

THE QUESTIONING DEFENSE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

In Sefer Yechezkel (46:9), we find the following instructions on how the nation of Israel was to approach the Bais HaMikdosh, the Holy Temple: "But when the people of the land shall come before Hashem on the holidays, he who enters in by the way of the north gate to bow down shall go out by the way of the south gate; and he who enters by the way of the south gate shall go out by the way of the north gate; he shall not return by the way of the gate by which he came in, but shall go out straight ahead."

Rav Yaakov Emden explains why these instructions were needed. Hashem did not want the people to see any given gate twice on a visit to the Bais HaMikdosh. If a person would enter and exit from the same place, that person might become too familiar with his surroundings. He might start acting in the Bais HaMikdosh like he does in his own home. Clearly, the Bais HaMikdosh, as the holiest location known to us on earth, deserves a level of reverence and respect far above and beyond that displayed when one is in his own home. Yet, if the person became too accustomed to the Bais HaMikdosh, too comfortable in those environs, he may come to disrespect the Holy Temple. To ensure that this would not happen, Hashem desired that people exit and enter the Bais Hamikdosh from different places, so that the people would be constantly reminded of where they were, and act accordingly.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz writes that greatest enemy to feelings of holiness is familiarity. The dangers of familiarity manifest themselves in different ways. On one hand, at a time when a person strives to accomplish more, when a person is close to reaching new heights, familiarity comes along and extinguishes that burning fire. A person becomes accustomed to a certain situation, to a certain status. He is comfortable with that status. He feels good in that position. Change is perceived as something that can cause discomfort, and discomfort is to be avoided. On the other hand, people may recognize the inherent holiness of a certain situation. They may recognize the value of acting in a certain way. However, because they spend so much time in that situation, or they act that way with great frequency, the uniqueness fades and the entire value diminishes, leading to a backsliding in spiritual stature. Familiarity causes people to not only be complacent, but to regress as well.

On Pesach, we have a mitzvah to tell over the chain of events culminating with our exodus from Mitzrayim. We tell over this story using questions and answers, to the degree that even if a person has no children who can ask questions, that individual should do both the asking and the answering

himself. Why is there such a stress on using this method? Rav Shmuelevitz writes that the commandment to tell the story is to tell the story as if it was the first time we were telling it. We should be relating all the events as if the one listening had never heard the story before. Obviously, this is extremely difficult - We are all familiar with the storyline, the listeners usually are as well, and this is especially true if the same person is doing all the talking!

The reason why we do not merely tell over the story, but we do so using , is to make the story a little different each time. Yes, we all know the story. We are familiar with it. It may not appear to be so special to us any more. That dangerous state of familiarity has crept in and made what could be a tremendously uplifting experience into just another lengthy holiday meal. In order to counteract that familiarity, we ask questions and provide answers. We provoke conversation and thought. We stimulate our audience and ourselves by engaging in a string of questions that should inspire us to delve deeply into this story that we all know so well. By inviting this spirit of freshness and originality into the narrative of the Seder evening, we eliminate the dangers posed by familiarity and we enable ourselves to properly fulfill our obligation to tell over the story of our departure from Egypt.

The holiday of Pesach is indeed special. The Seder is akin to a birthday party of sorts, when we celebrate the birth of our nation, the nation of Israel. We have the ability to infuse this party with a degree of holiness. However, this holiness can only be achieved if we appreciate what the party is all about. Our Sages gave us a mechanism to enable us to reach this degree of appreciation. It's called a question. And it's up to us to provide the answers.