

Parashat Tzav – Shabbat Hagadol 5773, 2013:

Rabbi Soloveitchik Encounters Rabban Gamliel: Two Questions

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The Haggadah is a trans-historical multi-layered document that is the product of numerous Jewish cultures both in Israel and the Diaspora. Thus, on many levels, it may be viewed as one of the preeminent post-Tanach (Hebrew Canon of Scripture) works since it so effectively captures the pathos, ethos, hopes, and visions of the entirety of our people. Little wonder, then, that it has always been, and continues to be, the focal point of the Passover Seder experience.

This leads us to ask an essential question: “Excluding actual quotes from the Bible, what is probably the most ancient and fundamental section of the Haggadah?” I believe that a very legitimate answer to this query is the portion of the Haggadah popularly known as “*Rabban Gamliel hiyah omer*,” (“Rabban Gamliel used to say”):

Rabban Gamliel used to say: Whoever does not mention these three things on Passover does not fulfill his obligation, and these are they:

- the Passover-offering (*Pesach*),
- unleavened bread (*Matzah*),
- and bitter herbs (*Maror*).

[The] Passover-offering [is offered] because the Ever-present One passed over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt. Unleavened bread [is eaten] because our forebears were redeemed from Egypt. [The] bitter herb is [eaten] because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt. (Mishnah, *Talmud Bavli* 116a-b)

Rabban Gamliel's initial statement: "Whoever does not mention these three things on Passover does not fulfill his obligation," immediately grabs our attention. Taking this phrase at face value, it appears that the obligation in question is that of *Sippur Yitziat Mitzraim* (the re-experiencing and retelling of the Pesach story). What exactly is *Sippur Yitziat Mitzraim*? In broad strokes, my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students, described the underlying narrative of the Exodus, and the consequent mitzvah for it to be retold "... as the story of Jewish destiny for all time – the eternal story of an eternal people. (Public lecture, March 1977, transcription my own) Thus, even though there are countless commentaries and halachic analyses concerning Rabban Gamliel's statement, the direct explanation of his assertion seems to be that somehow, and in some yet to be determined manner, "the eternal story of an eternal people" will not be adequately told if one fails to explicitly mention *Pesach*, *Matzah*, and *Maror*. The question, of course, is "Why?"

The Rav was fond of the analytical and conceptual distinction between a *nisa* (object) and a *nosa* (subject). The former is something or someone acted upon, whereas the latter is an actor in the historical drama we call life. At first blush, we look at *Pesach*, *Matzah*, and *Maror* as mere objects that must be consumed during the Seder (i.e. inclusive of the *Korban Pesach* when the Holy Temple is extant). Yet, in a creative *tour de force*, Rav Soloveitchik perceived each of these items as a nosa, as an active participant in the mitzvah of *Sippur Yitziat Mitzraim*:

Sippur Yitziat Mitzraim is a blend of storytelling, Torah teaching, and eating symbolic food items. It is a fusion of the spoken word and the physiological functions of eating and drinking, the intermingling of physical pleasure with Torah debate, the combining of the word of G-d with an activity motivated by biological pressure and characteristic not only of man but of animals. Eating the paschal sacrifice, *mazzah* and *maror* constitutes a

double *mizvah*. The *mizvat akhilah*, physically consuming these items, is *per se*, a religious performance, a *maaseh kiyum mizvah*. But eating the *Pesach*, *mazzah*, and *maror* is also **the instrument or medium of *Sippur Yitziat Mitzraim***, telling the story of the Exodus. We narrate the story not only through speech but through eating as well. [Therefore,] in order to fulfill the *mizvah* of *sippur* in the most perfect manner, one must interpret and explicate the symbolic meaning of *Pesach*, *mazzah*, and *maror*. (Based upon the March, 1977 public lecture, as recorded in Rabbi Menachem Genack's, *The Seder Night: An Exalted Evening*, pages 92-93, bolding, underlining, and brackets my own)

To clarify, and as I remember having heard when I attended the lecture myself, *Pesach*, *Matzah*, and *Maror* are far more than mere objects; instead, they are actual subjects and *mesapprim* (story tellers) of the *Sippur Yitziat Mitzraim*.

The second query that we might well ask on this Mishnah pertains to the order of the listed items. The Rav asked precisely this question in one of his lectures on Passover and the Haggadah:

Why is the order of the three Mitzvos recorded as *Pesach*, *Matzah* and *Maror*? What is the significance of this sequence? Historically, it would be more accurate that the order be *Maror*, *Pesach*, and *Matzah*, as the bitter torment preceded the *Korban Pesach*, and both preceded the baking of the *Matzos*, which took place on the day of the 15th?

The sequence that the Haggadah provides is that of the importance of the Mitzvos. *Pesach* is the primary Halacha; [whereas] the Mitzvah of *Matzah* is dependent upon that of *Korban Pesach*... However, there is a second Mitzvah of *Matzah*, that of eating it with *Maror*... *Maror* has no Torah obligation today, for it is completely dependent upon the *Korban Pesach*; *Maror* is only a Rabbinic commandment when there is no *Korban*, and it thus is last in the sequence... This is the meaning of the sequence that we have in our Haggadah. (Transcribed from a public lecture by Rabbi Aton Holzer, *Pesach to Go*, Nissan 5768, page 22, underlining, brackets, and editing my own)

Once again, the Rav illuminates a classic exegetical and conceptual problem inherent in Rabban Gamliel's statement. True, were we to focus primarily upon the historical pain and suffering of our Egyptian forebears, the order should have been *Maror*, *Pesach*, and *Matzah*. Yet, as significant as the crucible of misery that the 210 years of slavery represents, the everlasting and supernal nature of the mitzvot must take precedence. Therefore, since "the Mitzvah of *Matzah* is dependent upon that of *Korban Pesach*,"

Pesach, perforce, must be mentioned prior to *Matzah*, with *Maror* constituting the final part of the triumvirate.

With Hashem's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to experience the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (our Righteous Messiah), the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple), and the ingathering of the Exiles of our people, so that we may once again joyously offer the *Korban Pesach*, and eat our *Matzah* and *Maror* in the manner that the Torah prescribes. Then, and only then, will our *Sippur Yitziat Mitzraim* finally achieve true perfection. May this time come soon and in our days! *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag kasher v'sameach!*

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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