

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

Sponsored by Arlene Pianko Groner and family
in memory of her Uncle Sol Pianko, z"l,
whose yahrzeit is 22 Nissan,
and his brother, her Uncle Norman Pianko, z"l,
whose yahrzeit was 3 Nissan

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Pesach Issue

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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Short Thoughts for Pesach

Pesach is the oldest and most transformative story of hope ever told. It tells of how an otherwise undistinguished group of slaves found their way to freedom from the greatest and longest-lived empire of their time, indeed of any time. It tells the revolutionary story of how the supreme Power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless. It is a story of the defeat of probability by the force of possibility. It defines what it is to be a Jew: a living symbol of hope.

Turning Curses into Blessings

Genesis ends on an almost serene note. Jacob has found his long lost son. The family has been reunited. Joseph has forgiven his brothers. Under his protection and influence the family has settled in Goshen, one of the most prosperous regions of Egypt. They now have homes, property, food, the protection of Joseph and the favor of Pharaoh. It must have seemed one of the golden moments of Abraham's family's history.

Then, as has happened so often since, "There arose a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph." There was a political climate change. The family fell out of favor. Pharaoh told his advisers: "Look, the Israelite people are becoming too numerous and strong for us" (Shemot 1:9)1 – the first time the word "people" is used in the Torah with reference to the children of Israel. "Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase." And so the whole mechanism of oppression moves into operation: forced labor that turns into slavery that becomes attempted genocide.

The story is engraved in our memory. We tell it every year, and in summary-form in our prayers, every day. It is part of what it is to be a Jew. Yet there is one phrase that shines out from the narrative: "But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread." That, no less than oppression itself, is part of what it means to be a Jew.

By Janet Rottenberg, Mindy & Shmuel Tolchinsky & Family, Simi & Sammy Franco & Family, and Jerry Rottenberg to commemorate the 14th Yahrzeit of Melvin Rottenberg, Menachem Mendel ben Tzvi Yehuda, z"l, beloved husband, father and grandfather on the 9th of Nissan. May his Neshama have an Aliyah from this learning

The worse things get, the stronger we become. Jews are the people who not only survive but thrive in adversity.

Jewish history is not merely a story of Jews enduring catastrophes that might have spelled the end to less tenacious groups. It is that after every disaster, Jews renewed themselves. They discovered some hitherto hidden reservoir of spirit that fuelled new forms of collective self-expression as the carriers of G-d's message to the world.

Every tragedy begat new creativity. After the division of the kingdom following the death of Solomon came the great literary prophets, Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Out of the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile came the renewal of Torah in the life of the nation, beginning with Ezekiel and culminating in the vast educational programme brought back to Israel by Ezra and Nehemiah. From the destruction of the Second Temple came the immense literature of rabbinic Judaism, until then preserved mostly in the form of an oral tradition: Mishnah, Midrash and Gemara.

From the Crusades came the Chassidei Ashkenaz, the North European school of piety and spirituality. Following the Spanish expulsion came the mystic circle of Tzfat: Lurianic Kabbalah and all it inspired by way of poetry and prayer. From East European persecution and poverty came the Chassidic movement and its revival of grass-roots Judaism through a seemingly endless flow of story and song. And from the worst tragedy of all in human terms, the Holocaust, came the rebirth of the State of Israel, the greatest collective Jewish affirmation of life in more than two thousand years.

It is well known that the Chinese ideogram for "crisis" also means "opportunity". Any civilization that can see the blessing within the curse, the fragment of light within the heart of darkness, has within it the capacity to endure. Hebrew goes one better. The word for crisis, mashber, also means "a child-birth chair." Written into the semantics of Jewish consciousness is the idea that the pain of hard times is a collective form of the contractions of a woman giving birth. Something new is being born. That is the mindset of a people of whom it can be said that "the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread."

Where did it come from, this Jewish ability to turn weakness into strength, adversity into

advantage, darkness into light? It goes back to the moment in which our people received its name, Israel. It was then, as Jacob wrestled alone at night with an angel, that as dawn broke his adversary begged him to let him go. "I will not let you go until you bless me," said Jacob (Bereishit 32:27). That is the source of our peculiar, distinctive obstinacy. We may have fought all night. We may be tired and on the brink of exhaustion. We may find ourselves limping, as did Jacob. Yet we will not let our adversary go until we have extracted a blessing from the encounter. This turned out to be not a minor and temporary concession. It became the basis of his new name and our identity. Israel, the people who "wrestled with G-d and man and prevailed," is the nation that grows stronger with each conflict and catastrophe.

I was reminded of this unusual national characteristic by an article that appeared in the British press in October 2015. Israel at the time was suffering from a wave of terrorist attacks that saw Palestinians murdering innocent civilians in streets and bus stations throughout the country. It began with these words: "Israel is an astonishing country, buzzing with energy and confidence, a magnet for talent and investment – a cauldron of innovation." It spoke of its world-class excellence in aerospace, clean-tech, irrigation systems, software, cyber-security, pharmaceuticals and defense systems.²

"All this," the writer went on to say, "derives from brainpower, for Israel has no natural resources and is surrounded by hostile neighbors." The country is living proof of "the power of technical education, immigration and the benefits of the right sort of military service." Yet this cannot be all, since Jews have consistently overachieved, wherever they were and whenever they were given the chance. He goes through the various suggested explanations: the strength of Jewish families, their passion for education, a desire for self-employment, risk-taking as a way of life, and even ancient history. The Levant was home to the world's first agricultural societies and earliest traders. Perhaps, then, the disposition to enterprise was written, thousands of years ago, into Jewish DNA. Ultimately, though, he concludes that it has to do with "culture and communities."

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A key element of that culture has to do with the Jewish response to crisis. To every adverse circumstance, those who have inherited Jacob's sensibilities insist: "I will not let you go until you bless me" (Bereishit 32:27). That is how Jews, encountering the Negev, found ways of making the desert bloom. Seeing a barren, neglected landscape elsewhere, they planted trees and forests. Faced with hostile armies on all their borders, they developed military technologies they then turned to peaceful use. War and terror forced them to develop medical expertise and world-leading skills in dealing with the aftermath of trauma. They found ways of turning every curse into a blessing.

