

# FROM DISGRACE TO PRAISE

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

## IMAT'HIL BIG'NUT UM'SAYYEM B'SHEVACH: FROM DISGRACE TO PRAISE

The Mishnah (Pesachim 10:4) rules that in relating the story of the Exodus, the "narrator" is required to "begin with the disgrace and end with praise" - (Mat'hil big'nut um'sayyem b'shevach).. In other words, even at a point when the text of the Haggadah was not yet fixed (during the Tannaitic period), the general structure of the transmission of the story on this evening was to be bounded by this principle - begin with the disgrace and end with praise.

Before assessing the Gemara's dispute (see below) about which "disgrace - praise" sequence is intended here, it behooves us to analyze this structural requirement. Why do the Rabbis insist that we follow this order?

There are, generally speaking, three ways of understanding this desideratum:

1) The sequence of the story ought to be true to the chronology of events. Indeed, we began as slaves (for example) and ended up as noblemen. This approach suffers from one difficulty, namely that it seems so obvious that in telling a story we ought to follow the sequence of events as they unfolded that there would be no need for a Halakhic stricture to that effect. This challenge might be answered by maintaining that the Mishnaic dictum is not stating the obvious, rather it is providing parameters to the story - we begin at the nadir and only tell as much as brings us to the apex of the story. This would be a reasonable response - except that the wording of the ruling becomes hard to understand. Why not just state "We begin with servitude and end with the plagues", for example, clearly delineating the event-parameters of the evening.

2) Alternatively, we might approach this statement as driven by the telos of the evening. As demonstrated in an earlier shiur (that will be reprinted in two weeks), the objective of the evening is Shirah/Hallel - thanksgiving to God for the exodus which we are now experiencing. In other words, we are to learn about and then recreate the great sequence of events that took place in Egypt 3300 years ago in order that we come to give thanks to God for the liberation which we have just experienced. In order to ensure that we will, indeed, "spontaneously" burst forth in song, we must create an experiential crescendo by moving from the sad, disgraceful components of the story to the proud, liberating and exciting "praiseworthy" segments of the story.

3) There is a third way of understanding the rule of Mat'hil bign'ut um'sayyem b'shevach. Instead of seeing it as chronologically consistent or experientially enervating, the reason may be more legalistically-driven. The Rabbis, by and large, formulated their ordinances in accord with pre-existent Toraic law. One of the phrases which describes this phenomenon is kol d'tikkun rabbanan k'ein d'oraita tikkun - (every ordinance of the Rabbis was made in accord with Toraic ordinances). As such, we can peruse every incident in T'nakh where the Exodus - or, indeed, any act of Divine salvation - is mentioned, and we find that this order is religiously followed. (See, for instance, D'varim 26:5-9, 6:20-23, Yehoshua 24:2-14, Shof'tim 5 etc.) This approach has the advantage of fitting the wording of the rule most directly - we begin with disgrace and end with praise because this is the proper method of story-telling, as modeled in the T'nakh.

## IIIMAI G'NUT? WHICH DISGRACE?

The Gemara (Pesahim 116a) relates a dispute among the first generation Amora'im as to the "disgrace" indicated in the Mishnah:

What is "disgrace"?

Rav says: "Aforetime our ancestors worshipped idols";

Sh'mu'el says: "We were slaves"...

Although there is much literature - chiefly found within comments on the Haggadah itself - which discusses the underlying dispute which is expressed in this difference of opinion, I would like to begin our inquiry from a different angle. To wit - whose approach is adopted l'Halakhah?

A quick glance at the text of the Haggadah gives us no clear answer:

Immediately after the "four questions", the leader of the Seder states:

Avadim Hayyinu l'Phar'aoh b'Mitzrayim - we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt...

This would favor Sh'mu'el and imply that his opinion is the normative one.

A few pages later (or more, depending on the ratio of text-to-commentary in the given edition of the Haggadah), we are somewhat surprised to read the following:

Mit'hilah Ov'dei Avodah Zarah Hayyu Avoteinu - Aforetimes, our ancestors worshipped idols.

