

Answering the “Wicked Son”

Huh? What was that answer to the “wicked son?”

What was wrong with his question?

It is impossible to move boxes of year-round utensils out of the kitchen cabinets, line the shelves, kasher the sink and stove, cover everything, and bring in boxes of Pesach utensils to unpack into the cupboards with kids underfoot. So, the parents make the switch overnight while the kids are in bed. One kid wakes up and wants a drink of water at 1:30 am. He wanders into the kitchen and sees what is going on. He observes, “That’s a lot of work. Why are you doing it?” We can understand an answer like, “Sonny, you don’t belong here now.” But, “If you were there you wouldn’t have been taken out.” What is that about?

Why, indeed, do we work so hard for Pesach?

In the Hagadah we quote several Pesukim from Navi Yechezkel (Ch. 16) These seem somewhat incidental, included in the Hagadah to support the meaning of כר, “many.” Many of the words in the Pesukim are hard to pronounce, let alone to understand. And they are out of context. But they are central to the story of Pesach and how we approach it.

Here is the first of two Pesukim:

וְאָעֵבֶר עָלַיָּךְ וְאָרְאִיךָ מִתְבּוֹסֶסֶת בְּדַמֶּיךָ וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי:
 “When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: ‘Live in your blood.’ Yea, I said to you: ‘Live in your blood.’”

What in the world is that supposed to mean? The Navi is recounting the story of Hashem taking us out of Egypt, but speaking in a parable. A baby was born and immediately abandoned in a field, unwanted, unloved and uncared for; dirty and bloodied. A man walks by, hears the crying newborn and sees her sorry state. (Yes, the baby is a girl. That is why these Pesukim are in feminine form.) The man shows compassion and offers words of encouragement, “You will live despite your present bloody, unkempt state.” But he doesn’t seem to do anything about it.



Somehow, the baby survives and grows into adulthood, remaining uncared for, dirty, without bare necessities like clothing. After years pass, the man comes back and takes the young woman under his wing. He cleans her up and provides for her the finest clothing and jewelry, and marries her.

This is the story of the Jewish people in Egypt. They were like a baby in the earliest stages of formation. And they were abandoned, uncared for, left to the mercies of the Egyptians who enslaved them. Hashem promised them that they would survive and good things were in store for them in future, but they did not see any of that materialize. And then, when the time was ripe, Hashem “came back,” took them to be His, cleaned them up and dressed them up in finery, and “married them” by giving them the Torah.

But, why? What changed between the first time the man came by, when he did nothing and the second time?

Says R. Masia b. Charash in Mechilta. “Hashem saw that the time had come to fulfill the promise to Avraham that He would take his descendants out of slavery. But, they had no Mitzvos with which to merit being redeemed. So, He gave them two Mitzvos – Pesach and Mila (for they also circumcised themselves that night). And that is the double reference to blood – blood of Mila and the blood of the Pesach.”

Why was it necessary for there to be two Mitzvos? Why specifically these two?

R. Masia b. Charash is telling us that this parable of Yechezkel is teaching us something very powerful about our relationship with Hashem. How is it possible to have a relationship with Hashem? He is infinite and we are finite and insignificant. Where is the possibility for connection?

Hashem looks at the Jews in Egypt and asks the same question: “What can I have to do with an abandoned, helpless newborn?”

But, He doesn't let it go at that. He has a plan involving two Mitzvos. “Do these two Mitzvos and we've got something going. It's you and me. We're together, now and forever.”



The Previous Rebbe offers a famous analogy in Hayom Yom of two people. One is a simple unsophisticated person and the other is profound and deep scholar. It is the nature of things that they have nothing to do with each other because they have nothing in common, no similar interests, no shared language. There is no malice between them, they simply don't exist in each other's world. When the wise man asks the simple man to do something for him, even something menial or trivial, all of a sudden the simple man begins to exist in the wise man's world and vice versa.

In the same way, it would seem impossible for there to be any "shared" reality between us and Hashem. We simply "live" in different planes much more divergent than the wise man and the simple man. But when Hashem asks us to do something for Him, we suddenly become real to Him and He becomes real and close to us.

This is one explanation of the meaning of the word Mitzvah. It can be explained as being related to the Aramaic word *אחייל* meaning connection. When Hashem asks us to do something, and then we do it, a connection is created between Him and us. We are lifted out of being mere mortal material creatures and become G-dly, above-material-world kind of beings.

When Hashem sees the Jews in Egypt, He confronts the question, "What will lift them out of their current state, at the bottom rung of the human condition."

And the answer is, "Mitzvos!"

In Tanya (Ch. 46) the Alter Rebbe tells a story of a king who come across a hobo living in a trash heap in a dump. The King takes the man out of the trash, brings him into the palace, personally cleans him up, applies balm to his sores, gives him fine clothes, and embraces him and hugs him and spends more time with him than with his advisors and the nobility. How should the poor beggar react? Obviously, he should reciprocate the love and care that the king is showering upon him.

This, says the Alter Rebbe, is our story. Hashem took us out of the moral trash heap that was Egypt, lifted us up to Him, drawing us closer to Him than the



angels, and embracing us through enveloping us with Mitzvos. We need to reciprocate that love, take delight in the embrace. Learning Torah and doing Mitzvos is hugging Hashem and Hashem hugging us!

Why these two Mitzvos out of all others? The Rebbe explains that two changes were needed for the Jewish people to enter into this relationship with Hashem which became formalized after leaving Egypt when we celebrated the Chupah at Mount Sinai. One change needed was to remove from ourselves the overpowering bond to the material world. The other change was to have some positive value, some redeeming virtue. The first was accomplished by the Korban Pesach when they slaughtered the object of worship of the Egyptians, severing their own connection to the material-oriented world of the Egyptian. The second was accomplished by Mila creating in the flesh a permanent covenant with Hashem.

And this is what we say to the “wicked son.” “If you recognize Mitzvos as Hashem’s loving embrace of us and you eagerly engage in doing Mitzvos to embrace Hashem, you’ve made it out of Egypt and you’ve gotten the Egypt out of you. And, getting ready for Pesach isn’t work; it is a labor of love and a source of joy. But, if you just see it as tedious pointless work imposed upon us, you haven’t severed your connection to Egypt and haven’t made Hashem a part of yourself. If that is where you choose to remain, you will never get out of Egypt.”

The actual wording in the answer to the ‘wicked son’ is “if he was there he would not have been redeemed,” stated in the past tense. Because the truth is that since we stood at Mt. Sinai and formalized our relationship with Hashem, there is no such thing as a Jew who is unconnected. And therefore no Jew will be left behind. We will all speedily go out of Golus into the King’s palace with the coming of Moshiach NOW.

