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TELLING THE STORY; CREATING A FAMILY RABBI YOSEF KANEFSKY

With tremendous persistence over the last couple of weeks, my friend Eliana, who is six-and-a-half, has been posing the following question to anyone who might have an answer: "Why did God make the Jews slaves in Egypt?" Turns out that there aren't many – or actually any – answers to that question that are satisfying to an inquisitive and serious first grader. My most recent conversation with Eliana, my latest effort to provide her with something that made sense, went as follows:

"If God hadn't made us slaves," I asked Eliana, "would we be celebrating Pesach today?" "No," she replied. "And how would your family be a different family if you didn't celebrate Pesach every year?" And this turned out to be a question that she was at least willing to ponder further.

Back in 2013, a man named Bruce Feiler wrote an article called, "The Stories That Bind Us." Feiler writes that some recent breakdowns within his

own extended family had set him on a course to find answers to questions like, "What is the secret sauce that holds a family together? What are the ingredients that make some families effective, resilient, and happy?" He then takes us on a brief tour of some recent and very compelling research which has shown that, "the single most important thing you can do for your family [is to] develop a strong family narrative." In particular, the sort that the studies refer to as an "oscillating narrative," one which tells the story of success and of good times, as well as of more difficult times during which family members needed to battle adversity, turning to one another for assistance and support, relying upon their faith in the future, drawing inspiration from the examples set by their own parents and grandparents. The studies found that the more that family members, and children in particular, knew about the lives and the stories of their

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Telling the Story; Creating a Family

Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky.....pg. 1

Matzah: The Conflict Between Halacha and Spirituality

Rabbi Zachary Truboff.....pg. 3

The Multiple Meanings of Matzah

Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger.pg. 5

Thoughts on a Meaningful Seder

Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot..pg. 6

grandparents and great-grandparents, the more resilient they were, the more successfully they could face challenges, the more they described their families as a source of strength, rather than as a dysfunctional tangle. Knowledge of their family's oscillating narrative, produced children who knew that they belonged to something bigger than themselves. It produced people who – to borrow a phrase from the discipline of sociology – understood what their group was about.

We don't ultimately know why God made us slaves. But because He did, and then took us out, we have an eternal family narrative. And because we have religiously shared that narrative again and again, year after year, century after century, generation after generation, even the six-and-a-half-year-olds among us have always known that they belong to something bigger than themselves. They – and we- have understood what our group is about. And you shall tell the story on that day, saying.

And while Pesach is undoubtedly the most striking example of the way we use religious ritual to reinforce the idea that we belong to a group that is resilient, that is a source of strength, and more than anything else, is "about something," there are so many others, whose impact we don't appreciate enough. Our lives and our calendars are filled with symbols and ritual activities that frequently, completely wordlessly communicate other chapters of our narrative.

I always take a moment or two during the hakafot on Simchat Torah to try to understand what exactly it is that we're doing. And it always crystalizes for me when I see boys and girls, holding the Torah close to their bodies, and – whether they exactly realize at that moment or not – receiving our family narrative about holding on to this book for dear life, this book, which mustn't God forbid be allowed to fall, which we received at the beginning of time, through whose words we have lived, and for whose sake we have

died. And on different levels in different years, they understand that this is what our group is about.

Heschel famously described Shabbat as our "cathedral in time." And I would say that if Shabbat is our cathedral in time, then communal Seudah Shlisheet is our kitchen table in time: our place of social intimacy, the venue where we communicate our story about God our shepherd, who walks us through green pastures, who leads us by tranquil waters. Even when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, we are not afraid, for God is with us. The story of God our beloved, y'did nefesh, av harachaman. Modest and humble Seudah Shlisheet reinforces, through company and song, the recognition that we belong to a spiritual community that is much bigger than ourselves.

And in the same vein, call to your mind's eye just for second, the white felt that covers the Shulchan and the Torahs during the Yamim Noraim. Without speech and without words, they tell the stories of mothers and fathers, and grandmothers and grandfathers, crying silently during Netaneh Tokef, and exulting at the end of Neilah. This part of our "oscillating narrative" has communicated through time that this family of ours is one that believes in forgiveness and in personal redemption, in hope and in acceptance.

And these of course are but a small sampling of the symbols and the rituals that we utilize to weave our family narrative, to produce generations who know what our group is about. And this is the impetus as well for the creation of "new rituals," such as the Seder Yom HaShoah, as a way to retell our family narrative of calamity and darkness, of courage and of strength.

We are a community of ritual. And sometimes the emphasis on ritual and its minute details drives us a little crazy. But rituals are the way in which we tell the Stories That Bind Us.

