

Shabbat Hagadol – Pesach 5782, 2022:

Of Genut and Shevach

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

I have always found “*metichilah ovdei avodah zarah hiyu avotainu, v’achshav karvanu HaMakom l’avodato* (in the beginning, our ancestors were idol worshippers, and now, the Omnipresent One has brought us close to worship Him),” to be one of the many fascinating sentences in the *Haggadah*. It is based on the mishnaic statement: “One begins the telling of the Pesach story with that which is embarrassing (*genut*) and concludes with that which is praiseworthy (*shevach*),” (*Pesachim* 10:4) and is elaborated upon in *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 116a: “What is *genut*? Rav said: ‘in the beginning, our ancestors were idol worshippers,’ [and Shmuel] said: ‘We were slaves.’”

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, suggests the following explanation of this *machloket* (dispute):

It appears that they [Rav and Shmuel] are disagreeing as to the essence of the nature of the Egyptian servitude. Rav maintains that the fundamental characteristic of this bondage was the subjugation of the soul (*hashibude hanafshi*), that is, the Egyptians enslaved the souls of the Jewish people until they were forced down to the level of the 49th gate of impurity... In contrast, Shmuel asserts that the fundamental quality of this slavery was the subjugation of the physical (*hashibude hageshami*), in that the Egyptians enslaved the Jewish people and forced them to perform back-breaking labor. (This, and the following citations, *Haggadah shel Pesach: Siach HaGrid*, Rabbi Yitzchak Abba Lichtenstein, editor, pages 45-46, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, Rabbi Soloveitchik asserts that Rav maintained spiritual subjugation (*hashibude hanafshi*) was the essence of our ancestors' slavery experience in Egypt; whereas Shmuel held that it was fundamentally physical in nature (*hashibude hageshami*). These differing positions lead to contrasting opinions as to how to understand *geulat mitzrayim* (the Redemption from Egypt). For Rav, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests:

... the essence of the *geulah*, wherein the Holy One blessed be He redeemed us, is also expressed through His drawing us near to Him to His service and giving us the Torah, for, in truth, this was the ultimate purpose of the Exodus... As such, Rav holds that when we tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, we must begin with *genut* and speak of our spiritual enslavement and conclude with praise [to the Almighty] regarding the Redemption; namely, the Holy One blessed be He redeemed us, and brought us near to Him to His service.

According to the Rav, Shmuel, however, argued that the Redemption should be viewed as the miraculous act wherein:

... the Holy One blessed be He redeemed us from actual physical slavery (*m'liyot avadim b'guf*), and this is the case even though the purpose of *yetziat mitzrayim* was the receiving of the Torah. Nonetheless, the *geulah* from *mitzrayim* was [to cast off the shackles of slavery], *m'hashibude hageshami*. Therefore, when we tell the story of *yetziat mitzrayim* we begin with *avadim hi yinu*.

The second half of the *Haggadah*'s statement, “*v'achshav karvanu HaMakom l'avodato* (and now, the Omnipresent One has brought us close to worship Him),” has received far less attention in the works of the standard *Haggadah* commentators than the first. This is striking, since the word, “*v'achshav*,” appears entirely out of place. As the Chasidic *rebbe*, Rav Avraham Dov Baer of Ovruch, Ukraine (d. 1840) notes:

One must be very exact and ask, what is the meaning of the expression “*v'achshav*,” when the *Haggadah* should have written, “*v'achar kach karvanu* (and afterwards He brought us),” since [everything that is mentioned in the subsequent proof text from *Sefer Yehoshua*] is prior to our forebears and their Departure from Egypt? (*Sefer Bat Ayin, Sefer Vayikra, Drush l'Shabbat HaGadol*, this and the following translation and brackets my own)

Rav Avraham Dov Baer's response to his question is an interpretive tour de force:

The explanation of, “*v'achshav*,” is as follows: Since we now know [the true extent of] our [spiritual] defect, namely, that we were idol worshippers, and we are now exceedingly embarrassed

because of the evil of our actions, we are [are now in the position] to beseech Hashem in great humility and embarrassment. As a result of our approaching Him in this manner, He will have mercy upon us, bring us near, and provide an opening for us to do *teshuvah*. [Moreover,] He will transform the letter “*chet*” [in the word *chametz*, *chet-mem-tzaddi*] into a “*heh*,” and thereby [metaphorically] change *chametz* [that represents the *yetzer hara*] into *matzah* [*mem-tzaddi-heh*] that signifies, [in this instance, that which is free of sin] ...

May it be Hashem’s will and our fervent desire, that on this *Pesach*, we will be *zocheh* (merit) to transform all the *chametz* in our hearts and minds into *matzah*, so that we may serve Him in holiness and devotion. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach*

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

Please contact me at rdbe718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** 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: [The Rav](#)