The historian Paul Johnson, as always, put it eloquently: "Over 4,000 years the Jews proved themselves not only great survivors but extraordinarily skilful in adapting to the societies among which fate had thrust them, and in gathering whatever human comforts they had to offer. No people has been more fertile in enriching poverty or humanizing wealth, or in turning misfortune to creative account."³

There is something profoundly spiritual as well as robustly practical about this ability to transform the bad moments of life into a spur to creativity. It is as if, deep within us were a voice saying, "You are in this situation, bad though it is, because there is a task to perform, a skill to acquire, a strength to develop, a lesson to learn, an evil to redeem, a shard of light to be rescued, a blessing to be uncovered, for I have chosen you to give testimony to humankind that out of suffering can come great blessings if you wrestle with it for long enough and with unshakeable faith."

In an age in which people of violence are committing acts of brutality in the name of the G-d of compassion, the people of Israel are proving daily that this is not the way of the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of life and the sanctity of life. And whenever we who are a part of that people lose heart, and wonder when it will ever end, we should recall the words: "The more they were oppressed, the more they increased and the more they spread." A people of whom that can be said can be injured, but can never be defeated. G-d's way is the way of life.

1 This is the first intimation in history of what in modern times took the form of the Russian forgery, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. In the Diaspora, Jews – powerless – were often seen as all-powerful. What this usually means, when translated, is: How is it that Jews manage to evade the pariah status we have assigned to them?

2 Luke Johnson, 'Animal Spirits: Israel and its tribe of risk-taking entrepreneurs,' Sunday Times, 4 October 2015.

3 Paul Johnson, The History of the Jews, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, p. 58.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them travel'" (Exodus 14:15)

The climax of the Festival of Passover, the festival's seventh day which we will be celebrating in a few days, commemorates the splitting of the Re(e)d Sea, which teaches one of the most important messages of our Exodus from Egypt.

The Hebrews have been traveling in the desert for three days, distancing themselves from the Egyptians. God then gives a strange commandment to Moses: "Speak to the Children of Israel and let them turn back; and camp before the entrance to the Temples of Horus between the Tower and the Sea in front of the Idol Master of the North, encamping near the sea." (Exodus 14: 2)

Apparently, God wanted Pharaoh to believe that the Hebrews were lost in the desert, thus tempting him to pursue them and bring them back to slavery in Egypt. This is precisely what happens.

The Hebrews hear the Egyptian hordes – replete with 600 chariots – approaching from behind them; in front of them lies the Re(e)d Sea. The Hebrews are in turmoil. They seem to be in an impossible situation, devoid of any meaningful exit plan. Ibn Ezra argues that they could have assembled an army of hundreds of thousands, but this possibility did not even occur to them. Twice within the first nine verses of this chapter, the Bible identifies the names of their encampment. They are positioned before "Pi Hahiroth," which we previously identified with the Temple of Horus, but which could well be translated as "Freedom Way" or "Bay of Freedom" (the Hebrew word *herut* means freedom and is closely allied to *hirot*, which can also be connected to the Egyptian god Horus). They face the Idol Master of the North.

The Bible may well be telling us that these newly freed slaves are standing on the cusp of freedom, literally between Egyptian enslavement and Jewish liberation.

Idolatry as a political philosophy removes the possibility of meaningful action from the hands of human beings; all they can do is to attempt to propitiate the gods by bribing them with petty sacrifices into effectuating whatever they need. Judaism, on the other hand, sees human beings as God's chosen partners within the cosmic drama with a mission being to perfect the world in the Kingship of God.

The Israelites remain strongly influenced by Egyptian idolatry. The possibility of waging war against their Egyptian pursuers doesn't even enter their minds.

The only thing they can do is cry out to God in prayer, saying, "Are there not enough graves in Egypt that you had to take us into the desert to die?" (Exodus 14: 11) Moses also seems to be insufficiently imbued with the true message of freedom and the necessity of fighting for it even unto death. He admonishes the nation not to fear, to stand by and watch the salvation of

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the Lord: "God will do battle for you; you must merely be silent."

The second half of this chapter – which is divided into two equal halves – has God chide Moses for his passive advice: "Why are you crying out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them go forward" (Exodus 14: 15). Rashi quotes a midrash which puts the following words into God's mouth: "This is not the time for a lengthy prayer, Israel is in such terrible trouble; speak to the Children of Israel and let them move on".

What is God telling them to do? If they jump into the Re(e)d Sea, they will most likely drown. Our Sages tell us that we dare not rely on miracles; we must always act to the utmost of our ability.

Clearly, God was asking them to demonstrate by their actions that they understood the value of freedom, and that they were willing to choose death over enslavement. For to live the life of a slave without the freedom to direct one's own destiny was worse than death itself. God was telling them through Moses that they must jump into the Re(e)d Sea and thereby publicly declare, "Give me liberty or give me death."

Our Sages teach us that "One who comes to purify [himself or others], will be helped from on High" (Shabbat 104a). That is not necessarily guaranteed – we are not to rely on miracles – but it can happen. In this case, after the first Israelites jumped into the sea, God miraculously divided it, enabling the Israelites to cross safely but drowning the pursuing Egyptians.

The Jews were only helped, however, when they demonstrated that liberty was more important to them than life itself.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Why during Pesach do we exclaim, "Leshanah haba'ah b'Yerushalaim," – "Next year in Jerusalem"?

Rabbi Nosson Finkel, the Sabbah of Slobodka, used to explain that the primary purpose of 'aliyat haregel' – making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem – was for the sake of sasson, to benefit from the elation that that city gives to the world. He would quote the verse in Psalm 48, "Mesos kol ha'aretz," – Jerusalem gives elation to the world.