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MATZAH: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HALACHA AND SPIRITUALITY

RABBI ZACHARY TRUBOFF

Perhaps more than any other holiday, it is Pesach that leaves such an indelible mark on our soul. Chassidut refers to Pesach as Chag HaEmunah, the holiday of faith, because each year we renew our faith in God and God's eternal covenant with the Jewish people through acting out the seder and retelling the story of the Exodus. The seder has the potential to be a profoundly spiritual experience, though we are all aware that this so rarely occurs. Too often we come to the seder exhausted after having spent many sleepless nights cleaning our homes in preparation for the holiday. We then face the additional challenge of being encouraged to perform the mitzvot in a Herculean fashion. More matzah than we could possibly imagine must be eaten within a very short period of time, and we find ourselves wondering whether it is even possible to taste the experience of freedom at the seder night. It often feels as though the details and restrictions of halacha are doing everything that they can to undermine what should be a moment of deep spiritual connection.

This critique may have a heretical ring to it, but it is one that emerges from one of the most important spiritual thinkers of the 20th century, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook. In many of Rav Kook's writings he gives voice to the tension that exists between halacha and spirituality. This tension, he argues, can be found on multiple levels and is represented by the conflict between halacha and aggadah and historical models of Jewish leadership, including the rabbis and the prophets. In one of his own spiritual diaries (Shemoneh Kevatzim 1:151), Rav Kook appears to see this tension within his own life. Rav Kook often writes in the third person, and scholars note that Rav Kook uses this literary tool to describe his own spiritual experiences and insights. He writes, "Sometimes a person's spiritual vision, that is beyond all fixed logic and certainly beyond any practical halacha, intensifies to such a degree that

their heart aspires upward and beyond... If they give their spirit freedom to travel according to its inclination, it will search for God... It is not possible for a spirit such as this to be satisfied with order and details, it is impossible to burden it with extraordinary meticulousness." Rav Kook describes that there are times when halacha greatly constrains our spirit's desire to soar to the heavens in search of spiritual connection. In addition to feeling this tension in his own life, Rav Kook recognized that the same dynamic affects the Jewish people. When halacha strangles spirituality, it has a devastating effect. He explains that this was one of the primary reasons for the abandonment of religion at the end of the 19th century. The only way to solve this problem, he writes, is through intensifying the spiritual study of Torah through both aggadah and kabbalah.

A close analysis of the mitzvah of matzah shows us that the tension between halacha and spirituality is embedded within it. The Torah presents us with two reasons why the Jewish people ate matzah when leaving Egypt. The first reason, and the one that appears most prominently in the haggadah, is that they left Egypt in such a hurry that their dough did not have time to rise. However, there is a second, more subtle reason why the Jewish people ate matzah. When Moshe instructs the Jewish people to perform the first Pesach in Egypt, he tells them they must slaughter a lamb, roast it, and eat it on matzah. Even before they leave Egypt, they are commanded to eat matzah. No explanation is given. They are simply told that they must do so. The first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, observed that these two reasons seem to contradict each other, yet through a close reading of Torah, he offers a possible resolution. He notes (Likkutei Torah, Parshat Tzav) that when Moshe instructs the Jewish people that they must eat the korban pesach with matzah, the word matzot is spelled without the vav. However, when the Torah

describes that the Jewish people left Egypt in such a hurry that their dough turned into matzah, the word matzot is spelled with a vav. According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, that vav makes all the difference. The vav's simple straight line running up and down symbolizes the spiritual connection between God and the Jewish people, linking together heaven and earth. This matzah came into existence after the Shechina revealed itself to the Jewish people in the midst of the final plague. Whereas the matzah that was eaten with the korban pesach reflects nothing more than obedience to the Divine command, the matzah that was created when the Jewish people left Egypt represents a moment of profound spiritual connection between God and the Jewish people. While we may initially

eat matzah at the seder because of God's Divine command, such an experience is fundamentally lacking. It allows for the possibility that the details of halacha will overwhelm all other aspects of the experience. Our challenge is to transform the eating of matzah into a moment infused with spirituality. We must see the seder night as an opportunity for God's Presence to be revealed, as the eating of matzah recreates the very moment when the Jewish people experienced liberation.

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THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF MATZAH

RABBI HANAN SCHLESINGER

The Passover holiday revolves around matzah, but it's not so easy to figure out the significance of this flat cardboard-like bread. Why do we eat matzah on Pesach? The hagada seems to offer two contradictory answers. Very near the beginning of the Passover seder, we uncover the matzah and proclaim: "This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt." But further on in the hagada, we point to the matzah and announce that during the hasty flight of the Israelites from Egypt they found themselves with no time to let their dough rise, and had no choice but to eat matzah.

