

Parshiot Acharei Mot - Shabbat Hagadol 5774, 2014:

The Obligation of Telling the Story of the Departure from Egypt

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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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

One of the most widely accepted concepts within Rabbinic thought is that of the existence of *Taryag Mitzvot* (the 613 Mitzvot). There are a number of sources that discuss this idea. The most famous one is found in *Talmud Bavli, Makkot 23b*: “Rabbi Simlai expounded: 613 mitzvot were stated to Moshe. 365 negative precepts corresponding to the days of the year and 248 positive commandments corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body.” Unfortunately, while Rabbi Simlai taught the concept of the *Taryag Mitzvot*, he did not reveal its content. The daunting task of determining exactly which utterances of the Almighty are included in this category was left to the group of Torah sages known collectively as the *Monei Hamitzvot*. This group of luminaries includes such intellectual giants as the Baal Halachot Gedolot (9th century), the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), and the Sefer Hachinuch (13th century approx.). These sages utilized different criteria in determining which commandment should be considered part of the *Taryag Mitzvot*. As a result, no two lists of the 613 Commandments are exactly the same.

More often than not, however, there is a mitzvah that is agreed upon by all of the *Monei*

Hamitzvot. Such a mitzvah is that of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim*, the Telling and Re-experiencing of the Departure from Egypt. The classic source for this commandment is almost always given as: “On that day, you must tell your child (*v’hegadata l’vinchah*), ‘It is because of this that G-d acted for me when I left Egypt.’” (*Sefer Shemot* 13:8, this and all Torah translations, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*). Thus, by way of illustration, the *Sefer Hachinuch*, in Commandment 10, states the following:

To speak of the matter of the Departure from Egypt on the night of the 15th of Nissan: Everyone is obligated to do so according to his fluidity of speech. He is obligated, as well, to praise and adulate Hashem for all of the miracles He did for us there [in Egypt]. As the Torah states: “...you must tell your child (*v’hegadata l’vinchah*)...” (Brackets my own)

Given the nearly universal use of *v’hegadata l’vinchah* as the proof text for *Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim*, we are jolted by the Rambam’s introduction to the seventh chapter of the Laws of Chametz and Matzah:

There is a positive commandment of the Torah to tell the story of the miracles and wonders that were done for our forebears in Egypt on the night of the 15th of Nissan. As the Torah states: “Remember this day you left Egypt, the place of slavery, when G-d brought you out of here with a show of force. No leaven may be eaten.” (*Sefer Shemot* 13:3), just like it says in the Torah: “Remember the Sabbath day.” (*Ibid.*, 20:8)

The Rambam’s formulation raises a number of substantive issues:

- 1) What motivated the Rambam to deviate so forcefully from the proof text utilized by the other *Monei Hamitzvot*?
- 2) “*Zachor et hayom hazeh*” (“Remember this day...”) seems ill-suited as the source text for the very active and engaging mitzvah of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim*. This is particularly the case, since the act of *zechirah* (remembering) per se may be easily discharged by the slightest of all efforts. In addition, *zechirah* is a highly personal activity since it does not require any sharing with others. Moreover, *zechirah* does not require the singing of *hallel*, whereas, the obligation of *Sippur Yetziat*

Mitzraim demands precisely this action. (Based upon Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), “*B’inyan Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim*,” in *Shiurim l’Zacher Aba Mari zal*, p.153).

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal*, known by his students as “the Rav,” summarized all of the above-mentioned concerns by asking: “How is it possible to learn the commandment of *Sippur* from the verse ‘Remember this day you left Egypt?’” In his inimitable fashion, he suggests that the answer is really quite simple. He notes that the Rambam was not the first to use “*zachor et hayom hazeh*.” The Rambam, in fact, based this approach upon the second century halachic *Midrash* known as the *Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael*. In addition, the Rav notes that neither the *Mechilta*, nor the Rambam, exclusively utilize the verse “Remember this day you left Egypt” as the source for the mitzvah of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim*. Instead, both of them use this verse in conjunction with the standard source text of *v’hegadata l’vinchah*. Thus, he states: “And from where do we know [that the mitzvah of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim* must take place on] the night of the 15th of Nissan? The Torah teaches us: ‘On that day, you must tell your child (*v’hegadata l’vinchah*), ‘It is because of this that G-d acted for me when I left Egypt...’” In other words, both verses are necessary to teach us the obligation of Telling the Story of the Departure from Egypt. The question is “Why?”

In his first answer to this question, the Rav opines that these two non-juxtaposed verses form a conceptual unit and provide us with the basis for the mitzvah of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim*. In his view, *zachor et hayom hazeh* and *v’hegadata l’vinchah* actually teach us two different aspects of the *chiuv* (obligation) to tell and re-experience the story of the

Exodus. *Zachor* teaches us that even if an individual is, G-d forbid, alone on the night of Pesach, his obligation of Tell the Story of the Exodus, aloud and in depth, is no less incumbent upon him than if he was blessed with a roomful of family and friends. In contrast, *v'hegadata l'vinchah* is the aspect of the mitzvah that comes into play when there are children or others present. At that point, the *sippur* (telling) fulfills the essential role of sharing with others. The leader of the Seder thereby becomes a crucial link in the great chain of Jewish being that we call *Masorah* (the grand gesture of lovingly handing over the Torah from generation to generation). Hence, the Seder's leader, by definition, is duty bound to speak at length, and with all of his intellectual acumen, regarding the wonders, miracles, and mercy that the Almighty demonstrated to us when He took us out of Egyptian bondage. This is the essential meaning of the notion stated in our Hagadah of "*v'chol hamarbeh l'saper b'yitziat mitzraim, harei zeh meshubach*" ("and all who explain the Exodus at great length and depth have perform a laudatory act"). In sum, "*zachor et hayom hazeh*" is the halachic basis for the sole and lonely individual to tell and re-experience the story of the Exodus, while *v'hegadata l'vinchah* serves as the source of the obligation to engage in the act of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzraim* with, and on behalf, of others. We need both complementary verses, since one, by itself, cannot cover both the purely individual and public aspects of the mitzvah.

May this *Pesach* herald the imminent coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu*, the one and only true messiah. May he soon gather all of our exiles from the four corners of the earth, rebuild the holy *Beit Hamikdash*, destroy Amalek's heirs, and teach the entire world the truth of Hashem's Divine hand in man's past, present, and future. May this time come

soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *chag kasher v'sameach*

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