



COMPASSION AND CONNECTION: PESACH I

Mrs. Shira Smiles

Adapted by Channie Koplowitz Stein

Each of the three-foot festivals is traditionally associated with one of our patriarchs. Pesach is associated with Avraham Avinu. On the simplest level, this understanding is based on the episode of the three strangers/angels approaching Avraham's tent. Avraham ran to invite them in, rushed to prepare the best foods for them, and asked Sarah his wife to prepare ogot matzot/matzah cakes for them. From this exchange we deduce that Avraham Avinu kept the laws of Pesach even though the Torah had not yet been given. But the hallmark of Avraham Avinu's character was chesed, kindness, while Pesach is generally associated with servitude. How can these two contrasting ideas, loving kindness and servitude, form a basis for associating the holiday of Pesach with Avraham Avinu, asks Rabbi Yisroel Weintraub in Einei Yisroel?

In Pachad Yitzchak Rav Hutner zt"l offers a unique insight into this question. Rav Hutner notes that there are two covenants between Hashem and Avraham Avinu/Bnei Yisroel. The covenant we are most familiar with is brit milah/circumcision. This is the covenant upon our bodies that testifies to our connection to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. The event in Avraham's life that associates Avraham with Pesach occurred when Avraham was recovering from his own brit milah, his personal covenant with Hashem that would define his descendants forever. When Avraham's descendants, Bnei Yisroel would be redeemed from servitude in Egypt, they would offer the korban Pesach/Pascal sacrifice. From the blood of that sacrifice painted on our doorposts that defied the Egyptians and from the blood of circumcision did we merit the redemption Hashem had promised to Avraham Avinu.

Now Rav Hutner teaches that there is a second covenant connecting Avraham Avinu to Hashem and to Pesach. This is the brit halev/covenant of the heart. This is the covenant that manifests itself through acts of chesed. It was acts of chesed that Avraham regularly sought out, the desire to offer food to any wayfarer that passed his way that connects him to Pesach. As Avraham did chesed by offering food and matzah to these wayfarers while he was recovering from his circumcision, he connected both the covenant of the heart and the covenant of the body to the observance of Pesach. Both of these covenants are connected to the observance

of Pesach. First only those males who are circumcised can partake of the Pascal sacrifice. Equally important, we extend chesed and invite all who are needy/kol dichfin to join us in the celebration and the feast of the Seder.

The name Pesach itself describes Hashem's love for Bnei Yisroel, writes Rav Biederman. Pesach is not literally translated as "passed over", but more accurately as "hovered over". Rav Biederman suggests that Hashem was skipping and dancing as He encountered each Jewish home, joyous at the presence of another Jewish family He could love.

In Avodat Avodah, the Tosher Rebbe z"l expands on this thought. The night of Pesach is a leil shimurim, a night that Hashem watches over and guards Bnei Yisroel for all generations. The Tosher Rebbe z"l notes that each month of the calendar has a different verse associated with it. The month of Elul is noted as the initials of the verse (E)Ani Ledodi V(U)dodi Li/I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me. The Tosher Rebbe z"l explains that in the month of Elul, as the verse begins with "I", we Jews here on earth down below must first take the initiative to approach Hashem and then He too will come closer to us. But a later verse in Shir Hashirim is attributed to refer to the month of Nissan, the month of Pesach: Dodi li va'ani Lo [haRoeh bashoshanim]/My Beloved is to me and I [follow] Him [the Shepherd among the roses.] In that verse, and consequently throughout the month of Nissan, especially during Passover, Hashem initiates the relationship; Hashem is searching us out first in love, and then we reciprocate. On Pesach, Hashem "jumps over" the normal protocols in place all year to help extricate us in love from our personal maytzorim, our personal challenges and narrow spaces. Pesach is a time of chesed and love. This is what matzah is about.

The entire saga of our Egyptian experience is closely related to bread, notes Rabbi Leib Mintzberg z"l in Ben Melech. Why did Yaakov Avinu send his sons to Egypt? Because of the famine, because there was no bread in Canaan. After Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, he invites the entire family to Egypt where he will provide them with bread and support them. Bnei Yisroel descend to Egypt, and are the "guests" of Pharaoh. Bnei Yisroel is supported by Pharaoh and is indebted to

him. But when Hashem extricates us from Egypt, we are no longer indebted to a human, for Hashem Himself provides for us. At the Seder with the matzah as the mainstay of the rituals, we verbalize this transition in the Hallel Hagadol. Yes, Hashem provides food for all living creatures, for His kindness is forever. But for us personally, He redeemed us from the house of bondage, He nourished us in the time of famine and in plenty He supported us. The matzah at our Seder table is a reenactment of that first matzah we ate as our first taste of freedom when Hashem initially provided us with His food, not dependent on any human being.

It is not the physical taste or texture of the matzah that we should be focusing on at the Seder, but the spiritual dimension as a manifestation of Hashem's love for us. "For it is not by bread alone that man lives, but by all that emanates from Hashem's mouth." Rabbi Kluger emphasizes this point and maintains that that first matzah already contained the taste of the manna which Hashem would send down from heaven to sustain Bnei Yisroel for the forty years in the desert. It is that love that we should "taste" as we eat the matzah at our tables. We should feel Hashem's love and care as an infant in its mother's arms. We carry that model of chesed from Hakodosh Boruch Hu and from Avraham Avinu into our Seder by beginning the Seder with an invitation to all who are needy to join us, just as Hashem and Avraham Avinu provided for all others as well, adds Rabbi Schlesinger in Eileh Heim Moadai. In this merit may we soon enjoy a final redemption.

