

"MEMAAYAN HACHAIM"

Mussar talks from the Magiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

The Holiday of Passover: The Nature of Separation and Distancing from the Nations

The Shelah HaKodesh writes in his commentary on the Hagada Shel Pesach that when one recites the passage "V'Hee She Amda L'avoseinu V'lanu", it is customary to raise the cup of wine and to cover the matza. The simple explanation for this custom is to recognize the "Cup of Salvation" as we offer thanks to the Almighty who "faithfully fulfills His promise" (Heb. Shomer havtachaso) protecting us from the Nations throughout the long exile. With cup in hand, we cover the matza in order not to embarrass them (Trans.-- Just as we do when we make Kiddush on the wine, we cover the challa). Only afterwards, when we've concluded the passage of thanks to HaKadosh Boruch Hu for His protection, we again reveal the matza in order to continue with the recitation of the Hagada.

My Grandfather, the Gaavad of Pinsk, R' Ahron Walkin zt"l., offered an amazing insight to this custom. As we know from our experience in Galus, there is no greater source of blessing for Israel than the distancing of the Jewish people from the non-Jews, in fulfillment of the verse, "It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations" (Bamidbar 23:9). Our being different than and separate from the rest of the nations is the secret reason for our continuity as a people. It is also the foundation for our success maintaining the Torah as it was given to us at Sinai in spite of all of the difficulties and persecutions which have accompanied us throughout the long years of our exile.

Therefore, our Sages instituted ordinances in order to differentiate and separate the Jewish people from the rest of the nations, to protect our distinct national character. The primary protective laws established by Chazal are the prohibitions against wine touched by a non-Jew (yayin nesech) and bread baked by a non-Jew (pas akum). These laws represent the basis for our existence as Jews, insuring we do not assimilate into the surrounding culture. Unfortunately, there are those co-religionists amongst us who incorrectly claim that the proper approach is not to remain separate, to distance ourselves so much from the non-Jews. Rather, they insist, we should remain close to the surrounding culture. It is in this way, they claim, we will be saved from persecution.

Hence, explained my Grandfather, it is specifically on the night of the Seder, the day in which we re-live anew the Exodus from Egypt, the going out from the Jewish nation's initial exile, we make reference to our separation and differentiation from the nations of the world as a preservation of our essence as the Nation of Israel. This is the reason, he explained, why all Jews, on this Night of the Seder, act according to the custom of the Shelah—when the author of the Hagada relates "V'hee she amda", "It is this that has stood by our fathers and by us"—what is the secret reason for the wonderful survival of the Jewish people in exile? We raise the cup of wine, representing the protective ordinance of "yayin nesech", and we cover the matza, representing

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the law of “pas akum” which prevents us from assimilating. In doing these symbolic actions, we testify that we recognize “v’hee she amda”, our nation’s secret for its eternal existence with its Torah intact throughout the long generations of galus, is its separation and differentiation from the non-Jews of the world through the protective laws such as these.

Moreover, this is how we continue to be protected and saved from all the difficulties of the times. Thus, the Baal Hagada continues:

Go and learn what Lavan the Aramean attempted to do to our father Yaakov!

We replace the wine and reveal the matza, representing the environment *without* the protective ordinances of “yayin nesech” and “pas akum”. In this **we respond to those mistaken of our brethren who insist the path of closeness to the goyim will save us—go and learn from what Lavan the Aramean attempted to do to our father Yaakov—there was no greater closeness than that of Yaakov Avinu to Lavan, the father of his wives. And nonetheless, it is just this closeness of Yaakov to Lavan which is the precursor of Galus. The situation degraded even more: “for Pharaoh decreed only against the males, Lavan attempted to uproot everything”. The acts of the ancestors are harbingers for their progeny: whenever we come too close to the nations of the world, they too have attempted to damage us and uproot our entire existence.**

This insight is cited in Rabbi Walkin’s sefer “Metzach Ahron” (Drush 32):

Suffering is vital for Israel, for without pain the Jews would not keep the Torah.

Suffering is the guarantor for the fulfillment of the Torah’s requirements, for if they do not listen to the voice of Hashem and follow the

path of His Torah of their own free will, then Eisav will return them to the correct path.

We see how Hashem expresses His concern that the Jewish people not assimilate with the nations of the world. To the extent that we lose our unique nature and come close to the non-Jews, to that degree will they damage us. This, then, is the deeper intent of the custom articulated by the Shelah to raise the cup of wine and cover the matza when we recite the passage of “V’hee she amda”: the purpose of the holiday of Passover is to instill into ourselves and into our offspring the secret of the survival of the Eternal People throughout the long generations of Exile-- the path to the Exodus from Egypt and to the final exiting from our current Galus is separation and distancing ourselves from the non-Jewish world.

We see this same idea in the words of the Meshech Chochmah on the verse (Shemos 12:22) “. . . no man shall leave the entrance of his house till morning“:

If one analyzes (the situation of the Jewish people in Egypt—Trans.), one will see that while in Egypt, the Jews had forgotten major sections of Torah law (Heb. Gufei Torah). They were described by Scripture as “a nation within another nation” (goy b’kerev Goy), and by our Sages: “these (the Egyptians) were idol worshippers, and these (the Jews) were idol worshippers”. They even had abrogated their covenant of circumcision. Nonetheless, they stringently maintained their observance of the protective ordinances, as the Midrash in Mechilta states, “they did not change their (Jewish) names, they continued to speak their Jewish language (i.e. Hebrew, the holy tongue), and they did not change their uniquely Jewish style of dress”. For this reason, the Torah ordains many protective laws concerning Pesach and chometz in the rubric of “bal yeirae” (the prohibition of seeing one’s chometz)

chometz), since it was through the observance of this type of protective laws that they were redeemed. Therefore, Scripture teaches that “no man shall leave the entrance of his house till morning” so each individual Jew will be “bound” and connected to his people

through protective ordinances. As long as the Divine Light does not shine on him, the tremendous danger of intermingling with the non-Jews—and through that, losing their secret of survival-- is apparent to every Jew.