The inclusion of this passage leaves us a bit confused as to the ruling here - if we rule in accordance with Sh'mu'el, why mention the disgrace of having been idolaters? If, conversely, we rule like Rav, why is the opening declaration at the Seder Avadim Hayyinu?

The conventional explanation is that we adopt both positions - since, unlike many Halakhic disputes

where both sides are mutually exclusive from a practical perspective (e.g. we can't simultaneously light 1 candle on the first night of Hanukkah in accordance with Beit Hillel while lighting 8 candles as Beit Shammai rule), here there is no impediment to adopting both positions. In other words, there is no reason not to tell both "disgrace-to-praise" stories: Sh'mu'el's "slavery-to-freedom" and Rav's "idolatry-to-God" process.

There are three difficulties with this approach:

- 1) There are many cases where both sides of a debate might be maintained (either simultaneously or within permissible range of action), yet the Halakhah is clearly decided in favor of one opinion, rejecting the other. For instance, both Beit Shammai, who insist on reclining for evening Sh'ma, and Beit Hillel, who allow Sh'ma to be said in virtually any position, would be satisfied with a "reclined" Sh'ma. Yet the Halakhah vigorously opposes placating both sides and rejects Beit Shammai's position without making an attempt to "make both sides work". (see, e.g. Tosefta Berakhot 1:6)
- 2) We have a general rule that when Rav and Sh'mu'el disagree, the Halakhah follows Rav in all areas of ritual law. (BT Bekhorot 49b) We even have an explicit tradition regarding the only three instances where the Halakhah follows Sh'mu'el in such a debate (cf. BT Shabbat 22a - see Rashi ad loc. s.v. Halakhah k'Rabbi Shim'on)
- 3) The most obvious difficulty arises when we assay Rav's opinion. When asked which disgrace is the referent of the Mishnah, Rav answers "aforetimes our ancestors worshipped idols" - but would Rav deny the obligation to tell the story of the liberation from Egypt at the Seder? Certainly not - even a cursory glance at the basic verses which form the basis of the obligation of Haggadah reveal that the basic story must include the narrative of slavery-to-liberation. (see, inter alia, D'varim 6:20-23). We must, therefore, re-read Rav's opinion as follows: What is meant by disgrace? Rav says: we must also mention the disgrace of having been idolaters, whereas Sh'mu'el maintains that only the G'nut of having been slaves need be mentioned.

We can now safely maintain the approach that the Halakhah follows Rav, which is why both "disgraces" are mentioned in the Haggadah.

This solution, however, does not leave us totally comfortable with the inclusion and sequence of g'nut l'shevach in the Haggadah. I'd like to present a few difficulties within the form, structure and text of the Haggadah which, ultimately, relate to this problem and may be understood and resolved once we clarify the relationship between these two "disgraces".

### IIIA FEW MORE QUESTIONS

Before addressing our issue, I'd like to raise a few more questions from within the text of the Haggadah itself, along with one difficulty (of a general nature) which is not an obvious one within the context of this essay:

- 1) Just after the Mit'hilah Ov'dei Avodah Zarah... ("we were idolaters") section, there is a "mini-Shirah" which begins with the words v'Hi She'amdah (see our "Structure of the Seder" shiur, to be reprinted in two weeks). The gist of this paragraph of praise is that the events which we are retelling did not just happen once, rather "in every generation, they attempt to annihilate us and HaKadosh, Barukh Hu saves us from their hands". Since this paragraph is immediately followed by the detailed hermeneutic treatment of D'varim 26:5-8 (Arami Oved Avi) which forms the core of the Haggadah, what is the import of the placement of v'Hi She'amdah? It seems to interrupt the flow of retelling - wouldn't it be better placed just before the penultimate paragraph of the Haggadah: B'khol Dor vaDor...?
- 2) At the beginning of the Midrash of Arami Oved Avi, the deceptive Lavan is introduced as a viler and more rapacious enemy than Pharaoh. What is Lavan doing here? However we understand his behavior (next week's shiur will be devoted to a more complete treatment of the inclusion of Lavan in the Haggadah and will take a decidedly different approach to the one suggested here), this troubling uncle/father-in-law of Ya'akov is out of the parameters of the Exodus story - he died years before Pharaoh and his minions turned on us.
- 3) In the same vein, note that whereas the "prooftexts" utilized in the earlier part of the Haggadah are all "local" to the Exodus (i.e. each verse used to support a Midrashic claim is taken from T'nakh texts relating directly to Yetziat Mitzrayim), the Arami Oved Avi section includes several prooftexts from extrinsic contexts. For example, to demonstrate that an "outstretched arm" refers to "the sword", the Haggadah refers us to a verse at the end of the first book of Divrei haYamim (21:16) taken from the story of the plague induced when David conducted a census of the people - miles and years away from the Exodus. In order to identify the "wonders" as referring to the plague of blood, a verse from Yo'el (3:3) is cited. This verse refers to plagues which took place at least five hundred years later - why the "liberal" use of proof texts in this section?
- 4) After the Arami Oved Avi section, we are presented with a gradual expansion of the geographic and chronological parameters of events worthy of inclusion (and praise).. In the first three paragraphs, we move from Egypt proper to the Sea of Reeds - using various Midrashic tools to expand the plagues up to 50 plagues in Egypt and 250 at the Sea. Subsequently, in the Dayyenu section, we move quickly from Egypt and the Sea to the Divine sustenance in the desert and into Eretz Yisra'el and the Beit HaMikdash. At what point (and why) did the scope of retelling of the Exodus achieve such wondrous expansion?
- 5) As we discussed in our shiurim relating to the Four Parashiot, there is a strong tie between the celebrations of Purim and Pesach. Moving back to Purim (momentarily), I'd like to address an anomaly in the Midrashic development of the characters. Without going into too much detail, the presentation of the five major characters (Mordechai, Esther, Achashverosh, Haman and Vashti) in the text of the Megillah itself is a far cry - at times, even diametrically opposed - to that with which we are familiar from Rabbinic sources. For example, the evil Vashti, who (according to the Midrash)

used to abuse her Jewish servant-girls, is presented in the text as a something of a female Mordechai (note that both refuse to kowtow to the king's degrading order, both are endangered as a result and Ge'ulah [redemption] comes out of each case of being endangered). Why do the Rabbis move the characters so far from their presentation in the text?

#### **IV. ETERNALIZING THE PAST**

I'd like to respond to the last question by way of a vignette. In the spring of 1980, I visited the Soviet Union to bring succor and support to many of the refuseniks who bravely labored to maintain Jewish life under the harsh regime of Leonid Brezhnev. While visiting the illustrious Isaak Kogan in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), he proudly took out a photo album including many pictures from the Purim celebration held (under the watchful eyes of the KGB) three months earlier. In one picture, this tall gaunt man was dressed as a clown, leaning over and telling the story to a young boy of about 9 years. It suddenly hit me like a bolt of lightning - how easy it is for these folks to explain Purim to their young: they said "Haman" but understood "Brezhnev" - or "Saddam Hussein" for those of our brothers and sisters who waited in sealed rooms in the winter of 1991, or "Gamal Abdel-Nasser" while he led the blood-marches in the streets of Cairo in the spring of 1967 - and so on.

If we are left with the Haman of the canonized text, that story (and villain) belongs to Persia of long-ago. The Rabbinic development (or fleshing-out) of these characters allows the story - and the celebration - to ring true for Jews in every time and place where our lives are threatened. It is Haza'l's brilliance that allowed us to think of Hitler, Khomeini, Torquemada and Chmielnitzky (and the list goes on...) as "Haman". The bittersweet promise at the end of the Megillah that "the days of Purim will never leave the Jews" is ensured by making the components of the story eternal. This was accomplished by the Rabbis who highlighted those traits, not necessarily explicated in the text, which fit the ongoing reality of Galut.