It's actually interesting that in the midrash we learn that Rabbi Yochanan tells us that in temple times there was a business centre which was situated outside Jerusalem. That's where all business deals were made. And the reason? Because sometimes in business matters, there are some people who emerge disappointed or saddened, and there should be no disappointment, no sadness whatsoever within the walls of Jerusalem.

Indeed, Jerusalem is not just a place of happiness, it's a place of elation. And that's why, in our prayers over the High Holy Days, we say, "Simcha l'artzechah vesasson l'irechah." – "Please, God, give happiness to your Holy Land and elation to your holy City of Jerusalem."

Additionally in the Lechah Dodi melody that we sing on Friday nights, we say, "Yasiss alayich Elokayich kimsos chatan v'kallah." – "O Jerusalem, may God give you the elation which is similar to that of a bride and groom under their chuppah."

During the festival of Pesach, we are blessed as individuals, as family, as communities, and as a nation to have the simcha of the yomtov – deep and wonderful joy. But at this time we pray that God will bless us with added joy, and we say, "Leshanah haba'ah b'Yerushalaim." – "Please God, next year may we have the sasson of Jerusalem."

And indeed, at what point in the seder proceedings do we say "Leshanah haba'ah b'Yerushalaim"? We first exclaim in 'chasal siddur Pesach' "beduyim leTzion b'rina" – "Please God, enable us to be redeemed in Zion with joy, and immediately after the word joy comes "Leshanah haba'ah b'Yerushalaim."

That is our prayer, that we will indeed enjoy the ultimate happiness which will come to our people with the full redemption. May we all indeed be in Jerusalem next year – Leshanah haba'ah b'Yerushalaim.

Ha Lachma - The gift of Freedom

Did we ever imagine that the words we have just read would resonate so painfully as they do this year? In the Ha Lachma passage we declare, Hashatta avdei, leshanah haba'ah benei chorin – This year we are slaves, next year may we all be free. Sadly, some of us this year are quite literally being held in captivity. We celebrate Pesach filled with deep concern for all the hostages. May every single one of them be freed and come speedily home to the embrace of their families.

In our tradition, there are two prime words for freedom, chofesh and cherut. Chofesh means 'freedom from'. Freedom from the control of others; freedom from captivity. This is the type of freedom alluded to by the term benei chorin. To celebrate one's chofesh, one could be doing absolutely nothing. What's important is that the shackles of captivity have been removed. On the other hand, cherut is 'freedom to'. It is taken from the term charut, meaning 'engraved', used by the Torah to describe the words that were engraved on the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, representing our aspirations to live responsibly. We are charged to use our cherut by tirelessly striving to make a contribution of great value to our environment and to act in the finest spirit of Jewish values. Our challenge this year is clear. Let us guarantee that we utilise our cherut so that our brothers and sisters held in cruel

captivity will finally be granted their chofesh. We may not rest nor tire nor be silent, until every single one of us is free – until we are all benei chorin

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Mordechai Willig: Dry Bones

I. "The valley was filled with many very dry bones" (Yechezkel 37:1,2. haftarah of Shabbos Chol HaMoed Pesach). "Hashem said to me "These bones [represent] all of Bais Yisrael. They say, 'Our bones are dried out, and our hope is lost (avda tikvaseinu)'" (37:11). "Tell them 'I will put my spirit into you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your soil'" (37:14). The eternal message in these pesukim refers to the final resurrection of the dead, which will take place in Nissan (Mishna Berurah 490:14). The reality of "many very dry bones" in Auschwitz is seared in the collective memory of "all of Bais Yisrael". The miraculous rebirth of Am Yisrael on its soil just three years later proved that, contrary to our saying "our bones are dried out and our hope is lost", od lo avda tikvaseinu - our hope is not lost at all.

Sadly, our enemies continue to try to destroy us. Tragically, on Simchas Torah, they reached our soil and killed hundreds of innocent civilians, violating their bodies, before and after killing them, and burning many beyond recognition.

Haman planned, "lehashmid, laharog u'l'abed es kol haYehudim - to destroy, kill and eliminate all the Jews" (Esther 3:13). The Vilna Ga'on teaches that Amalek tries to defile us (see Rashi, Devarim 25:18), as in shmad - spiritual destruction, kill us, and even burn our bodies. The Nazis, who burned our bodies in crematoria, were the Amalek of the 20th century, and Hamas is the Amalek of the 21st century.

Haman, Hitler and Hamas all vow to kill us all (Esther 9:24, see Ramban Megillah 2a). The Rav zt"l (whose 31st yohrtzeit is on erev Shabbos) quoted that his father Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik zt"l taught that any nation that wants to kill all the Jews is, by definition, Amalek, irrespective of its genealogical roots. The Rambam (Hilchos Melachim 5:4-5) states that we can no longer identify the seven nations that we must eliminate because Sancheirev intermingled all the nations (as described in the mishna, Yadayim 4:4), but this does not apply to Amalek, because any nation that vows to destroy us is considered by halacha to be Amalek (Kol Dodi Dofek, footnote #23). For this reason, the Rav initially opposed German reparations (Nefesh Harav p. 87).

II. Last year, I visited Machane Shura, the headquarters of the Chief Rabbinate of Tzahal, accompanied by 5 members of my immediate family. Rav Binyamin Zimmerman, a member of the Rabbinate of the Israeli Army who arranged the visit, introduced us to the head of

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the halacha department, Harav Avihud Shwartz. His presentation of the complex questions dealt with by the department was scintillating. He demonstrated a depth of knowledge and a finely tuned approach to the halachic system worthy of a posek well beyond his approximately forty years. His reverence for mori v'rabi Harav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l, with whom he learned for nine years, was remarkable. The combination of broad Talmudic scholarship, halachic mastery and personal sensitivity which permeated Harav Schwartz's brilliant and lengthy shiur reflected his rebbi's unforgettable persona, and is a tribute to both rebbi and talmid.