R' Meir Simcha's profound analysis teaches us that even though the Jews were sunk in the depths of the 49th level of impurity, and they had undone their circumcision, they still had an intense passion and deep emotional drive to protect their Jewish identity, not to assimilate into the non-Jewish nations. This merit, to recognize their peoplehood and their forefathers—so they wouldn't change their names, language, or their mode of dress—stood for them, to save them and redeem them from Egyptian bondage. Therefore, the holiday of Passover was established as an everlasting memorial to their recognition and understanding that the tested and sure way to endure exile, and to leave exile, is only through separation from the nations. Further, we can only maintain this proper distance by following carefully the protective ordinances enacted by our great Sages. It was for this that the Torah commands: “no man shall leave his house till morning”, that is, during Pesach, it is incumbent upon each and every Jew to remain ‘bound and connected’ to his people through these protective laws. The Torah commands the multitude of the protective laws specifically on Pesach to impart to the Jewish people the truth that they are the key to our survival and redemption from exile.

In the Book of Esther (chap. 3), Haman stands before King Achasuerus and tries to convince him with a variety of arguments to execute a decree “to destroy, to slay, and to exterminate

all Jews”. He succeeds with his appeal that “their laws are different from every other people's”. This claim, though, is puzzling in the extreme: every nation's laws are different from any other! Each culture possesses its own character; what was Haman's unique criticism of the Jews?

The explanation is that while all nations have laws which are different from each other, the Jews have laws which are designed to keep them different. It was this insistence on avoiding any assimilation which disturbed Haman and Achasuerus. Indeed, they recognized that just this trait was the source of the success of the Jewish nation, the aspect of character which saved it from disappearing into the surrounding non-Jewish milieu throughout the generations.

At my father's zt"l.'s seder, the most moving part was the recitation, after the drinking of the third cup of wine, of “Shefoch chamascha” (“Pour your wrath upon the nations”, a series of verses from Psalms and Lamentations—Trans.). After we had filled the cup of Eliyahu and opened the door of our home, my father zt"l. would burst forth in emotional crying as he recited this part of the Hagada. Torrents of tears poured from his eyes as he recalled the memories of all the sufferings and pogroms he had endured. “Only when we remember well the non-Jew and all of his hatred for us can we show Eliyahu the Prophet that we merit and are ready for the Redemption,” he would say. Only when we show our distaste for and our distancing from the nations, that we have not been absorbed into their culture, only then are we fit to be redeemed and to quit the Exile. This is precisely the idea we've discussed in the previous paragraphs.

I once heard from my father, ob”m, R' Shmuel Dovid Walkin zt"l, a thought that while said somewhat in jest, certainly is appropriate to our discussion. He noted that Jews seem to have a propensity to divide themselves into multiple

groups, communities, and parties, each with its own background and point-of-view. And, he pointed out, the various groups do not seem to get along well. What, he asked, is the reason for this unfortunate reality?

The answer, my father, obm. said, is that since throughout the Exile Jews have been forced to live amongst the non-Jews, they have adopted certain of the natural characteristic of their hosts. Each Jew has, to a certain degree, a percentage of “non-Jewishness” in his makeup. Thus, in his words, “The Jews within us get along excellently with each other; it is the non-Jew buried within which has difficulty! Russian, Hungarian, or Litvak, they can’t get along, but the Jews— as the verse says, ‘It is a nation that will dwell in solitude ‘.” Amazing!

Every year on Seder night, two alternatives are presented before our eyes: 1) to separate ourselves from the nations of the world and make ourselves distinct from their culture, or 2) to come close to them and join in their society. The consequences of each of these options are clear. The author of the Hagada shows us tangibly in the passage, “V’hee she amda”, “And it stood for us”, that the proper path is one of separation and distance from the non-Jewish world. The word “v’hee” (Heb. and it) connotes separation, and just as we see in Egypt that the prominent aspect of the Jews’ conduct was that they wouldn’t change their names, language, or their mode of dress, so too we understand that the distancing ordinances (of yayin nesech and pas akum—Trans.) hold the key to our Exodus from Egypt.

Hence, the Shelah tells us of the custom just at this point in the Hagaddic text is to raise the cup of wine and cover the matza, as this custom is the foundation and depth of the entire holiday of Passover, showing our conduct throughout the generations—strict observance of the distancing laws established by the greatest of our people. Also, specifically now, during the holiday of Pesach, it is vital to fulfill the Scriptural command: “no man shall leave the entrance of his house till morning”, to remain within the confines of the Jewish home, with all of its protective restrictions, eating matza, the symbol of the simple, pure Jewish character, with no admixture of chometz, G-d forbid, representing assimilation and attachment to the nations and breaking the boundaries of Judaism. In this way, may we be successful to endure the Galus and to merit our personal “Exodus from Egypt” in our generation.



[Written and translated according
to understanding of writers]

**The shmuess for the month of Iyar will
be published be”H the week of Parshas
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