#### **VR. YEHUDA B. YAKAR AND THE "TWO HAGGADOT"**

R. Yehuda b. Yakar (13th c. Spain), the mentor of Ramban, suggests that a careful look at the text of the Haggadah reveals not only the adoption of both of the G'nuta Shevach sequences, but a (minimally) complete Haggadah embodying each sequence.

Let us keep in mind that the one absolute textual/content obligation which exists at the Seder is that attested to by Rabban Gamliel:

Rabban Gamliel says: Anyone who does not say these three things (at) (regarding) the Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation, and they are: Pesach, Matzah and Maror. (Pesachim 10:5)

R. Yehuda b. Yakar points out that between the beginning of the "Seder-narrative" (Avadim Hayyinu) and the beginning of the "second Haggadah" (Mit'hilah Ovdei Avodah Zarah), all three of these items are, at the very least, mentioned (which is all that Rabban Gamliel's obligation technically

encompasses). A brief overview of the sequence of our Haggadah text is in order:

1. "Four questions"
2. Avadim Hayyinu
3. The five sages in B'nei B'rak
4. R. Elazar b. Azariah's attempt to institute a mention of the Exodus every night
5. The four sons
6. The clarification of the proper time for telling the story

In the response to the "wise" son, the Haggadah directs us to provide a different answer than that indicated by the Torah itself. Here is the original "question and answer" from Sefer D'varim:

And when your son asks you in time to come, saying, What do the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, mean, which Hashem our God has commanded you? Then you shall say to your son, We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and Hashem brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; And Hashem showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his household, before our eyes; And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in, to give us the land which he swore to our fathers. (D'varim 6:20-23)

In the Haggadah text (parallel to the Mekhilta in Parashat Bo #18), we read a different response:

You also teach him the laws of the Pesach (including the law that) we do not eat any dessert after the Pesach.

In the last paragraph before we begin telling about the shame of being idolaters, we read:

(tell your son on that day, it is on account of this...) I might think [that we may fulfill this Mitzvah] from Rosh Hodesh [Nisan], therefore the Torah states: On that day. If [it only said] on that day, I might think [that we may fulfill this Mitzvah] during the day [i.e. the afternoon of the Pesach, what we call "Erev Pesach"], therefore the Torah says: On account of this - which can only refer to a time when Matza and Maror are placed in front of you.

Voila - Pesach, Matzah and Maror have all been mentioned by this point in the Seder, thus concluding the "first Haggadah".

(That all three items will again be explicitly mentioned and explained in the latter part of the Haggadah needs no citation - R. Gamliel's statement itself is recited, verbatim, just before Hallel.)

In sum, each of these two Haggadot includes the fundamental items which must be mentioned and each describes a process moving from disgrace to praise.

What is unclear from R. Yehuda b. Yakar's presentation, in addition to our first question above (why

are these "two Haggadot" in reverse chronological order?), is why the need for two stories to begin with? Why can we not suffice with telling one story, mentioning Pesach, Matzah and Maror once?

## VI HISTORY AND APPLICATION

We may be able to answer our questions by assessing the ultimate goal of the Seder.

As pointed out in the "Structure of the Seder" essay, the goal of the evening itself is Shirah - giving thanks to God - for the miraculous liberation which we have just experienced. There is, however, more to the story than that. For the experience of the Seder to impact upon the rest of our year (as indeed it should; it is unreasonable that we would spend so many weeks preparing for a night which is intended to leave us the same people we were beforehand), there must be a mechanism by which we can adapt the lessons of the story to our own world. We find ourselves caught in a curious dialectic - while we recognize the singularity of the events in Egypt of 3300 years ago, we simultaneously recognize that those events are the model upon which Jewish national and religious history are built. The prophets not only used Yetziat Mitzrayim as the entry point to our past (see, inter alia, Shoftim 2:1, Amos 2:10) , but also as the blueprint for future redemption (e.g. Mikhah 7:15, Yeshaya 11:15) and for a recommitment to God (Hoshea 2:16-17). Thus, although the immediate goal of the evening is Shirah, the long-range goal of this educational experience par excellence is to "eternalize the Exodus", even as we recognize its unique phenomenology.