If Harav Schwartz dazzled our minds, the next presenter, Rav Menachem Wechsler, penetrated our hearts. A twenty-seven-year veteran of the army chevra kadisha, his vast experience in the excruciating holy work of honoring the remains of fallen Israeli soldiers has done nothing to dim the emotional aspect of his virtuous personality and powerful presentation. Speaking in the spacious new (two-year-old) facility, he showed us the rooms used for tahara, cleaning the body. One was designated for female soldiers, another had a mikva.

On October 7, Simchas Torah, hundreds of bodies overwhelmed the facility. Most martyrs were civilians and thus Tzahal did not have the identifying data that they record for all soldiers. There was no record of who was missing, and no knowledge of who was taken hostage. Many bodies were burned beyond recognition.

Rav Wechsler's heart-rending description of the heroic non-stop work of identifying the bodies, often using DNA, was overwhelming and unforgettable. The professionalism, including a trip to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, which is the top DNA lab in the world, matched the idealism of the devoted male and female chevra kadisha, in establishing certain identity, legally and halachically, as quickly as possible. Rav Wechsler's final speech in the "cheder preida", the room where families of the victims bade them farewell, was emotionally overpowering. He called the room "Kodesh Kodashim", the Holy of Holies, and read a letter written by a bereaved father, filled with faith and pathos.

Rav Zimmerman then took us to a room filled with sifrei Torah from all parts of the world, donated to fulfill the needs of the soldiers throughout Eretz Yisrael and in Gaza. Even the ones unfit for use represent the eternity of our people, despite the constant efforts to destroy us. According to Rav Yaakov Emden (Sulam Beis El, p. 8), the unique historical phenomenon of a nation that has outlived all of the powerful empires that sought to destroy it and has survived with the Torah intact, is a greater miracle than those that Hashem performed for our ancestors in Mitzrayim.

III. On motzaei Shabbos (6 Nissan), Hashem again performed a miracle for His people on His soil. Over three hundred missiles, rockets and drones were launched by Iran in an unprecedented attack on Israel. Not one Jew was harmed, a statistical impossibility notwithstanding the Iron Dome and other devices.

We are dutybound to thank and praise Hashem for the incredible miracle. More than one rabbi, citing the Netziv (Sheilta 26:1), opined that there was a Torah commandment to recite Hallel on the day of the miracle.

One of the many miracles that took place on the night of Pesach is described in the Haggadah, citing the opening passuk of the haftorah of the eighth day of Pesach (Yeshaya 10:32), "Today he (Sancheirev) will stand in Nov." His huge army encamped there overnight, ready to enter and destroy Yerushalayim the next day. Hashem had said that the king of Ashur will not enter the city (Melachim 2, 19:32), and indeed, on that Pesach night, Hashem killed one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrian soldiers.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 94a) criticizes Chizkiyahu for not reciting shira immediately upon the miracle of the soldiers' death. The Emek B'racha (Hallel al HaNes p. 124,125), citing Rav Chaim of Brisk, says that Tehillim (13:6) teaches us: "I trust in Your kindness, my heart will exult in Your salvation. I will sing to Hashem because He saved me". Even one who is one hundred percent sure that Hashem will save him must sing to Hashem only after the miracle has occurred.

The medrash (Shir Hashirim Raba 4:19) gives Chizkiyahu's excuse, citing the penultimate passuk of the same haftorah (Yeshayahu 12:5), "Hashem's miracles are known throughout the world." He therefore thought that there was no need for a new shira. This is incorrect, however, and prevented Chizkiyahu from becoming the mashiach. We dare not repeat this mistake; we must thank Hashem for the miracle we experienced.

The Medrash Raba (Shemos 18:5) recounts that on that fateful night of Pesach, while surrounded by enemy forces and impending doom, Chizkiyahu recited Hallel, while the people were frightened. The Yefe To'ar says that they were unaware of Yeshayahu's prophecy that Sancheirev would not reach the city. In the morning, they arose to recite the Shema and daven Shachris k'vasikin (Etz Yosef). The Eshed Hanechalim says that this demonstrates the greatness of the bitachon of Chizkiyahu. Their Hallel is described by Yeshayahu (30:29), "The song will be yours like the night of the holiday's consecration." The Ra'avad (Hilchos Chanukah 3:6) states that this is the source for our obligation to recite Hallel.

Presumably, Chizkiyahu's tremendous faith diminished his realization of the obligation to

recite Hallel immediately. He expected all along to be saved. Similarly, Am Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael is "melumad b'nissim", accustomed to miracles. However, we must not allow ourselves, in Israel or in the diaspora, to fail to recognize the great miracle that occurred. We must, on Pesach, thank and sing to Hashem for it.

The Malbim (Yeshayahu 30:29) writes that as the simcha of Yisrael increased when they recited Hallel and thanked Hashem when they offered the korban Pesach, the destruction of the encampment of Ashur increased correspondingly.

In Tehillim (118:14,15) the Malbim interprets the phrase, "kol rena v'yeshua" to mean when the rejoicing of Hallel began, the sound of salvation came; as they began to sing and to thank Hashem, so came the salvation. We hope and pray that our Hallel will save us from our foes.

We approach Pesach, still horrified by the pogrom of Simchas Torah, still praying for the safe return of the hostages, still heartbroken after all the suffering of the last seven months since the last chag. Yet, at the same time, we thank Hashem for saving us from the much worse fate that our enemies planned, and for the amazing faith of Am Yisrael.

The haftorahs of Shabbos Chol Hamoad and acharon shel Pesach teach us that the dry bones of Yechezkel's prophecy will come to life on our soil. The partial fulfillment of that prophecy via the remnants of Auschwitz establishing a State which belies the doomsday predictions of then and now that avda tikvaseinu and that sings od lo avda tikvaseinu, has occurred. We fervently pray and await the fulfillment of the prophecy of Yeshayahu (11:1-16), i.e. the arrival of Mashiach, a descendant of David and Yishai, which will usher in an era of peace. He will gather in our dispersed people, and the world will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem. May it happen speedily in our days.

