciated his benefactor's kindness much more than the infant who grew up used to the best that life had to offer. One of the key objectives of the Seder formula is to bring us to recognition of G-d's kindness to our people. In order to heighten our sensitivity to His great hesed, we spend the night involved in contrasts. We were slaves. We were afflicted. We were idol worshippers. Then G-d came and not only saved us but make us his princes - - strong, free and wealthy -- and owner's of His holy Torah to boot.

By contrasting the peaks against the valleys of our spiritual and physical history the author of the haggadah created a scenario that is sure to bring us to the end of the service -- the Hallel of praises and song to our Savior-- with at an emotional high spearheaded by feelings of true gratitude for the miracles done on our behalf. This is the proper climax for an evening of thanks.

TABLE TALK -- QUESTIONS FOR THE SEDER TABLE

The Haggadah says, "Rebbi Yehudah used to give them [the ten plagues] signs -- dsa"kh ada"sh b'aha"b". Rebbi Yehudah is given credit for developing an acronym using the first letter of each of the ten plagues to form the three words by which one can remember the 10 punishments Hashem sent to Egypt. The question is "A child in school could take the first letter of the ten words and put this memory formula together. What is the genius of Rebbi Yehudah in putting together this sign? "

There are many answers given. The reason Rebbi Yehudah put together this sign is because in the book of Tehillim David Hamelekh lists the plagues in a different chronological order. Rebbi Yehudah made this sign to show us that the order given in the Torah is the actual sequence in which the events happened.

Another answer is that Rebbi Yehudah broke up the sign into a group of 3 and then another three and then four plagues. Aharon performed the first three, Moshe and Aharon did the second set and Moshe initiated the third group of punishments. The final plague --the Killing of the First Born -- was done by Hashem Himself but was grouped with the last three because it had no partner. [Source Haggadah Hazon Obadiah p. 243]

DID YOU KNOW THAT

Women are obligated in the misvah of the telling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt on the night of the Seder. If a woman does not read Hebrew she may fulfill her obligation by listening to others read. If she does not understand Hebrew then the Haggadah must be explained to her in the language that she does understand. Every man has an obligation to tell the story of the Exodus to others especially his children and to elaborate as much as possible. It is forbidden to speak about matters that do not concern the Haggadah during the reading except for extremely urgent circumstances. [Source Haggadah Hazon Obadiah, Hilkhos Lel Haseder, Mageed].

Raymond J Beyda
www.raymondbeyda.com

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