

# THE FOUR CUPS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*I will take you...I will save you...I will redeem you...I will take you to Me as a nation.*

Meshech Chochmah: These are the famed four expressions of redemption, each one addressing a different facet of our liberation.

"I will take you" means that Hashem will pluck the people from the surround in which they are embedded, as if delivering a child from the womb, and in the manner of "to take a nation from the midst of [another] nation."<sup>[2]</sup> Despite having become Egyptian-like in their idolatry and faulty spiritual notions, Hashem would exticate a distinct people from among their neighbors.

"I will save you" refers to the murderous designs of the Egyptians to physically annihilate them. Hashem would rescue them, as one who intervenes to save a victim from a murderer.

"I will redeem you" relates that Hashem would free them from their forced servitude.

"I will take you to Me as a nation" means that Hashem would craft them into a cultured people, a nation with order and structure.

The Yerushalmi<sup>[3]</sup> sources the four cups of wine on the Seder night in these four expressions of redemption. We can match the four cups to specific expressions, and how they relate to their particular positions within the Seder. When we do, we discover details of their practices and spiritual level that are not altogether obvious.

We begin with *Kiddush*, which speaks of the Jewish people sanctifying time, of declaring certain occasions holy. But only something holy can create holiness! The Torah commands us to be holy<sup>[4]</sup> in a postscript to the laws of *arayos*/ forbidden relations. As Rashi says there, the creation of barriers against sexual license is an indicator of the restraint and transcendence that are necessary components of holiness.

This *kedushah* corresponds to the first of the four expressions of redemption. In order for Hashem to "take out" a distinct nation from the midst of another, the boundaries between the two peoples could not have become blurred through intermarriage. Somehow, in hundreds of years, both before and during servitude, the natural tendency of peoples in close proximity to each other to mix and mate was resisted. There were no half-Jews; therefore, there was a Jewish people that was available to be taken out. We know enough about the forces within people and their weaknesses to conclude that the Jews must have taken active steps against assimilation. Without fences between them, surely

many would have succumbed. The Bnei Yisrael created the barriers to intermarriage by enforcing their separateness. Thus, their *kedushah*-behavior created the possibility of their being taken out. Kiddush therefore corresponds to the first expression of redemption.

"I will save you" implies the existence of a pursuer and a pursued, of a clear distinction between victim and victimizer. Intervention on behalf of the innocent against the evildoer becomes difficult – if not impossible – if the victim is a victimizer himself. Had the *Bnei Yisrael* behaved as so many other peoples – with people oppressing their own brethren through cooperating with the enemy by informing against each other – the distinction between the good and the evil would have been erased, and they could not be saved.

Their success in maintaining cohesive loyalty is linked to the third cup, the one recited over *Birkas HaMazon*. This mitzvah focuses on the antidotes to communal strife and dissension, which are fed by jealousy and greed. Those faults make people look upon their neighbors as competitors ready to rob them of what they want and need. *Birkas HaMazon*, however, teaches that every individual is provided with what he or she needs through exacting Divine Providence. No person is shortchanged because of the existence or needs of his neighbor. And while the Torah only requires us to *bentsch* after a meal that leaves us fully sated, our practice is to do so nonetheless even after a small amount of bread. We have incorporated *histapkus*/ the ability to make do with little in the way we perform the mitzvah. *Histapkus* is the polar opposite of the oversized appetites that turn neighbors into hated competitors. Hashem's "saving" the *Bnei Yisrael* points to their possession of the traits that *Birkas HaMazon* generally teaches.

"I will redeem you" implies a proud national spirit. Without it, they could have been satisfied with an easing of the brutality of their servitude, and nothing more. Freedom would not have been one of their aspirations. The lowly self-image of the slave often allows him to prefer slavery (and its apparent benefits, such as easy access to female slaves) over the more elevated and refined benefits that come with freedom.

This elevated spirit owes, in the case of our people, to a sense of connection with the past, with an appreciation of the *Avos*, and identification with them and their mission. The Jews in Egypt spurned the opportunity to ingratiate themselves by culturally mixing. They kept their Jewish names, rather than take new, Egyptian, ones. This loyalty to their history, to the Patriarchs, is linked to the second cup, the one we drink after the first part of Hallel, which deals with remembering the *Avos*.

"I will take you to Me as a nation" speaks of the belief they never lost that they would one day become a great nation with an important mission. They refused to abandon their national language, proud not only of their past, but of their future, when they would once again use that language as part of a fully functioning, independent nation. They had absorbed the lesson linked to the final cup, which is recited after the second half of Hallel, whose theme is the future of the *Bnei Yisrael* as a great nation.

It is no accident that the four expressions of redemption take form at the Seder as four cups of wine, rather than four of anything else. As we have seen, the four qualities that the Jews in Egypt must have possessed to be redeemed in this four-fold manner are related to separateness. The *Bnei Yisrael* kept their distance, in multiple ways. We, in *galus*, do the same; the way we relate to wine both enforces and symbolized that separateness. The rabbinic prohibition against drinking non-Jewish wine (as a barrier to intermarriage) has been extremely effective in keeping us apart. Haman scorned Jewish separateness. He told Achashverosh,<sup>[5]</sup> "If a fly falls into a cup of wine, they remove the fly and drink the wine; if you, the king, touch the wine, they spill it out, and wash the cup three times!"

What worked in the past still works today. Our ability to remain apart is a necessary precursor to the coming of Moshiach, may he come quickly in our day!

[1] Based on Meshech Chochmah, Shemos 6:6-7

[2] Devarim 4:34

[3] Pesachim 10:1

[4] Vayikra 19:2

[5] See Tosafos, Avodah Zarah 33B s.v. *kosei*

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