

Pesach, 5776, 2016:

Pesach, Matzah and Maror – and Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Haggadah is a multi-layered historical document that is the product of numerous Jewish cultures, both in Israel and the Diaspora. As a result, it may legitimately be viewed as one of the preeminent post-Tanach (Hebrew Canon of Scripture) works, since it so effectively captures the hopes and visions of our people. Little wonder, then, that it has always been the focal point and guide of the Passover Seder experience. Excluding actual quotes from the *Tanach*, one of the most ancient and fundamental sections of the Haggadah is the portion popularly known as “*Rabban Gamliel hiyah omare*” (“Rabban Gamliel used to say”), which is originally found in the following Mishnah:

Rabban Gamliel used to say: Whoever does not mention these three things on Passover does not fulfill his obligation, and these are they: the Passover-offering (*Pesach*), unleavened bread (*Matzah*), and bitter herbs (*Maror*). [The] Passover-offering [is offered] because (*al shum*) the Ever-present One passed over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt... Unleavened bread [is eaten] because (*al shum*) our forebears were redeemed from Egypt... [The] bitter herb is [eaten] because (*al shum*) the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt... (Mishnah, *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 116a-b, translation and brackets my own)

Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Eidels *zatzal* (1555-1631), known by his Hebrew acronym as the “Maharsha,” is renowned for his detailed two-part commentary on the *Talmud Bavli* that

systematically examines both halachic and aggadic passages. He applies his exegetical acumen to Rabban Gamliel's assertion, and asks a fundamental question:

We never find regarding other *mitzvot* that we are obligated to ask, “*al shum mah?*” [“why?”] as is explicitly found in the Haggadah's version of Rabban Gamliel's statement], for in all other instances it is sufficient to recite a blessing [before performing the *mitzvah*, why, however, do we need to ask and answer this question regarding the *mitzvot* of *Pesach*, *Matzah*, and *Maror?*] (*Maharsha, Chidushei Aggadot, Pesachim* 117b, this, and the following translations and brackets, my own)

The Maharsha answers his query in regards to the Passover Offering by citing the first Mishnah in chapter one of *Mishnah Zevachim*:

All offerings (*zevachim*) that are slaughtered without explicit designation as to their exact status (*shelo lishman*) are acceptable with the caveat that they will not count toward the fulfillment of the obligation for which they were initially brought, except for the *Korban Pesach* (Passover Offering) and the *Korban Chatat* (Sin Offering) – which are unacceptable unless they are unambiguously designated for their specific purpose (*lishman*) ... (Translation my own)

He continues by connecting this Mishnaic passage to Rabban Gamliel's statement regarding the *Korban Pesach*:

And, therefore, Rabban Gamliel says that the eating of the Paschal Lamb by its owners must entail an explicit designation that the act is specifically for the fulfillment of this commandment. – All of this is for the purpose of coming closer to the holiness [inherent in the *mitzvot*.]

At this juncture, one might very well ask: “Why does the Maharsha place such singular emphasis on the theme of the movement toward holiness?” His further comments answer this question by revealing our forebears' true nature prior to the Exodus:

And that which is stated, “the *Korban Pesach* is because the Holy One blessed be He passed over...” [is necessary to teach us] that the Jews were in Egypt and under the sway of levels of impurity (literally, “*klipot hatumah*”) [that] drew them near to engage in idol worship. As it is written: “And I said to them: ‘Every man cast away the despicable idols from before his eyes, and pollute not yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the L-rd your G-d.’” (*Sefer Yechezkel* 20:7)

Therefore, as Rav Eidels notes, the purpose of the *Korban Pesach* was two-fold in nature, namely, demonstrable proof of our ancestors' disavowal of idol worship, and incontrovertible acceptance of the Holy One blessed be He as the One and Only G-d:

With the slaughter of the Paschal Lamb and the eating of its meat – in light of the fact that this was a reprehensible act in the eyes of the Egyptians [who worshiped the lamb as a god] – they brought themselves to a position wherein they were able to come near to the *Schechinah* (Divine Presence). And our Sages proved this from the verse: “You shall say, ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the L-rd...’” (*Sefer Shemot* 12:27) – this refers to the eating of the *Korban Pesach*, since the slaughtering of the offering was already performed with the explicit intent [to bring it for Hashem]...

Next, the Maharsha examines the reason why the Haggadah pursues an in-depth analysis of *Maror*:

One can say that *Maror*, as well, requires one to seek its rationale (*al shum mah?*) [and provide a cogent response thereto]. This is because another aspect of the servitude in Egypt was the enormous difficulties our ancestors faced as a result of being under the hegemony of a spiritually impure government (*memshelet hatumah*). This requires an oral recognition, as the verse states: “And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the L-rd, your G-d, redeemed you...” (*Sefer Devarim* 15:15) We find that this act of oral remembrance is similar in kind to, “You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt,” (*Sefer Devarim* 25:17) and “Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it,” (*Sefer Shemot* 20:8) – both of which require that the remembrance be oral in nature – and all of this is to remove you from the spiritual impurities and bring you near to the *Schechinah*.

Following his rigorous examination of *Pesach* and *Maror*, the Maharsha analyzes the reasons inherent in eating *Matzah* on *Pesach* night. Here, too, he follows some of the thematic elements which he elucidated in his presentation of *Maror*:

So, too, regarding the matter of eating *Matzah*, as it is written: “You shall not eat leaven with it; for seven days you shall eat with it matzoth, the bread of affliction, for in haste you went out of the land of Egypt, so that you shall remember the day when you went out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.” (*Sefer Devarim* 16:3, underlining my own) This means that the eating of the *Matzah* is [to serve as a mnemonic device] to enable you to remember that you distanced yourself from the spiritual impurity that is symbolized by the power of the leavening agent that [is normally found] in dough – all with the purpose to bring you closer to the holiness [that is symbolized] through the eating of the *Matzah* – for when one eats the *Matzah* he/she becomes like the *kohan* who would eat the flour offerings (*Menachot*) in order to draw near to the holiness [of the Master of the Universe].

In sum, the vital concept that emerges in the Maharsha's investigation of *Pesach*, *Matzah*, and *Maror* is the notion of drawing closer to the Almighty. While this may well be the role of the *mitzvot* in general, it is the preeminent task of these three Seder-based commandments in particular. As such, this may be one of the reasons why Rabban Gamliel's passage resonates so powerfully for so many of us as we continue to grow in our devotion to Hashem.

May this *Pesach* ever bring us closer to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One blessed be He), and may it be our final *Pesach* in *galut* (in Exile). *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.