

Pesach 5779, 2019:

Why Do We Say Mah Nishtana Only on Pesach?

Rabbi David Etengoff

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, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the best-known parts of the *Haggadah* is the section known as “*Mah Nishtana*,” wherein one or more children at the *Seder* ask the Four Questions. It is based upon the following Mishnaic statement:

Now we pour him [the *Seder*'s leader] the second cup of wine. At this juncture, the son asks his father [the Four Questions.] If the son lacks the ability to ask (*im ain da'at b'ben*), his father teaches him, “*mah nishtana halailah hazeh mekol halai'lot...*” (“how different is this night from all other nights...,” *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 116a, translation and brackets my own)

The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (“the Berdichever,” 1740-1810), asks a fascinating question on this Mishnah: “Why does the son ask *Mah Nishtana* on Passover, and not on the Festival of Succot as well?” (This and the following quotes, *Kedushat Levi, Drushim l'Pesach*, translations my own) This is a very powerful query, since, like Pesach, Succot has many *mitzvot*, including sitting in the *Succah* and the *Arba'at Minim* (Four Species), that differentiate it from the rest of the year. As such, a child's interest would surely be piqued, and it, too, should generate the recitation of *Mah Nishtana*.

In order to answer this question, the Berdichever introduces a well-known Talmudic dispute regarding the creation of the world, namely, was the world created in the Spring, in the month of Nissan and Passover, or in the Fall, in the month of Tishrei and Succot? (*Talmud Bavli, Rosh*

Hashanah 10b) In his analysis of this Talmudic debate, the Berdichever submits that Hashem rules the world in two different ways, corresponding to these two seasons of the year. In his view, Tishrei is universal in nature, in the sense that it is the time when Hashem approaches the entire world *b'tuvo u'b'chasdo* — in His goodness and mercy. In contrast, Nissan is primarily the time when the Almighty relates to the world through the vehicle of *Tifferet Yisrael* (the glory of the Jewish nation), and exalts Himself through His inseverable connection to Israel, His chosen people. As the Berdichever suggests: “He [Hashem] performs their will [the Jewish people’s] by providing them with all that is positive, in response to that which they request from Him.” Little wonder, then, that Pesach, in the month of Nissan, was the time when we experienced “the miracles and great wonders” of the 10 Plagues and the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds, when we cried out to Him, “O L-rd, save [us]; may the King answer us on the day we call!” (*Sefer Tehillim*, 20:10, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At this point, the Berdichever proceeds to answer his initial question, “Why does the son ask the *Mah Nishtana* on Passover, and not on the Festival of Succot as well?” by introducing the idea of *Tzimtzum*. This concept maintains that Hashem contracts His Infinite Being in order to communicate with, and be “a part of,” our finite world:

This, then is intimated by the [Mishna’s] phrase, “the son asks on Pesach:” For in truth, [the notion] that the Holy One Blessed be He runs the world through [the principle] of *Tifferet Yisrael* actually means that He contracts Himself [in such a manner that His Divine Presence inheres] in the Jewish people’s worship of Him. He, in turn, has “great pleasure” (*ta’a’nug gadol*) from this [worship and adoration] and consequently fulfills their will and desire.

The Berdichever asserts that when the son asks his father the Four Questions at the *Seder*, the two of them are engaging in the exact same approach that has always existed between the Jewish people and Hashem:

And this model [of the Jewish people requesting their needs from Hashem,] is repeated [at the moment] of the son’s question to his father [at the *Seder* table]. For, [in truth] the intellectual

capacity of the father far exceeds that of the son, and it is only because of the father's love for his son that he "contracts himself" to provide answers to his son's [conceptual] difficulties (*kushiot*). This is the selfsame model that we have already discussed, wherein the [Infinite] Holy One blessed be He "contracts Himself" within [the finite] boundaries of the Jewish people, in order to glorify Himself amongst them (*l'hitpaer imahem*) by fulfilling their will [and providing for their needs].

The Berdichever has now provided us with a solid understanding as to why the son asks the questions of the *Mah Nishtana* solely at Pesach. During this *Yom Tov*, the principle of *Tifferet Yisrael* is particularly pronounced, for, as we have seen, this is the time when Hashem performed His countless wonders and miracles for us, both in Egypt and at the Sea of Reeds. We beseeched *Avinu sh'b'Shamayim* (our Father-in-Heaven), and He answered us in an unprecedented manner. What better moment exists, therefore, for children to ask their father to explain the amazing events of the Exodus other than at the *Seder* itself, for this, too, must surely bring joy to *Avinu sh'b'Shamayim*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Kasher v'Sameach*

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha's name.

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