Rabbi Hershel Schachter Our Beloved Hears, Even in Our Silence

The Mishna (Pesachim 116a) records that the Chachomim established that the mitzvah of sippur yetzi'as Mitzrayim which we observe on the night of the seder should be fulfilled in a specific form of talmud Torah: we should recite the pesukim of "Arami oveid avi" (Devarim 26:5-9) and give the commentary of the Torah Sheb'al Peh on each phrase of the pesukim. We combine Torah Sheb'al Peh with the Torah Sheb'ksav. On many occasions in his public shiurim, Rav Solovitchik repeated the comments of the Ma'aseh Nissim[1] to explain this combination. Each time we give an interpretation of the Torah Sheb'al Peh on each phrase of "Arami oveid avi", we are exposing an addition level of interpretation over and above the simple translation of the words by quoting a different passuk which teaches some additional point. For example, the simple

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translation of the passuk, "va'nitz'ak el Hashem elokey avoseinu" etc. (ibid 25:7) is that on the occasion of yetzi'as Mitzrayim our ancestors prayed to Hashem, He listened to their prayers and brought them out of Mitzrayim. The Rabbis who authored the Haggadah interpreted that passuk to mean that our ancestors never really prayed; they did not know how to pray! Rather, Pharaoh died, the masters in Egypt then made the Jews work harder than ever resulting in the Jews crying out in anguish over this burden of slavery, and Hashem in His kindness and love for the Jewish people considered it as if we had prayed and He redeemed us.

Many of the Jews in Eretz Yisroel who suffered in the last half year are secular people who are not in the practice of davening. Because so many strange things were happening this year, they obviously must have felt in their hearts that there is an all-powerful Boreh Olam who is running this world and Hakodosh Boruch Hu certainly has considered their expressions of pain and anguish as if they had offered tefillos.

The Gemara tells us that Chizkiyahu Hamelech acted improperly by not expressing Hallel v'hodoah over the miraculous redemption that the Jewish people experienced from the armies of Sancheirev, and he was therefore punished. After such a long and drawn-out war in which so many Jewish soldiers have lost their lives, and after long drawn-out negotiations with Hamas over release of the hostages which led to nothing, the Jewish people experienced a fantastic miracle last motzaei Shabbos. Several hundred missiles and drones were sent by Iran to attack Israel. These weapons of war must have cost Iran billions of dollars, and yet hardly any damage was caused to Israel. The entire Jewish people, all over the world, really ought to sing Hallel v'hodoah over this neis. However, the Jewish nation is so numb and emotionally drained by the atrocities of the pogrom which occurred on Simchas Torah and the losses that we have suffered in the ongoing war that most of us did not even think of offering Hallel v'hoda'ah. Hakodosh Boruch Hu, out of his love and kindness towards his chosen nation, will certainly consider it as if we davened to Him in the most proper fashion and as if we offered the proper hoda'ah al ha'neis, as he did at the time of yetzias Mitzrayim.

Just as the Torah Sheb'al Peh reads in between the lines of the Chumash and exposes additional levels of interpretation, so too Hakodosh Boruch Hu reads in between the lines of what we say and how we act and considers it as if we have davened properly and offered the proper hoda'ah. May He redeem us today just as he redeemed us at the time of yetzi'as Mitzrayim.

[1] The commentary on the Haggadah by the author of Nesivos HaMishpat, Rabbi Yaakov (Lorberbaum) of Lissa.

Now, Chew on That

For seven days you shall eat Matzos, but on the preceding day you shall clear away all leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leaven from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. (Shemos: 12:15)

What are the testimonies (AIDOS), the statutes (CHUKIM), and the judgments (MISHPATIM) that HASHEM our G-d has commanded you? – Question of the Wise Son in the Haggadah

And even you should instruct him regarding the laws of the Pesach (offering). We are not eating (dessert) after the Pesach Afikomen. – Answer Offered to the Wise Son in the Haggadah

This is a dialogue that is waiting to be decoded? What is being asked by this “Wise Son”? What is he being answered? Maybe from the answer we can figure out the nature of his question?

The Sefas Emes picks up on a seemingly subtle point in the question. How is the wise son asking about the category of Mitzvos known as Chukim? Chukim by definition cannot be explained! That may be the key to the answer he is given. Correct, Chukim are not understandable! They are not meant to be grasped by the human intellect. We do them as one who obeys a doctor. We defer to his expertise in this area. In our pedestrian lives we do it all the time. A doctor who spent years studying human anatomy and pharmacology prescribes a certain medicine to help us get better. We do not delay taking the medicine until we too have mastered physiology and pharmacology, and only if we agree with his decision do we take the medicine. By that time, it might be too late. So, we take it based on his superior knowledge.

Now we get the business of the answer. Nowadays we don’t have a Korbon Pesach, a lamb to eat on Pesach night. The final taste that we are left with is that big piece of Matzah that was set aside and reserved specifically for the end of the Seder. That is the dessert of the Pesach Seder. How is that a helpful answer given to this wise son?

Here, again the Sefas Emes explains an important foundational point. Yes, Chukim cannot be understood in advance of their performance but they can be afterwards.

In the analogy of the doctor prescribing medicine, the patient may not comprehend the effectiveness of the medicine prior to his taking it, but he sure can appreciate it after the fact. So too, with Chukim. Matzos and Mitzvos (which are made up of the same letters) may not seem so appealing before we begin munching on them, but they can be appreciated afterwards. We are being invited at

the Pesach Seder to acquire a taste for Matzos and Mitzvos!

In the Torah universe Mitzvos and Matzos begin with an element of Chok, the hidden ingredient, but they end up with a Taam, literally a taste, but also a reason. We can detect the wisdom only after doing. In the general world things start out with a Taam, a delicious flavor or even a reason and end up as a Chok, a habit, an addiction, a blind and mindless custom that the one who is doing it cannot explain or arrest himself from doing. So, it goes with cigarettes and cell phones and endless daily life consuming deeds. Even after the flavor is gone the habit of action lives on. Very often, it ends up like empty calories for the soul, as King Solomon tells us repeatedly in Koheles, “Vainities of vanities everything is vanities!” It may seem attractive and delicious at first but it ultimately disappoints and doesn’t let go. Someone said with brutal self-honesty, “The day I enjoyed my Maserati the most was the day before I got it!” Ain’t it the truth! Everything is overrated except for breathing!