So which is it? According to the first approach, matzah is a symbol of slavery. As many commentators explain, during all the years of Egyptian bondage, our forefathers were unable to eat bread, and had to subsist on matzah, either because the Egyptian taskmasters fed them this simple food to save resources and time, or because the harried slaves, herded from task to task, had to provide for themselves and had not the time to bake leavened bread. On the other hand, the second approach leads us to a very different understanding: matzah is the bread of freedom. Every year we recreate the very first meal that our forebears ate as free people.

So which is it? It could very well be that both understandings are true. While visions of freedom danced in their heads, the Israelite slaves ate matzah and dreamed of bread. But with freedom did not immediately come bread; rather God turned the wheels of history and redeemed us in such a fashion that in our flight towards freedom it was the same matzah that we were again forced to consume.

And now the question is, what can be learned from the strange fact that both slavery and freedom are symbolized at our seder table by one and the same foodstuff? What we might have

here is a pointed message concerning the nature of freedom. Perhaps slavery and freedom are not as different from one another as we would have expected; perhaps they are not polar opposites. Perhaps freedom is not just the lack of any external constraints upon our behavior, not merely the escape from the yoke of bondage to a human master. Paradoxically, we are often not free at all when explicit limits are removed. Rather, we then find our behavior controlled by the internal taskmasters of passion, appetite, anger and lust, or by external influences like fashion, advertising and the social standards of those around us. Our true inner selves are sometimes stifled specifically when there are no external restraints that can help us to say no to the insidious factors from within, and without that attempt to enslave us.

Rather, we need to impose upon ourselves frameworks in order to truly access our inner freedom. Ask any dieter: It is extremely difficult to restrict one's food intake simply through a straightforward act of will power. We experience an inner tug of war between our higher self and our lower self. We need to accept upon ourselves the yoke of a program, a plan that demands obedience. That is when we are able to do what our true inner selves really want us to do. That is when we access our true will, our core, our unique individual potential. We often feel most free, we find ourselves and actualize ourselves, when we manage to live according to the strictures that we place upon ourselves.

That is to say, there is a bit of self-enslavement in true freedom. We must conquer and shackle our base impulses. It may be that for this reason the exodus from Egypt will not be complete until it is followed by the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Perhaps true freedom will only be discovered when the yoke of Torah is made available as a

tool to help us set aside those parts of our psyche which interfere with the expression of our deepest inner selves. Freedom, it turns out, is not just bread – it is also matzah.

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SOME THOUGHTS ON A MEANINGFUL SEDER

RABBI NATHANIEL HELFGOT

One of the challenges for some families at the seder is to handle kids (above bar mitzvah) or adults who are hungry, with having a productive and meaningful Sippur Yeztiat Mitzrayim. Two suggestions come to mind:

1. When I was invited to Rav Amital zt"l's seder my first year in Gush thirty years ago, I remember him insisting that I come a half an hour before sunset to his home. At that point he and his wife were doling out a kind of potatoes stew to everyone with seltzer and encouraging everyone to have a bowl or two to ensure that they would not be hungry during the long sippur yetizat mitrayim that was, by the way, very much focused on the kids and guests and not fancy lomdus.

2. Another suggestion that I have been kicking around with others is to possibly follow the approach of the Rambam and the Gra (as well as the Rav zt"l and yebadel lehayyim tovim- mori veRabi Rav Lichtenstein) and not limit karpas to less than a kezayit as is standard practice and is written in all the Haggadot. In fact, according to those rabbinic authorities, one is *obligated* to eat more than a kezayit because either akhilah is only defined as eating a kezayit or less than a kezayit might not require the netilat yadayim for tibul bemashkeh of yerakot that is part of the seder experience.

One could theoretically have a nice substantial vegetarian "appetizer" as karpas or alternatively keep nibbling at one's potatoes or parsley or asparagus or the like and use that to keep one's hunger at bay. I was recently in YU at the Orthodox Forum and had occasion to discuss this with Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon who was visiting from Israel for the conference and he agreed with this and told me that in his haggadah he makes that very suggestion in writing. (In terms of berakha aharonah- Rav Lichtenstein makes a berakhah aharonah of borei nefashot after karpas, but most poskim do not take that approach-see Mishneh Berurah and Biur Halakha on Orah Hayyim-Siman 673 and rely on the birkat hamazon after to exempt even the eating of the karpas. One does not need to make a new borei pri ha-adamah on the Maror later on, as it is covered by the hamotzi of the seudah that we have just begun with the matzah).

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International Rabbinic Fellowship

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