The Sifsei Chaim points out that love and kindness are interrelated, whether between two human beings or between man and God. When we feel Hashem's kindness to us, our love for Him is aroused and we want to reciprocate by serving Him. If we can generate this gratitude toward Hashem in others, we will arouse in them as well a love for Hakodosh Boruch Hu. This is the point of the Seder, and this is emulating Avraham Avinu who, when his guests thanked him for his generosity, redirected his guests to thanking Hakodosh Boruch Hu Who provided them all with everything.

People generally love those who do good for them, but often find it difficult to thank Hashem

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for the gifts He gives us. Why is that? Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz suggests that in the case of Hashem's gifts, we often confuse the messenger with the gift Giver. This is analogous to thanking the mailman for delivering a check and neglecting to thank the writer of the check. [As someone who on occasion needs a small package delivered to my son in Israel, I believe it is also important to thank the messenger. He is also doing a chesed and helping in Hashem's "work". CKS] Because Hashem constantly does so much chesed for us, it is easy to overlook and consider it all normal entitlement. Hashem reminded us of His love for us by highlighting the very first of the Ten Commandments with a reminder that He took us out of Egypt, writes the Sifsei Chaim.

Einei Yisroel brings a different albeit related perspective to our discussion of Avraham Avinu. Greater than the chesed of giving food to his guests was Avraham's introducing his guests to the concept of monotheism, that there is a King Who provides for them and loves them. Prior to Avraham, no one had called Hashem his Lord and Master, his King. By bringing others to acknowledge the Creator and King of the world, Avraham Avinu brought others closer to Hashem and Hashem's presence closer to them. This was the greatest chesed. It is for this that our Sages interpret the Torah verse in Breishit as alluding to Avraham's being the purpose of creation: "Eileh toldot hashamaim v'ha'aretz b'Hebaram.../This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created..." The history and existence of the world was dependent on the life of Av(b)raham, an anagram of Hebaram. For it was through Avraham that Hashem was recognized as King, and because of Avraham that God and mankind could experience the chesed of a relationship based on faith. Our celebration of the Seder and retelling of our exodus from Egypt is a testament of our faith,

of our belief that Hashem controls the world, writes Rabbi Mandelbaum in his Hagaddah.

There are two kinds of mitzvot, writes Rabbi Mandelbaum citing the Malbim. There are eiduyot/testimonies that entrench the story of our redemption in our hearts, and pikudim/commands that are the action mitzvot of the Seder. At the Seder we have both. Similarly, there are two components to faith, logic and spirit. Logic is the language of the mind while imagination is the language of the soul. Therefore, one should recreate the scenes of the exodus in one's imagination, writes Rabbi Bernstein, and when we eat the matzah, we should imagine ourselves eating the matzah as we were about to leave Egypt, appreciate Hashem's greatness and acknowledge the gratitude we owe Him. The very term we use for the liturgy of the Seder night confirms these ideas. We call it haggadah rather than sipur, explains the Malbim. Haggadah connotes relating a personal experience while a sipur is a story that happened to someone else. In fact, posits Rabbi Wolbe z"l, the entire purpose of the exodus was to give us the opportunity to do these mitzvot and draw closer to Hashem.

The Seder is meant to transform us, and the matzah is called therefore the bread of faith writes Rabbi Pincus z"l. With the matzah/faith that we ingested, we no longer fear, for we both know and feel that Hashem's love surrounds me.

The entire enslavement experience was meant to teach us to serve, to train us in humility so that we could become true servants of Hashem and enjoy the blessing of that service (irrespective of other blessings that Hashem may give us) writes Rabbi Roth z"l. That's why before we begin the Shemoneh Esrei/Silent meditation, we review the exodus experience and remember the Song of the Sea. After we acknowledge Hashem as our Redeemer and

bless Him, we should go directly into the Silent Meditation without pause. In that way, one is already living the life of olam habo in this world, totally secure in the presence of his Redeemer.

We think that because we live in a democracy, we are not enslaved. But enslavement comes in many forms, writes Rabbi Belsky z"l. We are enslaved to our desires, and we are enslaved to the values of our host culture. Every character trait is positive until it becomes inflated, like dough with yeast. For example, every person needs self-respect, but when it grows too big, it morphs into arrogance. Every person must be somewhat acquisitive, or he would not have a home, food to eat, or clothes to wear. But when acquisitiveness becomes the goal rather than the means to a worthwhile end, we become enslaved to acquiring wealth at the expense of a life of freedom. While we await the geulah sh'laimah/complete redemption of our nation and the world, we need to work on our personal redemption, on removing the inflation of our character traits so that we free ourselves from all the chains that enslave us and keep us from becoming our true, great selves. The matzah, the bread of poverty, basic bread without the yeast that inflates it, symbolizes the freedom that comes when we rid ourselves of all these influences that cause stress and add no real meaning to our lives. Only through Torah and mitzvot, through serving Hakodosh Boruch Hu, can we cultivate true freedom. Then I am truly able to sing Hallel, to thank and praise Hashem for my freedom.

Avraham Avinu showed the way. He stood opposite all of society to proclaim Hashem as King and Master of the world. He fed others and gave them the key to freedom through faith in God. We celebrate this freedom through the matzah at our Seder table.