So many things in life overstate and underdeliver and yet Matzos and Mitzvos seem so understated and then they way over-deliver! Why is that so? Mitzvos and Matzos are so satisfying because they reach the big itch of the human soul and that is they bring us closer to HASHEM. Nothing else has that hidden ingredient! Perhaps that is why we eat Matzos on Pesach and why we don’t allow any other distracting dessert flavor at the end of the Seder. We want to “taste and see that HASHEM is good”, as Dovid HaMelech writes in Tehillim. Taste it and see for yourself! Literally, internalize the idea. Don’t just meditate on it. No, take it into your being and savor the flavor. Become intimate with the notion that Mitzvos are really where it’s at. That is the answer to the wise son. My boy, please don’t be so cerebral. Now, chew on that!

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

“Who Passed Over the Houses of the Children of Israel”

**By Harav Yaakov Medan
I. “It Is the Sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover”**

And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say to you, “What do you mean by this service?” that you shall say, “It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover (*pesach*), who passed over (*pasach*) the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He smote Egypt, and delivered our houses”... (Shemos 12:26-27)

The Torah explains the term “*pesach*” with the fact that God passed over (*pasach*) the houses of the children of Israel and rescued them. The accepted understanding of this verse is that God Himself came down to smite the firstborn of Egypt, as Chazal have expounded: “For I shall pass through the land of Egypt” – I Myself, and not an angel; “And I shall smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt” – I

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Myself, and not a seraph; “And against all the gods of Egypt I shall execute judgment” – I myself, and not a messenger; “I am the Lord” – I am He, there is no other. (Pesach Haggada)

It was God Himself who saw the paschal blood on the doorposts of the houses of Israel, passed over them, and refrained from smiting them. According to this understanding, God’s “passing over” means that He refrained from taking action. When God smote the firstborn of Egypt, He refrained from harming the firstborn of Israel. This interpretation gave rise to the popular expression “*pose’ach al shetei ha-se’ipim*” in reference to a person who refrains from deciding which path to choose.

I have three difficulties with the accepted explanation.

1) How did the blood on the doorposts cause God to refrain from smiting the firstborn of Israel (unless this was a “royal decree,” without reason, that the houses with blood on their doorways would not suffer harm)?

2) The plain sense of the verses seems to imply just the opposite – God Himself did not strike the firstborn of Egypt, but it was precisely His agent, the “destroyer” (*mashchit*), who did so:

For the Lord will pass through to smite Egypt; and when He sees the blood upon the lintel and on the two sideposts, the Lord will pass over the door, **and will not allow the destroyer (*mashchit*) to come into your houses to smite you.** (Shemos 12:23)

And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, **and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you (*le-mashchit*),** when I smite the land of Egypt. (Shemos 12:13)

3) The source of the expression “*pose’ach al shetei ha-se’ipim*” is found in the words of the prophet Eliyahu on Mount Carmel: “How long will you go hopping between two branches? If the Lord be God, follow Him, but if Ba’al, then follow him” (I *Melakhim* 18:21). The original meaning of the expression is not “refraining from taking either path,” but rather following both! The people of Israel in the days of Achav worshipped both God and Ba’al, like a bird who builds its nest on two branches (*se’ipim*), hopping back and forth (*pose’ach*) between them.

II. “And He Said to the Angel That Destroyed, ‘It Is Enough, Now Hold Your Hand’”

The source of the *derasha* in the Pesach Haggada seems to be a passage cited in two places in the *Yerushalmi*: “When the Merciful came to redeem Israel, He sent neither an agent, nor an angel, but rather it was He Himself. As it is written: “And I shall pass through the land of Egypt” – He and His entire entourage. (*Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 2:1; see also *Horayot* 3:1)

In this *derasha*, what is attributed to God is the redemption of Israel, and not the smiting of the firstborn.

It seems, then, that God did not pass over the houses of Israel in the sense that He skipped from one house to the next and refrained from acting upon them. To the contrary, He passed over them in the sense that His *Shekhina* hovered over them. The act of destruction He handed over to an agent, and it was he – the destroying agent – who smote the firstborn of Egypt. But God was not prepared to hand over to an agent the task of protecting His firstborn son, Israel, so that the destroyer should not enter through his doorway. He Himself – as it were – hopped from one Israelite house to another, stood over them and prevented the destroyer from entering and causing harm. The paschal blood placed on the doorposts of the houses was like sacrificial blood, which in later generations would be placed on the corners of the altar. Every Israelite house achieved the status of an altar, and the *Shekhina* rested upon it, in the sense of “I saw the Lord standing beside the altar” (*Amos 9:1*).

We find a similar relationship between God and His angel in another place as well. This is what was said at Mount Moriah, when God revealed Himself to David, His anointed one: **And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it. And as He was about to destroy, the Lord beheld, and He relented of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, “It is enough, now hold your hand.”** And the angel of the Lord stood by the threshing floor of Ornan the Yevusite. And David lifted up his eyes, and saw the angel of the Lord standing between the earth and the heaven, with a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, who were clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces. And David said to God, “Is it not I who commanded the people to be numbered? So that it is I who have sinned and done very wickedly; but as for these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray You, O Lord, my God, be on me, and on my father’s house, but not on Your people, that they should be plagued.” Then the angel of the Lord commanded Gad to say to David that David should go up, and set up an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Ornan the Yevusite. (*I Divrei Ha-yamim 21:15-18*)

The angel was the destroyer, and God protected His people and did not allow the destroyer to destroy them. His protection of His people came simultaneously with the setting up of the altar on Mount Moriah and with the designation of the place where the *Shekhina* would reveal itself.

