

הַגְּדָה שֶׁל פֶּסַח / Haggadah Shel Pesach

[Editor's note: During the two years that the Rav zt"l gave his lectures on *tefillah*, he devoted three *shiurim* in the weeks before Pesach to explanations on the *Haggadah*. This section is an adaptation of those *shiurim*.]

From my earliest youth, I remember that the children would ask each other on the first morning of Pesach, "How long did your *Seder* last?" This was true in my youth, and it is still the case today.

If the children were to ask me this now, I would answer them, "I made sure to eat the *afikoman* before *chatzos* (midnight)." According to some *poskim*, even the recitation of *Hallel* should be completed before *chatzos*. I must point out that the present-day practice in which all the children read from their prepared sheets which they received in school is not exactly in accordance with the mitzvah of וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ, and *you shall tell to your children*, etc. (*Shemos* 13:8) The children have started a new *mitzvah* of וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְאָבִיךָ וּלְאִמְךָ, *you shall teach your father and mother*, which makes it extremely difficult to reach the *mitzvah* of *achilas matzah* — and certainly the *afikoman* — before *chatzos*.

Rather than discourage the children from actively participating, they should keep their remarks brief, so the father, or other leader of the *Seder*, can read the text of the *Haggadah* and explain the *nissim* of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. However, the children should be encouraged to say their *divrei Torah* during the meal if there is time or, otherwise, during the daytime meals of Yom Tov.

The *Haggadah shel leil Pesach* is probably the most popular *sefer*, after the *siddur*, in the Jewish home. There are at least a thousand commentaries on the *Haggadah*, each with different explanations and interpretations. It is not the purpose of this *shiur* to add another one, but rather to share a few thoughts on various parts of the *Haggadah*.

On *Seder* night, it is a *mitzvas asei d'Oraisa* to retell to one's children the events surrounding *yetzias Mitzrayim*. If one has the *zechus* to have children or grandchildren, it is a *mitzvah* for the father or grandfather to hand down to them the details of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. The saying of so-called "*gute vertlach*," *good, short pieces of Torah*, is very nice, but if these are not details of the narrative of *yetzias Mitzrayim* — or its meaning and message — they are not a part of this *mitzvah*. On *Seder* night, the children are encouraged to ask any question relevant to *yetzias Mitzrayim*, and the father has a special

mitzvah d'Oraisa to respond to these questions, and tell his children about the miracles *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* did for us. This is based on the *pasuk*: וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעֶבְרַת עֲשָׂה ה' לִי בְצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם, *And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt"* (Shemos 13:8).

The Gemara says: תְּנִינָא רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר: חוֹטְפִין מִצּוֹת בְּלִילֵי פְסָחִים בְּשִׁבִיל יִשְׁנוּ, *It is stated in a Baraisa that Rabbi Eliezer said: One is "choteif" the matzah on Pesach nights for the benefit of the small children, lest they fall asleep* (Pesachim 109a). The phrase חוֹטְפִין מִצּוֹת, which has the literal meaning of “snatching” the matzos, is explained by *Rashi* and *Rashbam* (ibid.) as having either of the following meanings:

It could mean מְגַבִּיהִין אֶת הַקְּעָרָה בְּשִׁבִיל הַתִּינוּקוֹת שִׁישְׂאוֹ, the *ke'arah* (*Seder* plate containing the matzah) is raised (snatched away) to arouse the children's interest in the matzah and the other objects on the *Seder* plate.

The other explanation, which *Rashi* calls עֵיקָר, the main explanation, is that אוֹכְלִים מֵהָרַח, the matzah is eaten early in the evening (literally: one grabs the matzos) so that the children, with their short attention span, will be awake when the matzah and *maror* are eaten. They will not be too tired when they see the father holding the matzah and hear him explain: “This is the kind of bread that our forefathers ate while they were slaves in *Mitzrayim* and also soon after they were redeemed.” They will also hear the father explain that the *maror* reminds us of the bitterness of the lives of our forefathers while they were enslaved in Egypt.

In practice, we follow both explanations: We raise the *ke'arah* while saying הָאֵל לְחֵמָא עֲנִינָא to pique the children's curiosity, and we also endeavor to eat the meal early enough so that the children can participate in performing — and understanding — all the *mitzvos* and *minhagim* of the evening. [See *Orach Chaim* 472:1 with *Mishnah Berurah* 3 and particularly *Shaar HaTziyun* 2.]

There is another explanation for חוֹטְפִין מִצּוֹת, which takes it to mean, literally: the matzos are snatched from one another (see *Rambam, Hil. Chametz U'Matzah* 7:3). While this is not our *minhag*, the reason for it is the same: to arouse the children's curiosity.

A related, and quite universal, form of חוֹטְפִין מִצּוֹת is the *minhag* that the children take the matzah that will be used for the *afikoman* while the father is distracted — and are offered a reward for its return. This little game keeps the children awake and interested until the reward is offered at the end of the meal.

I, personally, do not care for the term “stealing the matzah.” *It is un-Jewish to steal* — even the *afikoman*! לֹא תִגְנוֹבוּ, the prohibition against theft, includes לֹא תִגְנוֹב עַל מְנַת לְמִיקַט, even if it is done as a prank (see *Bava*

Metzia 61b). Notwithstanding the fact that the children taking the *afikoman* is not stealing, because it is not removed from the premises, it would still be the wrong *chinuch* to call it “stealing.” Rather, I would call it “hiding” the matzah, to be used later as the *afikoman*, which is called *צפון*, *hidden*.

