

Shabbat Hagadol 5771, 2011:

*Pesach: The Bond that Ties Us Together*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The *mitzvah* to recite the story of our departure from Egypt is time-bound in nature in that it is reserved for the night(s) of Passover. By limiting the time wherein the commandment may be fulfilled, the Torah appears to be teaching us that the recitation of this story must take place on the anniversary of the actual events. This, I believe, enables us to have a greater opportunity to both narrate and re-experience the Exodus. The experiential motif of the Hagadah is crucial. Without it, Passover would, G-d forbid, be reduced to little more than one more historical event in our storied history. With it, however, the Exodus has been transformed into the defining and *never-ending* moment when we experienced, and re-experience, physical and spiritual freedom, transformation into a nation, and acceptance of Hashem's holy Torah.

*Sefer Bereishit* contains the narrative of the *Brit Bein Habetarim* (The Covenant Between the Pieces). It is a broad-stroke revelation of some of the events that will occur to Abraham's descendants. In many ways, therefore, it foreshadows what will transpire in *Sefer Shemot*. Herein, Abraham is told that his heirs will be enslaved and afflicted strangers in a foreign land, and that they will eventually be redeemed:

When the sun was setting, Abram fell into a trance, and he was stricken by a deep dark dread. [G-d] said to Abram, 'Know for sure that your descendants will be foreigners in a land that is not theirs for 400 years. They will be enslaved and oppressed. But I will

finally bring judgment against the nation who enslaves them, and they will then leave with great wealth. (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:12-14, translation, from *The Living Torah* by Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

The *Baal Hagadah* (Compiler of the Hagadah) viewed this final verse to be of such great import that he included it in the Hagadah in the section we know as “*baruch shomer havtachato l’yisrael*” (“Blessed be He who keeps His promise to the Jewish people”). We immediately sense that there is far more here than meets the eye.

Rashi (1040-1105) explains the phrase “they will then leave with great wealth” in a simple and direct fashion: “with much money, as it is said (*Sefer Shemot* 12:36): ‘and they emptied out Egypt.’” (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) By defining “great wealth” (*birchush gadol*) in this fashion, Rashi is in consonance with *Talmud Bavli*, *Berachot* 9a-b:

In the school of R. Jannai they said: The word 'na' means: I pray. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: I pray of thee, go and tell Israel, I pray of you to borrow from the Egyptians vessels of silver and vessels of gold, so that this righteous man [Abraham] may not say: “And they shall serve them, and they shall afflict them” He did fulfill for them, but “And afterward shall they come out with great substance” He did not fulfill for them. (Translation, Soncino Talmud)

R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865), author of the classic Torah commentary *Haketav v’Hakabbalah*, takes an entirely different approach to understanding the phrase “*birchush gadol*.” Rather than following the Talmud’s natural language approach, Rav Mecklenburg opts for a figurative interpretation that tells us “the story behind the story”:

...the inner meaning [of *birchush gadol*] is really spiritual and soul-based wealth and possessions. This is the case since [the Jewish people] afterwards wanted to receive the obligations of the Torah and Commandments. The fiery furnace [of Egypt], therefore, served to remove the dross and impurities from within them. This is why the Torah says “*rechush gadol*” rather than “*rechush rav*”... This is the case since the word “*rav*” refers to an amount [i.e. quantitative], whereas the word “*gadol*” refers to the qualitative nature of someone or something... (Translation my own)

In sum, “*birchush gadol*” refers to the holy Torah that our ancestors were now fully ready to receive, as a result of their dual experiences of servitude in, and redemption from, Egypt.

In a 1969 Boston public lecture, my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), like Rav Mecklenburg, interpreted the expression “*birchush gadol*” in a different manner than that of Rashi and the above-cited Talmudic passage. In his explanation of the meaning and significance of the portion of the Hagadah known as “*Halachmah anyah*” (“This is the bread of affliction”), he noted that it contains an invitation to all Jews who are hungry and/or in need to join their more fortunate brethren at the Passover Seder. As such it is:

...a renewal of the pledge of solidarity among the Jewish people, between individual and individual, and between the individual and the Jewish people. This solidarity, according to *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) was responsible for the redemption from Egypt...What was the *rechush gadol* they took out of Egypt? **They became a people.** (Transcription and emphasis my own)

The Rav’s reinterpretation of *rechush gadol* as referring to *amimut* (peoplehood) is novel, to say the least. Moreover, it sheds new light on the deeper meaning of one of the four Expressions of Redemption, namely; “*v’lakachti etchem li l’am*” (“and I will take you to Me for a people”). It illuminates the essential secret of Jewish existence, and the glue that binds us together. We are the people of the past, present, and future. We are Hashem’s eternal nation, created to receive and keep His eternal Torah. Therefore, we boldly and proudly declare on Pesach night: “*Baruch Hamakom baruch Hu, baruch shenatan Torah l’amo Yisrael.*” (“Blessed be G-d, may He be blessed. Blessed be He who gave His Torah to His people Israel.”)

This Pesach, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to recognize the *chag* (holiday) for what it truly is: the “renewal of the pledge of solidarity among the Jewish people, between individual and individual, and between the individual and the Jewish people.” In this way, may we move closer to recognizing the bonds that eternally bind us to one another, and to our Creator. *V'chane yihi ratzon*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag kasher v'sameach*

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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 at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).