The Hamaayan Haggadah

Volume I

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The family of Sammy Kalkstein

ל”וי שמעיה בן שמעיה ע”ה
Introduction

With immense gratitude to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, we are proud to present our readers with a collection of divrei Torah relating to the Pesach Haggadah, the Egyptian exile, and Yetziat Mitzrayim that have appeared in our weekly publication, Hamaayan / The Torah Spring, over the last 19 years. Each “piece” appears almost exactly as it was published originally. Only obvious typographical errors have been corrected and a modest effort was made to render consistent some of the stylistic differences that exist between transliterations in earlier and later issues of Hamaayan. (In addition, some references to Torah scholars who were living when their words originally appeared have unfortunately had to be changed to reflect the fact of their passing.)

This work would not have been possible without the help of several people (in addition to the sponsors and the other supporters of Hamaayan). First and foremost, my wife and children, who live with the fact that I am always under pressure to put out the next issue. Second, Harav Gedaliah Anemer, without whose active support and encouragement I would have stopped publishing Hamaayan long ago. Finally, my dear friends Alan and Fran Broder, who have distributed Hamaayan via email and the Internet for the last 15 years. In the early years, when I was still creating Hamaayan on a typewriter, Mrs. Fran Broder re-typed each issue for electronic distribution, and it is those files that were used to create much of this compilation.

A final note: This is the third book I have been privileged to publish, each of which has borne the title She’a’ih Berachah (She‘aih Berachah). However, I neglected to explain in either of the first two works what the origin of that name is. R’ Eliezer Rokeach z”l (12th century) is quoted as saying that an author should allude to his name in the title of his work. I have done this with the word “She‘ait,” which has the same gematria as my first name, שלמה. The phrase שבעה ברכה is based on the entreaty in the bentching for a Sheva Berachot, שבעה ברכה בני ישורון, בני אחותו, and alludes to my being a son of Aharon, i.e., a kohen. Finally, the word “berachah” (blessing) is spelled the same as and, according to some commentaries is related in meaning to, the word “beraichah” / a pool of water. As both my first work (published in 5749 / 1989) and this one consist of divrei Torah drawn from Hamaayan / The Torah Spring, they appropriately form a beraichah / pool of “water” (“אין מים אלא תורה”). May it be Hashem’s will that I will merit to continue to teach His Torah and publish other works like a מעיין נבוך / “flowing spring” for many years to come.

Shlomo Katz

י נס החסידי
R’ Moshe Isserles z”l ("Rema") writes of a custom to read part of the Haggadah on the Shabbat before Pesach. Why? The Vilna Gaon z”l explains that it was on that day that our ancestors set aside animals for the Korban Pesach; thus, it can be considered the beginning of their redemption. However, the Vilna Gaon then rejects this answer based on the following Midrash (which is quoted in the Haggadah): “I might think that one can fulfill his obligation to read the Haggadah on the first day of Nissan . . . but the Torah teaches me that the mitzvah of Haggadah applies at the same hour as the mitzvot of matzah and maror.” If the Shabbat before Pesach has a claim to being the beginning of the redemption, asks the Vilna Gaon, why does the Midrash, which considers several possibilities for when the seder should be held, not entertain a suggestion that it should be on Shabbat Hagadol?!

R’ David Cohen shlita answers this question as follows: The halachah states that the Haggadah should begin with the low point of Jewish history and build up to the redemption. What is that low point? Rav (a Talmudic sage) says, “In the beginning, our ancestors were idol worshippers.” Shmuel (another sage) says, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” What is the basis of their dispute? R’ Cohen suggests that they disagree whether the primary redemption was spiritual (Rav) or physical (Shmuel). Such a disagreement would be consistent with other disputes between them, such as whether mashiach will come as a result of our repentance (Rav) or suffering (Shmuel).

Ramban, in his Torah commentary, appears to accept Rav’s view, for he writes as follows (in explaining why the building of the Mishkan is described in the book of Exodus): “Even though our ancestors had left Egypt, they were not yet free until they had built a Mishkan and Hashem’s Presence rested among them.” When did the redemption start? Perhaps Rav would say that it started on the day when the Korban Pesach was set aside (i.e. Shabbat Hagadol), since the purpose of the Korban Pesach was to free Bnei Yisrael from their spiritual bondage. When Rema writes of the custom to read the Haggadah on Shabbat Hagadol, he is accepting the view of Rav, as Ramban did before him. As for the midrash which troubled the Vilna Gaon, perhaps that represents the opinion of Shmuel and others who disagree with Rav. (Mas’at Kapi II, p.60)

R’ Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z”l writes: Religious idealism is alive at every time and place, but the mundane in our lives obscures its light. However, Yom Tov comes along and lifts the veil, revealing the light once again, and then we all take pleasure in Hashem and His kindness. The great love which is aroused at that time drives us to occupy ourselves with Hashem’s mitzvot, as we realize our profound debt to the One who has always loved us.

In particular, on the night when Pesach begins, a feeling of liberation comes over us, and the Divine spirit hidden so deeply within us makes its presence known. This spirit, in turn, allows us to see how we are in fact, gradually being redeemed. We have fought with enemies, physical and spiritual, strong and weak, and we are winning. We are witnesses that there is no spirit like the spirit of our nation which is constantly watered by the dew of renewal. (Siddur Olat Re’iyah)
“If one cleans his room on the 13th of Nissan and has in mind to search for chametz and to destroy it, and he is careful not to take any chametz there afterwards, nevertheless, he must perform bedikat chametz on the night of the 14th. And, every person should clean his room before bedikat chametz.” (Shulchan Aruch O.C. 433:11)

What is the purpose of this seemingly redundant effort? The Chafetz Chaim explains that one who is cleaning does not take pains to search in every corner. Moreover, searching by candle light forces a person to focus more carefully on each spot. (Mishnah Berurah)

R’ Moshe Yehuda Leib Friedman z”l (the Pishkaner Rebbe; died 1947) adds that there is a mussar reason for the above law:

It is well known that chametz alludes to the yetzer hara. This is how one much introspect if he is to defeat his yetzer hara -- one act of introspection followed by another!

The story is told of a visit by R’ Yaakov Yosef Hakohen of Polnoye z”l to the Ba’al Shem Tov z”l. As they were discussing various esoteric matters, a non-Jewish laborer knocked on the shutters and asked, “Are there any broken vessels here that need fixing?”

The Ba’al Shem Tov answered, “No! I have already repaired all of the broken vessels.”

To this, the non-Jew retorted, “Look harder, maybe you’ll find something.”

When that worker had left, the Ba’al Shem Tov turned to his guest and said, “You understand, do you not, that this non-Jew was sent as a messenger from Above to ask us, ‘Why are you busy with esoteric matters when you have not repaired all of your character flaws that need repairing?’ I replied that I had already perfected myself, to which Heaven answered, ‘Look harder, and you will find additional flaws to repair’.”

R’ Yaakov Yosef answered, “I cannot accept that Heaven sends messengers in such a manner.”

The Ba’al Shem Tov replied, “Don’t say ‘I can’t.’ Say, ‘I am not willing.’” And with this, they parted.

Along his journey, R’ Yaakov Yosef encountered a wagon mired in the mud. “Help me,” the wagon-driver pleaded, but R’ Yaakov Yosef replied, ‘I can’t’.”

“Don’t say ‘I can’t,’” said the stranded wagon-driver. “Say, ‘I am not willing’.” Recognizing that he had been sent a message, R’ Yaakov Yosef helped the wagon-driver extract his vehicle from the mud. Then, reversing direction, he returned to the Ba’al Shem Tov and acknowledged that the latter had been correct.

This is the message of bedikat chametz as well, explains R’ Friedman. When searching for character flaws, look harder, and you will find something to repair. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Adir B’mlichah p. 16)

The Mishnah (Nega’im 2:5) states: “A person sees all nega’im--tzara’at wounds--except his own.” Literally, this means that a person, even a kohen, may not be the judge of whether he himself has tzara’at. Rather, he must go to another kohen.

Figuratively, however, this statement is frequently interpreted as referring to the fact that people are rarely objective about their own faults. A person sees everyone else’s faults, but not his own.
If so, asks R’ Eliezer David Gruenwald z”l (1867-1928; Hungarian rabbi and rosh yeshiva), how can a person assess where he stands? The answer is found in another Mishnah: “One does not search [for chametz] by the light of the sun and by the light of the moon, but only by the light of a candle.” Kabbalists and mussar works teach that chametz represents the yetzer hara. The strong “light of the sun” represents wealth, and the weak “light of the moon” represents lack of success. Wealth is not an accurate indicator that a person has conquered his yetzer hara and therefore Hashem is happy with him, and lack of success is not an indicator of the opposite. Only the “light of a candle,” an allusion to the verse, “A mitzvah is a candle” is an accurate indicator.

What does this mean? If a person wants to know where he stands in his service of Hashem, he should look at his attitude towards mitzvot. If he or she considers mitzvot to be a burden, then he or she has a long way to go. However, if a person enjoys performing mitzvot, then that person is on the right track. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Chasdei David)

The preparations of R’ Yisrael Hager of Vizhnitz z”l (known as the “Ahavas Yisrael”) for bedikat chametz were lengthy, and he approached the mitzvah with great feeling. He said the berachah with great fervor. Then, while searching all of the cracks by candlelight, he beat his chest like one reciting Vidui, and called out “Oy, oy, oy!” All who heard him trembled, and their hearts broke at the sound of his groans.

When he had completed the search, he turned to his faithful Chassid, R’ Mordechai Chanah, and standing before him, tore open his shirt and said, “Now, search out the Chametz in my heart.” [The Gemara and other works refer to the “Yetzer Hara” - evil inclination- as “Chametz.”]

R’ Mordechai did not lose his presence of mind, and replied, “Rebbe, the Halachah instructs us that we need not search a place where Chametz has not entered.” (R’ Natan Elya Roth: Kedosh Yisrael)

The Gemara states that chametz which is found during the search must be set aside in a place where rodents cannot find it and spread it about. On this law, R’ Chaim M. Hager z”l (son of the “Ahavas Yisrael”) commented:

“Chametz” signifies pride. It rises and we must get rid of it. But, as with chametz (some of which is left over for the mitzvah of “Biur” / burning), we must leave something. Pride is sometimes needed in our service of Hashem (see, e.g., Divrei Hayamim II 17:6)

Yet man must take care that the small measure of pride which he leaves over be kept in a hidden place. He should take care lest a “rat” comes and spreads it about--lest the yetzer hara persuade him to make his pride public.

A man once came before R’ Yisrael Hager of Vizhnitz z”l (1860-1936) and poured his heart out. He had arranged a match for his son some time before, but he had no money with which to meet the many wedding expenses. The Rebbe asked him if he had already set a date for the wedding. “No,” replied the man, “I cannot pay for anything. How could I set a date?”

“Look,” said the Rebbe. “Our Torah demands of us that not a particle of Chametz be found in our homes on Pesach, and Pesach expenses are large. Now imagine that the Torah had not set a date for Pesach, and that we would only celebrate it when we had completed our preparations. We would never celebrate it! But since the Torah had established a specific date, a great wonder takes place. Everyone manages to clean his home, and all the needs of Pesach are filled.

“Learn a lesson from the Torah: Set the wedding date and you will see that you will acquire whatever you need by then.” (R’ Natan Elya Roth: Kedosh Yisrael)
“Bedikat Chametz” — typically translated, “The search for chametz” — actually means, “The search of chametz.” What does it mean to search the chametz? R’ Yissochor Ber Rokeach z”l (the Belzer Rebbe) answered this question with the following parable:

A group of merchants was walking home from a successful day at the market, and they decided to rest under a tree. But where could they place their day’s earnings for safekeeping? After looking around for a safe place to deposit their moneybag, they decided to hang it among the branches of a tree.

Satisfying themselves that the only witnesses were the cows grazing nearby, the merchants hid their treasure in the foliage. Soon they had fallen into deep sleep.

The merchants did not stop to think that where there are cows, there may be a cowherd. From his place in the nearby brush, the cowherd had seen everything. Stealthily, he removed the gold coins from the sack in the tree and filled the bag with an equal volume of dung. He then hid the money in a hole he had dug and concealed himself in the brush until the merchants would leave and he could reclaim his ill-gotten wealth.

Upon awakening, the merchants took their bag from the tree. Feeling that the sack was much lighter than before, they looked inside and realized they had been robbed. But who had done it? There were no humans nearby!

Obviously, the merchants concluded, the cows were the culprits. But who had ever heard of cows that steal gold coins? Who had ever heard of cows that climb trees? How did the cows put the dung in a bag? No matter — there was no other explanation. With that, the merchants shrugged and went on their way.

These merchants were fools, said R’ Yissochor Ber. Had they investigated further, they would have found the real thief and their money. Only a fool shrugs off such a loss.

Chazal teach that chametz is a metaphor for the yetzer hara / evil inclination, the cause of the great spiritual losses which we suffer on a regular basis. Our duty at this time of the year is to eradicate chametz, and what it represents. However, it is not enough to search for chametz; we must search the chametz itself. We must examine the nature of the chametz within ourselves and ask ourselves how it got there. We may not shrug it off like those foolish merchants shrugged off their discovery of dung in their moneybag. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Sha’arei Armon)

R’ Shlomo Wolbe z”l (famed teacher of mussar, died Chol Ha’moed Pesach 5765 / 2005) writes:

Education consists of two parts: First, building a stable human being, and second, enabling the student to continue to grow from within. These two processes are represented by halachah / law and aggadeta / ethical and philosophical teachings, respectively.

Halachah creates structure and stability. Without halachah, the Jewish people would not be a unique people. Furthermore, halachah is universal, applying equally to young and old in their respective circumstances.

Aggadeta, on the other hand, inspires growth and change, not stability. Furthermore, each person’s grasp of aggadeta is bound to vary depending on the refinement of his soul.

Our Sages say, “Don’t challenge statements of aggadeta.” Many people mistakenly take this to mean that Chazal endorsed an “anything goes” attitude toward aggadeta, i.e., nothing a person says in the realm of aggadeta can be “wrong.” In fact, says R’ Wolbe, that is not at all what our Sages meant. Rather, the statement, “Don’t challenge aggadeta,” means, “Don’t attempt to study the non-halachic sections of Torah in the same analytical question and answer format (“shakla v’taria”) with which you
study the legal sections of the Talmud. _Aggadeta_ is something one comes to understand through reflection over a long period of time while living his life within the framework of _halachah_.

For example: A person who bakes _matzah_ is engaged in a process strictly governed by _halachah_. He must meticulously follow the laws associated with that act, taking care of every minute detail to avoid any possibility that the dough will leaven or come in contact with _chametz_. There certainly is no time during the _matzah_-baking for philosophical or ethical reflection. But afterward, the realization sets in that the _zerizut_ / alacrity with which one bakes _matzah_ is a paradigm for all _mitzvah_ observance. The Torah says (Shmot 12:17), “You shall guard the _matzot_.” In Hebrew, the word מצות / “matzot” is spelled the same as the word המצות / “mitzvot”; thus, our Sages derive from this verse that one must “guard” the _mitzvot_, i.e., perform them with alacrity. Just as _matzah_-dough can become _chametz_ if it is not prepared quickly, so any _mitzvah_ can be “spoiled” by laziness or delay.

Another example: One who carefully performs the search for _chametz_, checking every corner of the house and every pocket of his children’s garments, is too busy to reflect on the meaning of the _mitzvah_. But later, he realizes that _chametz_ is a metaphor for the _yetzer hara_. Indeed, the Gemara (Pesachim 7b) derives the obligation to use a candle for _bedikat chametz_ from the verse (Mishlei 20:27), “A man’s soul is Hashem’s candle, which searches the chambers of one’s innards.” Just as a candle is used to search for physical _chametz_, so the soul should be used to search inside oneself for spiritual _chametz_. Furthermore, the physical inspection of the house demonstrates the importance of physical cleanliness. On further reflection, we sense the importance of spiritual cleanliness as well. (Alei Shur Vol. II p.388)

R’ Shimshon David Pinkus z”l (rabbi of Ofakim, Israel, and a prolific public speaker and author; died 12 Nissan 5761 / 2001) once told the following story about his own youth:

“When I was still single and studying in the Brisk Yeshiva [in Yerushalayim], I shared an apartment with several other boys. On the night of _bedikat chametz_, I was left all alone in the apartment. And so, at the appointed time, I took upon myself to fulfill the direction of our Sages: ‘At dark on the 14th [of Nissan], we search for _chametz_.’

“Searching the entire apartment took one hour, then another, and then several more. It was hard work, and I became tired. Very tired! When I finished the _mitzvah_, I sat down – exhausted but content.

“Suddenly, I shuddered. ‘The attic!’ I jumped up as if bitten by a snake. ‘There is no one here to check the attic. The neighbors won’t do it. Yet, the _Shulchan Aruch_ says expressly that one must check the attic.’

“Naturally, a battle was raging within me. ‘Is it my responsibility to check the common attic that is shared by all the tenants in the building?’ Of course, my exhaustion was a major consideration. All kinds of thoughts raced through my head, but in the end I decided, ‘I will not give in. I will fulfill the _mitzvah_ in its entirety.’ With that, I started to climb the steps.

“I opened the door of the common attic and turned on the light, and I was taken aback. It looked as if the space had not been cleaned in years. The ceiling was covered with thick layers of dust. It would be impossible to check the attic in that condition, even putting aside the _halachah_ that one must clean each room before _bedikat chametz_. But it had to be checked, for there was no doubt that people sometimes brought food up there.

“I stood in the doorway, and tiredness washed over me. I was almost too exhausted to know what my real obligation was. But I said, ‘No matter; I will perform the _mitzvah_ if it takes my last ounce of strength.’
“I went downstairs for a pail of water, and I came back up and started to work. Here I was, a yeshiva bachur cleaning years worth of grime from a common attic at midnight on the night before Pesach. From time to time, I paused and asked myself, ‘Am I sure that this is a mitzvah?’ And I reminded myself that, indeed, we are commanded by the Sages to check the whole house for chametz, including the attic. That knowledge gave me strength to go on. Close to dawn, I finally lit the candle and performed Bedikat Chametz in the attic.

“Needless to say, I could barely stay awake that morning, but there was too much to do to have time for a nap. I said to myself, ‘What kind of Seder will I have now that I am so tired!’

“The Seder arrived, and I began to feel a great sweetness in the evening’s mitzvot. I also felt as if a bright light was shining before me. As I read the words of the Haggadah, they had a ‘flavor’ that I had never experienced. When I ate the matzah, I felt such a connection that I was ready to sacrifice my life for that one mitzvah. I experienced a feeling of closeness to G-d that I had never known. I felt so elevated, that I became another person. This feeling lasted through the entire Seder.

“I couldn’t sleep that night, and I stayed up performing the mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim / relating the story of the Exodus. As mentioned, I felt a closeness to G-d that I had never known. At first, I assumed that this was a sensation that was possible only on the Seder night, but I was wrong. The next day, I felt the same way.

“In the afternoon, I wondered, ‘Can this feeling possibly continue through Chol Ha’moed?’ [There is only one Seder night and one day of Yom Tov in Israel.] But the feeling did continue throughout the festival. That year, the seventh [and in Israel, final] day of Pesach was followed by Shabbat. That week, I experienced for the first time in my life what Shabbat was meant to be.

“It was then, after that Pesach and Shabbat, that my real spiritual growth began. If I have any accomplishments to my name today, it is because of that one rabbinically-ordained mitzvah which I performed with true sacrifice.” (Haggadah Shel Pesach Tiferet Shimshon p. 5)

ברוח אשתו, היא אלוהים ים כל העולמי, באשתו ברא פניהם, תرمز על כן חמי.
כל תמיים והмиות דאתם ברשותיה, כל הימאים ודלי ערה וידע אנה לכבש
להיה חפק ועפרה דאראיה.
בעור חמה
כל תמיים והמיות דאתם ברשותיה, לחיות באה ודרה, לחיות דלעם חמה.
דברותétablילין
ברוח אשתה, היא אלוהים ים כל העולמי, באשתה ברעם בהמないように, תורת על כן חמי.
 котором רוחו всем שאר ליאכטה יבשא וייבשא ומלאיה לילדיים יראählen שרה עומדית
והמשועד כל ערמה, מופיעה ונפשות לנהל זך שרים לוחם יצリア חימי חיאתו.
Many commentators have found homiletical meaning in the above poem, aside from its obvious purpose of reminding us how to conduct the Seder. For example, R’ Yehoshua Segal Deutsch z”l (rabbi of the Katamon neighborhood of Yerushalayim) writes as follows:

King David asks (Tehilim 24:3): “Who will climb Hashem’s mountain, and who can stand in His holy place?” This poem tells us how one can stand before Hashem and not worry about falling: “Kadesh u’rechatz” / Sanctify yourself and be confident! (“Rechatz” in Aramaic means “be confident.”)

How does one accomplish this? “Karpas yachatz” / Man’s material nature (which, like karpas, comes form the earth) cannot be reined in overnight. Rather, divide (“yachatz”) and conquer. According to one commentator, Bnei Yisrael’s defense for the sin of the Golden Calf was that Matan Torah / the giving of the Torah had been too sudden for them, and left them confused and disoriented.

Another tactic is “Maggid rachtzah” / Tell others to cleanse themselves. This will inspire you to do the same.

However, one might ask, “Who am I to rebuke others?” The answer to this is “Motzi matzah” / Get rid of that humility, that view of oneself as being lowly as matzah. As important as humility is, there is no place for it when one sees others violating the Torah. However, do not become arrogant or haughty, but rather “Maror korech” - Wrap yourself in a cloak of authority (=“marah”) which you can use when rebuking others, but can shed at other times.

In order to be an effective teacher, “Shulchan oraich” / Make sure your Torah knowledge is like a set table before you so that it will always be at your fingertips. Also, make sure that your rebuke does not become a weapon of the Heavenly prosecutor. Make sure that “Tzafun baraich” / Hidden (“tzafin”) within your heart should be blessings for your fellow Jews. You should also “Hallel” / Praise your brethren before Hashem.

If you do this, your deeds will be “Nirtzah” / Accepted by Hashem. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Kol Yeshuah)

Why is the Seder (“סדר”) called by that name?

R’ David Moshe Hakohen z”l (son-in-law of the last Radomsker Rebbe; killed in the Holocaust) offers the following explanation:

Regarding all foods prohibited by the Torah, there is a minimum amount that one must eat before he is considered to have transgressed. (Usually, that amount is a ke’zayit / the volume of an olive.) Not so chametz, which is prohibited down to the smallest morsel. Also, in no case where the Torah prohibited eating a particular food did the Torah prohibit owning the food. No other food-related prohibition
requires us to search for the contraband and destroy it. Why does chametz have these unique requirements?

The Radvaz (16th century) answers this by referring to the midrash which alludes to a connection between chametz and the yetzer hara. [Just as chametz rises, the yetzer hara causes a person to “rise,” i.e., to become haughty.] Just as one is supposed to uproot every vestige of the yetzer hara from within himself, so one must uproot every vestige of chametz from his house.

There are four ways to interpret the Torah: peshat / the simplest explanation, remez / allusion (e.g., gematria), drush / homiletics, and sod / the esoteric meaning. It seems, however, notes R’ David Moshe, that there is no “simple” explanation for the severity of the prohibition of chametz. The peshat is missing, and all that is left is the “SeDeR” – sod, drush and remez. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Tiferet Shlomo p. 53)
Many halachic authorities maintain that if one has no wine, he may fulfill his obligation to drink four cups at the seder by taking anything that qualifies as a “national drink.” [Depending on the country, this may be juice, milk, coffee, etc.] R’ Moshe Isserless z”l (“Rema”; O.C. Section 483) writes that this is similar to the halachah which permits using a “national drink” for kiddush on Shabbat.

R’ Yitzchak Ze’ev Soloveitchik z”l (the Brisker Rav) notes that there is, in fact, a distinction between the Pesach cups and all other cups which we drink in fulfillment of a mitzvah (kiddush, havdalah, etc.). In the latter cases, all that is required is that the cup and drink qualify for the recitation of the berachah in question. However, the Pesach cups have an additional requirement: That they make us feel like free men. Wine can do this, but can milk or coffee?

In truth, perhaps Rema agrees with this logic. However, he allows the use of a “national drink” for those who have no wine because it is better that they should fulfill at least one aspect of the mitzvah rather than none at all. (Quoted in Ma’adanei Mo’ed, p. 52)

The Arba Kosot / four cups of wine which we drink at the seder are traditionally associated with the four expressions of redemption in Shmot 6:6-7: “I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you from their service; I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I shall take you to Me as a people . . .” But why are there four different expressions for redemption? Also, why are these commemorated specifically with wine?

