

HA LACHMA ANYA

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

We begin the Maggid portion of the Haggadah with the recital of "Ha Lachma Anya" in which we invite whoever is hungry to come and eat - "kol dichfin yesei v'yeichol", and whoever requires a place to eat Korban Pesach to come and partake - "kol ditzrich yesei v'yifsach". This invitation appears to be presented at the wrong time, for Kiddush has already been recited, in the wrong place, for it is issued in the privacy of our own homes, and in a language, Aramaic, which most people no longer understand. Furthermore, to partake in the Korban Pesach one had to be a member of the group from the time the Korban was slaughtered earlier in the day[1]. What purpose do these invitations serve?

The Pesach Seder is a celebration of our redemption and we are all guests of honor. To prevent the guests from feeling beholden to the "Baal Habayis" - "host" which would inhibit their involvement and participation in the evening, we begin the Seder by allowing the guests to invite others. The Talmud states "ein oreiyach machnis oreiyach" - "a guest is not permitted to invite other guests[2]". However, a guest of honor has the right to invite whomever he chooses. The message we are relaying to all the participants is they are not merely guests beholden to the homeowner. Rather, they are all guests of honor, celebrating their own redemption. It is imperative that all the guests feel comfortable, for they have to speak freely and engage in the conversations of the evening to fulfill the mitzvah of sipur yetzias Mitzrayim[3]. In the same vein, the Tosafos Yom Tov had a custom to spill wine on the clean tablecloth so that the guests would feel at ease. The purpose of the invitation is for the guests already assembled, not for those who are absent.

The sensitivity that the homeowner is being called upon to exhibit is reflected in the language of the pronouncement. In Parshas Toldos, the Torah relates "Yitzchok was forty years of age when taking Rivka, daughter of Besuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram, sister of Lavan the Aramean, as a wife for himself[4]". Rashi questions the need to revisit her dubious "yichus". Are we not already familiar with her lineage and birthplace? Rashi answers that the Torah is praising Rivka by noting that although she had been brought up in such adverse surroundings, she was not influenced by the actions of the wicked[5]. Generally, Rashi's comment is understood to mean that in spite of her environment she was able to maintain her righteousness. Analyzing the Midrash we see however that this cannot be the entire meaning of the message, for the Midrash from which Rashi derives his comment cites the verse in Shir Hashirim to describe Rivka's qualities "kashoshana bein hachochim" - "like a rose among the thorns[6]". If the intent of the Midrash is to point out that Rivka retained her righteousness in the face of adversity, then the thorns would represent the adversity. This analogy is difficult for the rose

does not thrive in spite of the thorns, rather because of the thorns that protect it and allow it to thrive. What then is the message of the verse?

The Torah describes Lavan as a "ramai" - trickster[7]. The entire region was known for this quality; the letters of the word "Aram" when rearranged spell "ramai". A ramai is not the same as a "ganav" - "thief". A thief maintains no pretences that his actions are in the victim's best interest. A ramai is a confidence man, possessing the ability to deceive the victim into believing that he is gaining from the actions of the ramai. It is only later that the victim realizes that he has been victimized. The ability to perpetrate such a crime requires the ramai to know exactly what the victim is thinking, to see the victim's perspective. This quality can be utilized in a positive manner. The greatest "chesed" - "acts of kindness" are performed by an individual who is sensitive to the needs of the recipient. Although Aram was notorious for their trickery, Avraham wanted a wife for Yitzchak who would possess this same sensitivity when performing chesed. It was this genetic quality that Avraham wanted to infuse into Klal Yisroel, and it was this quality that Eliezer was looking for when testing Rivka. This is the message of the Midrash; the thorns reflect the quality of the ramai by which Rivka was surrounded, but which enabled her to achieve the great levels of chesed of which only she was capable.

The ability of the Arameans to see the perspective of others is reflected in their language. An example of this can be found in Parshas Kedoshim. The verse states "A man who shall be intimate with his sister...it is a 'chesed' and they shall be cut off[8]." Rashi explains the term "chesed" as an Aramaic word meaning "shame"[9]. However, in Hebrew "chesed" means "kindness", a term with positive connotations. When a person does chesed he receives fulfillment from the act, while the recipient feels shame. The Hebrew and Aramaic meanings are therefore not contrary, but, in fact, complementary. The Hebrew translation focuses on the perspective of the giver while the Aramaic translation focuses on the perspective of the recipient. By using the Aramaic word "chesed", the Torah is teaching us that when we do chesed, we should be sensitive to the recipient's shame. This way, we will do chesed in a manner which will diminish the recipient's shame. It is therefore appropriate to begin the Seder in Aramaic for this is the language that symbolizes the sensitivity of seeing the perspective of another.

Aside from the sensitivity required of the host to give the participants the feeling that they are guests of honor, the very nature of sipur yetzias Mitzrayim requires seeing the perspective of another. The mitzvah must be performed "derech she'eilah uteshuvah" - "by question and answer", i.e. the Socratic method[10]. The only way for such an approach to be effective is if the listener is sensitive to the questions being posed. Very often a person's only interest is to make heard what he is thinking, and he does not address the question at all. The most important Jewish literary work after the Torah is the Talmud. The Talmud is also presented in the Socratic method, question and answer. It is therefore most appropriate that the Talmud is written in Aramaic and in the region of Aram for this is the language and region that lends itself to seeing the perspective of others, crucial when attempting to respond to the queries and difficulties which are the basis of the Talmud.

1. Shemos 12:4, Pesachim 81a
2. Bava Basra 98b
3. The Torah-mandated precept based upon the verse in Shemos 13:8
4. Bereishis 25:20
5. Ibid
6. Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:4
7. Bereishis 25:29, Megilla 13b
8. Vayikra 20:17
9. Rashi ibid
10. See Minchas Chinuch #21 who rules that even if one is alone, he should recite the Haggadah in question and answer form.