

Maimonides 613 Series.

Haggadah: The Obligation to Recall the Exodus from Egypt.

A Story

For many years, the Lubavitcher Rebbe held his seder in the home of his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch, even after Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak's passing. At the seder, the Rebbe's brother-in-law, the Rashag, would always ask the Rebbe questions. One year, the Rashag asked, "Why is it Chabad custom to remove the karpas (the vegetable) from the seder plate after dipping it in salt water?" The Rebbe answered, "I also had this question, and I asked our father-in-law. I said to him: 'On the seder plate, we have six items plus the three matzahs and the silver plate that the Rebbes put underneath the matzahs. That's ten items altogether, which allude to the Ten Sefirot [Divine Attributes]. Why remove the karpas from the seder plate instead of keeping all of the Ten Sefirot intact?' Our father-in-law said simply, 'This is our custom.'" The Rashag replied, "If the Rebbe is so concerned about the concept of Ten Sefirot, why is it that only the Rebbes have a silver plate under the matzahs, and not the chassidim, who have only nine items?" The Rebbe answered: "Even our father-in-law, the previous Rebbe, before he became rebbe, did not have the silver plate."^{1,2}

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On Erev Pesach 1950, two months after the passing of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, and almost a year before the Rebbe would finally accept his position as rebbe, he summoned my grandfather, Rabbi JJ Hecht, ob"m, and asked him to pick up a silver plate that he had ordered to put under his matzahs. Rabbi Hecht got the plate. Soon after, he was in 770 pacing back and forth when his brother Sholom Hecht came in.

"Why are you so nervous?" Sholom asked. Rabbi Hecht told him "The Rebbe has asked me to get him a *becher*, a silver goblet with a certain *shiur* –size, but it's late and I don't know where to get it now!" and Sholom replied, "Don't worry, I know where to get it," and hopped on a bus to the Lower East Side, where a few silver shops were still open. Sholom quickly spotted the right cup, paid for it, and came back to 770. He knocked on the Rebbe's office door and gave him the cup. Sholom awaited the Rebbe's approval. The Rebbe looked at it and said, "It is good." After Pesach, the Rebbe asked Sholom how much he owed him for the cup. Sholom

replied, “Nothing.” “I don’t accept gifts,” said the Rebbe, “only books. Tell me how much it cost or I’ll pay you what I think it’s worth.” So Sholom told the Rebbe and was reimbursed. (Every year after, on Purim, Rabbi Sholom Hecht would bring the Rebbe books as a gift.) Even though the Rebbe hadn’t yet officially accepted the “Rebbeship”, since he asked for a silver plate that Pesach, we know he had already internally accepted.³

Exodus 13:8

וְהַגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי מִצְּרָיִם

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "Because of this, the Lord did [this] for me when I went out of Egypt."

Rambam’s Positive Commandment #157

Rambam writes that the 157th positive commandment is to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt to our children on the night of Passover and to speak of G-d’s greatness with the most eloquence we can muster. One who speaks at great length about these things, Rambam writes, is truly praiseworthy. Every single person, no matter how brilliant and wise, is obligated to speak of G-d’s greatness and miracles accompanying the Exodus on the 15th of Nissan.

The Chinuch on Rambam

The Chinuch,⁴ a commentary on the Rambam, says that even if a person is doing the seder alone, even if they have no children to whom they can relay the miracles, they are obligated to tell of them. This establishes a psychological rule: through speech, one awakens the heart. (We are commanded to pray to G-d verbally; meditation is not enough. We must verbally express G-d’s love for us in order to increase our love towards Him.) Words of praise awaken our hearts; therefore we should say the Hagaddah out loud.

The Chinuch also notes that Pesach has many mitzvahs associated with it - not just the Hagaddah. Why? He answers: "Because Pesach is a great foundation and strong pillar in our Torah and in our faith."

The Rebbe expounds on the Chinuch's statement: a foundation is underground -- you don't see it, even though it holds up the entire building. A pillar, you do see. Pesach is both. It is the foundation of Torah. For example, the first of the Ten Commandments states: "I am G-d, your G-d, who took you out of Egypt." Pesach is also a pillar, revealed among many mitzvos. For example, we mention in the Friday night kiddush, "Zecher l'yetzius Mitzrayim", "A Remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt." Furthermore, in the mitzvah of tefillin, the meditation before donning tefillin mentions G-d taking us out of Egypt. It is a reminder that G-d controls everything in every world, both physical and spiritual. This is a great foundation and pillar of Judaism.

What's the Big Mitzvah?

Pesach is the birth of the Jewish nation, the holiday that the most Jews celebrate in one form or another. If on Pesach we are supposed to speak about the miracles, how does this mitzvah of "telling your children" about the exodus differ from the daily mitzvah of remembering the Exodus?