R’ Yitzchak Mirsky shlita explains (based on the writings of R’ Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin z”l): The four expressions represent four phases of the Exodus. The first phase occurred after the fourth plague, when Bnei Yisrael were relieved of their back-breaking labor. At that point we read (Shmot 8:28), “Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and he did not send out the people.” The redundant phrase, “he did not send out the people,” indicates that he did not free them entirely, but, it implies, he lightened their burden.

In the second phase of the redemption, Pharaoh began to respect his Jewish subjects. This occurred after the plague of hail, where Pharaoh refers for the first time to “Bnei Yisrael” (Shmot 9:35), rather than to “the people.”

The third phase was the actual Exodus. It will be noted that these three phases parallel, in reverse order, Hashem’s prophecy to Avraham (Bereishit 15:13): “[1] Your descendants will be strangers in a land which is not theirs, and [2] they will enslave them and [3] oppress them.”

In the fourth phase, Hashem took us as His people. This refers to the giving of the Torah.

Why wine? Netziv explains that wine is used because it changes a person’s complexion just as the Exodus brought joy to the faces of our ancestors. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Hegyonei Halachah)

Rabbeinu Bachya z”l also explains the four expressions of redemption as referring to four events: The first expression refers to the end of Bnei Yisrael’s slavery; the second, to the actual Exodus; the third, to the splitting of the Yam Suf / Red Sea; and the fourth, to the giving of the Torah.

If all four of the quoted expressions describe redemption, why is one of the expressions: “I shall redeem you”? Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the third step — the splitting of the Sea — was the culmination of the redemption. Even when a master frees his slave, the slave must fear that the master will change his mind and chase after him. Only when the master is dead, as all of Pharaoh’s army perished at the Yam Suf, can the slave truly feel free. (Commentary on the Torah)

It was customary in Europe for the teachers of the very young to have their pupils memorize the key words of the order of the Seder (i.e. “Kadesh U’rechatz” etc.) along with their traditional interpretations. Once, on the evening of the Seder, the Chassidic Rebbe known as the “Shpole Zeide”
asked his little son to recite the key aloud. The child began, “Kadesh—when the father comes from shul on the evening of the seder, he must immediately recite Kiddush.”

The “Zeide” waited for his son to continue, but the child said that his teacher had not taught him anything further on this point. And so, his father taught him the conclusion: “so that the youngsters won’t fall asleep, but rather will ask the Mah Nishtanah.”

On the following day, the child’s teacher was present at the Rebbe’s table, and the Rebbe asked him, “Why didn’t you teach the children the concluding remarks?”

“I didn’t want to trouble them,” said the teacher, “especially since the reason given is not very important. After all, even a person who has no children makes Kiddush immediately upon his arrival from shul!”

The Rebbe became angry. “Are you the one to judge which reason is important and which is not? Are you wiser than all of the other teachers? How did you dare change that which has been taught for generations? Let me tell you what those who lived before us alluded to with this statement. “When the father - that is our Father in Heaven - comes from shul on the evening of the Seder—when He sees how His children, the people of Israel, have severed themselves from the darkness and troubles of the Exile and have come to the shul to praise Him for their Redemption; when He sees this, He must immediately recite kiddush, i.e., He must renew the ‘Kiddushin’ / the marriage bond between Himself and ourselves, and strengthen us in our Exile so that the youngsters won’t fall asleep, i.e., so that we don’t sink into a deep slumber in our Exile, but rather [we] will ask the Mah Nishtanah / why is this night, this Exile, longer than all the other exiles?”

With that, the Zeide burst into torrential weeping, and all present wept along with him. Finally, he came to himself and said, “Now we must give our Father some joy; we must show Him that His children can dance in the darkness, too.” And together they began to sing and dance.

למחות

Կարպաս

In Temple times, one would wash before consuming a damp fruit or vegetable in order to eat it in ritual purity. Although we cannot achieve such purity today, we observe this law of netilat yadayim / washing at the Seder in order or express our hope that we will soon be obligated to observe it, due to the arrival of mashiach and the rebuilding of the Bet Hamikdash. This is an expression of the freedom that we feel on Pesach. (The Artscroll Haggadah)

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Մետալիսթ կարպաս բուխտակացում

Why do we eat karpas? The best known reason is that the Hebrew spelling of karpas (“כרבס”) suggests “60 ferach” (“פֶּרֶך”=“60”)--i.e., “60 (x 10,000=600,000) Jews worked hard as slaves.” Some say that karpas was the herb which Bnei Yisrael used to heal the sores they got while working and through beatings. Finally, the name karpas reminds us of the “ketonet pasim”--Yosef’s coat which played a role in bringing about the enslavement of the Jews. (R’ Yehuda Lebowitz: Notes to Ritva’s Hilchot Seder Ha’Haggadah)

Of what does the salt-water in which we dip the karpas remind us? R’ Menachem Mendel Hager z”l of Oyber-Vishneve notes that, throughout the Talmud, salt is used as a metaphor for suffering. Chazal teach that suffering is actually good for a person for it expiates his sins, but, being only human, we
quickly reach a point where we can stand no more. Salt reminds us of this, for a little bit of salt improves the taste of food, but if that same food is too salty, it is not edible. As we begin to recall the suffering of the slaves in Egypt, this thought should be on our mind. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Visheve-Vizhnitz Shearit Menachem)

Why is the middle matzah broken rather than the top or bottom one? There are two berachot that are recited before eating matzah at the seder: Hamotzi / the blessing for “bread” and Al Achilat matzah / the special blessing over the mitzvah of eating matzah on the first night of Pesach. The halachah is that whenever we recite Hamotzi it is preferable to have a whole loaf of bread or matzah before us, whereas the berachah on the mitzvah of eating matzah is preferably recited over a broken matzah, symbolizing that it is “Lechem Oni” / “The bread of poverty (or affliction).”

There is a halachic principle which states, “One may not pass over a mitzvah (or a mitzvah-object).” Generally speaking, all mitzvot should be done in the order in which they present themselves to us (and all mitzvah-objects should be used in the order in which they are brought before us). This rule obligates us to recite “Hamotzi” over the first matzah that we see when we are ready to eat, i.e. the top one in the pile of three, and because of the Halachah cited above this matzah must be whole, not broken. The blessing of “Al Achilat matzah” must be recited on the second matzah we see, i.e. the middle one, and this one should be broken. If we had broken the bottom matzah instead of the middle one, we would have to pass over the middle (whole) matzah to reach the broken one, and this should not be done. (Haggadah Shel Pesach MiBa’al Shelah Ha’kadosh)

A young man in Israel married into a family which did not have the custom of stealing the afikoman. When he had a son who was old enough to “steal” his grandfather’s afikoman, the latter insisted that such behavior violated the Torah’s prohibitions on theft and extortion. This dispute was then brought before R’ Chaim David Halevy z”l (Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv; died 1998), who wrote as follows:

The Gemara (Pesachim 109a) mentions a custom of “grabbing” the matzah in order to keep the children awake. As explained by Rashi and Rashbam, this does not refer to a custom that children steal the afikoman, but rather that the matzah was stolen from the children. Why was this not prohibited as stealing? Apparently, writes R’ Halevy, because it is justified as one more strange thing that we do on the seder night to highlight for the children the uniqueness of the night.

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 61b) states that stealing is prohibited even if one does not desire the object of the theft, but merely intends to pain the victim. Interestingly, Rambam does not quote this law in his Code. Instead, Rambam writes that one may not steal, even in jest. Why doesn’t Rambam quote the Gemara’s law? Also, what is the source for Rambam’s law that one may not steal in jest?

R’ Halevy explains: Since we know that Rambam did not invent laws, nor did he ignore laws that were found in the Talmud, we may assume that Rambam was merely reformulating the law that one may not steal in order to pain another. Rambam’s use of the phrase “in jest” must be equivalent to the Gemara’s phrase “intended to cause pain.” Why did Rambam change the words? Because he wanted to teach us, incidentally, that the only time that stealing in jest is prohibited is when it is intended to cause pain. However, stealing the afikoman at the seder is not intended to cause pain. Rather, it is intended only to “liven-up” the seder and interest the children. (Aseh Lecha Rav Vol. VI, No. 35)

One year, at the seder of R’ Shimon Sofer z”l (known as the “Michtav Sofer”), his grandson asked him the reason for stealing the afikoman. At first, the Michtav Sofer did not respond, but after the seder, he explained as follows:
The Torah (Shmot 11:7) relates that as Hashem passed through Egypt killing the firstborn, not one dog belonging to a Jew barked. It seems strange, said the Michtav Sofer, that Chazal did not establish any remembrance for this miracle which the Torah troubles itself to mention. [Ed. Note: In contrast, we allude in the Haggadah to literally hundreds of miracles which the Torah does not mention at all.]

In fact, said R’ Sofer, stealing the afikoman is that remembrance. The Gemara (Pesachim 113a) states that one is not permitted to live in a city that has no dogs. Rashi explains that the barking of dogs is a protection against thieves. It follows, therefore, that on Pesach night, when the dogs did not bark, there was a greater risk of thieves. We allude to this by stealing the afikoman.

Why didn’t R’ Sofer answer his grandson until after the seder? It has been suggested that he sought to teach his grandson that a Jew must accept our Torah, mitzvot and customs even when he does not understand them. (Quoted in Vayaged Moshe)

מגיבים את הקערה ומתחילים באמירת ההגדה

R’ Shimon Schwab z”l (1908-1995; rabbi of the K’hal Adath Jeshurun “Breuer’s” community in New York) writes:

From my earliest youth, I remember that the children would ask each other on the first morning of Pesach, “How long did your Seder last?” This was true in my youth, and it is still the case today.

If the children were to ask me this now, I would answer them, “I made sure to eat the afikoman before chatzot [halachic midnight].” According to some poskim [halachic authorities], even the recitation of Hallel should be completed before chatzot. I must point out, R’ Schwab says, that the present-day practice in which all the children read from their prepared sheets which they received in school is not exactly in accordance with the mitzvah of הגדתך לבראשך / “and you shall tell to your children” (Shmot 13:8). The children have started a new “mitzvah” of וגדתך לחברך ולאמיך / “and you shall tell to your father and mother,” which makes it extremely difficult to reach the mitzvah of achilat matzah / eating the matzah – and certainly the afikoman – before chatzot.

R’ Schwab continues: Rather than discourage the children from actively participating, parents should encourage their children to keep their remarks brief so that the father or other leader of the Seder can read the text of the Haggadah and explain the miracles of Yetziat Mitzrayim / the Exodus. Children should be encouraged to say their divrei Torah during the meal if there is time or, otherwise, during the daytime meals of Yom Tov.

On the Seder night, concludes R’ Schwab, it is a mitzvat asai d’Oraita / an affirmative commandment from the Torah to retell to one’s children the events surrounding Yetziat Mitzrayim. If one has merited to have children or grandchildren, it is a mitzvah for the father or grandfather to hand down to them the details of the Exodus. The saying of “vertlach” / short divrei Torah is very nice, but if these are not the details of the narrative of the Exodus – or its meaning or message – they are not a part of this mitzvah. On the Seder night, the children are encouraged to ask any question relevant to Yetziat Mitzrayim, and the father has a special mitzvah d’Oraita to respond to these questions, and to tell his children about the miracles that G-d did for us. (Rav Schwab on Prayer p. 541)

“In order that that you may relate in the ears of your son and your grandson how I fought the Egyptians...and you shall know that I am Hashem.” (Shmot 10:2)

It is well known that in order to completely convince others of something, the speaker must himself believe what he is saying. In keeping with this, the above verse may also be read, “In order to relate to your descendants how I fought Egypt, you must believe that I am Hashem.” (R’ Yehoshua of Belz z”l)
Why don’t we recite a berachah on the mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim / retelling the story of the Exodus? R’ Asher Anshel Katz z”l (Hungarian rabbi; killed in the Holocaust) quotes a work called Chessed L’Avraham which explains:

R’ Yonatan Eyebschutz z”l (died 1764) asks: Why do we not recite a berachah before performing the mitzvah of giving charity? Because, R’ Eyebschutz answers, the existence of this mitzvah is a curse. Were we worthy, we would see the fulfillment of the verse (Devarim 15:4), “However, may there be no destitute person among you; rather, Hashem will surely bless you.” We do not recite a blessing over something which has an element of a curse to it.

Similarly, states the work Chessed L’Avraham, if we were worthy we would see the fulfillment of the verses (Yirmiyah 23:7-8), “Behold! Days are coming – the word of Hashem – when people will no longer swear, ‘As Hashem lives, Who brought Bnei Yisrael up from the land of Egypt,’ but rather, ‘As Hashem lives, Who brought up and brought back the offspring of the House of Israel from the land of the North and from all the lands wherein He had dispersed them,’ and they will dwell in their own land.” The miracles of the Final Redemption will be so great that they will supplant the Exodus from Egypt in our national consciousness. Since we look forward to that day, how can we recite a blessing over the mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim!

R’ Katz adds: Perhaps this is why we declare at the very beginning of the Seder, “This year, here; next year in Yerushalayim.” One would expect the Seder to begin with a berachah, “Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding the mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim.” Our declaration, “This year, here; next year in Yerushalayim,” is our explanation for why we do not recite such a berachah. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Chodesh Ha’Aviv p. 85)

Why are we happy on Pesach — after all, aren’t we once again in exile? The answer is that we rejoice in the knowledge that we can be redeemed at any time. Even from Egypt, where we were destined to remain for 400 years, G-d took us out early. Certainly, then, He can take us out of our present exile which has no fixed length.

How can we earn this redemption? Through charity! The Haggadah excerpt quoted above is not literally an invitation. It is a reminder that if throughout the year we practice feeding the hungry, then: This year here; next year in Eretz Yisrael. (Divrei MaHaRY”A)

Why do we begin the Haggadah with “Ha lachma ania,” a reference to the “poor bread” (matzah)? This may be answered by a parable:

A poor shepherd caught the eye of a king, who brought the shepherd to his court and appointed him as an official of the royal household. Gradually, this former shepherd rose in rank, until he became Minister of the Treasury.

Other royal ministers were jealous, and they told the king that his treasury minister was embezzling funds. The king did not believe them, but their constant attacks on his minister forced him to take action.
One morning, the king and his ministers set out to pay a surprise visit to the treasury minister’s home. Arriving there, they were surprised to see how humble the home was. There was certainly no sign that the minister had come into new found wealth.

But one door of the house was locked, and there, the ministers were sure, the king would find hidden treasure. The king demanded that the door be unlocked, and all of the treasury minister’s entreaties were to no avail. Entering the room, the king was shocked to see nothing but a stick and a knapsack. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked.

“With my sudden rise to prominence,” the former shepherd responded, “I was afraid lest I become conceited. Therefore, I come into this room every morning, dress in my old shepherd’s garb, and remember what it was like to be humble.”

We, too, are faced with the shepherd’s problem, the commentaries say. Once we were humble slaves in Egypt, but suddenly we became a proud nation with the Torah and a land of our own. We begin the seder by looking at the matzah, and this reminds us of who we were and Who made us what we are. (Yalkut Lekach Tov: Haggadah Shel Pesach)

“This year, we are here; next year may we be in Eretz Yisrael! This year, we are slaves; next year may we be free men!”

R’ Yehoshua Heschel of Cracow z”l (known as “the rebbe, Reb Heschel”; died 1663) notes that the above statements appear to be redundant. He explains:

We have a tradition that the enslavement in Egypt ceased six months before the actual Exodus. Presumably, says R’ Heschel, the same will be true when the Complete Redemption arrives. Six months before mashiach arrives we will notice a marked improvement in the Jewish People’s condition. [In the discussion below, we will refer to the Complete Redemption as “Step 2” and the lightening of the burden of exile that will take place six months beforehand as “Step 1.”]

There is a dispute in the Gemara whether the Complete Redemption will take place in the month of Nisan (the opinion of the sage Rabbi Yehoshua) or the month of Tishrei (the opinion of the sage Rabbi Eliezer). Our passage from Haggadah refers to both of those views. [For greater clarity, we will explain the second sentence first.] According to Rabbi Eliezer, it is not likely that we will be in Eretz Yisrael next year, for if the Complete Redemption (Step 2) were destined to occur in this coming Tishrei, we would already have seen signs of Step 1 now, six months before. If we have not seen those signs, then the most we can hope for is that Step 1 will occur by next Tishrei, and Step 2 will occur six months afterward, in the second Tishrei from now. Hence, “This year, we are slaves, next year may we be free men [i.e., by next Pesach, Step 1 will occur].”

According to Rabbi Yehoshua, the Complete Redemption (Step 2) could indeed happen by next Pesach. Perhaps Step 1 will indeed occur by next Tishrei, six months before Pesach. Therefore, “This year, we are here; next year may we be in Eretz Yisrael [i.e., even Step 2 may occur by next Pesach].” (Chanukat Ha’Torah)

One might ask, especially in light of the above, why do we continue to recall the Exodus every year? After all, we are still in exile!

R’ Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht z”l (founder and rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh) used to begin his Seder with a parallel that addressed this question:

There were two destitute brothers who sold used rags that they found in other people’s garbage. So poor were they that the only place they could find to live was a large barrel, which they shared.

One day, they earned an unusually large amount of money. It was the first time that they had ever possessed more money than they needed for one day, so they bought a lottery ticket. And, they won! They were now wealthy.
The brothers had different ideas about how to spend their money. One took his half and bought a large house and fancy cars. Since he didn’t have to work, he spent his time traveling, hunting, and engaging in other leisure activities.

The other brother took his wealth and used it to obtain an education. Before long, he was expert in a number of sciences and other subjects. Soon, the two brothers had little in common, but they still met every year on the anniversary of their day of good fortune in order to recall how their lives had changed.

But life is a never-ending cycle, and one day, the two brothers became poor again. When the next anniversary of their first change of fortune arrived, the brother who had chosen a life of leisure saw no reason to celebrate; he had nothing left of his good fortune. However, his brother continued to observe that anniversary, saying that although he had no money, he still had the education that he had obtained.

So, too, said R’ Goldvicht, we may be exile, but we still have the education that we received as a result of the Exodus, namely, the Torah. Therefore, the Exodus is still something to celebrate and remember. (Asufot Ma’archot: Haggadah Shel Pesach p. 13)

The Gemara says that the story of the Exodus should be told in a question and answer format. Even if a person is all alone, he is expected to follow this format. Why?

R’ Aryeh Leib Zunz z”l explains: The Zohar says that when a person tells the story of the Exodus, Hashem Himself rejoices. He then gathers together the entire heavenly entourage and says to them, “Go and hear My praises which My children are saying.” Thus, says R’ Zunz, a person who is conducting a seder is never really alone. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Birkat Shir)

Why the emphasis on the question and answer format? Why doesn’t the individual who is conducting the Seder simply lecture to his family and guests, explaining each step of the seder?

R’ Moshe Meir Yashar z”l (a student of the Chafetz Chaim) explained with the following story:

Towards the end of World War II, the Soviet army marched into Bucharest, Romania and liberated it from the Nazis. Among the Russian officers arriving in the Romanian capital was one, a Jew, who had somehow managed to remain observant despite the trials of military service under a Communist regime.

When Pesach came, this officer went knocking on the doors of Bucharest, looking for a Seder which he could join. Pretty soon, he found himself seated among his brethren, ready to start the Seder.

“Please honor us by asking the Four Questions,” the host asked his Russian guest.

“I’m sorry,” said the soldier, “but where I come from, one is not permitted to ask questions.”

When I read of this incident (R’ Yashar wrote) I realized that being able to ask questions on Pesach, with no one to stop us or limit the number, is the truest sign of freedom. In fact, the name of this holiday, “Pesach,” may be read as two words meaning, “A mouth which talks.” Therefore, the son is encouraged to ask questions.

Chazal designed the Pesach seder to revolve around questions and answers. Indeed, the halachah states that if a couple has no children, the wife should recite the Mah nishtanah. And, if a person is all alone, he should ask himself the questions. Why?

R’ Avraham Danzig z”l (author of the halachic compendium Chayei Adam) explains: We do so many of our mitzvot by rote, without giving them much thought, if any. However, the lessons of Pesach
are the centerpieces of our beliefs as Jews, and are much too important to be done by rote. Therefore Chazal required us to ask questions in order to slow us down and make us think.

Nor should the questions be limited to Mah nishtanah, R’ Danzig writes. When the Gemara describes the seder, it says, “We pour the second cup, and then the son asks.” Presumably the question that the son will ask is, “Why are you pouring a second cup of wine before washing for hamotzi?” which is not one of the questions in Mah nishtanah.

Moreover, R’ Danzig notes, a child could not ask the questions of Mah nishtanah [unless he had been prepared beforehand]! One of the questions is, “Why on all other nights do we eat chametz and matzah, and tonight only matzah?” How can a child know at the beginning of the meal that we will eat only matzah? Perhaps, just as on all other nights we eat chametz and matzah, right now there is only matzah on the table, but soon we will bring chametz!

Rather, Mah nishtanah is a set of more sophisticated questions, whose real meaning is, “Why will our actions tonight combine signs of slavery, such as eating matzah, and freedom, such as eating while reclining?” As for the children, they should be allowed to ask whatever questions strike them. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Toldot Adam)

R’ Shmuel Avigdor of Karlin z”l (19th century) observes that the question and answer format is not merely a creation of Chazal. It is a mitzvah de’oraita / Torah-ordained commandment, mentioned no fewer than four times in the Torah. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Im Peirush Maharsha)

We begin our story with the statement “Avadim hayinu...” / “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” R’ Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z”l writes that this sentence describes three levels of degradation” (1) We were slaves, (2) to a foreign king, (3) in a foreign land. The Haggadah then goes on to recount that G-d saved us from all three of these troubles: (1) We were taken out of slavery, (2) by Hashem, our own King, and (3) we were taken from Egypt and brought to Eretz Yisrael. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Olat Re’iyah)
We read in the Haggadah: “If Hashem had not taken our forefathers out of Egypt, we, our children and our grandchildren would be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.” R’ Chaim Elazar Shapira z”l (the Munkatcher Rebbe; died 1937) writes that the purpose of this statement is to answer the question: Why is our present exile so long and drawn out? Why doesn’t Hashem redeem us in the same dramatic way that He redeemed our ancestors from Egypt?

R’ Shapira explains with the following parable:

A doctor was once rushed to the bedside of a sick man and, seeing the condition of the patient, he performed an emergency appendectomy that saved the patient’s life. Within days, the patient was up and about, and he thanked the doctor accordingly.

Several years passed, and again this man took ill, this time with painful kidney disease. The same doctor was called, and he prescribed a regimen of diet and medication. “If you follow these instructions,” he said, “you will be cured in several months.”

“A few years ago, I was sicker than this — was I not?” the patient asked.

“You were,” the doctor answered.

“And then you operated and I was cured in a matter of days — was I not?”

“Yes,” said the doctor.

“Then why are you giving me a gradual cure that will leave me suffering for months rather than operating and curing me immediately?” the patient inquired.

The doctor explained: “Surgery is a drastic measure that is performed as a last resort. Had I not operated then, you would have died shortly. Now, however, there is no immediate danger to your life. Although you may suffer for a time, this diet and these medications will cure your illness at its source, and you will remain healthy.”

The Exodus, R’ Shapira explains, was a “dramatic rescue” because the Jewish people were on the verge of total assimilation. Even we and our children would have been lost. This is what the above excerpt from the Haggadah is teaching us. The present exile, though painful, can be “cured” more gradually and less dramatically. (Sha’ar Yissaschar: Ma’amor Aggadeta De’Pischa, No. 22)

The primary redemption, says R’ Yaakov Moshe Charlap, z”l (1883-1951; student of R’ Kook and his successor as Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Merkaz haRav), is too great to be brought about through other nations. This is why, after Pharaoh had given Bnei Yisrael permission to leave, he had to change his mind.

The same will be true of the final redemption. The nations of the world will control Eretz Yisrael and will give us the right to settle there. Before the redemption can be complete, however, they will have to regret their decision, so that it will be clear that Hashem alone has redeemed us. (Quoted in Ohr Ha’Techiyah p.24)

Chazal say that Hashem hurried to take the Jewish people out of Egypt before they became permanently mired in Egypt’s impurity. Although the exile was supposed to last 400 years, Hashem, in His kindness, counted the 400 years from the birth of Yitzchak.

