

MATZAH AND MAROR - WORTHY MECHUTANIM

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

As much as we are told that Purim is a Yom Tov of opposites - "ve- nahapoch hu," the Pesach Seder has more than it's own share of opposites. It can be confusing: Are we commemorating our freedom and the Exodus from Egypt and slavery, or are we remembering the bitterness of our years as slaves under the cruel rule of the Pharaohs of Egypt. We recline, to demonstrate we are free. Yet we dip our food in salt-water to remind ourselves of the tears of our slavery. We drink the "Arba Kosos - four cups" of wine, which represent the "four languages of redemption," but we eat charoses to commemorate the mortar bricks we were forced to make. Maror reminds us of the bitter times we spent in Egypt, yet we recline to demonstrate our liberty.

The explanation, however, is obvious. As our Sages put it, "Light is only fully recognized when emerging from darkness." One can only appreciate the importance of freedom after he fully understands what slavery entails. To truly praise Hashem for taking us out of Egypt, we must first learn about slavery, and even perform physical symbols to bring home to us how bitter it actually was.

Matzah and maror can also be seen as "opposites," as the following story illustrates.

One Seder night, the holy Rebbe R' Yissachar Dov of Belz was walking through the alleyways of his town Belz. As he passed by the house of a simple yet G-d-fearing Jew, he stopped by the window to listen in on his Seder. He overheard the Jew saying the section of the Haggadah which establishes the correct time to remember the Exodus:

"One might think that the obligation to discuss the Exodus commences with the first day of the month of Nissan... therefore the Torah adds (Shemos 13:8), 'It is because of this that Hashem did so for me when I went out of Egypt,' [the pronoun this implies something tangible, leading us to conclude that] I have commanded you [to discuss the Exodus] only when matzah and maror are lying before you [at the Seder]."

The simple Jew, it seems, was not very learned. Instead of saying, "I have commanded you only when matzah and maror lie (munachim) before you," he said, "I have commanded you only when matzah and maror are mechutanim (i.e. relatives through marriage) before you." It was all his disciples could do not to break out laughing. Yet to their surprise, R' Yissachar Dov took his blunder quite seriously. After pondering the simple Jew's words for a moment, he remarked, "Indeed, matzah and maror are mechutanim!" Seeing his disciples' amazement, he related the following story.

Reb Zelig was a rich and important Jew whose daughter's time had come to marry. Her father searched far and wide for a young man worthy to take his daughter's hand in marriage, yet it seemed that every boy he met just didn't suit the bill.

One day, while travelling on business, he came across a young man sitting and learning in beis hamidrash. At first, R' Zelig was put off by the boy's shoddy clothes and impoverished appearance. The more they spoke, however, the more impressed he became. "This young man is a diamond in the rough," he thought to himself. R' Zelig wasted no time, and immediately arranged a shidduch, with a date for the wedding to be arranged later.

So excited was R' Zelig by his chassan that he began to become paranoid lest someone else "discover" him and steal from him his catch. He sent an urgent telegram to the young chassan. "Come right away," it said, "the wedding must take place immediately! Do not worry about clothing or wedding expenses, I will take care of everything."

Alarmed, the chassan promptly gathered his meagre possessions, and travelled to the city of the kallah. When he arrived, he was whisked off to the tailor to have a new suit made for the chassunah. The tailor was instructed save the chassan's old torn suit for the father of the kallah, who was footing the bill. Then, not even taking the time to prepare a lavish wedding banquet, as would normally befit a man such as R' Zelig, a hasty chassunah took place.

In later years, when R' Zelig's son-in-law disagreed with him, or refused to take his advice, R' Zelig would go to his closet and remove the old, tattered clothing his son-in-law had worn before marrying his daughter. "You forget," he would say, "that I'm the one who made you what you are today. Look at your regal clothing - this is what you used to wear!"

Not to be outdone, R' Zelig's son-in-law had his own trick up his sleeve. He had put aside a stale piece of bread from the hastily prepared leftovers which had been served at his chassunah meal, saving it for just such an occasion. Taking it out, he would say, "Ah, but you too forget just how anxious you were to have me as your son-in-law. Why, you didn't even take the time to prepare a normal meal - you just couldn't wait!"

"So, you see," said the Belzer Rebbe, "they were mechutanim worthy of one another."

"The same discussion," concluded the Rebbe, "takes place between the Jewish nation and Hashem on the Seder night. Hashem, so to speak, takes out the maror, showing it to us. 'You see,' He tells us, 'this is how bitter your lives were before I took you out of Mitzrayim. Without Me, you would still be there!' But, not to be had, we too have what to say. We take out the unleavened matzos before Hashem, as if to say to him, 'Ah, but remember the rush You were in to have us as your nation. Why, you couldn't even wait until our bread had time to bake!' Indeed, matzah and maror are the finest of mechutanim."

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