III. “He Will Defend It and Deliver It; He Will Pass Over It and Spare It” - God acted in the same manner on Pesach of a later generation, when the armies of Sancheriv, king of Ashur, laid siege to Jerusalem during the days of Chizkiyahu. At that time, the Assyrian

king boasted about his strength and mockingly declared:

And my hand has found as a nest the riches of the people, and as one gathers eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped. (*Yeshayahu 10:14*)

Sancheriv likened the gods of the nations to birds that fled their nests instead of protecting their eggs, and this was also the way he related to the God of Israel. To this, the prophet responded:

As birds hovering, so will the Lord of Hosts defend Jerusalem; He will defend it and deliver it; He will pass over it (*paso’ach*) and spare it. (*Yeshayahu 31:5*)

For surely our God is not like their gods, and our God – who is likened to a bird – will protect His nest, Jerusalem, and its residents. He will pass over and hover over Jerusalem, and from the heights of His holy heavens, He will give it protection.

And, indeed, this is what happened, as on the night of Pesach at midnight: Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of Ashur a hundred and eighty five thousand. And when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. (*Yeshayahu 37:36*)

The destroying angel smote the armies of Ashur, and the *Shekhina* hovered, passing over Jerusalem and protecting it so that the destroyer should not enter. There is an important lesson to be learned from this: We are the children of God, and He Himself in all His glory protects us. He who dares cast out his defiled hand at us will not go unpunished. [*Translated by David Strauss*]

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm’s Derashot Ledorot The Same Old Thing

One of the great problems that Judaism has to face in the modern world, is the human desire for change and novelty. In a society and an atmosphere which encourage this quest for newness, whether genuine novelty or mere fad, traditional religion hardly stands a chance. So, traditional Judaism is declared to be hopelessly static, unresponsive to the creative urge for something new, and it is jettisoned in favor of the newest fad of the day. All mitzvot, observances, disregarded customs – all prayers, all Torah – are dismissed as “The Same Old Thing,” and ignored. They are considered boring and unexciting.

Now this horror of “The Same Old Thing” is a very real reaction. A man does not want to read yesterday’s news, tune in yesterday’s programs, see T.V. reruns only, wear yesterday’s style hat. “The Same Old Thing” cannot hold him, therefore, in religion too.

This instinctive reaction against “The Same Old Thing” – a reaction which keeps newspapers and the communications and textile industries, amongst others, in business – is responsible to a

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great extent for the spiritual breakdown of modern man. But it goes further than that. The horror of “The Same Old Thing” accounts as well for deterioration in many another vital aspect of life. We give up old and dear friends – because we want a new face, not “The Same Old Thing.” We lose interest in our professions or in our businesses – we do not wish to face, every day, “The Same Old Thing.” We hear of infidelity in marriage – our desire for change and novelty and dislike of “The Same Old Thing” leads us into the strange byways of immorality. Too many marriages are breaking up, more than ever before, because of such arguments as “I have to find myself,” “I need room for personal growth,” “I have to have more experiences” – all euphemisms for all too quick boredom, for an irresponsible lapse into “The Same Old Thing” syndrome.

How can, and does, Judaism respond to this challenge? It will not do merely to condemn it. It is an innate feeling and, I suspect, a deeply rooted part of the human psyche. But whether indigenous or not, it certainly is a fundamental part of our culture and our psycho-social condition in this urbanized, technological age. You cannot banish the desire for change and newness merely by denouncing it. Yet you obviously cannot submit to it. What then? Our Torah tradition understands that there is yet another deeply implanted instinct that goes in the opposite direction to the desire for change, and that is: the desire for permanence. Both of these coexist within each of us: the wish for the new and the need for the old. Just because we live in a world of such wrenching change, where everything is always coming apart, we want some measure of continuity, some feeling of being rooted, some element of permanence and changelessness. So that there are two seemingly antagonistic instincts to be accounted for. And God in His wisdom has given us the wherewithal to achieve harmony in our lives by balancing off within us the drive for newness and novelty with the desire for the permanent and the unchanging, the familiar and homey.

What Torah has done for us is ingenious: it has solved both problems, satisfied both penchants, in one bold stroke. Torah gives us the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. It prescribes certain mitzvot for certain times. It schedules them to reappear and recur at clearly defined intervals. In this pulsating rhythm of the Jewish year, we find both the old and the new. Pesach may be old – you may have celebrated it twenty or fifty or seventy times before. But this year it is brand new. It makes you feel comfortable in its permanence, reminding you of the Seder in father’s or grandfather’s home many a year ago. But you wait for it anew each year as for something excitingly novel. This particular Pesach is a new one: there is a new face at the Seder table, a new family situation, new prospects for the year ahead. The very fact that we observe it every 15th of Nisan satisfies our desire for the permanent and familiar. The very fact that this particular holiday, in all its unique individuality, has not been observed for twelve months, makes it refreshingly new.

I believe that this idea is implicit in a key phrase in the Haggadah, one which otherwise would be most difficult to understand. Towards the end of the Haggadah, after telling of all the

miracles God performed for us, we raise our cups and say: Therefore ought we thank and praise and exalt God.” We conclude on this climatic note “Let us sing before Him a new song.” We breathlessly wait for the new, song we have just said we will sing. A new melody from Israel? New lyrics by a great Hebrew poet? Brand new verses created for today by some latter-day Yehudah Halevi or Jewish counterpart of Rodgers and Hammerstein? – No, not at all. Instead: the old, tried worn Hallel! The same Hallel that you and I have been reciting for decades, the same Hallel your fathers and grandfathers, and their fathers and grandfathers before them, back to the days of King David, have been reciting every single year at the Seder table as well as on Festivals and Rosh Hodesh! And yet we introduce Hallel with a flourish: a new song!

So puzzled were some commentators on the Haggadah by this apparent anomaly of announcing a new song and singing an old one, that they suggested that the words shirah hadashah were a mistake, perhaps put in by an over-exuberant copyist, and ought to be omitted in a correct reading of the text!