R’ Eliezer Nachman Puah z”l (Italy, 1600’s) observes that the Jews were in a “catch-22” situation. On the one hand, if they had remained in Egypt, they would have been lost spiritually. On the other hand, he writes, fruit which is artificially or forcibly ripened is not as sweet as fruit which ripens naturally, and, so too, the redemption from Egypt could not be complete because it had to be hurried. This is why the Jews had to suffer so much in the desert, and this is why we have suffered in additional exiles until today.
This also explains, he writes, why our Sages cautioned against hurrying the ultimate redemption. Rather, we should wait until the “fruit” ripens at the ordained time. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Midrash Bechiddush)

We read in the Haggadah, “Even if we all are wise, we all are understanding . . . it would still be a mitzvah for us to relate the story of the Exodus.” Of course it would be! Why would we think otherwise? asks R’ Mordechai Gifter z”l.

He explains: The mitzvah of relating the story of the Exodus has two parts. From the fact that we push our children to ask questions, it would appear that the mitzvah is mainly to inform those who do not know the story. No, says the Haggadah, it also is a mitzvah for those who already know the story to remind themselves of it. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Pirkei Mo’ed)

We say in the Haggadah: “Even if we all were sages, even if we all are understanding . . . it still would be incumbent upon us to retell the story of the Exodus.”

R’ Azaryah Berzon shli’ta explains this in light of the Gemara (Menachot 99b) which relates that a man named Ben Damah asked his uncle Rabbi Yishmael, “Since I have learned the entire Torah, may I study Greek wisdom?”

Rabbi Yishmael responded, “One is commanded to speak Torah day and night (Yehoshua 1:8). Find a time which is neither day nor night and study Greek wisdom.” What was the logic behind the question and what was the answer?

Ben Damah thought that the purpose of Torah study is to know the Torah. Rabbi Yishmael responded that that is only one aspect. There is another mitzvah, which is to occupy oneself with Torah.

Similarly, the Haggadah is teaching us that the purpose of retelling the story of the Exodus is not (only) to know the story. Rather, telling the story is an end and a mitzvah in and of itself. (Printed in Hadarom, No. 53, Nissan 5754)

Why is even the wisest sage obligated to retell even the basics of the Exodus story every year? R’ Nosson Zvi Finkel z”l (the Alter of Slobodka; died 1926) explains: No matter how wise one has become, no matter how old one is or how many times one retells the story, one still retains the incorrect images of the Exodus that he formed as a child. The story must be retold and retold until these images are uprooted. (Quoted in Haggadat Roshei Yeshivat Chevron p. 78)

R’ Yehoshua Heschel Rabinowitz (the “Manestricher Rebbe”) z”l writes: The purpose of the mitzvah to relate the story of the Exodus is not to give thanks to G-d for the kindness which He did for us in taking us out of slavery and making us His special people. Rather, the purpose of the mitzvah is for the benefits which it offers in the present, strengthening us as we wander from exile to exile. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Torat Yehoshua)

[The above explanation of the mitzvah answers a question which is posed by several works: Generally, one is prohibited from praising G-d excessively, for once one starts to praise G-d, how dare he stop (see Megillah 18a). How, then, can the Haggadah say, “The more one tells about the Exodus, the better?” However, if we understand that the purpose of relating the story of the Exodus is not to praise G-d, but to learn from it and apply the lessons to our own lives, then the above question is resolved.]
Siddur Avodat Yisrael writes that there is a chapter of Tehilim which corresponds to each parashah. The psalm for Parashat Vayera, which describes many of the plagues, is Psalm 46. On verse 1, “On the hidden things, a song,” the Midrash Shocher Tov observes that we can’t describe all of Hashem’s wonders, for His true greatness is hidden. Similarly, the Sages of the Gemara criticize one who praises G-d excessively. “Have you said all of your Master’s praises?” the Sages ask rhetorically of the person who begins praising Hashem effusively and then stops. Rather, a person should limit himself to the set prayers and psalms. (Berachot 33b)

Yet, our Sages say, “The more one speaks about the Exodus, the more he is praiseworthy.” How can this be reconciled with the above teachings?

There is a difference between praise and thanks, says Maharal. When you are indebted to someone, do you refrain from thanking him just because you cannot thank him enough? For the specific event when G-d redeemed us from slavery, we must be grateful, and must praise Him as much as we are able. It is only spontaneous praise that is prohibited. (Gevurot Hashem ch.1)

R’ Yitzchak Hutner z”l offers another answer: It is disrespectful to speak about the king’s wealth because one might underestimate it. However, if the king has something that he wants to show off, he understands that each viewer will appreciate that object only on his (the viewer’s) own level. Such is the case with the miracles of the Exodus, which G-d performed only in order to increase His own honor. (Pachad Yitzchak: Pesach ch.16)

Because Hashem’s wonders are hidden, says R’ Yediyah Hapenini z”l (13th century), Pharaoh’s magicians were unable to imitate most of the plagues.

R’ Ovadiah Yosef shlita quotes R’ Yitzchak Elchanan Spector z”l with another answer, as follows:

The Haggadah’s word “meshubah”--commonly translated “praiseworthy”--should be translated instead as “of high caliber.” The Haggadah’s message is, “The more a person is able to appreciate the significance of the Exodus, the more we can be certain that this is a person of high spiritual caliber. (Haggadah Chazon Ovadiah p.203)

The mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim / relating the story of the Exodus requires more than just reading the story. One’s recitation of the Haggadah must be from the heart and also must penetrate one’s heart, so that the story of the Exodus will serve as the basis for strengthening one’s emunah / faith. Indeed, R’ Simcha Zissel Ziv z”l (the “Alter of Kelm”; died 1898) used to observe that the statement in the Haggadah, “The more that one relates about the Exodus, the more praiseworthy it is,” also can be translated, “The more that one relates about the Exodus, the more improved he is.”

R’ Yaakov Levitt z”l (Bialystok) illustrated with a parable the difference between the right way to tell the story of the Exodus and the wrong way:

A villager once took seriously ill. The doctor was called, and the doctor recognized that the villager’s illness was fully curable if treated properly. He wrote out a prescription and he told the villager’s wife, “Give your husband this prescription with water three times a day until it is finished, and he will be cured.”

The family did as it was told. Every day, the simple village wife tore a small piece off the prescription, dissolved it in water and gave it to her husband to drink. Needless to say, his condition did not improve.

The doctor was called, but he was very perplexed. “I know that this prescription works,” he said. “I have prescribed it for this illness before.”
“Let me see the prescription,” he requested finally. “Perhaps I made a mistake.” The villager’s wife explained, however, that she could not show him the prescription because she had given it to her husband as instructed.

“Fools,” he shouted. “Can a piece of paper cure your husband’s illness? It’s not the paper that makes the difference, but what’s written on the paper that would have cured him.”

So it is with the Haggadah. It is neither the book of the Haggadah, nor simply reading the Haggadah, which illuminates one’s soul. Rather, one must absorb the contents of the story. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Sha’arei Armon p. 150)

R’ Avraham ben Ha’Gra (died 1808; son of the Vilna Gaon) writes: the mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim / relating the story of the Exodus is virtually unique in that it has no upper limit. In contrast, most mitzvot are subject to the prohibition of “bal tosif” / “You shall not add.” [For example, one may not keep nine days of Pesach or place an additional Torah-portion on the parchment in his tefilin.]

R’ Avraham continues: the story in the Haggadah about Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah and his colleagues who sat all night speaking about the Exodus, until their students came and told them that the hour had arrived to recite the morning Shema, is meant to answer the first of the Four Questions — “Why on all nights may we eat chametz and matzah, and, on this night, only matzah?” How so?

The Zohar says that the purpose of the mitzvah to study Torah day and night (“You shall contemplate it day and night” — Yehoshua 1:8) is to destroy one’s “chametz.” What does this mean? Chametz is a metaphor for the Yetzer Hara, and the Gemara says, as if quoting Hashem, “I created the Yetzer Hara and I created the Torah as an antidote.”

Thus, on all other nights, when a person has time to study Torah, he may eat chametz, for the Torah he studies will destroy the “chametz.” However, on this night, one has no time for Torah study; one must occupy himself all night with the mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim. Therefore, one must not eat any chametz on this night.

How far does the obligation of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim go? R’ Avraham notes that the Sages’ students did not say, “The time has come to pray,” but rather, “The time has come to recite Shema.” They knew that their teachers would stop their “story-telling” to recite Shema at the earliest possible time, because Shema also mentions the Exodus. However, they assumed that their teachers would not pray until the latest possible hour so that they could continue their Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim as long as possible. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Ge’ulat Avraham)

R’ Yaakov Yisrael Berger z”l (rabbi in Ohio before World War II) wrote in 1944: Bnei Yisrael were supposed to be in Egypt for 400 years, but Hashem took them out 190 years early. Yet we have now been in exile for thousands of years. The Jews probably suffer more in Europe now than our ancestors did in Egypt. In the Western nations, where our brethren have found rest for their bodies, there is no rest for the soul. The foundations of the Torah in these countries are collapsing. Shabbat and family purity laws are almost forgotten. Why then does Hashem not redeem us?

He adds: This is the meaning of the Haggadah’s statement, “The more that one tells about the Exodus, the more praiseworthy he is.” The more that one explores the reasons that brought about the early redemption from Egypt, the more praiseworthy he is, for such a person hastens our own redemption. This is also the meaning of Rabban Gamliel’s statement: “Whoever does not explain the following three things at the Pesach festival has not fulfilled his obligation — the Korban Pesach, matzah and maror.” It is not enough to eat these three things. One must learn their lessons; for example, one must feel the bitterness of our own exile, and do what we can to be redeemed as our ancestors were. (Kol Yisrael Chaveirim p. 87)
Why is it necessary for the Haggadah to tell us that the more that one tells about the Exodus, the more praiseworthy he is? Would we have thought otherwise? R’ Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer z’l (the “Ketav Sofer”; 19th century Hungary) explains as follows:

The Gemara (Shabbat 118b) teaches: “One who recites Hallel every day is a blasphemer.” Why? R’ Sofer explains that Hallel praises Hashem for the supernatural miracles of the Exodus. However, one who focuses too much on G-d’s supernatural miracles doesn’t notice His everyday wonders. Man is obligated to see Hashem as much in His daily life and in nature as in His supernatural acts, and therefore man is forbidden to recite Hallel every day.

R’ Sofer adds: This is the meaning of the verse (Mishlei 3:6), “In all your ways know Him and He will smooth your paths.” In all of your ways, in whatever you do on a day-to-day basis, know Him. Know that He is the source of your day-to-day success, and then He will indeed smooth the path before you.

In light of the above, one might think that he should downplay the story of the Exodus. No, the Haggadah tells us, on the Seder night one should elaborate as much as possible on the Exodus. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Ketav Sofer-Shir Ma’on, p.10b)

Exactly what is the extent of one’s obligation to retell the story of the Exodus? R’ Shimon Sofer z’l (1850-1944; son of the Ketav Sofer) answers:

The next paragraph of the Haggadah relates that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon (all sages of the Mishnah) sat together during the entire night and discussed the Exodus. In apparent contrast to this, the Shulchan Aruch (481:2) states: “One is obligated to busy himself with the laws of Pesach and [the story of] the Exodus and to relate the miracles and the wonders that G-d did for our ancestors until he is overpowered by sleep.”

In reality, there is no contradiction, R’ Sofer explains. One is, in fact, obligated to discuss the Exodus (and/or the laws of Pesach) all night. However, the Shulchan Aruch recognizes that most people cannot accomplish this, and it therefore states that one’s obligation continues until he falls asleep. This means, however, R’ Sofer writes, that one may not do things that will cause him to fall asleep sooner. For example, one may not drink any wine after the fourth cup and one should not overeat at the Seder meal. In addition, if one does fall asleep and he happens to awaken before dawn, he is obligated to resume his discussion of the Exodus until morning. (Ibid p.2b)

“He has established a remembrance of His wondrous deeds; He is kind and merciful. He has given food to those who fear Him; He will remember His covenant forever.” (Tehilim 111:4-5)

Why has G-d asked us to hold the Pesach Seder and to commemorate many of the other miracles which he did for us on our way out of Egypt? It is for His honor? Does He need these observances?

R’ Yehuda Mintz z’l (16th century) found the answers to these questions in the above psukim from Tehilim (Psalms). Why did Hashem establish our holidays as a remembrance of his wondrous deeds? Because he is kind and merciful. Commemorating the miracles which were done for our ancestors will help us to appreciate and remember important principles of faith. This, in turn, will allow Hashem to reward us for performance of the mitzvot which flow from that faith. The reward which Hashem seeks to give us is also alluded to in the above verses. “He has given food (symbolic of all material blessings) to those who fear Him, He will always remember his covenant.” (Haggadah Zichron Nefli’ot)
In order that you may remember all the days of your life, the day on which you left Egypt.” (Devarim 16:3)

The mitzvah to remember the Exodus on a daily basis not only allows us to thank Hashem for His kindness in redeeming us from slavery and making us His chosen nation, it actually strengthens us and assures our continued existence as we wander from country to country in our exile. As we are persecuted and despised [openly or more subtly] in our host nations, we can easily despair. If someone says that we are the lowliest of peoples, we might believe him, but remembering the Exodus tells us that this is not so. Look at all of the “trouble” (so-to-speak) to which Hashem went to take us out of Egypt and turn us into His people.

In Shmot 19:5 we read Hashem’s words, “And it will come to pass if you listen to My voice...and you will be My treasure among the nations…” We can interpret this as meaning that listening to Hashem’s voice means realizing that we are His chosen nation. This is not meant in a vain or haughty way, G-d forbid, but this knowledge can prevent our assimilation into the lands of our exile. [Ed. note: In World of Prayer (vol. I, pp.26 and 48), R’ Elie Munk z”l enjoins us to see “Choseness” as duty, not a privilege, and certainly not a cause for conceit. Please see that work for a more complete explanation of this often misunderstood concept.]

Remembering the Exodus reassures us that we are not abandoned, and we can in fact see evidence of this every day. How else [in Chazal’s words] can a lamb exist among seventy wolves? This is possible only if the lamb is protected by an exceptional shepherd. This may explain why the Torah says that the Exodus occurred through Hashem’s mighty hand and outstretched arm. The mighty hand refers to the strength which Hashem demonstrated as the events of the Exodus unfolded. The outstretched arm refers to Hashem’s constant presence in our lives, always rescuing us when we are in danger. (R’ Yehoshua Rabinowitz: Haggadah Shel Pesach Torat Yehoshua)

Why does the Haggadah introduce the passage about the “Four Sons” with a blessing over the gift of Torah? R’ Moshe Yisrael Feldman z”l (rabbi of Dragomiresti, Hungary; killed in the Holocaust) explains:

The Mishnah (Eduyot Ch. 2) teaches that wisdom is hereditary. If so, how is it possible for one person to have four sons like the Four Sons of the Haggadah: a wise son, a wicked son, a simple son, and a son who does not know how to ask? The answer may be found in the teaching of the Gemara (Nedarim 81a): “Why is it rare for Torah scholars to have sons who are Torah scholars? Because they do not recite the blessings over the Torah first thing [in the morning].” [The Mefaresh / Anonymous Commentary on Nedarim explains that the Torah scholars referred to are in such a hurry to return to their studies when they awaken that they neglect to recite the blessings, including the prayer, “May we and our descendants . . . be students of Your Torah.”]

Says R’ Feldman: Now, as we are about to speak of the Four Sons, we remind ourselves to recite the blessings over the Torah, lest our sons grow up to be as different as these four. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Shem Yisrael)
I kvita De’meshicha bows his head to his father and grandfather and awaits an answer. (Shemot 1:1), so, when they left, the sons were attached to their fathers. ’And it shall be when your children say to their father: ‘What do you bring me?’ and he answers: ‘A multitude of livestock, and Aaron your brother, and all the congregation of Israel, are on the other side of the river. And they came over the river toward Succoth, and encamped there.’’ In contrast, the highlight of the redemption will be when the hearts of fathers chooses a metaphor for the exile, He says (see Berachot 3a), ’Woé to sons who have been exiled from their father’s table.’ In contrast, the highlight of the redemption will be when the hearts of fathers will be restored to their children and the heart of children to their fathers.

We read later in the Haggadah: “In every generation, one is obliged to regard himself as though he himself had actually gone out from Egypt.” One must regard himself as if he is on a continual journey out of Egypt. After all, the Exodus was supposed to be the Final Redemption, except that our ancestor’s “rebelled under the chuppah,” i.e., they sinned in the desert. Thus, as long as the Final Redemption has not taken place, the Exodus is not over.

In this light, says R’ Shaag, we can obtain a new understanding of the wise son’s question and the Haggadah’s answer to him. The wise son asks: “What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that Hashem our G-d has commanded you?” What do we answer him? “One may not eat anything after eating the Pesach sacrifice.”

The wise son’s question is as follows: Certainly the mitzvot are eternal. They will be performed even after the Final Redemption occurs and they must be relevant to that time as well. Yet, presumably, we will no longer remember the Exodus after the Final Redemption because the miracles of the Final Redemption will far surpass the miracles of the Exodus. (Precisely this issue is discussed earlier in the Haggadah in the paragraph beginning “Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said . . .”) What role does the Korban Pesach play in the future?

We answer him: One may not eat anything after eating the Pesach sacrifice. Rather, halachah requires us to eat the Korban Pesach after the meal, when we are satiated. This symbolizes that the Exodus, which the Pesach sacrifice represents, will not be complete until we are satiated with the miracles of the Final Redemption. (Derashot Ha’rash)

The haftarah that is read on Shabbat Hagadol, the Shabbat before Pesach, concludes with the words (Malachi 3:23-24), “Behold — I send you Eliyah Hanavi, before the great and awesome day of Hashem. He will restore the heart of fathers to children and the heart of children to their fathers . . .” In an essay entitled “The Fathers and the Sons,” R’ Yaakov Moshe Charlap z”l (died 1951) writes:

“There are many aspects to redemption and each brings salvation in some form. However, if even one aspect is missing, the redemption is incomplete. Moreover, a darker situation may arise as a result.

“Every division is a form of galut (literally: ‘exile’) and every coming together is a redemption. Certainly, however, the most dangerous division is the division between fathers and sons. Thus, when Hashem chooses a metaphor for the exile, He says (see Berachot 3a), ‘Woé to sons who have been exiled from their father’s table.’ In contrast, the highlight of the redemption will be when the hearts of fathers will be restored to their children and the heart of children to their fathers.

“The redemption from Egypt, the root of all redemptions, began by revealing the wonders of Bnei Yisrael’s allegiance to their families. Just as ‘with Yaakov, each man and his household came’ (Shemot 1:1), so, when they left, the sons were attached to their fathers. ‘And it shall be when your children say to you . . .’ (Shemot 12:26 & 13:14). Even the wicked son, although he asks with chutzpah, he nevertheless bows his head to his father and grandfather and awaits an answer. (Mei Marom: Ma’ayanei Ha’yeshuah, Ikvita De’meshicha Ch. 2)
In the Shabbat Hagadol derashah which he delivered in 5683 / 1923, R’ Yitzchak Yosef Zylberberg explained that the Four Questions of the Haggadah parallel the Four Sons. Thus, for example, the second question (Why do we eat maror?) parallels the rasha / wicked son. How so?

The rasha asks, “What is this service to you?” Why do you focus on the bitterness of Egypt and not on the delicacies which we ate there for free (see Bamidbar 11:5)?

To this son we say in the Haggadah, “If he had been there, he would not have been redeemed.” If a person allows creature comforts to obscure the fact that we are indeed in exile, that person has no hope of redemption. (Atzei Zayit)

ָתֹםַּיַּמִּי: מָהָּ מְדַּיָּא מָאָאְרָא? מְדַּיָּא! אִמְּרָּהָא אָלָּלָּה: בַּּהָּּּוָּדָּוָּ צָּרָּאָרָא יָּּאָּרְרָא מְפָּרִּיָּמְיָּ מְבָּּיָּ יָּּטָּר: בַּּהָּדָּוָּוָּ צָּרָּאָרָא מְפָּרִּיָּמְיָּ מְבָּּיָּ יָּּטָּר

“When your son shall ask you, ‘What is this?’ you shall say to him, ‘With a strong hand G-d took us out of Egypt, from the house of slaves’.” (Shmot 13:14)

R’ Chaim “Brisker” Soloveitchik z”l asks: Since we nightly fulfill the mitzvah of remembering the Exodus [by reciting the last verse of the third chapter of Shma], why do we need the additional mitzvah of reading the Pesach Haggadah? He explains that there are three differences between the daily performance of this mitzvah and its performance on Pesach.

(1) A person’s daily obligation is to privately recall the Exodus, but on Pesach, a verbal question-answer format is required. Thus, even a person who conducts the Seder alone is required to “ask himself” appropriate questions and to read the Haggadah aloud.

(2) Our daily obligation is simply to recall that the Exodus occurred, while on Pesach night we must “begin with shame and conclude with praise” [i.e. we must mention that our ancestors were idol-worshippers and that G-d chose Avraham from among them, etc.]

(3) On Pesach we are required to discuss the mitzvot associated with the Exodus (the Pascal sacrifice, matzah, Maror), while the daily obligation does not include this detail. (Chiddushei HaGrach HaShalem, No.40 (p.25)

משיָניי יודְיָא לָּאָאָרָא, אָאָרָא פְּטָּה נָל: שאָאָרָא: הָוָּדָּוָּ בָּּגָּה, בָּּוָּ לָּוָּא הָוָּאָר מָרָא: בָּּבָּוָּ

“You shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt’.” (Shmot 13:8)

Rashi comments: “Because of this” — i.e., in order that I could keep the mitzvot such as Korban Pesach, matzah and maror;”

R’ Yerucham Halevi of Mir z”l (died 1936) taught: We are used to thinking that the purpose of the Exodus miracles was to ingrain in us belief in G-d and His greatness. Indeed, many verses support this interpretation of events. However, Rashi is teaching us another aspect of the Exodus — the purpose of the Exodus miracles was to oblige us in the mitzvot associated with those events.

A similar interpretation is given by R’ Yosef Yaavetz z”l (known as “The Chassid Yaavetz”; 1435-1507) in his commentary to the mishnah, “If there were no Torah, there would not be derech eretz / the way of the world; If there were no derech eretz, there would not be Torah.” He explains: Derech eretz means our daily activities such as planting, harvesting, lying down, getting up, building a house, eating, etc. Hashem created all of these activities only so that mitzvot could revolve around them.

We are used to thinking that because we have a father and mother, we have a mitzvah to honor them. This is not so; rather, because there is a mitzvah to honor our parents, Hashem “had” to give us parents. Similarly, Hashem told Moshe (Shmot 16:4) that Bnei Yisrael would be given the mahn “so that I can test them whether they will follow My teachings or not.” The purpose of the mahn was not to feed
Bnei Yisrael, it was to be an object with which mitzvot could be performed (for example, saying blessings). (Yalkut Lekach Tov; see also Shai Latorah; Alei Shur Vol. II p.390)

We read: “And so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son’s son that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I placed among them — that you may know that I am Hashem.” (10:2)

R’ Yehuda Gruenwald z”l (rabbi in Satmar, Hungary) explains that there are two goals when telling the story of the Exodus. First, it should be in such a manner that it enters “the ears of your son” (i.e., makes an impression). The second requirement is that it should cause you (the parent) to “know that I am Hashem,” i.e., to be awakened to realize that there is a G-d who is One and Who conducts the World.

Alternatively, this verse can be understood as follows: Chazal say that if one teaches his grandson Torah, it is as if he (the teacher) received the Torah at Har Sinai. Thus the verse means to teach: In the merit that you are committed to relate in the ears of your son and your son’s son that G-d made a mockery of Egypt, you will receive the Torah at Har Sinai and know that He is Hashem. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Olelot Yehuda)

Why might I think this? R’ Avraham ben Hagra z”l (died 1808; son of the Vilna Gaon) explains: The ancient Egyptians worshiped the sheep, and to counter this fallacious belief, Bnei Yisrael were commanded to slaughter sheep for the Korban Pesach. Not coincidentally, the sheep (Aries) is the astrological sign for the month of Nissan. Therefore, I might think that the time to speak of the Exodus and of Hashem’s mastery over all other forces begins on Rosh Chodesh, when the sign of the sheep first ascends.

For the same reason, the Haggadah states that I might think the time to discuss the Exodus is on the afternoon of Erev Pesach. That is the time when the Korban Pesach was slaughtered. (Geulat Avraham)

We read in the Haggadah, “I might think that I should start telling the story of the Exodus from Rosh Chodesh Nissan; therefore the Torah (Shmot 13:8) says, ‘Because of this.’ This verse teaches us that the mitzvah of the Haggadah applies at the time when ‘this’ (the Korban Pesach, the matzah, and the Maror) are before us.”