We can now understand why the Ba'al haHaggadah (or the author of the relevant passage in Sifri, Parashat Ki Tavo) was so "liberal" in the use of non-Exodus verses to support the Midrashim in Arami Oved Avi - the purpose of the exposition of this section is not only to deepen our awareness and appreciation of the events which took place in Egypt many years ago, but also to broaden our read of the Exodus and to find threads of the story throughout Jewish history. We also understand why the Haggadah, after this point, moves effortlessly forward from Egypt to Yam Suf, through the desert and on to the Beit haB'chirah in Yerushalayim.

[This explains a seemingly doubled wording in Rambam's treatment of the Mitzvah of Haggadah. In Hilkhhot Hametz uMatzah 7:1, he states that "anyone who expands upon the telling of the things which occurred and happened during the Exodus is considered praiseworthy." Further on, in 7:4, he rules that "anyone who adds and expands in the explication ( D'rash) of this selection (Arami Oved Avi) is considered praiseworthy." In light of our approach, we might suggest that Rambam is ruling that both expanding upon the events that took place - note his wording in 7:1 - and the viewing of other epochs in Jewish history in light of these events - through the "expansion" of Arami Oved Avi - are praiseworthy.]

We can now revisit our second question regarding the location of v'Hi She'amdah - immediately after beginning the "Haggadah of Jewish history" (which starts with "our ancestors were idolaters"), we declare and praise God that the events we have been retelling were decidedly not a one-time affair - "in every generation" there are Pharaohs and Hamans "and the Holy One, who is blessed,

saves us from their hands."

We can also understand why the exposition of the Arami Oved Avi section begins with the evocation of the threat visited upon us by Lavan - not only is the experience of persecution/threat and God's salvation/redemption an oft-repeated cycle of Jewish history, it even predates the Exodus and goes as far back as our pre-formative years as a people.

## **VII**"LOCAL" AND "GLOBAL" EDUCATION

We must now respond to our first question: Since the particular events which are the focus of the evening - the slavery in and Exodus from Egypt - occurred several hundred years after "Your fathers lived on the other side of the river in old time, Terach, the father of Avraham, and the father of Nachor; and they served other gods. And I took your father Avraham from the other side of the river...", why do we tell the story "out of order"? Why don't we first relate the "disgrace" of idolatry and then, in full fidelity to chronology (and, perhaps, causality), the "disgrace" of slavery?

We have to remember the primary target audience at the Seder: In four different places the Torah commands us to teach our children about the Exodus - and so much of how we teach on that special evening is geared towards children.

As the great educational psychologist Jean Piaget discovered, children develop their mental abilities in a somewhat uniform way, moving from an inability to know the existence of anything out of sight ("object permanence") to the ability to think in abstract terms (usually about the age of 14).

Since we first need to respond to the curiosity of the children, providing them with a response and a story with which they can identify and which they can understand, we begin the narrative by telling about a specific event - we couldn't be any more specific: "We were slaves - to Pharaoh - in Egypt."

All of the Halakhot, D'rashot and Ma'asim (stories) related during the "first Haggadah" relate, solely and exclusively, to the Exodus. It is only after we have completed this obligation that we are able to turn and say: Children, the story you have just heard has happened, in one form or another, many times in our history. It will even happen again when we open the door to welcome Eliyahu, who will bring us the glad tidings of the ultimate Ge'ulah.

## **VIII**POSTSCRIPT

Although the "first Haggadah" is focused, as mentioned, on the particular events of the Exodus, there are several allusions that the story we are about to recount casts its net over much of Jewish history:

And if HaKadosh Barukh Hu had not taken us out of Egypt, we and our children...

More subtly, yet much more powerfully, the story relating the "Seder of the five Sages" in B'nei B'rak notes that they remained awake all night, telling the story of the Exodus until the students came and told them that the time for morning K'riat Sh'ma had arrived. Have we any better imagery of the



constant companion that the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim has been through the long cold night of exile, as we await the clarion call that the dawn of redemption has arrived?

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