And yet the Jewish tradition as such has not accepted these suggestions. It has experienced no perplexity and has refused to be puzzled and confounded by the presentation of the old Hallel as a shirah hadashah. For our people throughout the ages have instinctively understood that the rhythm of Torah combines the old and the new; that it allows us to recognize the familiar in the new, and the new in the familiar; that in the old words of the Hallel and the familiar melody in which we chant them, we can indeed find elements which are tantalizingly new: not only the newness of rhythm, the fact that for a year now these words were not recited in this mood, at this table, and in this manner. But new insights are possible, insights that come with age and wisdom and experience – thank God we are servants of the Lord, and not the servants of Brezhnev, incarcerated behind the Iron Curtain. The Lord is exalted above all the nations – and will exalt Israel above even oil-producing countries, and above those who deny Israel the right to exist in its natural Home. He “raiseth up the lowly out of the dust.” Who of us has not experienced some low point this past year, some feeling of lowliness – whether psychological or spiritual, with regard to family or business? Yet God has raised us up – or He will old words, but what refreshingly new thoughts we can bring to Him maketh “the barren woman to dwell in her house as a joyful mother of children.”

Those words are startlingly new not only for the mother who was blessed with a child this year – but also to the parent who had been disappointed with children and grandchildren, and whose grieved heart was perhaps encouraged. A child showed signs of improvement in school. Another changed his attitude from rebellion to friendship and responded to love. Another learned, finally, that even – parents are worth loving. The mother of such children is happy beyond words, Hallelujah! To those who have not been fortunate enough to experience such “nachas” this year, the old words give new courage – try harder, think clearer, love stronger, and God will help.

We do not go through the entire Hallel to prove the point. It is, I believe, clear enough. The old and the new are combined in the rhythm of Judaism. Both instincts are satisfied. The ancient Hallel is indeed also a shirah hadashah. All of life testifies to this meeting of old and new in rhythm. Nature is the same every year. There is nothing new under the sun.” Springtime is as old as the earth, itself. We go through it every year. We know just what it consists of. Yet is anyone ever tired of the first breath of Spring? Are we bored by the first explosion of delicate colors? Do we recoil from it, sneering, “Oh, that same old thing again?” Indeed not! The old season is always new! Every day God renews the old work of creation. Old and new are combined. And does not Art follow Nature? Who but a Phyllistine, a totally unesthetic and insensitive person, would turn aside from an old master’s painting, an old and beautiful symphony, with the words, “Oh, I saw that – or heard that – once before. It’s the Same Old Thing!” Indeed, there is much that is new in that which is old.

Our Torah is an old Torah. Its principles came down to us from Sinai. It is always the same Torah. Yet every year we reread the Joseph story, and no one but an obtuse and unthinking person, an eternal adolescent, would quarrel with its reading by saying “I already heard the end last year.” For every year we each have some new aspect, new insight, new feeling. Only one who has immersed himself totally in Talmud study, at least for a while, can appreciate the combination of old and new in talmud torah – the familiar folio of the Talmud tome, the deliciously musty smell of its yellowing pages, the familiar cast of characters – those old friends and teachers – Rashi, Tosephot, Rambam, Maharasha... And yet – always the breathless anticipation of something new, of some hiddush, some novel idea, creative interpretation, new insight. Prayer may be a repetition of the same words – but the new feelings, new insights. People often complain about their inability to pray: The Same Old Thing, the same words, verses, ideas. Doesn’t it become boring? Isn’t it enough to say it once for an intelligent person? But the answer is that prayer is not an intellectual exercise which, once learned, has no need for repetition. It is a spiritual exercise which, like a love poem, needs repetition in order to bring out new shades, new nuances, new hues of sacred thought. Repetition is dull in the realm of the intellect. It is vital and reinforcing in love.

In fact, take love itself – married love. If the old and the new will not be combined, if there will be only the horror of “The Same Old Thing” – there must be infidelity, unhappiness, breakdown of married life. That is why Torah in its sacred wisdom has legislated laws of Taharat ha-Mishpahah, “Family Purity.” Love must never become stale, prosaic, routine, the “Same Old Thing.” So Torah sanctified the natural biological rhythm of life, by superimposing on it the rhythm of Torah, and gave the old and the permanent the challenge and freshness of the new and the novel. It taught married couples how to sing the old Hallel as a true shira hadashah, how to find both desires – for the old and the new – satisfied in love sanctified by God. For only so – is love also lovely.

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Here, then, is the lesson of the new song of Geulim, the redeemed. The unredeemed can never understand this. We are always to combine the old and the new – to find new insights in the old, and relate the new to the permanent and unchanging. To abandon all that is old, as if life and tradition and religion were just newspapers or TV programs made to tickle our fancies and provide us with an endless round of new entertainment; to denigrate Orthodoxy and try to invent Judaism afresh each generation as is the wont of so many “ritual committees” in suburbia; to lose our respect for Masorah and pant only after the latest fads; to strive only for the new and neglect the old – is to engage in no more than unworthy sensationalism, and to reduce Torah to sacred journalism. And then our shirah hadashah is not a new song but a cheap ditty.

Yet, we must never be satisfied to keep the old without adding to it any of the dynamics of one’s own soul, any of the life throbbing in our spirits and pulsating in our hearts. We must never forget to sing the old Hallel as if it were truly a shirah hadashah. If we fail to strive for hiddush, for the element of newness – then we are at the mercy of boredom – the horror of that “Same Old Thing” – and that is the death of the spirit.

Somewhere I read that Robert Frost once said that not only Sight and Insight are important, but also: Excite... We must keep the old in Sight; perceive in it the new through Insight; and as a result learn – to Excite our souls, our spirits.

This, then, is what the Geulim, the redeemed, teach us this Pesah. The Hallel was sung by the Geulim of Egypt. It will be sung by the Geulim when Messiah redeems us completely. Meanwhile those of us who have been slaves – either to a static conception of the old or to the unlettered, rootless, and phillistine pursuit of fashion and sensationalism – we too, by virtue of this lesson, may regard ourselves as spiritually redeemed. For we have learned the great lesson of the spirit – the fusion of old and new, old Hallel and new song. O Lord, hadesh yamenu ka’kedem – “renew our days as of old.