However, says R’ Mordechaj Gifter z”l (Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe), the Haggadah does not tell us whether the mitzvah of the Haggadah applies only when those three items are actually before us, or merely at the hour when those three mitzvot apply. What if one does not have matzah and Maror? The answer may be found in the Gemara (Pesachim 116b), however. There we learn that according to the view that the mitzvah of matzah is only an obligation of rabbinic origin now that the Bet Hamikdash is not standing, so the Haggadah is also a rabbinic commandment. Why does this view consider matzah to be only a rabbinic obligation? Because we don’t have a Korban Pesach on the table. We see, therefore, that the mitzvah of the Haggadah applies on a Torah level only when the other three mitzvah-objects are actually before us, not only at the time when they apply.

The question arises, since it is clear that the mitzvah of Haggadah applies “miDeoraita” only at the hour when the mitzvah of Korban Pesach applies as well, why did R’ Elazar ben Azaryah remain at the Seder with his colleagues past midnight (as told in the Haggadah)? R’ Elazar ben Azaryah maintained, after all, that the mitzvah of Korban Pesach could be performed only until midnight!
The answer is that even if the time for the mitzvah of the Haggadah has ended, the Haggadah and the story of the Exodus are nevertheless Torah study. By remaining at the Seder he was thus able to perform that mitzvah. (Pirkei Mo'ed p.23)

R’ Menachem Mendel Schneerson z”l (the “Lubavitcher Rebbe”; died 1994) asks: The very source for the mitzvah of retelling the story of the Exodus is the above verse, “You shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘Because of this Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt’.” And, as the above passage indicates, the word “this” in the verse refers to the matzah and the marror. Since the mitzvah of Haggadah is thus connected with the matzah and the marror (whose time is Pesach night), how could the author of the Haggadah entertain the possibility that the mitzvah of telling about the Exodus begins on Rosh Chodesh, fifteen days before Pesach?

He explains: We are taught that the Patriarchs observed the Torah before it was given. However, there is a difference between their Torah observance and ours. For us, there are such things as holy objects (for example, tefillin) and unholy objects (for example, a non-kosher animal). However, to the Patriarchs, such concepts did not exist. Although they could observe the laws of tefillin and the laws of kashrut, the objects themselves were not yet invested with sanctity or impurity (as the case may be) because the Torah did not yet exist in the physical world. (This, says R’ Schneerson, is why Avraham did not circumcise himself before Hashem commanded him to do so. Before the mitzvah of milah was given, there was no impurity to the foreskin.)

The mitzvot of matzah and marror were first given to Moshe on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, two weeks before Pesach. It was on that day that the idea of matzah and marror as mitzvah-objects first came into being, and the author of the Haggadah thought that perhaps that was sufficient basis to begin retelling the story of the Exodus. No, the Haggadah concludes, the matzah and marror are not invested with their full holiness until it comes time to eat them, and that is when there is a mitzvah to retell the story of the Exodus. (Haggadah Shel Pesach: Admor Mi Lubavitch)

“Originally our ancestors were idol worshipers, but now the Omnipresent has brought us near to His service . . .”

Many commentaries observe that this sentence fulfills our Sages’ direction: “We begin with disgrace and conclude with praise.” But whose praise? R’ David Hanaggid z”l (1224-1300; grandson of Rambam) explains:

We begin with our own disgrace – “Originally our ancestors were idol worshipers” – and we conclude with praise of Hashem – that despite our lowly standing, He performed miracles for us and, in His kindness, took us out of Egypt.

R’ David adds: There also is praise of Bnei Yisrael implied here – that despite their tribulations, they did not lose faith and did not assimilate among the Egyptians. Rather, they clung to that which their father Avraham had taught.

However, concludes R’ David, this leads back to Hashem’s praise, for it was He who chose Avraham from among all the other people of his generation, gave him Yitzchak, etc. (as the remainder of this paragraph in the Haggadah relates). (Midrash R’ David Hanaggid: Haggadah Shel Pesach p.55)
Why is it relevant to the story of the Exodus that our ancestors were idolators? R’ Moshe ben Machir z”l (16th century) explains that the Haggadah is contrasting Avraham with our ancestors in Egypt and with ourselves. In the process, we see Hashem’s greatness and kindness.

Avraham abandoned the idolatry of his fathers and rose to great heights. His descendants in Egypt again became idolaters.

Despite Ben Yisrael’s idolatry, Hashem redeemed them. So, too, he redeems us repeatedly from our oppressors in the merit of His covenant with Avraham. (Seder Hayom)

Why were our ancestors exiled to Egypt? R’ Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz z”l (1505-1584; Tzefat, Israel; author of the poem Lecha Dodi) answers:

The Torah states (Devarim 32:30), “[I]f not that their rock had sold them out.” Who is “their rock”? The prophet Yishayah answers this question (Yishayah 51:1): “Look to the rock from which you were hewn,” i.e., Avraham.

How did Avraham sell us out? The midrash relates that Hashem allowed Avraham to choose what would happen to his descendants when they sinned, and he chose exile. And, since Avraham was a loving father, the paradigm of chessed / kindness, we can presume that he chose something that is good for us, his children.

How is exile good? What does it accomplish? The Torah tells us (Vayikra 26:41), “Perhaps then their uncircumcised heart will be subdued, and then they will gain appeasement for their sin.” When Hashem exiles us, it is not an act of vengeance, but rather a means by which we can be purified.

The ultimate goal of our existence is to purify ourselves. This is the meaning of the Sages’ comment on the verse (Bereishit 1:31), “And G-d saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good” — “This refers to death.” Why is death “very good”? Because it is at death that one finally frees himself of his yetzer hara and is left with a pure soul.

This allows us to understand why Hashem expelled Adam from Gan Eden and posted guards at the gate, “lest he stretch out his hand ...” (Bereishit 3:22). Wasn’t it G-d’s desire originally that man live forever? Yes, before Adam sinned. However, after man sinned, he could only purify himself through death.

This also explains why Moshe Rabbenu broke the first Luchot / Tablets. The Zohar says (making a play on the words of Shemot 32:16) that mankind was freed of the Angel of Death when the Luchot were given. Yet, after Ben Yisrael made the Golden Calf, they needed to repent and purify their souls once again. Thus, as just explained, immortality would have been a curse for them, and therefore Moshe broke the Luchot. (Berit Halevi Ch. 1)

ברוך שם הbrateת ל’ישראל. ברוך ה’ שקרד אותם ברוך ה’ שברח את המק, לשון
כפי שקרד להם בבריט בין בני המינים, очерט על אמי קבורה וילענ therein
כיoir לייהор וארק אלהים, עבדו והענינו את השם铸造_printer: יבש את ה’
אשLOY נבאות לך עד אכלי, אחריה כי יראו, ברוך חובל.

“Baruch shomair havtachato l’Yisrael” is commonly translated, “Blessed is He Who kept His promise to Yisrael.” In truth, this is difficult to understand; would we then think that Hashem does not always keep his promises?

Rather, says R’ Eliezer David Gruenwald z”l, the above expression should be translated: “Blessed is He Who guarded His promise to Yisrael.” We read in the Torah that Avraham questioned Hashem, “How do I know that [my descendants] will inherit [the Land]?” Logically speaking, Avraham argued, my children should assimilate and disappear in Egypt, just as most nations do when they migrate to a foreign land and remain there for several hundred years.
But this did not happen? Why, because Hashem guarded us from that fate so that His promise would be fulfilled. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Chasdei David)

There is a disagreement between the twelfth century sages Rambam and Ra’avad (in Hilchot Teshuvah ch. 6) regarding the answer to the following question: if Hashem decreed that Avraham’s descendants would be exiled and enslaved, why were the Egyptians punished for enslaving them? Rambam answers that Hashem did not say in what country Bnei Yisrael would be enslaved. The Egyptians so-to-speak volunteered to enslave Bnei Yisrael, and for that they were punished. Ra’avad disagrees; he writes that the Egyptians were punished for treating their slaves more harshly than necessary.

R’ Gavriel Ze’ev Margolis z”l explains Rambam’s and Ra’avad’s disagreement as follows: The Gemara (Nedarim 36b, and Rabbenu Nissim there) teaches that if a person (Reuven) says, “Let whomever wants come and separate terumah from my produce,” a volunteer who comes and separates terumah (Shimon) would not be considered to be an agent of the produce-owner (Reuven). Accordingly, even if Reuven had previously undertaken a vow not to derive any benefit from this Shimon, Shimon would be permitted to separate terumah on Reuven’s behalf, since Shimon would be acting on his own and not technically acting for Reuven.

On the other hand, if Reuven said, “Let whomever hears me come and separate terumah from my produce,” a volunteer who comes and separates terumah is considered to be Reuven’s agent. Therefore, if Reuven had previously undertaken a vow not to derive any benefit from Shimon, Shimon would not be permitted to separate terumah on Reuven’s behalf.

Rambam writes elsewhere that there is no contradiction between our having free-will and Hashem’s knowing the future because His knowledge is different from our knowledge in a way that we cannot comprehend. Somehow, the fact that He knows that a certain event will happen and a certain person will be involved does not force that person to play that role. Rather, every person has free-will.

Thus, continues R’ Margolis, when Hashem decreed that Bnei Yisrael would be enslaved, His knowledge that the enslavement would take place in Egypt did not force the Egyptians to enslave Bnei Yisrael. It was as if Hashem had said, “Let whomever wants come and enslave Bnei Yisrael,” in which case the person who responds is not deemed to be an agent. It follows, then, that the Egyptians who did respond were deserving of punishment.

Ra’avad on the other hand, contends that Hashem’s omniscience somehow limits man’s free-will. Thus, when Hashem decreed that Bnei Yisrael would be enslaved in Egypt, He effectively appointed the Egyptians as agents to fulfill His will. It was as if He said, “Let whomever hears come and enslave Bnei Yisrael,” in which case the one who responded was deemed to be an agent. Therefore, since the Egyptians were merely His agents, they would not have been deserving of punishment if not for the fact that they treated their slaves too harshly. (Torat Gavriel to Shmot 1:1)

Elsewhere, R’ Margolis writes that in light of Ra’avad’s view that the Egyptians were punished only because they enslaved Bnei Yisrael too harshly, the verses quoted above can be understood as follows: When Moshe first spoke to Pharaoh, Pharaoh responded by worsening Bnei Yisrael’s working conditions, as described near the end of Parashat Shmot. That parashah then ends with Moshe questioning why Hashem allowed this to happen.

Parashat Va’era opens with Hashem’s answer to Moshe’s question: “Elokim (the Attribute of Justice) spoke to Moshe: ‘I am Hashem’ (the Attribute of Mercy).” My harsh judgment and My mercy are one and the same; in order to redeem Bnei Yisrael before the end of the 400 years that the exile was supposed to last, I had to increase the harshness of the exile.”

That Hashem’s harsh justice can at the same time be merciful is something that Hashem never revealed to the Patriarchs, for they could withstand justice alone. “With My Name Hashem I did not make Myself known to them.” And, why did Hashem ignore Bnei Yisrael’s suffering until now?
Because, “I established My covenant with them” — it was My decree in My covenant with Avraham that they would be enslaved.

But now, “I have heard the groan of Bnei Yisrael whom Egypt enslaves” more harshly than I had decreed. “Therefore, say to Bnei Yisrael, ‘I am Hashem,’ the merciful G-d who will redeem them and punish their oppressors. (Torat Gavriel to Shmot 6:2)

R’ Elazar Lew z”l (died 1837) observes that Chazal gave three reasons why Bnei Yisrael were redeemed from Egypt before the 400 years of the exile had passed, and all three of them are alluded to in the verses: “G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him, ‘I am Hashem! I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov as Kel Shakkai, but with My Name Hashem I did not make Myself known to them. Moreover, I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, in which they sojourned. Moreover, I have heard the groan of Bnei Yisrael whom Egypt enslaves and I have remembered My covenant.’” (Shmot 6:2-5)

First, our Sages teach that Hashem applied the merits of the Patriarchs to their descendants and redeemed them early. “I appeared to the Patriarchs as Kel Shakkai – with My Attribute of Justice – but with My Name Hashem – My attribute of Mercy – I did not make Myself known to them.” Therefore, all of the kindness and mercy that the Patriarchs had earned was stored away for their children to draw on.

Second, our Sages say that Bnei Yisrael had sunk to a very low spiritual level and would have disappeared into spiritual oblivion if they had not been redeemed immediately. “Moreover, I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan – and if I don’t keep this promise soon, it will be too late.”

Third, Chazal teach that Hashem increased the level of the oppression in Egypt so that the suffering that should have taken 400 years was compressed into 210 years. “Moreover, I have heard the groan of Bnei Yisrael whom Egypt enslaves.” (Haggadah Shel Pesach Shemen Rokeach p. 73)

R’ Chaim Yosef David Azulai z”l (Chida; died 1806) writes: Hashem told Avraham (Bereishit 15:13), “Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own, they will cause them to be enslaved, and they will oppress them for four hundred years. But also the nation for which they shall slave I shall judge, and afterwards they shall leave with great wealth.” Hashem told Avraham that He would punish the nation that would enslave Bnei Yisrael. Why didn’t Hashem also say that He would punish the nation that would oppress Bnei Yisrael? Likewise, why does our verse refer only to slavery and not to oppression?

Chida explains: The Egyptians did not deserve to be punished to the extent that they were only fulfilling Hashem’s decree. Therefore they were not punished for oppressing Bnei Yisrael. However, the decree of slavery was lifted from Bnei Yisrael as a result of Yosef’s slavery. [As the trailblazer for the Avraham’s descendants in Egypt, Yosef could fulfill the decree on behalf of all of them.] Thus, the Egyptians did deserve to be punished for enslaving the Jewish People. That is why our verse says that Hashem heard the groans specifically of Bnei Yisrael who Egypt enslaved. (Nachal Kedumim)

We read: “G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him, ‘I am Hashem. I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov [by the Name] Kel Shakkai, but with My Name Hashem I did not make Myself known to them’.” (Shmot 6:2-3)

These verses were Hashem’s answer to Moshe after he questioned Hashem at the end of Parashat Shmot. Moshe had asked why the Egyptians’ subjugation of the Jews became harsher after Moshe presented himself to Pharaoh as G-d’s messenger.

R’ Avraham Abish Lissa of Frankfurt z”l (died 1768) explains as follows: Although Hashem had told Avraham that his descendants would be sojourners in a foreign land for 400 years, the actual exile to
Egypt lasted only 210 years. The early redemption was possible because the Egyptians subjugated the Jews more harshly than Hashem had planned, thus condensing the pain of 400 years into only 210 years.

Had Pharaoh not increased his subjugation of Bnei Yisrael, the exile would have lasted longer. And, had that happened, the Jews might never have been redeemed, for Chazal say that Bnei Yisrael were already at the brink of spiritual oblivion (i.e., 50th gate of impurity) when Hashem took them out of Egypt.

When Hashem first appeared to Moshe, writes R’ Abish, Moshe could not understand why Hashem was speaking about the redemption; after all, 190 years remained in the planned exile! And, after Moshe presented himself to Pharaoh and Pharaoh cracked down on the Jews, Moshe could not understand why G-d was allowing this to happen. G-d replied, “I am Hashem” — the Name associated with His mercy. “It is because of My mercy that I am condensing the suffering of the exile into a shorter period, for otherwise, there will be no redemption,” Hashem told Moshe. “What of My prophecy to Avraham that the exile would last 400 years? I never revealed Myself to him as a merciful G-d. In that role I can change My plan.” (Haggadah Shel Pesach Machazeh Avraham p.57)

R’ Shmuel Avigdor Halevi z”l (R’ Abish’s son-in-law — see above) asks: Surely Hashem knew from the beginning that the exile would last only 210 years! Why then did He tell Avraham it would last 400 years?

He answers: There are two reasons commonly given for the exile in Egypt — to prepare Bnei Yisrael to be G-d’s servants and to rid them of bad traits such as the jealousy which caused Yosef’s brothers to sell him. When Hashem told Avraham of the exile, the sin of the brothers was not yet committed and they had the option not to commit it. [Although Hashem knew what they would choose, He does not punish until man actually makes his choice.] Originally, Hashem planned a 400 year period in which Bnei Yisrael would prepare to accept His yoke. However, after the trait of jealousy manifested itself among the Jews, the subjugation had to be intensified in order to rid them of that trait. As a result, the exile ended sooner.

In this light we may understand a strange statement of Chazal (quoted in Rashi to 11:2). Chazal say that Hashem pleaded with Moshe: “Please make sure that the Jews receive gifts from the Egyptians lest Avraham say that I did not keep My promise to Him that they would leave with gifts.” This midrash implies that Hashem was thinking of not keeping His promise. Why? Because the purpose of the exile had changed since He had spoken to Avraham, and now the Jews were no longer deserving of riches. (Ibid p.54-55)

Why was Pharaoh punished for implementing G-d’s word? After all, Hashem told Avraham that his descendants would be enslaved as punishment for Avraham’s questioning the fulfillment of G-d’s promise (see Bereishit 15:8).

R’ Rephael Yom Tov Lipman Halpern z”l (the Oneg Yom Tov; 1816-1879) explains as follows: There are two different ways that Hashem deals with the Jewish people. Sometimes He deals with them in a completely miraculous manner, without regard to the laws of nature. At these times, Hashem makes specific decrees as to what will happen to the Jewish people, whether for good or for bad. At other times, because of our sins, G-d leaves us people to be ruled by the laws of nature, and He stands by and does not interfere, whatever happens. (This is known as “hester panim” / “hiding His face.”)

Perhaps, says the Oneg Yom Tov, Hashem never decreed that the Jewish people should be slaves in Egypt. Rather, because of Avraham’s sin, and later, the sin of Yosef’s brothers in selling him, G-d decided to stand back and let nature take its course. Along came Pharaoh, a man with an evil nature, and mistreated the Jewish people. If not for Pharaoh’s evil character, the fact that Hashem was “standing aside” would not have resulted in the Bnei Yisrael’s being enslaved.

This explains, as well, why we consider it a kindness that Hashem took us out of Egypt. Had He been the cause of our enslavement, we might have considered G-d to be obligated to redeem us. However, since He did not make us slaves in the first place (but merely refrained from saving us when
Pharaoh enslaved us), it was a kindness to save us.  (Oneg Yom Tov Al Drush, Drashah Leshabbat Hagadol)

The *midrash* states: “‘Thereafter they will leave [Egypt] with great possessions’--this is the meaning of ‘All the Jews had light in their homes’.” (The first verse quoted is Bereishit 15:14, the second is Shmot 10:23)

R’ Nachum Mordechai Friedman z”l (the Tchortkover Rebbe) explains as follows:

As quoted on the first page, Hashem was “concerned” lest Avraham feel that his descendants did not receive their due upon leaving Egypt. But why would Hashem expect that the tzaddik who refused the material wealth offered by the King of Sdom would want the wealth of the Egyptians?

Another question: Why did Avraham pray that Sdom should not be destroyed, but he did not pray that his children should not be enslaved?  R’ Nachum Mordechai explains that there are two ways to contribute to the correction of Adam’s sin--through Torah study and mitzvot, or through being exiled to a spiritual wasteland.

Avraham understood that this was the purpose of his descendant’s enslavement. First they would collect the spiritual “sparks” from Egypt, then they would receive the Torah. And this was Hashem’s concern--not that Avraham would demand material wealth for his descendants. Rather, as the Arizal teaches, Bnei Yisrael’s “cleaning-out” Egypt materially merely that Egypt had become barren of spirituality as well.

Finally, we may understand the *midrash* with which we began, i.e., that the great wealth with which Bnei Yisrael left Egypt was a spiritual “light.” (Doreish Tov: Pesach)

Yet another explanation of the above *midrash* is offered by R’ Meir Bergman shlita (son-in-law of R’ Elazar M. Shach z”l). Of course, Hashem keeps His promises, not only because Avraham might complain. However, the great reward which Hashem intended to give the Jewish people was a spiritual reward, not a material reward.

Hashem had “intended” that the suffering of slavery would refine the Jews and enhance their spirituality. But people have free will, and Bnei Yisrael allowed themselves to sink into the 49 Gates of Impurity. Thus, the spiritual reward which Hashem had intended was no longer fitting. Instead, Hashem had to shower the Jews with silver, gold, and clothing, simply for the sake of keeping His promise to Avraham. (Sha’arei Orah Vol. II)

We read in the Torah that Hashem foretold to Avraham that the Jews would be exiled. [Some commentaries say that the exile was a punishment for Avraham because he questioned G-d’s promise that he would inherit Eretz Yisrael.] On the other hand, Chazal tell us that the exile in Egypt was caused by Yosef’s brothers selling him as a slave. Which is the real reason?

Similarly, the Gemara teaches in one place that the Bet Hamikdash was destroyed because of the prevalence of murder, adultery and idolatry. In another place, the Gemara states that the Bet Hamikdash was destroyed because the Jews did not study Torah. Again, which is the real reason?

R’ Yisrael Reisman shlita explained (in one of his Motzaei Shabbat Navi classes) that Hashem runs the world the way a person does a jigsaw puzzle. How does one decide where to place each piece of the puzzle? The answer is that there are often multiple reasons for placing a particular piece in a specific location, i.e., the right side fits the piece on the right, the left side fits the piece on the left, etc.

So, too, we should not look for one reason for why Hashem acts the way He does. There may be multiple reasons.
“This is what stood by our fathers and us.”

What is “This”? R’ Yitzchak Yaakov Weiss z”l (1902-1989; “Dayan Weiss” of Manchester and Yerushalayim) explains that this statement refers to Hashem’s words to Avraham quoted in the previous paragraph of the Haggadah: “Know that your offspring will be aliens in a land not their own . . .” It is the fact that we have always been aliens, keeping some distance from our host nations, that has maintained us in all of our exiles. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Minchat Yitzchak)

When we recite these words during the Seder, it is customary to cover the matzah and to lift the cup of wine. Why? Is not the matzah a mitzvah de’oraita / a Torah-ordained mitzvah, while the Four Cups are only a rabinically-ordained mitzvah? Why do we seem to attribute more importance to the rabinic mitzvah than to the Torah mitzvah?

R’ Menachem Mendel Kalish z”l (1819-1868; Rebbe of Vorka, Poland) explained: What is it that has held the Jewish people together and has stood us in good stead throughout the millennia of exile and persecution? It is the Torah scholars of each generation who have ensured the continuity of halachah and mitzvah-observance, and it is our adherence to their words that has preserved us as a nation. This is why we point out a rabinic mitzvah and say, “It is this that has stood by our fathers and us.”

When R’ Aharon Rokeach of Bilgorai z”l (died 1948; father of the current Belzer Rebbe) repeated R’ Kalish’s explanation to his father, the Belzer Rebbe, R’ Yissochor Dov Rokeach z”l (1854-1926), the latter ordered that it be written down immediately. When he was reminded that it was chol ha’moed, when writing should be avoided if possible, R’ Yissochor Dov responded that such a thought is too important to forget. It must be written down, even on chol ha’moed. (Quoted in Mi’saviv La’shulchan No. 140)

“Go and learn what Lavan the Aramean attempted to do to our father Yaakov! For Pharaoh decreed only against the males, while Lavan attempted to uproot everything.”

R’ Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z”l (1910-1995) comments: Although the Torah never mentions explicitly that Lavan wanted to kill Yaakov, our Sages testify that such was his intention. And, just as the details of Lavan’s plot against Yaakov remain hidden, so it has been throughout history. We read in Hallel: “Praise Hashem, all nations . . . For His kindness has overwhelmed us . . .” Commentaries ask: Should the nations praise Hashem because His kindness has overwhelmed us? The answer that is commonly given is that only the nations can truly appreciate Hashem’s kindness to us, because only they know how many times they have plotted against us and failed. (Haggadah Shel Pesach R’ Shlomo Zalman Auerbach)

Why, on the Seder night, would we want to downplay the evil of the Egyptian king? To the contrary, on the night which is set aside for relating Hashem’s miracles, we should emphasize how terrible conditions in Egypt were!

