

Parashat Vaera, 5770, 2010:

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Understanding Pirsumei Nisa (Publicizing the Miracle)

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* contains four words that refer to the imminent salvation of the Jewish people from the hands of their merciless Egyptian taskmasters:

Therefore, say to the children of Israel, 'I am the L-rd, and I will take you out (*v'hotzati*) from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will save you (*v'hitzalti*) from their labor, and I will redeem you (*v'gaalti*) with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will take you (*v'lakachti*) to Me as a people, and I will be a G-d to you, and you will know that I am the L-rd your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (*Sefer Shemot*, 6:6-7, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach* translation, emphasis and Hebrew transliterations my own)

Rashi (1040-1105), Rashbam (1085-1158), and the *Baalei Tosafot* (12-14th centuries), among many others, labeled *v'hotzati*, *v'hitzalti*, *v'gaalti*, and *v'lakachti* as the “four expressions of redemption” (“*arbaah leshonei geulah*,” *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 99b).

The earliest source for this concept, however, is the *Talmud Yerushalmi* in tractate *Pesachim* (10:1):

What is the derivation of the obligation to drink the four cups of wine at the *Seder* on the night of Passover? Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Banayah said: “They correspond to the four redemptions: “Therefore, say to the children of Israel, 'I am the L-rd, and I will take you out (*v'hotzati*)... And I will take you (*v'lakachti*) to Me as a people... *v'hotzati*, *v'hitzalti*, *v'gaalti*, *v'lakachti*. (Translation and emphasis my own. In addition, *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 88:11 contains a parallel presentation of this idea.)

Whether we follow the *Talmud Yerushalmi*'s approach and label our terms “the four redemptions,” or follow Rashi, Rashbam, and the *Baalei Tosafot* and call them the “four expressions of redemption,” it is clear that they provide the scriptural basis for the

Rabbinic obligation of drinking the four cups of wine at the Seder. This requirement is stated explicitly in the Mishnah at the beginning of the 10th chapter of *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 99b: “Even the poorest person from the Jewish people may not eat [on the night of the Seder] until he leans [in a demonstrable sign of freedom]. In addition, there shall be given to him no less than four cups of wine – even if this must come from the public dole.” (Translation my own) Since even the most indigent individual amongst our people has the obligation to drink the four cups of wine, so, too, do the rest of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people). The Rambam (1135-1204) codified this *halacha* (law) in the following formulation:

Therefore, when a person feasts on this night, he must eat and drink while he is reclining in the manner of free men. Each and every one, both men and women, must drink four cups of wine on this night. [This number] should not be reduced. Even a poor person who is sustained by charity should not have fewer than four cups. The size of each of these cups should be a quarter [of a *log*]. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chametz U'Matzah* 7:7, this and all *Mishneh Torah* translations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

It should be noted that all subsequent *poskim* (halachic decisors) follow this opinion. Thus, the Rabbinic commandment to drink the *Arba Kosot* (Four Cups of Wine) is at one and the same time a constitutive element of the Seder, and the centerpiece thereof. The question, of course is “Why?” In other words, “What are the conceptual underpinnings of this commandment that has led to its universal adoption?” After all, there are many Rabbinic obligations that are not part of the mitzvah repertoire of all Jewish groups. What, then, is so unique about the *Arba Kosot*?

An answer to this question is provided by the 14th century Spanish halachist Rabbi Vidal di Tolosa, known as the Maggid Mishneh, after the name of his commentary on the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*. In *Hilchot Chanukah* 4:12, the Rambam states:

The mitzvah of kindling Chanukah lamps is very dear. A person should be very careful in its observance to publicize the miracle and thus increase our praise of God and our expression of thanks for the miracles that He wrought on our behalf. Even if a person has no resources for food except [what he receives] from charity, he should pawn or sell his garments and purchase oil and lamps to kindle them [in fulfillment of the mitzvah] (Underlining my own)

In his explanation of the above-underlined sentence, the Maggid Mishneh states: “It appears that the Rambam learns this from that which is explained in the seventh chapter of *Hilchot Chametz u’Matzah*: ‘Even a poor person who is sustained by charity should not have fewer than four cups.’ The reason thereof is because of the obligation of *Pirumei Nisa* (Publicizing the Miracle) ...” (Translation my own) Based upon Rav Vidal’s cogent explanation, we may conclude that the overriding significance and obligatory character of the *Arba Kosot* stem directly from their role as mitzvah objects in the grand drama of *Pirumei Nisa*. This, then, accounts for the universally accepted status of the *Arba Kosot*. As such, they join two other Rabbinic commandments that share this *raison d’etre*, the lighting of the Chanukah candles and the reading of the Megillah on the night and morning of Purim.

The great scholar and founder of the Sochatchover Chasidic dynasty, Rabbi Avraham Bornsztain *zatzal* (1838-1910), in his posthumously published work of Torah responsa entitled *Avnei Nezer*, built upon the Maggid Mishneh’s explanation of Maimonides’ decision in the above-cited passage from *Hilchot Chanukah* and declared:

Perforce one must say that [all] the mitzvot of the night of Passover are different [than other commandments in general] since they serve the purpose of publicizing [the wonders and miracles of Passover] to his sons and the other members of his family, as the Torah states: “And you shall tell your son on that day...” This matter is understood based upon what I have already explained as the rationale of the Rambam – namely, in all other commandments [excluding *Pirumei Nisa*] one is not obligated to sell their garment in order to fulfill a particular mitzvah. [This is based upon the well-known Talmudic dictum found in *Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 6a, wherein it states:] “Behold if one has the intention to perform a mitzvah and does not do so [through no fault of his own], the Torah

considers it as if he has done so.” This is not the case in instances of *Pirsumei Nisa* where the entire rationale for the mitzvah is to publicize [the miracles] to others. After all, what is the connection of other people to his [mere] thoughts? (*Orech Chaim, Hilchot Chanukah* 501, translation and underlining my own)

In this halachic *tour de force*, Rav Bornsztain teaches us that all the mitzvot of *Pesach* (Passover) night, and not just the *Arba Kosot*, serve the function of *Pirsumei Nisa*. As such, they must be performed at all costs – up to and including selling one’s garment to acquire the funds whereby they can be fulfilled. While regarding other mitzvot, it may well be “the thought that counts,” in matters of *Pirsumei Nisa*, the commandment must be performed without exception. In my view, our zealous performance of all mitzvot involved with publicizing the wonders and miracles that Hashem has performed for us enables us to be *mekadash shame shamayim* (sanctify G-d’s name). Hence the singular import they demand within the world of Halacha.

With G-d’s help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to live lives wherein we can be *mekadash shame shamayim* and bring true recognition to His great and awesome Name. If we can do this, we will realize and achieve the ultimate purpose of *Pirsumei Nisa*. May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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