There are three basic answers:

- 1) Daily, we fulfill this mitzvah by remembering in our hearts; on Pesach, we must articulate it.
- 2) Daily, a minimal utterance is sufficient to fulfill the mitzvah; on Pesach, we must articulate it at length.
- 3) Daily, even one mention is enough; on Pesach, the mitzvah is to speak of the miracles all night.

Another question: If it is such a special mitzvah to recall the miracles of the Exodus on Pesach, why don't we say a blessing on it?

When the previous Rebbe was a young boy, his father, the Rebbe Rashab, asked him this very question. The previous Rebbe did not know what to answer. The Rebbe Rashab said, "When I was a young boy, my father, the Rebbe Maharash, asked me the same question, and I did not know, either. When my father, the Maharash, was a young boy, his father, the Tzemach Tzedek, asked him the same question, and my father did not know the answer. When my grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek was a young boy, his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, asked him the same question, and he did not know the answer. However, the Tzemach Tzedek's uncle, the Mittler Rebbe, had an answer. He said that according to the *RI"ף*: When we make kiddush on Pesach, we say the *brocha*, '*Zecher yitias mitzraim*', which also covers the mitzvah of speaking of the miracles." And according to the RASHBA: Even a simple utterance is sufficient. The Alter Rebbe, however challenged this by saying that on Pesach, we need to express ourselves at length. Rather, he says that just as we do not make a blessing before we say the Grace After Meals, which is a mitzvah, we do not make a blessing on the Haggadah. As The Rebbe comments, it is a book of blessing and praise to G-d, and we do not make a blessing on a blessing.

Four Questions

There is a custom that every single person should ask the Four Questions, not just the children, because we are all children of G-d. It states in the Haggadah, "Now the child should ask." At this point in heaven, all the doors are open, and we should ask G-d for all we need.

Whose Mitzvah?

There is a teaching in the Rebbe's Hagaddah that the phrase, "whoever discusses at length the exodus of Egypt is praiseworthy," includes even Kohanim, Leviim, and converts. Converts were not in Egypt, so why should they discuss it? Therefore, they are praiseworthy for speaking at length about it. Kohanim and Leviim never

served in Egypt; they weren't part of the slavery, instead studying Torah all day. Yet they, too, must tell the story.

Immediately after this statement, the Haggadah continues to tell the story of our Sages in Bnai Brak, who spoke of the miracles all night until their students came to tell them it was time for the Morning Shema. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yeshua were Levites; Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Tarphon were Kohanim; Rabbi Akiva came from converts. They all had an excuse to not speak of the miracles; yet they all got carried away talking about the greatness of G-d all night. In every generation, this is true: after the seder, the Rebbe would come down to the main sanctuary and would *farbrenge* about the Haggadah all night.

Daily Remembrance

This concept applies not only to the night of Passover, but every single day. What exactly are we supposed to remember, and why?

1) Mitzrayim, the Hebrew word for "Egypt", means "*metzar u'gvul*" - boundaries and limitations. Every day, we are reminded of our responsibility to leave our personal Egypt, our borders and constraints. What we accomplished yesterday is not enough; we should never be complacent with success. We must do more each day.

2) Leaving Egypt means not only to leave slavery, but that we are free to go beyond our limitations. Every day, we must ask ourselves, 'am I truly free?'. The Mishnah says, "Who is truly free? He who studies Torah because Torah connects us to that which is Infinite, that which is beyond all limitations."

3) The Rebbe said that there were revealed miracles and hidden miracles when we came out of Egypt, and we must remember that G-d performs miracles every day for us in our own lives. We must look for and acknowledge the revealed and concealed miracles in our lives – the exodus from Egypt must be remembered every day of the year. This gives us the ability to go out of our limits every single day.

End of Seder

In Chabad, we do not announce, "Now we have ended the seder," because the seder never ends. Every day, all year long we go out of Egypt, and each year is an upward spiral: we reach a new level of freedom.

Another Story

On the first night of Pesach, an unmarried man went to the shul of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's, ob"m. Rabbi Feinstein invited the young man to come eat at his family's home. The young man was honored but said, "I'm sorry, I can't come. I don't eat *gebrachts* [food made with matzah], but I know that the Rav does." The Rabbi pulled over two of his students and said, "We are now a Beth Din." He then told the young man to say *Hataras Nedarim* and nullify that stringency. He then said, "Now you can come to my house and eat *gebrachts*."

The message is this: on Pesach and all year round, we may have our own meticulous stringencies, but we cannot place them upon these people. We have to give others the best. By wining and dining others and truly experiencing what it means to be children of kings and queens, we will come to offer the Paschal lamb in the Third Temple, as we conclude in the Haggadah, next year in Jerusalem!

Footnotes

- 1) Editors note: Since chassidim are connected to their Rebbe, they receive the power of the tenth Sefirah, malchus, through their Rebbe's seder plate.
- 2) Hemelech B'mesibo, first night Passover 5727.
- 3) Heard from my great uncle Rabbi Sholom Hecht.
- 4) Mitzvah 21 on Parshas Bo.