R’ Levi Yitzchak Horowitz shlita (the Boston-Har Nof Rebbe) explains that the quoted phrase is meant to demonstrate the truth of the preceding statement in the Haggadah: “In every generation they rise up against us to destroy us.” We don’t necessarily see evidence of this, and we might doubt that it is true.
By the same token, though, there is no clear statement in the Torah that Lavan wanted to destroy the fledgling Jewish People. Yet, just as we accept our Sages’ assertion that Lavan really did want to uproot everything, so we accept their teaching that our enemies rise up to destroy us in every generation and Hashem saves us from them, sometimes without our knowledge. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Ezrat Avoteinu p.115)

Why doesn’t the Haggadah mention that Esav also wanted to “uproot everything”? R’ Chaim Kanievski shlita answers that the statement quoted above actually alludes to Esav.

How so? R’ Kanievski explains: The Torah does not say anywhere that Lavan wanted to destroy Yaakov and his family. If so, to what is the Haggadah referring? It is referring to the Midrash Sefer Hayashar which relates that Lavan sent a messenger to Esav saying, “Yaakov has left my territory and is traveling toward you. Do with him as you wish.” In other words, how did Lavan try to uproot everything? By provoking Esav. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Shirat Ha’leviim p.57)

R’ Shalom Schwadron z”l (“The Maggid”) writes in the name of his mother: Hashem has promised that, regardless of our enemies’ attempts to destroy us, Bnei Yisrael will exist forever. If so, Lavan’s plan to “uproot” Yaakov’s entire future could not possibly have succeeded. No miracle was necessary to save us from him. In contrast, Pharaoh’s decree affected only a portion of the nation; therefore, he might have succeeded. In this paragraph of the Haggadah, we praise Hashem that Pharaoh did not succeed. (Intro. to Da’at Torah, vol. 2)

“With seventy persons your forefathers descended to Egypt, and now Hashem, your G-d, has made you as numerous as the stars of the heaven.” (Devarim 10:22)

R’ Moshe Rosenstain z”l said: It is a basic principle of the Torah that we are bound to value every individual. Each person must say, “The world was created for my sake.” Yet how is it possible to view each man as a world onto himself? When we see that man is as numerous as the fish in the sea, are we truly to think that each is worthy to have G-d create the world for his sake? How can we imagine that G-d would make a covenant with each and every one?

But when we gaze upwards to the heavens, towards the billions of stars, and realize that each star is a world in itself, immense and important, then we can believe that, even if the people of the world are like the sands of the seashores, each is a world onto himself. G-d created all for his sake and he is worthy to hear the word of G-d and enter into His covenant. (Quoted in The Artscroll Mussar Haggadah)

We read in Tehilim: “Acknowledge Hashem, declare His Name, make His acts known . . . Remember His wonders which He wrought [and] His marvels . . . Thus Yisrael came to Egypt . . . And He made His nation exceedingly fruitful . . . He turned their hearts to hate His nation, to plot against His servants.” (Tehilim 105:1,5,23,24,25)

These verses are difficult to understand, writes R’ YosefDov Halevi Soloveitchik z”l (rabbi of Brisk; died 1892). As the opening verses suggest, the 105th chapter of Tehilim is devoted to the kindness
that G-d showed the Patriarchs and the generations which preceded the Exodus. How does the report that G-d caused the Egyptians to hate Bnei Yisrael demonstrate G-d’s kindness?

R’ Soloveitchik explains: Our Sages teach that as long as Bnei Yisrael were in Egypt they neglected the mitzvah of Brit Milah / circumcision. Yet this presents a difficulty in light of the verses calling Bnei Yisrael G-d’s “servants.” (See verse 25 quoted above, and see Sanhedrin 47 where the expression “G-d’s servant” is interpreted to refer only to the righteous.) Certainly a person who willfully neglects the mitzvah of circumcision cannot be called righteous!

The above questions may be resolved as follows: Bnei Yisrael knew that they would remain in Egypt for several centuries, and they therefore sought ways—within the bounds of Torah observance—to make their lot easier. What did they do? After performing a circumcision, they would perform a second operation which would hide the fact that the circumcision had been done. (This is called “moshaich orlato.”) They reasoned that the more similar people’s bodies are, the closer their hearts can come. Perhaps the servitude that was imposed upon them would then be lighter.

Although they violated no commandment—moshaich orlato is only a rabbinic prohibition—their actions were bound to lead to assimilation. After all, one of the reasons for the mitzvah of Brit Milah is to set Bnei Yisrael aside as a separate and distinct people. What was Hashem’s response? “He turned [the Egyptians’] hearts to hate His nation, to plot against His servants.” This foiled the plan of the assimilationist Jews. This was certainly one of Hashem’s kindnesses, for had the Egyptians not hated Bnei Yisrael, they would have assimilated and disappeared long before the arrival of the Exodus. (Bet Halevi: Parashat Shmot)

גּוֹדֵל עַצְמוֹ, קְחֵחַ שֵׁאָמְרָה: יֵבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, פְּרוֹ הָאָדָם, וּרְבֹּא נְעָשֵׁם, בֶּאָדוֹת מָאָלָה,

תַּמוּנָה הַקָּרָא אָתָם.

“He said to his people, ‘Behold! The people, the Children of Israel, are more numerous and stronger than we [literally: ‘from us’].” (Shmot 1:9)

R’ Shmuel di Ozeida z”l (16th century; author of Midrash Shmuel) explains that Pharaoh wanted to make his evil plot more palatable to the Egyptians. He said: “All these years, Yosef ruled over us and protected his people while they multiplied and grew stronger. Who is to blame for this? We are; it is ‘from us’! Wouldn’t we have shown sufficient gratitude to Yosef if we had just released him from jail, rather than appointing him to be the viceroy? Didn’t we strengthen the Jews by mourning Yaakov for 70 days?! Now, therefore, it is time to turn the tables.” (Derashot Rabbi Shmuel di Ozeida)

נְרָבָה קְמָה שֵׁאָמְרָה: רְבַּעַה קֶסְמָה תַּשְׁפָּה, יְהוּדָה, וָיְהוּדָה, וּבַנְיָמֵינָה בְּעָדֵיה: שֵׁדֶים בָּנָה, שָׁעֲרֵי Šaµ: יְהוּדָה, יָםְתִּים לְעָלָה.

לָאָבַר עָלָה יָאָרָעַה: בְּקָמָה יְהוּדָה בְּקָמָה יְהוּדָה, יָּאָרָעַה בְּכָמָה יְהוּדָה בְּכָמָה יְהוּדָה.

R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch z”l writes in his introduction to the Book of Shmot: “With this second book, the history of the Jews as a nation starts. We are led out of the history of the individuals and families into that of the Nation by a list of those men [i.e., the twelve sons of Yaakov] who are already known to us as the “main stem” of the Jewish people. It is out of these men, with their different individualities and characteristics, that the Jewish Nation developed. But there was one basic trait which they all had in common, and this formed the foundation of Jewish nationality: ‘Each one with his household came with Yaakov’ [Shmot 1:1].

“Later on, when the national body, dismembered by Pharaoh’s mishandling, appeared to lie helplessly on the ground as a welcome feast for the vultures of history (as it had appeared in the prophetic vision of the ancestor [i.e., Avraham — see Bereishit 15:11]), and, at the call of G-d, was to arise ‘in its blood’ [Yechezkel 16:6 — i.e., through the mitzvah of milah] to immortal life, G-d began the building up of His people on the rock-like foundation of ‘homes’ — ‘a lamb for a household’ [Shmot 12:4 — i.e., the Korban Pesach] — on the bond of children to parents and parents to children. And here we are told that
this foundation of the immortal People of G-d — even if it had been forcibly and violently crushed and disturbed [by Pharaoh] at the time of the redemption — was implanted in them when the Children of Israel originally moved down into the Egyptian womb, out of which, through suffering and woe, they were to be born into a nation.  (Commentary on the Torah)

R’ Simcha Wasserman z”l taught: During the period of the infancy of the Jewish people, they went through several distinct periods.

The first one was when they became a nation.  This occurred when they were in exile in Egypt, where they underwent terrible tortures.  It could be said that they were in a very unhappy and tragic ghetto.  But that is where they became a nation.  They came into that ghetto as a family, and they came out a people.

The next period was a time of training in beliefs.  It lasted for one year, the year prior to their leaving Egypt.  The entire year was dedicated by Providence to implanting in their minds three basic beliefs: 1) the existence of Hashem; 2) that Hashem is concerned with human behavior; 3) that there is such a thing as Divine communication with a living human being, i.e., prophecy.

This is of the utmost importance, because these three basic beliefs, culminating with the demonstration of prophecy, were the necessary preparation for the giving of the Torah.  If a person does not accept that there is a possibility of Divine communication with a human being, he would consider that whatever Moshe gave us is man made.  Then the Torah loses all of its value.  (Reb Simcha Speaks)

When Bnei Yisrael arrived in Egypt, they gathered together and made a pact among themselves that they would always remain one people, that they would perform acts of kindness for each other, and that they would maintain in their hearts the covenant of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov to serve only their Father in Heaven.  They agreed not to abandon the language of their fathers, and not to learn the Egyptian language because of the idolatrous references which proliferated throughout the language.

The Egyptians used to ask them, “Why don’t you worship our gods so that your work will be lightened?”

The Jews answered, “Did our ancestors ever abandon their faith?  They did not, and neither will we!”

When the Jews would perform the Brit Milah, the Egyptians would ask, “Why don’t you abandon this practice so that we may deal more lightly with you?”

Again the Jews answered, “Did our ancestors abandon their obligation to G-d’s commandments. They did not and neither will we!”

Sometimes, when a Brit Milah was performed, the Egyptians would ask, “Why do you bother? Before long we will throw your child into the Nile and drown him as Pharaoh commanded.”

The Jews would answer, “We must fulfill our obligations and then you may fulfill yours.”

Similarly, when the Jews would observe the Sheva Berachot, the Egyptians would ask, “Why do you celebrate?  Don’t you know that the newlyweds will soon be taken as slaves?”

The Jews would answer, “We must fulfill our obligations.  You can harm no one on whom G-d has not decreed harm.”  (Midrash Tanna D’vei Eliyahu)
“He said to his people, ‘Behold! The people, the Children of Israel, are more numerous and stronger than we [literally: ‘from us’].’” (1:9)

R’ Shmuel di Ozeida z”l (16th century; author of Midrash Shmuel) explains that Pharaoh wanted to make his evil plot more palatable to the Egyptians. He said: “All these years, Yosef ruled over us and protected his people while they multiplied and grew stronger. Who is to blame for this? We are; it is ‘from us’! Wouldn’t we have shown sufficient gratitude to Yosef if we had just released him from jail, rather than appointing him to be the viceroy? Didn’t we strengthen the Jews by mourning Yaakov for 70 days?! Now, therefore, it is time to turn the tables.” (Derashot Rabbi Shmuel di Ozeida)

The exile in Egypt was twofold. Besides the physical exile in which the Jews were enslaved with bricks and mortar, the Jews’ spirits were not able to develop. This spiritual exile was itself twofold. There was the exile of the da’at / knowledge and the exile of the midot / character traits.

The exile of the da’at came from their being “slaves to Pharaoh” (in the words of the Haggadah). Pharaoh himself said (5:2), “I do not know Hashem.” [Therefore, Bnei Yisrael too did not know Hashem.] When a king is small-minded, his people will be too, for the king is to his nation as the head is to the body. This is what King Shlomo meant when he wrote (Kohelet 10:16), “Woe to you, a land whose king acts as an adolescent.”

The exile of the midot relates to the degeneration of the Jewish people’s own character. This came from the fact that the land of Egypt is itself an impure place which is called (Bereishit 42:9), “The nakedness of the land.” The Torah similarly introduces the prohibition on incest with the words (Vayikra 18:3): “Do not perform the practice of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled.” It does not say, do not perform the practices of those who dwell in the land, but rather, the practice of the land itself. The land itself is impure. One can see how deeply the land of Egypt negatively influenced Bnei Yisrael in their complaints in the desert that they missed the food of Egypt. [Imagine, after all the suffering that Jews endured in Egypt, they missed its food!]

(Do not ask, writes R’ Rabinowit, that the same verse in Vayikra says, “Do not perform the practice of the land of Canaan.” He explains that the immorality of the Canaanites turned Canaan into a “sick” land, but it could be, and was, cured, when Bnei Yisrael settled there and kept the Torah.) (Haggadah Shel Pesach Torat Yehoshua p. 27)

R’ Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson z”l (the Lubavitcher Rebbe; died 1950) once commented: People mistakenly think, “If only we had a Moshe Rabbeinu today, he would rescue us from our exile.” Those people are wrong. The redemption is not delayed because we don’t have a Moshe Rabbeinu. Even in Egypt, Hashem sent the redeemer only after the people cried out to Him. If we would cry out to Hashem similarly, He would send out redeemer. (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U’geonei Ha’dorot)
During those many days, it happened that the king of Egypt died, and Bnei Yisrael groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to Elokim.” (Shmot 2:23)

R’ Shmuel Shmelke Horowitz z”l (1726-1778; rabbi of Nikolsburg, Moravia) comments: This verse praises the Jewish people. Although they groaned because of the difficult work, their outcry “went up to G-d,” i.e., what made them cry was not the backbreaking labor but the desecration of G-d’s Name that was being caused by their condition. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Ezrat Avoteinu p. 132)

R’ Eliezer Nachman Poah z”l (Italian kabbalist; rabbi of Modena; died 1701) explains this verse differently. He writes: When one is in such pain that he cannot formulate his prayers properly, he should simply cry out to G-d. Those prayers will go up to Elokim, a reference to G-d’s Attribute of Justice. The Heavenly Tribunal will then evaluate these sincerely uttered prayers and the proper Divine Attributes (i.e., manifestation of G-d’s powers) will come to the fore in response.

He adds: Bnei Yisrael in Egypt did not know what Divine Attributes Hashem would use to redeem them, so they did not know how to formulate their prayers. This is why Moshe asked (3:13), “When they say to me, ‘What is His Name?’ – what shall I say to them?” Since each Name of Hashem refers to a different manifestation of Him, Moshe meant, “What Attribute shall I tell them will redeem them?” (Haggadah Shel Pesach Midrash Be’chiddush)

R’ Yaakov David Willowsky z”l (1845-1913) observes: The seemingly redundant language, “Bnei Yisrael groaned because of the work and they cried out,” means: They groaned because of the work and they cried out because of the Egyptian taskmasters who oppressed them. Significantly, only their cries that were because of the work went up to G-d; their cries that were because of their Egyptian taskmasters do not seem to have been answered.

Why? It is always proper to call out to G-d to save yourself from your own suffering. However, Chazal teach that if the oppressed calls upon G-d to judge his oppressor, G-d will judge the oppressed first.

We read later (3:7): “I have indeed seen the affliction of My people that is in Egypt and I have heard its outcry because of its taskmasters, for I have known of its sufferings.” Does this verse not appear to contradict the lesson stated above? R’ Willowsky explains that it is to answer this question that Hashem concluded, “For I have known of its suffering.” This means: It is true that one is not supposed to complain about his oppressor, only about the oppression, but I have seen how great their suffering is and I know that the fact that they complained against their taskmasters is involuntary. Therefore the Torah continues, emphasizing (3:9): “And now, behold! The outcry of Bnei Yisrael has come to Me.” Although they cried out against their oppressors, I view it as if they cried out for themselves alone. (Nimukei Ridvaz)

Why did they cry out now that Pharaoh died? R’ Meir ibn Gabbai z”l (Egypt; early 1500s) explains that it is common for a newly crowned king to grant a general amnesty to political prisoners. In this case, however, Pharaoh died and the new king did not grant amnesty to Bnei Yisrael.

Why did this fact draw Bnei Yisrael closer to G-d such that they now cried out to Him? Because the fact that they were not freed caused them to recognize that their slavery was not a natural phenomenon but rather a Divine decree. (Avodat Ha’kodesh Ch.34)
We read: “Therefore, say to Bnei Yisrael, ‘I am Hashem, I shall take you out from under the ‘sivlot’ / burdens of Egypt. . . I shall take you to Me for a people and I shall be a G-d to you; and you shall know that I am Hashem your G-d, Who takes you out from under the sivlot / burdens of Egypt’.” (Shmot 6:6-7)

Why is word “sivlot” / “burdens” written in the lacking / chasser form (i.e., without the letter vav) in verse six and in the full / malai form (i.e., with the letter vav) in verse seven?

R’ Yosef Zvi Salant z”l (Yerushalayim; died 10 Shevat 5741 / 1981) explains: Bnei Yisrael experienced two types of persecution in Egypt--physical and spiritual. However, the enslaved people were primarily conscious of only the physical oppression. The spiritual damage that was being done to them was less apparent. Thus we read (2:23-25), “Bnei Yisrael groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to G-d. G-d heard their moaning, and G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak, and with Yaakov. G-d saw Bnei Yisrael; and G-d knew.” Bnei Yisrael groaned only because of their physical labors, and that outcry surely went up to G-d. However, G-d Himself knew that they were suffering from another cause as well; they were losing their spiritual connection to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

In this light, the word sivlot is written here “lacking” (i.e., without a vav) to indicate that Bnei Yisrael’s suffering was lacking a dimension. However, Hashem takes us out from all of our sivlot--written “full”--because He recognizes when we are suffering spiritually as well. (Be’er Yosef)

What is it that “G-d knew”? R’ Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik z”l explains: The Midrash records that the angels complained, “What is the difference between Bnei Yisrael and the Egyptians? Just as the latter are idolators, so are the former!”

Hashem answered, “Would you have Me judge an involuntary transgressor (‘onnes’) as a willful sinner (‘mazeed’)?” Whereas the Egyptians worshipped idols by choice, Bnei Yisrael in Egypt became idolators only because they were confused by the pain of the exile.

Only Hashem knows when a transgression is truly involuntary. While it may sometimes appear that a person is being forced to sin, we cannot say that he was truly entrapped unless he was not predisposed to commit that sin. However, if he would have transgressed even without the pressure of external circumstances, he is not an “onnes.” This is the meaning of the above verse, “[A]nd G-d knew,” i.e. He knew that the idolatry of Bnei Yisrael was a true case of “onnes.”

The preceding idea has halachic applications as well. For example, the Gemara states that a couple which remains childless for many years should divorce, yet the practice in the Diaspora is not so. Why? Because we assume that it is the sin of living in the Diaspora which has caused the childlessness, and not the incompatibility of the couple. The 18th century sage, R’ Pinchas HaLevi Horowitz z”l (known as the “Ba’al Hafla’ah”), asks: Is this so? Do we not follow the halachic view that one is exempt from the mitzvah of settling in Eretz Yisrael in times of economic hardship? Why then should people be punished for not settling in Eretz Yisrael? [Apparently, most, if not all of the last 2,000 years would fall within this exemption.]

His answer is none other than the principle explained above. A person is not called an “onnes” unless the only factor which induces his action or inaction is the one that “forces” him to choose that course. However, there are many people who have no desire to settle in Eretz Yisrael, and the land’s
economic difficulties are only an excuse that they give. Such a person cannot be called an “onnen.” (Bet Halevi: Parashat Shmot; also in Haggadah Shel Pesach Mi’bet HaLevi, p. 153)

“The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives . . . ‘When you deliver the Hebrew women . . . if it is a son, you are to kill him.” (Shmot 1:15-16)

R’ Joseph B. Soloveitchik z”l (1903-1993) observed: The method employed by the haters of Israel throughout the generations has been not only to oppress the Jew but also to discredit or dehumanize him in the eyes of the world. They have wanted to prove that he is a subhuman, an immoral being, and therefore does not deserve the sympathy of other people.

This was exactly the method employed by Pharaoh. He wanted to show that Bnei Yisrael were not worthy of sympathy in that the Hebrew midwives themselves had no sympathy for the newborn babies. Pharaoh wanted to show that the midwives were willing to kill the babies at birth in order to save themselves from punishment. (Quoted in The Rav, Section 18.06)

“Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying, ‘Every son that will be born -- into the River shall you throw him! And every daughter shall you keep alive!’” (Shmot 1:22)

“She [Yocheved] could not hide him [Moshe] any longer, so she took for him a wicker basket and smeared it with clay and pitch; she placed the child into it and placed it among the reeds at the bank of the River. His sister [Miriam] stationed herself at a distance to know what would be done with him.” (Shmot 2:3-4)

Later, after the splitting of the Yam Suf, the Torah relates that (15:20): “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aharon, took her drum in her hand and all the women went forth after her with drums and with dances.” Why did the women have musical instruments with them? Rashi writes that the righteous women in that generation were confident that God would perform miracles for them and they accordingly had brought musical instruments with them from Egypt. R’ Levi Yitzchak Horowitz shlita (the “Bostoner Rebbe”) notes that the men were not similarly prepared.

R’ Horowitz continues: Miriam’s faith in G-d’s miracles is evident in our verses as well. Miriam was confident that Moshe would be saved; therefore, she “stationed herself at a distance to know what would be done with him.” “At a distance” may also refer to her foresight, to her prophetic look into the future to see that this baby would grow-up to be the redeemer of the Jewish people. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Ezrat Avoteinu p. 136)

Pharaoh conspired to enslave the Jewish People and prevent them from growing as a nation. At one point, he even commanded that every newborn baby be thrown into the Nile.

Rashi z”l writes that this last decree was not against Bnei Yisrael alone, for the Torah says (1:22), “Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying, ‘Every son that will be born -- into the River shall you throw him!’” Rashi explains that Pharaoh’s astrologers told him that the savior of Bnei Yisrael would be born on a certain day, and he might be Jewish or he might be Egyptian. (They were confused because the savior, Moshe, actually would be a Jew who would grow up in the palace of an Egyptian.)

R’ Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld z”l (1848-1932) observes that this story illustrates how Hashem pulls all the strings behind the scenes and uses every person to bring about the result that His Will has ordained. The Gemara (Chagigah 15a) teaches that everything in the world has an opposite. In the physical world, for example, there are mountains and valleys, etc. In the spiritual world, there are tzaddikim and resha’im, Gan Eden and Gehinnom, etc. In the same vein, we are taught that the opposing forces of good and evil must be balanced in the world in order to preserve man’s ability to exercise his free will. According to Hashem’s own design, if a soul enters the world that has the ability to become a
great tzaddik like Moshe Rabbeinu, another soul must come into the world that has the potential to counter-balance that holiness by spreading unspeakable evil and impurity.

Whatever became of the impure soul that was destined to counter-balance the soul of Moshe Rabbeinu? We never hear of such a person! The answer, says R’ Sonnenfeld, is that “Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying, ‘Every son that will be born -- into the River shall you throw him!’” Unwittingly, Pharaoh killed the one person who could have prevented Moshe Rabbeinu’s future mission from succeeding. (Chochmat Chaim)

We read: “Moshe spoke before Hashem, saying, ‘Behold, Bnei Yisrael have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me?’” (Shmot 6:12)

Many commentaries observe that Moshe’s argument seems illogical. The Torah tells us why Bnei Yisrael did not listen; it was, in the words of verse 6:9, “because of shortness of breath and hard work.” However, this reason did not apply to Pharaoh, so maybe he would listen!

R’ Chaim Elazary z”l (died 1984) answers that Moshe’s argument was as follows: No one can be rescued from exile unless he feels the exile and wants to be redeemed from it. If Pharaoh sees that Bnei Yisrael are satisfied with their present situation, why should he listen to me and let them go? (Netivei Chaim II p. 91)

R’ Yehuda Loewe z”l (the Maharal of Prague; 16th century) comments in Gevurot Hashem (Ch. 56) that “a mighty hand” alludes to those plagues that occurred because G-d distanced himself from man, while “an outstretched arm” refers to those plagues in which G-d actively struck man. R’ Aharon Lopiansky shlita (rosh yeshiva at the Yeshiva Gedolah of Greater Washington) explains:

G-d brought the plagues upon the Egyptians not only to punish them, but to teach both them and us. There are two erroneous viewpoints that the plagues were designed to counter. Some philosophers assert that G-d does not exist at all, while others acknowledge that He exists and that He is the Creator, but claim that once He finished creation, He can no longer intervene in the world’s affairs. To counter the first belief, G-d sometimes pulls back from the world and says, “Look what would happen if I did not exist -- the world would fill with darkness and evil.” This is the meaning of the verse (Eichah 3:38), “From the mouth of the Most High will not emanate evil.” When evil strikes man, it is not because G-d did it, but because He distanced himself from man, thus creating a spiritual vacuum that was filled by evil.

To counter the second belief -- that G-d is subservient to the laws of nature -- G-d sometimes intervenes directly in the world. We read regarding the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea (Shmot 15:1), “A horse with its rider He hurled into the sea.” Why is it important that the Egyptians were riding on horses when they drowned? A soldier mounted on his powerful steed is a symbol of man’s might. Thus, this verse reminds us that G-d is mightier still. Nothing can stop Him from intervening in man’s affairs when He chooses. (Heard from R’ Lopiansky 26 Adar 5763)

The day before Pesach is Ta’anit Bechorim / the Fast of the Firstborn. The usual explanation for this fast is that it commemorates the fact that Hashem killed the firstborn of Egypt but spared the firstborn of Bnei Yisrael. However, observes R’ Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z”l (1910-1995; one of the foremost
halachic authorities of the second half of this century), there are several serious objections to this explanation. These are:

(1) If the fast commemorates the plague of the firstborn, why is it observed on the day before that plague occurred and not on the day of the plague itself?

(2) Erev Pesach is itself a yom tov (equivalent to Chol Ha’moed). Why was it made into a fast day?

(3) Notwithstanding its popular name, the plague of the firstborn struck not only firstborn children, but also the oldest child in each household. Why, then, are only the firstborn required to observe the fast?

(4) If the fast is a way of thanking Hashem for the fact that the Jewish firstborn were saved in Egypt, why do present-day firstborn fast? The fast should rather be observed by descendants of those firstborn who participated in the Exodus!

(5) Why has it become customary to excuse the firstborn from fasting if they participate in a mitzvah-meal such as a siyum / completion of a Talmudic tractate?

In answer to all of these questions, R’ Auerbach explains that the common understanding of the fast of the firstborn is incorrect. Before the sin of the golden calf, the firstborn, not the family of Aharon, served as kohanim to Bnei Yisrael. The firstborn attained this status because Hashem so-to-speak acquired them as His own when He spared them from the plague of the firstborn. (This priestly status was reserved, however, for the male firstborn of their fathers.)

How great then is the embarrassment of the firstborn every Erev Pesach, when each Jew brings his Korban Pesach and the firstborn can only watch as the kohanim, who are descendants of Aharon, perform the service that once was reserved for the firstborn themselves! (Their embarrassment is particularly acute on Erev Pesach because it was in connection with the Korban Pesach, whose blood was placed on the doorposts to identify Jewish homes, that the firstborn were originally sanctified as priests.)

This explains the custom that the firstborn eat at a siyum instead of fasting, for what the firstborn are doing is drowning their sorrows in Torah study. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Arzei Ha’levanon, Vol. II, p.8)

We read: “And Pharaoh rose up in the night . . .” (12:30) Rashi comments: “From his bed.”

What is Rashi teaching us? It is said in the name of Reb Mendel of Kotsk z”l: Such is the nature of a Pharaoh. He is told in advance that all of the firstborn around him will die, and he goes to bed!

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Chazal say that when Moshe and Aharon first appeared before Pharaoh, they miraculously walked through a heavily guarded doorway into the midst of a large state dinner. Despite this obvious miracle, Pharaoh hardened his heart and ignored them.

The second time that they visited Pharaoh, they performed another miracle (turning Aharon’s staff into a snake), and even though Pharaoh’s magicians mimicked Aharon’s act, he won the day when his staff swallowed theirs. Nevertheless, Pharaoh still ignored Moshe and Aharon.

The next time that the two brothers appeared before the king, they turned water into blood. Again the magicians did the same, and this time, Moshe and Aharon did not even score a victory over them.

R’ Yechezkel Levenstein z”l (1885-1974) notes that each of these tests was easier for Pharaoh to fail than the preceding one had been. Each of Moshe and Aharon’s miracles was smaller than the one before it. This is Hashem’s way -- he tests a person, and should the person ignore the challenge, Hashem leads him down the path which he has chosen. Spiritual failure becomes easier with each step. (Quoted in the Artscroll Mussar Haggadah p.82)

We read: “When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, ‘Provide a wonder for yourselves,’ you shall say to Aharon, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh -- it will become a snake!’” (Shmot 7:9)

What is meant by “Provide a wonder for yourselves”? Wasn’t the wonder provided for Pharaoh? R’ Shalom Rokeach z”l (the first Belzer Rebbe) explains:

For himself, Pharaoh did not care to see a sign from Hashem, as Mishlei (18:2) states, “The fool does not desire understanding.” We read similarly in Yishayah (17:11-12) that Hashem invited the wicked king Achaz to challenge and test Him, and Achaz responded, “I will not ask [for a sign] and I will not test Hashem.”

Rather, Pharaoh’s intention was to impugn the emunah / faith of Moshe and Aharon. “Surely you have doubts and would like to see a sign,” he implied.

R’ Rokeach continues: [Obviously Moshe and Aharon had no doubt as to the truth of their mission.] However, the typical Jew does sometimes experience doubts in matters of faith. Why did Hashem create us this way?

The answer is that such experiences are meant to be growth opportunities, for a person who has doubts will either research the answers to his questions in our holy literature or he will go to a tzaddik to find answers.

Deep down, every Jew wants to know the truth. In contrast, the wicked (such as Pharaoh) are terrified of the truth. This is why Pharaoh was not content to deny the veracity of Moshe and Aharon’s message. Instead, he had to goad them as if they did not believe either. (Midbar Kodesh)

All of the miraculous signs which Moshe and Aharon performed, such as turning the staff into a snake, were only for Pharaoh’s benefit. Bnei Yisrael did not need such signs in order to believe Moshe.

Why then did Bnei Yisrael believe Moshe? R’ Mendele “Rosh Yeshiva” z”l of Minsk explains that this is the secret of the Holy Name, “I Shall Be As I Shall Be,” which Hashem taught Moshe (Shmot 3:14). What this means is, “It is My will that My will shall be done.”

In reality, R’ Mendele explains further, Bnei Yisrael’s situation in Egypt was hopeless from any natural perspective. How could they ever be extracted from their slavery in Egypt? Yet, when Moshe spoke to them, they believed him -- they felt a glimmer of hope -- and that feeling of hope was itself the proof that Moshe was sent by G-d and spoke the truth. (Midrash Menachem: Ma’amor Nevuat Moshe)
Why were the plagues ten in number? R’ Yosef Moshe z”l (Polish rabbi; died 1815) offers the following explanation:

On the verse (Yirmiyahu 31:19), “Is Ephraim My dear son,” the midrash comments (as if quoting Hashem): “How dear is he to Me? How many frogs did I pay? How many lice did I pay?” The Midrash refers to these plagues as if Hashem gave the frogs and lice as a ransom for Ephraim, a nickname for the Jewish people.

Was it halachically proper to pay a large ransom for Bnei Yisrael? Halachah in fact prohibits paying exorbitant ransoms in order not to encourage kidnaping. There is one case, however, where halachah not only permits, but demands, that a huge ransom be paid. Specifically, the Gemara states that if one sells his slave to a non-Jew, and the non-Jewish buyer prevents the slave from observing mitzvot, the seller is obligated to redeem the slave even for ten times the slave’s value.

Such was the case in Egypt. The verse (Devarim 26:6), “The Egyptians treated us badly,” also can be translated, “The Egyptians made us bad.” They lowered our spiritual stature by preventing us from performing the mitzvot. Hashem therefore had to ransom us even for a ten-fold ransom. This is why we introduce the plagues in the Haggadah with the statement: “These are the ten plagues that Hashem brought on the Egyptians in Egypt.” The last two words are seemingly redundant, but they emphasize why there were ten plagues: Bnei Yisrael were enslaved in Egypt, where they could not perform mitzvot. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Be’er Mayim p.72)

R’ Betzalel Ashkenazi z”l (16th century Egypt; author of the Talmud commentary Shittah Mekubetzet) asks: Why were so many plagues necessary? Couldn’t Hashem demonstrate that Pharaoh had lost the right to repent by striking Egypt fewer than 10 times?

The answer, says R’ Ashkenazi, is that this was not the only purpose of the Plagues. Perhaps it was not even their primary purpose. We should not forget that the midrash illustrates how each of the Plagues was a punishment midda-k’negged-middah / measure-for-measure for the ways in which the Egyptians had oppressed Bnei Yisrael. (Derashot R’ Betzalel)

R’ Dovid Bornstein z”l (died in 1942 in the Warsaw Ghetto) observes:

Kabbalists teach that the Ten Plagues paralleled the Ten Utterances with which Hashem created the world, as taught in Pirkei Avot chapter 5. This is why the first mitzvah after the Ten Plagues is the commandment to sanctify the new moon, for the waxing and waning of the moon is a constant reminder of Creation.

Our Sages say that Moshe could not comprehend the new moon until Hashem showed him: “Like this you shall see it and sanctify it.” In light of the above, R’ Bornstein comments: The Midrash states: “To tell man about the greatness of Creation is impossible, so He told His nation the greatness of His ways.” This seems contradictory at first, but it actually means that it is impossible for man to grasp
Creation except through the eyes of the Torah. Man, being material, cannot fathom something as esoteric as G-d’s Creation unless he looks at it through spiritual lenses. Even Moshe could not understand the secret of the new moon except through the Torah – through the mitzvah of sanctifying it.

If we understand the Ten Plagues and the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon as alluding to Creation, we can understand why those sections are followed by mitzvot that involve eating. When we recognize that Hashem created us, we necessarily recognize that we are His servants. It is part of the “contract” between a master and a servant that the servant will be fed. (Hashem would not have created us if He did not intend to sustain us.)

This is incidentally why the introductory portion of Birkat Hamazon refers to G-d as Elokim (as in “nevaraich l’Elokenu” / “we will bless our Elokim”). “Elokim” is the Divine Name associated with strict justice, and strict justice requires that a master feed his servants. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Chasdei David p. 5).

All told, the plagues lasted twelve months. R’ Leib Broida z”l (brother of the “Alter of Kelm”) writes that one of the reasons that the plagues lasted so long (rather than merely 10 weeks or so) was so that Bnei Yisrael could enjoy the revenge which was being exacted from their enemies. As everyone knows, there is nothing sweeter than revenge.

What lesson is the Torah teaching us? That despite the prohibition on exacting revenge, there is a place for it. And where is that? Man should take “revenge” on his greatest enemy--the yetzer hara (evil inclination).

Chazal say that man should serve Hashem with both of his inclinations: the good and the bad. How can man serve Hashem through the yetzer hara? The Alter of Kelm explains that if a person asks himself why this great enemy was placed as an impediment to his service of Hashem, he will realize that Hashem demands hard work. When he then succeeds in serving Hashem completely, the yetzer hara will have aided him. (Kitvei HaSaba MiKelm VeTalmidav)

“Go and gather the elders of Yisrael . . . They will heed your voice. You and the elders shall come to the king of Egypt.” (Shmot 3:16-18)

Why was it necessary for Moshe to convince the elders that Hashem would take the Jewish people out of Egypt? Why was it necessary for the elders to participate in Moshe’s mission? Why would it matter if the Jews did not believe Moshe at first?

R’ Shlomo Eliasoff (Elyashiv) z”l explains that Hashem could have brought about the Exodus without the ten plagues and without all of the miracles which Bnei Yisrael witnessed. Rather, the purpose of those miracles was to teach us that our existence is supernatural--that G-d can change nature for our benefit at any time.

Accordingly, it was necessary for Bnei Yisrael to actively place their faith in G-d. This is why Moshe said later (6:12), “Behold Bnei Yisrael have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me?” This is also why, in response to Moshe’s question, Hashem commanded him to speak to Bnei Yisrael again, before returning to Pharaoh. Without our ancestors’ faith, the Exodus could not have taken place. (Sha’ar Leshem Shevo V’achlamah p.402)

We read: “Hashem is the Righteous One.” (Shmot 9:27)

Why did Pharaoh acknowledge this specifically after the plague of hail? R’ Chizkiyah bar Manoach z”l (13th century) explains that it was because Hashem warned the Egyptians to take their sheep indoors. Human warriors do not give such warning to their victims. (Chizkuni)
We read: “Moshe said, ‘When I leave the city I shall spread out my hands to Hashem . . .’” (Shmot 9:29) Rashi explains that Moshe did not want to pray inside the city because it was full of Egyptian gods.

R’ Heschel of Cracow z”l (died 1663) asks: Why was this a problem for the first time after the seventh plague? Moshe never said before that he would pray only outside of the city!

One of Egypt’s gods was the sheep. Just before the seventh plague, the Torah says (9:20), “Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem hurried his servants and livestock to the houses.” Before this plague, the sheep were in the fields, so Moshe prayed in the city. Now, the sheep were in the city, so Moshe prayed in the fields. (Chanukat Ha’Torah)

During the plague of locust, Pharaoh hurried to call Moshe and Aharon, and to repent. Then Pharaoh changed his mind. What happened?

R’ Yehoshua Leib Diskin z”l explains that each of the previous plagues had lasted seven days. Therefore, Pharaoh thought that if he “repented” quickly, he could save his crops. However, after the locust departed, Pharaoh learned how much damage actually had been done, and he decided that there was nothing to gain from repentance.

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The word “dizah means “happiness” (as in the last of the Sheva Berachot recited at a wedding). The first of R’ Yehuda’s acronyms -- pronounced “deetzach” (not “detzach”) – means “your happiness.” “Adash” refers to the “nezeed adashim” the lentil soup that Yaakov gave Esav in exchange for the birthright. “Be’achav” should be read “B’ach bet” (the same letters in Hebrew) meaning “with the second brother.” Or, it could be short for “with the brother who is the b[echor].” Taken together, the entire phrase indicates that our happiness with the purchase of the birthright by the second brother in exchange for lentils is now complete. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Marbeh Le’Sapper)

The Mishnah (Avot 5:8) teaches that Moshe’s staff was one of the ten things that were created in the last moments of the Six Days of Creation. R’ Eliezer Felkeles z”l (rabbi of Prague; late 18th century) explains the significance of this fact as follows:

Rambam writes that the Divine Attribute which we refer to as “Ratzon” / G-d’s Desire was utilized only during the Six Days of Creation. Everything that will exist at any time in the future was
“desired” by G-d during the Six Days of Creation. Even things which appear to be deviations from the laws of nature, notably, the Ten Plagues, actually are built into the Creation.

The Midrash relates that the Ten Plagues (or their initials) were engraven on the staff. This alludes to the same idea, writes R’ Felkeloos. The Ten Plagues were already planned during the Six Days of Creation and were not a suspension of G-d’s laws. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Ma’aseh B’Rebbe Eliezer)

Rabbi Nosson of Amona: Moshe recognized that his own understanding, unparalleled by any later “saw” at the Red Sea that enabled them to believe.

Certain basic awareness; he must have “seen” certain things within his soul. This is what he did not see, his awareness.

R’ Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro of Piaseczno asks (in the name of his father): If they saw, what room was there to believe? Moreover, why did they believe now more than after the ten plagues? He explains as follows:

True sight is not with the eyes alone, but is a combination of what the eyes take in and all of man’s experiences (which give context and meaning to what the eye “sees”). For example, one person may look at a yom tov feast and see only a lavish banquet, while another person will look at it and see the service of G-d in progress.

True vision occurs deep within the soul. Thus Chazal sometimes use the expression, “Even though he did not see, his mazal/inner awareness saw.” In order to believe in Hashem, one must have a certain basic awareness; he must have “seen” certain things within his soul. This is what Bnei Yisrael “saw” at the Red Sea that enabled them to believe.

Why didn’t they believe after the plagues? When Moshe resisted being Hashem’s emissary to the Jewish people, it was because any leader would have to transfer from his soul to the people’s souls the basic foundation of belief. Moshe recognized that his own understanding, unparalleled by any later prophet, far exceeded what the people could attain, and he doubted that he could impart the necessary foundation to Bnei Yisrael. They, too, doubted, and when they felt themselves believing in G-d, when they saw the impossible transfer of belief from Moshe’s lofty soul to their own, they were sure that it could not last. Because of that, it didn’t, and only at the Red Sea, when they “saw” again, were they able to believe. (Derech Hamelech)

The Exodus was not complete until Kri’at Yam Suf / the splitting of the Red (or Reed) Sea, says R’ Zalman Rotberg shlita (Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Bet Meir in Bnei Brak). Until then, Hashem’s purpose, to reveal His power and majesty, was not accomplished. At the sea, though, Bnei Yisrael did not just see five more fingers (see Shmot 8:15), they saw Hashem’s great hand (14:31), i.e. they saw the completed deed of Hashem.

The main purpose of Hashem’s miracles was to teach Bnei Yisrael, not to impress the Egyptians. Unlike Bnei Yisrael, Pharaoh and his servants were not moved to spontaneous song by the miracles which they witnessed. [Note: The Midrash says that Pharaoh survived the splitting of the sea.] Now, after Bnei Yisrael witnessed the culmination of these miracles, the same Pasuk can tell us, “They believed in Hashem.” (Tuv Da’at III, p.57)
Rabbi Ephraim of Luntschitz z”l (17th century; author of *Kli Yakar*) observes that the number 15 recurs in many aspects of Jewish history and practice. For example, *Pesach* comes on the 15th of the month, as did the Exodus; the song “Dayenu” has 15 stanzas; the greatest glory of the Jewish kingdom occurred in the 15th generation from Avraham (i.e., under King Shlomo); the destruction of the Temple

Many commentaries have dealt with the question: How could Hashem inflict the plagues on Egypt if Pharaoh’s refusal to release *Bnei Yisrael* was the result of Hashem’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart, i.e., strengthening Pharaoh’s resolve not to release *Bnei Yisrael*? R’ Avraham Dov Berish Flamm z”l (1804-1873) explains as follows:

*Chazal* say that *Bnei Yisrael* became idol worshipers in Egypt. The plagues, writes R’ Flamm, were a response to this fact. Their purpose was not to punish Pharaoh at all; rather, their primary purpose was to disabuse *Bnei Yisrael* of their idolatrous notions and to demonstrate to them the existence of G-d and His power. (This is borne out by the fact that the first of the *Aseret Hadibrot* reminded *Bnei Yisrael*: “I am your G-d Who took you out of Egypt.”) Indeed, some commentaries interpret the words at the beginning of *Parashat Shmot*, “And My Name Hashem I have not made known to them,” to mean, “. . . I have not made it known to *Bnei Yisrael*.” The Jews in Egypt simply did not know G-d and they had to be taught.

When Hashem hardened Pharaoh’s heart, it was only so that He could have additional opportunities to teach *Bnei Yisrael* about His strength. Pharaoh was not punished for refusing to release *Bnei Yisrael* after his heart was hardened.

Nevertheless, R’ Flamm inquires further, was it fair to Pharaoh that he should suffer so that *Bnei Yisrael* could learn about G-d? Yes, it was, because Pharaoh needed to learn the very same lessons. Had not Pharaoh said (5:2), “Who is Hashem that I should listen to Him?”! Moreover, whose fault was it that *Bnei Yisrael* had forgotten G-d? It was Pharaoh’s fault, and it was therefore appropriate that he should suffer for as long as it took *Bnei Yisrael* to recognize Hashem. (Shemen Ha’mor: Ma’amor Aribot Hashamayim, ch.12)

We read: “Pharaoh’s heart became strong and he did not send out *Bnei Yisrael* . . .” (Shmot 9:35)

Why is Pharaoh’s refusal to listen to Hashem referred to as having a strong heart? Does this imply that one who does listen to Hashem is weak? R’ Baruch Ezrachi shlita (Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Ateret Yisrael in Yerushalayim) explains as follows:

Many commentaries asked: Was it fair to bring the plagues on Pharaoh if his heart was hardened and he could do nothing to avoid the plagues? *Ramban* answers that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart did not destroy his free will; to the contrary, it restored his ability to choose. Had Pharaoh released *Bnei Yisrael* as a result of one of the plagues, he would not have been doing so of his own free will. Rather, he would have done so because the plagues coerced him to act.

Based on *Ramban’s* explanation, we can understand why the Torah speaks here and elsewhere of “strengthening Pharaoh’s heart.” Pharaoh’s heart, his will, was weakened by the plagues, and it had to be strengthened so that it would be in equilibrium. Then, and only then, would Pharaoh have free will. (*Birkat Mordechat* p.257)
took place 15 generations later; there were 15 steps up to the Bet Hamikdash and there are 15 psalms which begin, “Shir ha’maalot” / “A song of ascents.”

He explains: The number 15 alludes to the completion of Hashem’s throne. Thus, when Hashem swore that His throne would not be complete until Amalek is destroyed, He used the Name which is spelled “yud-heh,” i.e., whose gematria is 15 (see Shmot 17:16). This is why the greatest glory of the Jewish kingdom occurred in the 15th generation from Avraham. (King David, who battled Amalek was the 14th generation. Note that the gematria of “David” equals 14.)

The number 15 also represents one half of a lunar month. The greatest glory of the Jewish people was in the 15th generation, just as the moon’s glory is fullest on the 15th day of the month. The destruction of the Temple took place 15 generations later, just as the moon disappears 15 days after it is full. King Shlomo, the 15th generation, built the Temple with 15 steps. (The fifteenth “Shir ha’maalot” psalm refers to those who stand in the “House of Hashem,” i.e., the Temple.) The 15th line of Dayenu also refers to the Temple.

The Torah (Shmot 13:18) states that Bnei Yisrael left Egypt “chamushim” / “with fives.” We also read (14:7) that Pharaoh chased Bnei Yisrael “with threes.” R’ Ephraim explains that these verses refer to three groups of five gifts each which Hashem gave to Bnei Yisrael. The first group consists of the five ways in which the Egyptians were punished. The second group consists of the five basic necessities which Hashem provided our ancestors in the desert. The third group consists of the five special gifts which Hashem has given us as His people. All 15 of these are listed in the 15 lines of Dayenu. (Olelot Ephraim, II, Pillar 5)

Before Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, Hashem told Moshe, “Please speak to the nation and let them borrow from their fellows silver vessels and gold vessels” (11:2). Chazal say that Hashem said “Please” in order that “that tzaddik” (i.e., Avraham in Gan Eden) should not accuse Hashem of keeping His promise to enslave the Jews and not keeping His promise of a great reward for them. We must understand, asks R’ Meshulam Roth z”l: Does Hashem keep His promise only so that Avraham will not complain? And why is Avraham called “that tzaddik”?

R’ Roth explains that the title “that tzaddik” alludes to a specific incident, i.e., when Avraham refused to take a share of the booty so that no one would say that the King of Sdom made Avraham wealthy. This was a great act of righteousness because it demonstrated Avraham’s desire to have no master other than G-d himself.

Just as Avraham did not wish to be beholden to the King of Sdom, he would not want his descendants to be beholden to the Egyptians. He would not want Bnei Yisrael to receive gifts from their enslavers. Therefore, Hashem said, “Please speak to the nation and let them borrow from their fellows,” rather than taking gifts. The borrowed items would later become the Jews’ possessions (as ownerless property) when the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea. “Please do not let Avraham say that I kept My promise in a way that displeases him,” Hashem said. (Raglei Mevaser)

There are three verses which address the wealth which the Jews took from Egypt: (1) “Each woman will request from her neighbor silver vessels, golden vessels, and garments.” (Shmot 3:22)

(2) “Please speak to the nation and let them borrow from their fellows silver vessels and gold vessels.” (11:2)
(3) “Bnei Yisrael carried out the word of Moshe; they requested from the Egyptians silver vessels, gold vessels, and garments.” (12:34)

Why does the second of these verses not mention garments? asks R’ Yosef Meir Weiss (the Spinka Rebbe). He explains that of these three verses, only the second is Hashem’s command. The first is Hashem’s statement of fact, i.e., that is what will happen. The third verse is the Torah’s statement of what did happen—exactly as Hashem had said. But the second verse is a command, and Hashem had no reason to command Bnei Yisrael to ask for clothes. The clothes which they wore in the desert grew with their wearers; as for newborns, since Bnei Yisrael should have entered Eretz Yisrael almost immediately (if not for their sins), there would have been no children born in the desert. (Imrei Yosef)

We say in the Haggadah: “If He had drowned our oppressors in [the Sea], but had not provided for our needs in the wilderness for 40 years, it would have sufficed for us.” Nevertheless, says R’ Abdallah Somech z”l (1813-1889; Baghdad; teacher of the “Ben Ish Chai”), the fact that Hashem did provide for our needs in the wilderness for 40 years demonstrates His intentions in redeeming us from Egypt. He explains:

Once a nobleman’s son was kidnapped by a duke and held hostage in the dungeon of the latter’s manor. The king sent the duke a warning to release the boy, but the duke refused. Moreover, the duke sent a belligerent message back to the king.

The king was incensed and he sent a battalion of troops to destroy the duke’s home and free the nobleman’s son. And so it was. People wondered, however, “Did the king do this because he was concerned about his friend’s son or because he was angry at the duke?” How could they tell? If the king’s troops destroyed the duke’s house and left the former prisoner on his own, then it would be apparent that the king’s primary concern was the duke’s disrespect. On the other hand, if the king’s soldiers carried the boy home triumphantly and also brought him to the king’s palace, then all would know that the king was interested in the boy’s welfare.

When Hashem first sent Moshe to Pharaoh, Pharaoh responded, “Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice?” As Chazal understand it, Pharaoh was asking, “Why hasn’t Hashem sent me gifts like other foreign kings do?”

Later, when Hashem brought about the ten plagues, one could legitimately wonder whether Hashem’s true motivation was Pharaoh’s disrespect or the welfare of the Jewish people. However, the fact that Hashem did provide for our needs in the wilderness for 40 years demonstrates that His real interest was Bnei Yisrael. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Sha’arei Armon p. 129)

“If He had brought us before Mount Sinai and not given the Torah to us, that would have been sufficient.”
What does this mean? What would have been the purpose of coming to Har Sinai if we were not to receive the Torah?

R’ Yechiel Michel Epstein z”l (author of Aruch Hashulchan) explains as follows: There is a principle of halachic decision-making which says, “The Torah is not in the Heavens.” This means that halachic disputes must be resolved by men, applying Torah logic and majority vote, not by heavenly signs. If a sage were to say, as we read in the Talmud, “If I am correct, let the wall of the bet midrash lean to the side,” we would not listen.

This exclusive right to decide halachic matters is a gift separate from the gift of the Torah itself. Hashem might have given us the laws but not to place the Torah in our exclusive dominion. Thus we say, “If He had brought us before Mount Sinai and not given the Torah to us,” that itself would have been a reason to be grateful to Hashem. (Quoted and elaborated upon in Gift of Torah by R’ Yitzchak Sender)

Perhaps one of the most perplexing parts of the Haggadah is the song known as “Dayenu,” in which we say that if G-d had taken us out of Egypt but had not judged the Egyptians, that would have been enough for us. Or, if He had judged the Egyptians, but had not destroyed their idols, that, too, would have been enough for us. Or, if He had destroyed their idols, but had not killed their firstborns, that, too, would have been enough. Or... What does this song mean?

R’ Eliyahu Hakohen Ha’itamari z”l of Izmir (commonly known as the “Ba’al Shevet Hamussar”) explains that for each of the Divine gifts or miracles listed in this song, one could make an argument that G-d should have acted otherwise. Our praise of G-d is that He considered all these arguments and acted in the way that was best for us and for the glory of His Name.

For example, one could argue that if G-d had taken us out of Egypt but had not judged the Egyptians so harshly as to practically destroy them, His name would have been magnified even more because the Egyptians would live to remember, and to tell others, how He had humbled them. On the other hand, one could argue that they would not feel humbled in that event. Rather, they would say, “He won this battle, and we will win the next battle.”

That is why G-d judged the Egyptians harshly. However, one could argue that if G-d had judged the Egyptians harshly but had not destroyed their idols, those idols would have served as constant reminders of G-d’s power to anyone who saw them. On the other hand, some people would say that G-d was not strong enough to destroy the Egyptians’ idols.

That is why G-d destroyed the Egyptians’ idols. However, one could argue that if G-d had destroyed their idols, but had not killed their firstborns, then those firstborns would have had a special reason to tell others of G-d’s greatness. It was customary at that time to devote one’s firstborn to the service of the idol; with all the idols destroyed, the Egyptian firstborn, who were no longer performing that service, would be a testament to G-d’s power. On the other hand, Pharaoh was a firstborn; if the firstborns had not been smitten, people would say that it was Pharaoh’s merit or power which saved him and those like him.

That is why G-d killed the firstborn. . . (Minchat Eliyahu ch.32)

על אבות טמא קשת טמא כפטולה ומכפלה למוכוס

עלינו:

שהיאו אמי מנכסים, ישיאי בית שפשם, ישיאי בלשלים, ויהר את בכורים, וentarios
ולא את קומוס, ירך על אצ חיים, עשהיכרים נחתו בחרBuilderInterface, ישיא ע⎨י רכימי בקנח
“How much more so should we be grateful to the Omnipresent for all the numerous favors that He showered upon us: He brought us out of Egypt . . . and He built us the Temple, to atone for our sins.”

R’ Yaakov Kranz z”l (1747-1805; the Dubno Maggid) asks: Given the implication here that the building of the Bet Hamikdash was the completion of the Exodus process, why did the Jewish people agree to be redeemed when the Temple would not yet be built until 480 years later? He answers with a parable:

If a father would say to his daughter, “Let us schedule your wedding now, and we will prepare a wedding gown, Shabbat clothes, Yom Tov clothes, an apartment, etc. as the need for each arises,” his daughter would likely refuse. She would say, “No! Let us first prepare a trousseau and then arrange the wedding.”

On the other hand, if a girl were a prisoner and someone rescued her and said, “Marry me, and I will provide everything you want as the need arises,” she would certainly agree. Bnei Yisrael in Egypt were like that second bride. They were more than happy to be rescued from their situation, even if there permanent marital home would not be completed for hundreds of years to come.

We read in Shir Hashirim (4:8), “With Me, from the Levanon, o’ bride; with Me, from the Levanon, you will come.” The Midrash comments on this verse that most brides are decorated and perfumed before they enter the chupah, but Hashem did not do this for His bride – the Jewish people. Rather, He took His bride directly from the Levanon – from the word “levainah” / “brick” (i.e., from building Pharaoh’s cities). But He promised her, “You will come with Me to the Levanon – a reference to the Bet Hamikdash, where the sins of the Jewish people became lavan / white. [Note also that the Bet Hamikdash was built from cedars of Levanon / Lebanon.] (Haggadah Shel Pesach Sha’arei Armon p.132)

The midrash relates a parable regarding a princess who was rummaging amongst the stalks in the field in search of food until, one day, a king saw her and took her to his palace. Thereafter, the other women said to her in wonder, “Yesterday you were rummaging amongst the stalks, and today you are sitting in a royal carriage?!”

She replied, “Just as you are amazed, so I am amazed.” Similarly, the midrash says, the nations of the world said to the Bnei Yisrael, “Yesterday you were slaves in Egypt and today you are the chosen people?!”

Bnei Yisrael replied, “Just as you are amazed, so we are amazed.”

R’ Yedayah Ha’penini z”l (died 1315) explains this midrash as follows:

The amazement of the gentiles and of Bnei Yisrael was for different reasons. To the idolatrous nations who did not know Hashem and who attributed events to the stars or to nature, the ascent of Bnei Yisrael was truly beyond their understanding. A nation’s rise from slavery, such as Bnei Yisrael experienced, was unnatural and unprecedented.

To Bnei Yisrael, who were aware of Hashem’s abilities and who had learned from their ancestors that Hashem watches over Bnei Yisrael, the source of their amazement was different. Bnei Yisrael in Egypt were idolators, and they expected G-d to punish them for it. They were doubly amazed — not only did Hashem not punish them, He made them His chosen nation!

What is the answer to that which caused such wonder in Bnei Yisrael? R’ Yedayah writes that Bnei Yisrael failed to realize that the Exodus took place in the merit of the Patriarchs and because of Hashem’s promise to the Patriarchs. Bnei Yisrael themselves really did not deserve to be redeemed.
Also, while Bnei Yisrael did not merit the redemption at that moment, G-d had great plans for them. Hashem redeemed them from Egypt so they could be the means of revealing His Name in this world. (Peirush Tehilim, Ch.21)

Rabban Gamliel said: If a person conducted a Seder but did not mention the Korban Pesach, the matza, and the Maror, he did not fulfill his obligation.

The Jews were instructed to bring a lamb as a Korban Pesach because the Egyptians of the time worshipped the lamb, and it was necessary for the Jews to show both the Egyptians and themselves that this “god” was powerless. To bring the point home, the animal had to be roasted whole over an open fire.

In addition, the fire represents the burning furnace from which Avraham was saved. The three mazot symbolize the loaves that Sarah prepared for the three angels. The Maror represents the bitter travails of Yaakov who remained faithful to Hashem despite all his hardships. Through these foods, we hope to remind Hashem that we, too, stuck by Him despite many difficult times. (Me’am Lo’ez)

Rashi explains that the name “Pesach” derives from the word “skipping.” He writes: “For Hashem skipped over the houses of the Jews which were among the houses of the Egyptians. He jumped from Egyptian to Egyptian, and the Jew was in the middle. As for you, serve Him for the sake of Heaven.”

What does Rashi’s last comment mean and how is it related to his explanation of the word “Pesach”? R’ Nosson David Rabinowitz z”l (grandfather of the present “Munkatcher Rebbe”) explains as follows:

Sometimes a person witnesses a powerful event which inspires him to strengthen his service of Hashem. However, that is not the ideal. Rather, we should serve Hashem because, and only because, that is His will.

Moshe was concerned that the plague of the firstborn would have an undesirable effect on Bnei Yisrael. This is why, according to Rashi, Moshe instructed them: “As for you, do not serve Hashem because you will see Him skipping over your houses. Instead, serve Him for the sake of Heaven.”

In this light, we can understand why the Korban Pesach is referred to (in Shmot 12:43) as a “chok” — a mitzvah whose reason is unknown. Although the Korban Pesach (whose blood was placed on the doorposts to identify a Jewish house) recalls the great miracle that Hashem performed and our gratitude to Him, that should not be our reason for performing the mitzvah. Rather, we should observe the mitzvah of Korban Pesach as if its reason is unknown to us.

The Torah tells us (Shmot 12:50), “All of Bnei Yisrael did as Hashem had commanded Moshe and Aharon, so did they do.” The Torah is informing us that Bnei Yisrael took Moshe’s message to heart and sacrificed the Korban Pesach solely for the sake of the mitzvah. (Ve’eileh Ha’devarim She’ne’emru L’David p.101)
“If he shall offer it as a todah / thanksgiving-offering, he shall offer with the todah unleavened loaves . . . With loaves of leavened bread shall he bring his offering.” (7:12-13)

The above verses teach that a todah / thanksgiving-offering must be accompanied by loaves of both chametz and matzah. R’ Don Yitzchak Abarbanel z”l (15th century) asks: Since the Korban Pesach seems to be, in essence, an offering brought in thanksgiving for the Exodus, why is it not accompanied by both chametz and matzah?

R’ Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer z”l (the “Ketav Sofer”; 19th century) answers that the Korban Pesach is not a todah-offering. Rather, it is more like another set of sacrifices--the inaugural sacrifices brought at the dedication of the mishkan. Those sacrifices were accompanied by matzah, but not by chametz.

He explains further: Chazal instructed that when we relate the story of the Exodus at the Seder, we should begin with disgrace, with the fact that our ancestors were idolators, and conclude with praise. Why? This may be understood through a parable:

When one gives a garment to a laundry in order to have a stain removed, the laundry applies soaps and chemicals which first make the garment dirtier than it was before. Of course, when the customer pays the laundry, he does not intend to pay for the labor that was expended in dirtying the garment; he intends to pay for the cleaning of the garment.

Similarly, we do not praise Hashem at the Seder for redeeming us from Egypt. Who asked Him to take us to Egypt in the first place? Rather, we praise Hashem because He cleansed the stain of idolatry from our souls. Just as the laundry cleanses the garment with vile chemicals, the process by which Hashem cleansed us was our enslavement in Egypt. It follows, that we do not owe Hashem a debt of gratitude for the Exodus, and the Korban Pesach is not a todah offering. Rather, the Korban Pesach is a sacrifice brought upon our inauguration into Hashem’s service. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Ketav Sofer p.18a)

“Pharaoh summoned Moshe and said, ‘Go -- serve Hashem, only your flock and cattle shall remain behind; even your children may go with you.’

“Moshe said, ‘Even you will place in our hands feast-offerings and elevation-offerings, and we shall offer them to Hashem Elokeinu. And our livestock, as well, will go with us -- not a hoof will be left -- for from it shall we take to serve Hashem Elokeinu; and we will not know with what we are to serve Hashem until our arrival there’.” (Shmot 10:24-26)

When Moshe first appeared before Pharaoh, he said to the Egyptian king (5:3), “Let us now go for a three-day journey in the wilderness and we shall bring offerings to Hashem Elokeinu.” How then could Pharaoh suggest that Bnei Yisrael leave without their animals? How would they bring offerings without animals?

Another question: Why did Pharaoh say, “Go serve Hashem,” while Moshe answered by referring to “Hashem Elokeinu”? And, after Moshe referred to “Hashem Elokeinu,” why did he then revert to saying only “Hashem”?

R’ Yitzchak Karo z”l (approx. 1458-1535; uncle of R’ Yosef Karo z”l) answers these questions as follows:

[When Moshe came to Pharaoh, Pharaoh said (5:2), “Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice to send out Yisrael? I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Israel.” Moshe then answered (5:3), “The G-d of the Hebrews happened upon us. . .” Commentaries explain that Pharaoh knew that Bnei Yisrael had a G-d, but he did not acknowledge the Name Hashem which represents G-d’s omnipotence.] Now, therefore, Pharaoh said to Moshe, “You call your G-d by His special Name, ‘Hashem’ and you claim that your G-d is the G-d of all beings – not like the gods of the nations that are ‘private’ gods. I could understand that a smaller god might require an animal sacrifice – for example, the constellation taurus
might demand an ox and the constellation aries might require a ram. But your G-d is above that all; He should not require any sacrifices! Therefore, go without your animals.”

Moshe responded: “Hashem is Elokeinu – He is above everything, but He relates to us as our personal G-d. He allows us to serve Him in a way that is meaningful for us, although He has no need for our sacrifices.” Continuing, however, Moshe acknowledged that there was an element of abstract truth in what Pharaoh said; Hashem is above our service. Therefore, “We will not know with what we are to serve Hashem until our arrival there.” (Toldot Yitzchak)

If Bnei Yisrael needed some merit with which to be redeemed from Egypt, why did Hashem give them this particular mitzvah and not a commandment that somehow encompasses all of the 613 commandments? R’ Meir Yechiel Halevi Halstock z”l (1852-1928) answers that the mitzvah of Korban Pesach does allude to all of the 613 commandments. Specifically, the “full gematria” of the word “Pesach” / פסח is 613, the number of commandments. (“Full gematria” means the gematria of a word when each of the letters of the word is spelled out the way that letter is pronounced. Thus, the “full gematria” of מַצָּה haired f תָּמ is 408+120+85 = 613.)

This may explain as well why Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael the mitzvah of matzah while they were still in Egypt. The “full” gematria of the word “matzot” / מצות also is 613. (מָצָה זָרַיִם הָיִרְצִים = מַצָּה = 416+13+104+80 = 613.)

R’ Halstock observes further: Hashem had told Avraham that his descendants would be in a foreign land for 400 years, yet Bnei Yisrael were in Egypt for only 210 years. They were redeemed 190 years early in the merit of the mitzvah of matzah. The “full” gematria of the word “matzah” / מצה equals 190 (םָצָה = מַצָּה = 6+104+80 = 190.) (Meir Enei Chachamim Vol. III, p.54)

In what way is matzah connected with freedom? Matzah reminds us that the dough of our forefathers did not have time to rise. Matzah teaches that spiritual freedom requires mastery over time, as R’ Yehuda Halevi (author of Kuzari) wrote: “A slave of time is a slave of a slave; a slave of Hashem is a free person.”

Matzah has the same ingredients as ordinary bread; the main difference is the attention to time which making matzah requires. [If the matzah is not completed in 18 minutes, it is presumed to have become Chametz.] Chazal often use “Chametz” as a metaphor for the evil inclination. Idleness and inattention to time allow spiritual “Chametz” to form. Positive spiritual activity, on the other hand, together with the pressure to watch and preserve valuable time, prevents this “fermentation.”

The Halachah requires that matzah be made out of grains which have the potential to become Chametz. The same elements within man which often produce evil emotions are those which must be controlled by positive spiritual activity. (R’ Aharon Soloveitchik z”l)

R’ Shlomo Luria (Maharshal) writes that one should wrap the matzah in a sack, throw it over his shoulder, and walk around the room in this manner saying, “This is how our ancestors left Egypt, their belongings tied to their clothes, on their shoulders.” R’ Shlomo Kluger explains this custom as follows:

Hashem told Moshe, “When Bnei Yisrael leave Egypt, they should not leave empty-handed. Rather, each woman should borrow items of value from her neighbor, etc.” Isn’t this verse redundant? If each woman is borrowing things from her neighbor, of course they will not leave Egypt empty-handed!
The Gemara says that after slaughtering the Korban Pesach in the Bet Hamikdash, each Jew would carry it home, thrown over his shoulder the way an Arab carries his load. Why is it important for the Gemara to tell us that the Korban was carried like an Arab’s load? To remind us that the reason the Jews ended up in Egypt in the first place was that Yosef’s brothers sold him to a caravan of Arabs.

Did the Jews deserve to be paid for the work that they did in Egypt? Only if they were subjugated unfairly. However, since we now know that this exile was a punishment for the sale of Yosef, apparently the Jews did not deserve to be paid. This is why the Jews could only borrow items from their Egyptians neighbors. [Ed. note: R’ Kluger does explain why the Jews were nevertheless allowed to keep what they “borrowed,” but that does not directly relate to our question.] To remind Bnei Yisrael of this, Hashem told Moshe, “The Jews should not go empty-handed.” They should carry these items in their own hands, and not place them on the animals or wagons. More explicitly, they should carry these items on their shoulders the way an Arab carries his load, so that they would be reminded of the reason that they went to Egypt in the first place.

This is what Maharshal tells us to do: We too should know why our ancestors were enslaved in Egypt. Carrying the matzah around the room on our shoulders reminds us of the reason. (Yeriot Shlomo)

“They baked the dough which they had taken out of Egypt into matzah cakes, for it did not leaven, for they were thrown out of Egypt and they couldn’t wait. . . .” (Shmot 12:39)

Is this the reason that Bnei Yisrael baked matzah? Actually, Hashem had commanded them earlier to eat matzah on Pesach!

Chazal teach that Hashem took the Jews out of Egypt early because they were about to assimilate. In fact, however, the Jews had not been enslaved the full 400 years that Hashem had told Avraham they would be strangers in a foreign land.

Because of this, Chazal say, the Jews had to suffer future exiles, to complete the unfinished work of the Egyptian exile. Because the Jews “were thrown out of Egypt and they couldn’t wait,” therefore there was still reason to “bake[ ] the dough which they had taken out of Egypt into matzah cakes.”

If the first exile had been a closed chapter in Jewish history, there might be no reason for us to eat matzah, the bread of suffering. However, when Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to eat matzah, He “already” knew that there would be future exiles, and future opportunities to eat the bread of suffering. Thus, there is no inconsistency between the timing of the commandment and the reason that our verse gives. (Based on R’ Chaim Halberstam of Sanz’s Divrei Chaim, Pesach)

The Torah tells us that the Exodus occurred be’chipazon / hurriedly. But why, asks R’ Shlomo Kluger z”l (1783-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia), do we place so much emphasis on this detail of the Exodus? He explains with a parable:

There were once two dear friends – call them Reuven and Shimon – who helped each other in every possible way. One day, Reuven was arrested and charged with a serious crime. As he was being led away, he cried bitterly, “Save me, my friend.”

His friend, Shimon, called after him, “Don’t worry! I will do everything I can, and I will not rest until I have rescued you.”

Reuven was taken to a dark jail cell and was locked away. One day passed, then another, then a month and two months, but Reuven never gave up hope of being rescued. He knew Shimon would knock on every door until Reuven’s innocence had been proven and he would be released.

A year passed, and then another, and doubt began to creep into Reuven’s mind. Perhaps Shimon had forgotten him? “No! Shimon promised to save me, and he will.” As Reuven sat there musing thus, he thought he heard a distant sound of metal banging on rock. For several days, this sound continued, until one day several bricks popped out of the wall and Shimon’s head appeared through the hole.
“Hurry,” Shimon whispered. “Let’s get out of here.” Reuven was beside himself with joy, not only because he had been rescued, but also because the sudden manner in which Shimon had appeared showed Reuven that Shimon had never forgotten him. All of these years, Shimon had been planning and preparing Reuven’s rescue.

Similarly, explains R’ Kluger, Hashem’s sudden appearance in Egypt and His hurried rescue of the Jewish people demonstrated that He had been planning their salvation for a long time and was merely waiting for all the pieces to fall into place.

The prophet tells us (Michah 7:15), “As in the days when you left Egypt, I will show you wonders [at the time of the Final Redemption].” After two millennia in exile, we might think that Hashem has abandoned us. It’s not true, writes R’ Kluger. The Final Redemption will demonstrate also that Hashem never forgot us. This is why we take pains to remember the chipazon aspect of the Exodus. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Sha’arei Armon)

The matzah is one of only two mitzvot of the seder which is a Torah obligation even when the Bet Hamikdash is not standing. (The other is the recitation of the Haggadah.) The three matzot represent the two loaves which are taken every Shabbat and Yom Tov, with an additional matzah that can be broken to represent the “lechem oni” / “the poor man’s bread.”

The three matzot also symbolize the Avot, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, whose merit sustained us through the Egyptian enslavement and other exiles.

Finally, the three matzot represent the three types of loaves which accompanied a Korban Todah (Thanksgiving offering) in the Bet Hamikdash. The Gemara (Berachot Ch.9) says: “Four people must give thanks. One who crossed the sea, one who crossed the desert, one who recovered from an illness, and one who was freed from prison.” Each of these describes Bnei Yisrael at the time of the Exodus. (Ed. note: The illness from which Bnei Yisrael “recovered” presumably refers to the “Plague of the Firstborn” which killed many Egyptians. Alternatively, it refers here to a spiritual illness.) (R’ Eliyahu KITov)

Why do we always say “Pesach, matzah, and maror” (mentioning maror last) when the matzah and the Pesach sacrifice commemorate the redemption which came after the “bitterness” of the exile?

We know that the exile in Egypt had a purpose. According to R’ Chaim Yosef David Azulai z”l (Chida), it helped prepare Bnei Yisrael to receive the Torah. However, during the dark days of slavery, the Jews could undoubtedly not appreciate this. Only later, after the redemption, did they understand why the bitterness was necessary.

To truly appreciate Maror we must discuss it after the Pesach and matzah. (Bnei Yissachar)

R’ Moshe Sternbuch shlita writes: If this were taken literally, it would undoubtedly be the most difficult of the Seder’s mitzvot to perform. However, Rambam does not understand it so. Rather, he writes, “In each generation, man is obligated to act as if he had participated in the Exodus.”
How is this accomplished? Chida writes in his Haggadah that it’s not sufficient to recognize in your heart that you have benefited from G-d’s taking our ancestors out of Egypt. Each person at the Seder must demonstrate to his relatives and guests that he truly and enthusiastically recognizes and appreciates the favor that G-d did for us by taking us from Egypt and giving us the Torah so that He may reward us. (Haggadah Shel Pesach: Mo’adim U’Zmanim)

R’ Shimon Schwab z”l explained this difficult mitzvah as follows: If a person breaks his left arm, he may still point to it decades later and say, “I broke this arm.” In fact, with the passage of time, there is not a single molecule in that arm which was in the “arm” that broke.

Similarly, the physical content of the Jewish nation is different than it was thousands of years ago, but we must see ourselves as the continuing embodiment of those people. (Ma’ayan Bet Hashoevah)

Rabbeinu Asher z”l teaches in Orchat Chaim that our belief in G-d is specifically as a result of the Exodus. R’ Baruch Ber Lebowitz z”l elaborates: A Jew who professes to believe in G-d, but not because of the Exodus, is like one who cuts off a tree’s roots and hopes the tree will survive.

If it were possible for a person to visit Heaven and see undeniable proof of G-d’s existence, that would not be the faith of Bnei Yisrael. The uniqueness of the Jewish people is that every event is filtered through the concept which underlies the Exodus, i.e., the concept of reward and punishment. (Quoted in Orach Yesharim, an anthology of commentary to Rabbeinu Asher’s Orchat Chaim)

In all, the Exodus is mentioned 50 times in the Torah. Why? asks R’ Aharon Roth (“Reb Ahrele”) z”l. If a master (i.e., Hashem) frees his slave (i.e., the Jewish people), is that something the master should take such pride in?

G-d is not bragging, explains Reb Ahrele. Rather, the 50 references to the Exodus allude to the fact that G-d saved us from the 50 “Gates” or levels of Tumah/Defilement that existed in Egypt (and exist in the world). Indeed, the word Mitzrayim/Egypt can be read “metzar yam”/“the confines of the 50.” (“Metzar” means “confines” and the word “yam” has a numerical value/gematria of 50.)

Paralleling these 50 Gates of Tumah there are 50 Gates of Binah/Understanding. Bnei Yisrael attained 49 of these levels when they received the Torah after their first 49 days in the desert. But entrance to the 50th Gate is reserved for the future, after the Exodus is finished, i.e., after all of the exiles have concluded.

The Torah alludes in several places to the fact that the Exodus is not yet finished. For example, when Hashem told Avraham of the future enslavement of the Jews, He said (Bereishit 15:14), “And also the nation which they will serve, I will judge.” The midrash explains that the redundant language, “And also,” teaches that Hashem will judge not only Egypt, but the other nations that subjugated or enslaved us, as well. All of our exiles are part of the same long process, explains Reb Ahrele, a process which will culminate with our attainment of that 50th Gate of Understanding. (Shomer Emunim, Drush Hageulah, ch.1)

We have a number of holidays that commemorate victories over our enemies. How do they differ from each other?

The Jewish People has two kinds of enemies. There are those who oppose the existence of the Jewish nation, and there are those who oppose that nation’s service of Hashem.

R’ Yitzchak Hutner z”l teaches that Pesach represents the defeat of the first kind of enemy, while Purim represents the defeat of the other. In each case, the enemy that was defeated was the purveyor par excellence of the type of enmity which it represented.
Chazal refer to the “Seven Nations” and the “Four Kingdoms” which have opposed the Jews. The reference to one set of enemies as “Nations” and the other as “Kingdoms” is significant.

To be a servant, R’ Hutner explains, one must meet a two-part definition: (1) he must be acquired by a master, and (2) he must be informed what the master’s will is and be given the means to carry out that will. The Four Kingdoms opposed Bnei Yisrael on the first level; the Seven Nations opposed them on the second.

The Four Kingdoms that have oppressed the Jewish people attempt to subjugate and enslave them so that they will be servants of these Kingdoms, and not Hashem’s servants. This is an action taken by kingdoms, in opposition to Hashem’s kingdom. The first nation that did this was Egypt.

The Seven Nations, on the other hand, did not oppose the “nationhood” of the Jewish people. Rather, they attempted to prevent Bnei Yisrael from conquering Eretz Yisrael. In so doing, they sought to withhold from the Jewish people the means to carry out the will of its Master. Since no subjugation of the Jewish people is involved, no kings are necessary. Even the common man, i.e., the nation, can be the enemy. The first nation that did this was Amalek, the ancestor of Haman.

At the time of the Exodus, the Jews were acquired by Hashem as His servants, and they ceased to be the servants of Pharaoh (see Megillah 14a). This is Pesach. Then, before Bnei Yisrael could receive the Torah and be informed of what the master’s will is, Amalek (the ancestor of Haman) attacked them. When he was defeated, the Torah could be given. (Similarly, after Haman was defeated, the Jewish people accepted the Torah anew (Shabbat 88a).) (Pachad Yitzchak)

Why are we grateful to Hashem for redeeming us from slavery? asks R’ Chaim Berlin z’l. After all, He made us slaves in the first place! R’ Berlin explains as follows:

Hashem told Avraham that his descendants would be caused to suffer for 400 years; in fact, the Jews were in Egypt for only 210 years. In order to “find” the full 400 years, we must begin counting from the birth of Yitzchak. How did Yitzchak suffer? He was a very wealthy man! So, too, Yaakov was a very honored person in Egypt!

For Yitzchak and Yaakov, living among the gentiles (Avimelech, Lavan, Pharaoh) constituted suffering. Only after Yaakov died did the Jews’ senses become more dulled, and they forgot that they were in exile. In the words of the midrash (on Shmot 1:7), “And the land filled with them’ -- the theaters and circuses filled with them.”

Naturally, says R’ Berlin, this could no longer be considered part of the promised 400-year suffering. Accordingly, the suffering had to intensify, even to the point of slavery. This is the meaning of the midrash, “If you had merited, you would read (Shmot 3:7), ‘I have seen the suffering of My nation in Egypt.’” Had we merited, G-d would have viewed our very presence in Egypt as suffering. As it was, we did not merit. We caused our slavery, and we thank Hashem for redeeming us.

The tribe of Levi was not enslaved in Egypt because that tribe maintained its separateness from the Egyptians in Egypt. Its members, for example, continued to circumcise their sons after the others had stopped doing so. (Kuntres Imrei Chaim Al Haggadah Shel Pesach)
In the berachah which concludes the “Maggid” portion of the Seder, we say, “[W]e shall rejoice in the rebuilding of Your city and shall be joyful in Your Temple service; and there we shall eat of the sacrifices and the Pesach offerings . . .” What are we saying? Is it in order to eat of the sacrifices that we pray for the rebuilding of the Temple?

R’ Yaakov Kranz z”l (the “Dubno Maggid”; died 1804) answered this question with a parable: A merchant once hired a wagon and wagon-driver to take him home from the market with the goods he had purchased. On the way, they stopped at an inn to eat.

When they came out, a shock awaited them, for the unattended wagon had been robbed of all of its contents. The merchant turned white, but said nothing. In contrast, the wagon-driver fell on the ground in bitter tears, screaming, “Woe is me! My raincoat is gone! My umbrella is gone! What will be with me?”

All the other visitors to the inn began to chastise the wagon-driver: “Your passenger, who has lost thousands of rubles in merchandise, is standing by silently, and you are crying hysterically for a raincoat and umbrella!”

“Yes,” answered the wagon-driver. “You see, my passenger’s goods were insured. He has lost nothing. However, I depend on my raincoat and umbrella to help me earn my living. While my loss may be objectively small, to me it is a real loss.”

So, too, said the Dubno Maggid, eating the sacrifices may seem like a small, even insignificant, part of the Temple service, but it is the only part that is really lost. Are we not taught that when one studies the laws of the sacrifices, it is as if he had brought those sacrifices to the Bet Hamikdash? If so, Hashem is receiving our offerings even though there is no Temple. We, however, are missing our share of the sacrifices — the part that we would be eating if real sacrifices could be brought in the Temple — and it is for this that we pray. (Quoted in Sha’arei Armon p. 161)
כוס שני

At the Pesach Seder, we drink four cups of wine, each one paralleling on of these four expressions.

R’ Yitzchak ben Shlomo Al-chadab z”l (Spain; early 15th century) observes that there is more to this parallelism than just the number four. Rather, each of the cups is drunk at a point in the Seder that relates to one of the four expressions of geulah / redemption.

The first cup is drunk at kiddush. This parallels “I shall take you out” in that there is a mitzvah at every Shabbat and Yom Tov night kiddush to mention the basic fact that Hashem took us out of Egypt.

The second cup is drunk at the blessing “Ga’al Yisrael” in which we thank Hashem for rescuing us from Egypt. The verb “I shall rescue” is used a number of times in the Torah to refer specifically to the redemption from Egypt. (See, for example, Shmot ch.18.)

The third cup is drunk at Birkat Hamazon. The halachah is that one does not fulfill the mitzvah of Birkat Hamazon if he does not mention three things: Eretz Yisrael, Brit Milah and Torah. These parallel “I shall redeem you,” for the redemption is not complete until our bodies and souls are saved – Eretz Yisrael for our bodies and the Torah and Brit Milah for our souls.

Finally, the fourth cup is drunk at Hallel, for we have a particular obligation to acknowledge the special gift of “I shall take you to Me for a people.” (Haggadah Shel Pesach: Pesach Dorot)

R’ Eliezer Nachman Foa z”l (Italy; 17th century) observes that the Exodus from Egypt did not put an end to the Jewish people’s troubles. Immediately following the Exodus, Bnei Yisrael wandered in the desert for 40 years and suffered through various trials. In the millennia since then, Jews have suffered innumerable periods of oppression. Why wasn’t the Exodus the final redemption?

He explains: It is well-known that fruits which fall off of the tree before they are ripe will not taste as good as those which ripen on the tree. Similarly, Hashem redeemed Bnei Yisrael from Egypt before the time was ripe (because they were about to be overwhelmed by the impurity of that land). Therefore, the redemption could not be a complete one.

In this light, we can understand why Chazal warned us not to rush the final redemption. If the redemption comes prematurely, it will not be complete.

R’ Foa adds: When we speak of the “strong arm” which Hashem used to redeem the Jewish people, we do not mean that He had to struggle to defeat the Egyptians. Rather, we mean that He, so-to-speak, used force to subdue Din / Justice, for Justice claimed, correctly, that Bnei Yisrael did not deserve to be redeemed.

This explains why it was necessary for Pharaoh to say the word, “Go!” Hashem could have redeemed Bnei Yisrael in any case, but the attribute of Justice required that Pharaoh acquiesce. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Midrash Be’chidush)
Although the “Kadeish U’Rechatz” poem is, in its most simple meaning, the order of service that we follow at the Seder, numerous commentaries see it also as a complete plan for a Torah way of life. One of its messages is: “First ‘Kadeish U’Rechatz’ - ‘Sanctify and wash (purify) yourself’ - and only later, ‘Maggid Rachtzah’ - ‘Tell others to wash themselves’.” (Haggadah Shel Pesach Zichron Niflaot and others)

R’ Moshe Sternbuch shlita writes: Feeling joy when performing mitzvot is always considered one of the highest forms of service of G-d. We should feel especially joyous when eating matzah, for Chazal teach that this mitzvah, properly fulfilled, can save one from judgment on Rosh Hashanah. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Moadim U’Zmanim)

Chazal teach that chametz represents the evil influence of the yetzer hara and that our task on Pesach is to eradicate this chametz. The word “matzah” can be translated “battle” and matzah is therefore an appropriate food to eat when we battle the yetzer hara. Eating matzah is mandatory on the first night of Pesach only, for after that the “battle” is (hopefully) over. However, we remain forbidden to eat chametz for several more days (i.e. the rest of Pesach), for we must keep the yetzer hara from returning. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Shem MiShmuel)

R’ David Hakochavi z”l (approx. 1260-1330; Avignon, France) writes: When one contemplates the mitzvah of eating matzah, one sees the Torah’s perfection. How so?

G-d wished to prohibit us from eating chametz. Had the prohibition been for only one or two days, it would not have made the necessary impression. Therefore, the prohibition on eating chametz lasts for a week [eight days in the Diaspora].

In contrast, we are not commanded to eat matzah for seven days. One’s obligation to eat matzah is only on the first night [the first two nights in the Diaspora], and only one kezayit [a very small volume]. Why is there this difference between the prohibition on eating chametz and the commandment to eat matzah? Because the Torah takes into account the fact that too much matzah can make a person ill. (Migdal David: mitzvah 151)
The Talmud Yerushalmi (Pesachim Ch. 2) states that the ideal maror is the vegetable known as "chazeret." Just as the chazeret starts out sweet but becomes bitter as it grows, so it was for our ancestors in Egypt. First it says (Bereishit 47:6), "In the best part of Egypt settle your father and your brothers." Later it says (Shmot 1:14), "They embittered their lives..."

Why is it important to recall this aspect of our stay in Egypt? asks R' Eliyahu Hakohen z"l (the 'Shevet Musar'; Izmir, Turkey; died 1729). He answers that one's gratitude at being rescued from suffering is significantly greater if he once knew wealth and happiness than if he had suffered all his life.

"Chazeret" starts out sweet but becomes bitter as it grows, so it was for our ancestors... this is the vegetable known as "chazeret." (Aggadat Eliyahu: Pesachim)

Hillel used to make a sandwich of the Pesach, matzah, and Maror, in opposition to the halachic view that the taste of each mitzvah, canceled out the others. This is consistent with Hillel’s custom of giving every meal the sanctity due the Shabbat meals. Since we do not know the relative importance of different mitzvot, we must treat them all equally, and none can cancel out another. (Divrei Shaul)

This expression literally means “He is setting the table” (in the present tense), and it alludes to G-d. The story is told of a beggar who “worked” the homes of his neighborhood for only two hours a day, yet collected more than any of the beggars who struggled from door to door all afternoon long. When he was asked the secret of his success, the beggar said, “I knock on doors only at mealtimes. Since the table is already set, no one minds feeding me as well. You, however, arrive at the houses when people are busy with other things, and they cannot be bothered to open the kitchen just for you.”
Hashem, says R’ Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, is not like a human. He (G-d) is always “setting the table” for us and thus we find sustenance at all times. (Sefer Orach Chaim: Peirush Al Haggadah Shel Pesach)

בְּרָךְ

The Gemara says that after a person eats, he has only one heart. What does this mean?

Before a person eats, he has a yetzer tov / “good inclination” and yetzer hara / “evil inclination”. After he eats, however, he has only one. If he has eaten “For the sake of Heaven,” the yetzer tov subjugates the bad, but if he ate merely too fulfill his own desires, then it is the yetzer tov that is subjugated.

Reciting Birkat Ha’mazon enables the yetzer tov to prevail, for in it we acknowledge that all food is G-d’s. (Haggadat R’ Tzadok Hakohen)

ר’ Eliyahu Ki Tov writes that in Aramaic, “Afikoman” means “Bring out (‘Afiku’) dessert (‘Man’).” It, therefore, symbolizes our freedom, for the poor and oppressed cannot afford the luxury of a leisurely conclusion to their meal. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Yalkut Tov)
ולעל חל בְּאֶלְּכָּנִי אֲנָחָנִי מְזוּדִים לָךְ, וָמַנְכָּרֵי אֲנוּתָה, יַחְצֶרֶת שְׁמַךְ בְּפִי כָּלְיָה לְעֹלָם, לִכְפּוֹעַ, לְאֵלַכָּנִי וּלְעֹלָם, לִבְּחָרָת אֲנָחָנִי, לַעֲלָה צְלָה בָּאָרָתָה, שְׁמַךְ בְּפִי כָּלְיָה לְעֹלָם, לִכְפּוֹעַ.

לָךְ. בְּרָזֹת אֲנוּתָה, לַעֲלָה צְלָה בָּאָרָתָה.
The four italicized phrases are called the “Four Expressions of Redemption,” each one represented by one of the four cups of wine which we drink at the Seder. There also is a fifth such expression: “And I will bring you to the land...” (Shmot 6:8). This parallels the fifth cup—the cup of Eliyahu—the subject of our discussion.
The Haggadah commentary Divrei Negidim, a work that has been attributed to the Maharal of Prague, notes that the kindness which Hashem displays in providing our daily sustenance is greater than the kindness that He showed in creating the world. How so?

To be a “creation” (rather than a creator) means to be dependent on another. It therefore means being inherently deficient. Thus, despite Hashem’s kindness in creating us, we are necessarily lacking because we are no more than “creations.” However, when Hashem gives us food, He gives us the ability, to a certain extent, to stand on our own. Thus, Hashem’s kindness in feeding us is the greatest kindness of all.

This explains the structure of Psalm 136 which is known as “Hallel Hagadol”—“The Great Hallel.” In this chapter of Tehillim we recall Hashem’s wonders in creating the world and in redeeming us from Egypt. Each line of the Psalm culminating with the expression, “For His kindness endures forever.” How does this chapter conclude? “He gives bread to all flesh, for His kindness endures forever. Acknowledge the G-d of the Heavens, for His kindness endures forever.” This expresses our recognition that, as noted above, this last kindness, giving us bread, is greater than the earlier ones.

The fifth cup of wine which some have the custom to drink at the Seder represents the kindness that Hashem does for us when He feeds us. After we retell the story of the Exodus and drink four cups of wine, we recite Hallel Hagadol and pour the fifth cup of wine. In many homes, it is the custom that the head of the household alone drinks this cup, because it is that person who has primary responsibility for receiving Hashem’s gift of bread. In other households, this cup is left for Eliyahu Hanavi—the “Angel of Peace”—for peace is a prerequisite to receiving all of Hashem’s blessings, sustenance included. (See Mishnah Uktzin 3:12). (Haggadah Shel Pesach L’Maharal, London ed., p. 174)

The four cups of wine which we drink at the Pesach Seder parallel the four “Lishonot Ge’ulah”—“expressions of redemption.” These are, “I will take you out from under the suffering of Egypt, and I will save you from their service, and I will redeem you with an outstretched hand... And I will take you as a nation....” (Shmot 6:6-7). But there is actually a fifth expression, the verse immediately following the above: “And I will bring you to the land....” Many commentators wonder why this verse, the promise of Eretz Yisrael, is not also represented by a cup of wine.

R’ Shlomo Goren z”l (former Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel) explains that there is a fundamental difference between the fulfillment of the first four expressions and that of the fifth. The former were openly miraculous - G-d overturned the laws of nature, brought the ten plagues, and redeemed His people from Egypt. Not so, the latter. Although Yehoshua’s conquest of Eretz Yisrael was guided by Hashem, it was, for the most part, not overtly miraculous. Because of this difference, we do not commemorate being brought to Eretz Yisrael as we do the other miracles.

Chazal teach that Eretz Yisrael can be acquired only through suffering. Similarly, says R’ Goren, it can be acquired only through sacrifice. Hashem took Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt by a route where they would not encounter war; although they did, in fact, have to go into battle, Hashem did not want their first taste of war to be on the border of Eretz Yisrael. Why? Because one is permitted to fear battle, but only when it is not a “Milchemet mitzvah” - a war which is a mitzvah (as conquering Eretz Yisrael is). That, one is not allowed to fear. (Torat haShabbat v’haMo’ed p.147)

The paragraphs of Hallel are divided at the Seder into two groups, one of which is recited before the meal and the other after. (To see this division, compare Hallel as found in the Haggadah with Hallel as found in the Siddur.) Malbim explains that the section recited before the meal contains two paragraphs: one describes G-d’s greatness in general terms, and the other deals specifically with the Exodus. These paragraphs are closely related to the story we tell tonight, and are therefore recited immediately upon concluding the mitzvah of “Maggid” and just before eating the matzah.
In contrast to these, the paragraphs of Hallel which are recited after the meal are interpreted by Chazal as referring to the future, not the past, redemption. As such, they are more appropriately placed after our performance of the major Pesach mitzvot (matzah, Maror, etc.), for then we can look ahead to the future. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Im Be’ur Midrash Haggadah)
"I shall take you to Me for a people and I shall be a God to you; and you shall know that I am Hashem your God, Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt." (6:7)

This is one of the “Four Expressions of Redemption” for which we drink four cups of wine at the Seder. Specifically, the Sages say that this verse alludes to the giving of the Torah.

R’ Yitzchak Arieli z”l (1896-1974) writes: We learn from here that our existence as a people depends on our acceptance of the Torah, and only through the Torah are we called “G-d’s nation.” The Biblical Ruth recognized this when she converted to Judaism. Thus, the Gemara (Yevamot 47b) teaches that Ruth’s statement (Ruth 1:16), “Your people are my people,” was responding to Naomi’s attempt to
dissuade her from converting, saying, “We have 613 commandments.” It is our Torah and mitzvot that define us as a people.

Yet, there is a fifth Expression of Redemption, one which is not represented by a cup of wine. This is (Shmot 6:8): “וּנֵלָךְ אֶל הִשְׁכָּנָה יָדָךְ, נִסְדָּר בְּרָכָה לָּנוּ אֲחֵרָה.” / I shall bring you to the land about which I raised My hand to give it to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov; and I shall give it to you as a heritage.” Why is this Expression not represented by a cup of wine? Because it is not simply another promise like the other four Expressions; it is the ultimate goal of all of the others, and they are preparatory steps for it. (Midrash Ariel)

In the poems and songs of this section of the Haggadah we pray that all of the “Tefilot” which we have recited at the Seder be accepted by Hashem. If one has performed all of the Seder according to Halacha, he may feel confident that his service has indeed been accepted by G-d. We should pray that we is the ultimate goal of all of the others, and they are preparatory steps for it.

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כינו “אמרות גזח פשת.”

אמות בברותה הפלאת פשת, בראש כל מזדית השאת פשת, בגלייה לאוריםיה חצות בלילה בכנס, ואמרות גזח פשת.

כלומר פשקת חמש הימים פשת, חסידת usי עגון מוצט פשת, אחד покר ופי כר ששרא עד פשת, ואמרות גזח פשת.

נערם ט שניתן (יט治療 במשה) בכות פשת, חלף לו מים, ומאגר אפק בוק פשת, טאואות אנטריםمل ופי בברך פשת,

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הנה.

קוזו מוכלה, רוחו מוכלה, שיאורי יאמרו ב: כל יומוי, כל יומוי, ככלי יומוי, ככלי יומוי.

הנה.

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הנה.

אוצר הוה,

בננה בות בקזר, במקהלה במקהלה, בקי בקזר. אלא בנה, ככלי בות בקזר.

כזא להוה, ודלי להוה, בננה בות בקזר, במקהלה במקהלה, בקשיו בקזר. אלא בנה, ככלי בות בקזר.
אחד מי לדעת?

אחד יא ידע: אהד אדלמנש שפשמים ובאר.

שנינו מי יידע? שים יא ידע: שלשה אוות, שלשה אוות, ובאר אדלמנש שפשמים ובאר.

שלשה מי יידע? שלשה יא ידע: שלשה אוות, שלשה אוות, ובאר אדלמנש שפשמים ובאר.

אכר מי יידע: אכרום או ידע: אכרום אוות, שלשה אוות, ובאר אדלמנש שפשמים ובאר.

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שנינו מי יידע השוק יא ידע: שישה שדים, שישה שדים, ובאר אדלמנש שפשמים ובאר.

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שנינו מי יידע השוק יא ידע: שישה שדים, שישה שדים, ובאר אדלמנש שפשמים ובאר.
R’ Mordechai Twersky, the Maggid of Chernobyl z”l (died 1838) explained this song as follows:

The word “gadya” / “kid” is related to “Haggadah” / “statement.” “Chad gadya, chad gadya,” refers to two statements, specifically, the first two of the Ten Commandments: “I am Hashem” and “You shall not have other gods.” These two statements encompass all of the mitzvot; “I am Hashem” encapsulates all of the positive commandments, and “You shall not have other gods,” all of the negative commandments.

“That father sold” alludes to the Sages’ teaching that the Torah is unlike any other acquisition. Ordinarily, when one sells an object, the seller’s connection to the object ends. Not so, however, when Hashem “sold” us the Torah; He, our Father, sold Himself to us with the Torah. In other words, through the Torah, one connects himself to Hashem.

However, one who wants to come close to Hashem and His Torah must experience yearnings / kissofim for that goal. This is alluded to by the “two zuz,” as those coins are made of silver / kessef.

Moreover, it is not enough to yearn for Hashem and His Torah. One must also hate evil, i.e., he must be a “sonai ra.” This is alluded to by the cat (or weasel), referred to in the song as a “shunra.” Of course, the yetzer hara will not stand by idly while a person attains these spiritual accomplishments. Rather, the yetzer hara, represented by the kalba / dog, will attack the shunra.

When the yetzer hara threatens to defeat a person, the surest way to prevail is to strengthen one’s emunah / faith. This is the chutra / the staff on which one can lean and with which one can hit the dog, i.e., the yetzer hara. However, the yetzer hara is tenacious and does not give up easily. Thus, the nura / fire of the yetzer hara may burn the staff of emunah.

What should one do to protect himself? Study Torah, which is likened throughout rabbinic literature to maya / water.

Our sages teach that the Torah can be an elixir of life if one studies it with the proper motivation, but it can be poisonous if one approaches it with the wrong intentions, for example, if one studies Torah so that he can attack Torah scholars on their own ground. The tora / ox that drinks the water in the song represents the animal that one can become if he misuses the Torah. [Ed. Note: The Aramaic word “tora,” meaning ox, is related to the Hebrew word “shor,” but is unrelated to the Hebrew word “Torah.”]

The shochet who slaughters the ox represents one’s slaughtering of the yetzer hara that caused him to act like an animal. However, the “angel of death” (who is one and the same with the yetzer hara)
may slaughter the shochet, i.e., it may cause a person to act hypocritically. This is alluded to by the Gemara’s teaching that one who slaughters an animal on Shabbat is liable for the act of painting (i.e., painting the skin of the animal with the animal’s blood). The word “tzavua” / “painted” also means “hypocrite.”

In the end, however, Hakadosh Baruch Hu / The Holy One Himself will destroy the angel of death and the yetzer hara. (Likkutei Torah)

R’ Yitzchak Ze’ev Soloveitchik z”l (the Brisker Rav; died 1959) used to say: One must take care to nap on Erev Pesach so that he can stay awake all night relating the story of the Exodus. He used to wonder aloud: “Why are so many people meticulous to stay awake on Shavuot night, which is merely a custom, while they neglect the halachah / law that one should try to stay awake all of Pesach night?” (Haggadah Shel Pesach Mi’Bet Halevi p. 34)