There is an oft-quoted saying, although not found in any original halachic source, *מנהג ישראל תורה היא*, that all Jewish *minhagim* have a deep meaning. For instance, the wearing of masks on Purim is an allusion to the words of Chazal: “*רָמְנוּ לְאַסְתֵּר מִן הַתּוֹרָה מִנֵּין . . . וְאֵנֹכִי הִסְתַּר אֶסְתִּיר פָּנַי*,” *Where do we find an allusion to Esther in the Torah? . . . But I will surely have concealed My face* (*Devarim* 31:18; *Chullin* 139b). The wearing of masks on Purim alludes to the fact that Hashem’s “face was hidden” during the miracle of Purim. It was a *neis nistar*: . . . *But I will surely have concealed My face* (*Devarim* 31:18).

Thoughtful Jewish parents of old, in playing with their children, always incorporated a Torah lesson into their children’s games. The story is told that the Chazon Ish, while walking with his young nephews through the streets of Bnei Brak (he never had children of his own), told the boys that he would like to play a game where he would close his eyes, pretending to be blind, and they would have to lead him. The purported object of this little game would be to see how many times he could guess which street they were on. When these boys matured, they realized that the real object of this “game” was that the Chazon Ish avoid seeing immodestly dressed women.

Similarly, the *minhag* of *ניח*, whereby we break the matzah into a larger and smaller piece, with each being used for its special purpose, is also deeply symbolic. The smaller piece, the *לחמא עניא*, the poor man’s bread, is left in the *Seder* plate along with the *maror* and the *charoses*. However, the larger piece is hidden away for the *afikoman* by the children, who will ask for a reward for its return, and it is then eaten at the end of the meal, *על השובע*.

I heard a beautiful explanation for the symbolism of this *minhag* from my father זצ״ל. He explained that the smaller piece of matzah, the *לחמא עניא*, represents *Olam Hazeih*, with all its trials and tribulations. This piece is left in the *Seder* plate along with the *maror* and *charoses*, reflecting life in this world, with all its sweet and bitter experiences. However, the larger, main piece, which is hidden away during the *Seder*, to be eaten after the meal as the *afikoman*, represents *Olam Haba*, which is hidden from us during our lives in this world. The eating of this piece *על השובע*, after the meal, when one is satiated, is symbolic of our reward in *Olam Haba*, which can be obtained only if we have first satiated ourselves in this world with a life of Torah and *mitzvos*. The children’s request for a reward before giving up the *afikoman* is symbolic of our reward in *Olam Haba*, which is granted to us by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* if we have earned it.

The Haggadah was put into its present, universally accepted form by the *baal Haggadah* — his name is not known — who lived at the time of the

chacham remarks: מה נשתנה הלילה הזה, “How different is this night, when usually trivial matters take on such major significance.”

And the father responds to his son’s very intelligent observation: “You know why all these normally trivial matters are so important tonight? It is because tonight, we have a special guest at our table: *The guest is the Ribbono Shel Olam Himself!* Tonight is the night of Hashem; tonight Hashem pays special attention to us.” ליל שמרים הוא לה' להוציאם מארץ מצרים הוא, *It is a night of anticipation for Hashem to take them out of the land of Egypt, this was the night for Hashem, a protection for all the Children of Israel for their generations (Shemos 12:42).*

The father explains, “From the beginning of our creation as a nation, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* paid special attention to us on this night. He appeared to our forefathers on this night when He redeemed them from Egypt. And every year, on this night, He comes to you, the ensuing generations. It is only on one night a year (or two in *chutz la'aretz*) that we have this experience, and that is why it is so special.”

This way of explaining it is borne out by the wording of the paragraph עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים ויצאנו ה' ממצרים, which is a paraphrase: עבדים היינו לפרעה, *We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and Hashem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand (Devarim 6:21)*, with which the *baal Haggadah* begins the father’s response. However, upon reaching the words ויצאנו ה', he adds his own words: אלהינו משם ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה וגו', to complete the narrative.

This is so, because having reached the word ייחודה, the *baal Haggadah* interrupts and expresses the thought: “Before we go any further, let us know that at the core of our *emunah* lies the fact that our redemption was effected by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* Himself, as אלהינו; He personally redeemed us — *bichvodo u'v'atzmo* — *He, Himself, Personally*, from Egypt. Tonight we are to remember that it is ליל שמרים הוא לה'. *Tonight is God’s night.*

So the father tells his son, “You rightfully pointed out that tonight everything is different. *And how is it different!* Tonight is dedicated to אנו ולא מלאך, אנו ולא שרף, אנו ולא השליח, אנו הוא ולא אהרן; *to ייחודה*. Tonight is ליל שמרים הוא לה' . . . לדרתם; it is the night when we transmit the basic elements of our *emunah* to you, the next generation.”

We then continue, אלו לא הוציא הקדוש ברוך הוא את אבותינו ממצרים הרי, אנו ובנינו ובני ובנינו משעבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים. This means that if *yetzias Mitzrayim* had not been done by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu bichvodo u'v'atzmo*, through the personal involvement of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the entire concept of human freedom would never have been implanted in the mind of mankind, and *Bnei Yisrael* would have been permanently enslaved to the Egyptian Pharaohs, or to any subsequent governing power. The accepted norm would have been for the Jews to be slaves.

This is a remarkable statement. It means that without *yetzias Mitzrayim al yedei HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the event of the Exodus from Egypt as an act of God's personal intervention, there would never have been a notion of human rights, whereby the Egyptians and other civilized peoples would eventually have freed their slaves. The now commonly accepted principle that all human beings have an inherent right to freedom had its birth at *yetzias Mitzrayim al yedei HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. Without the personal intervention of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* in *yetzias Mitzrayim*, it never would have occurred to anyone that there is any evil in one group of people subjugating or exploiting another. Therefore *yetzias Mitzrayim* was a world-historic event, not only for *Bnei Yisrael*, but also for all of mankind.

The acceptance of this basic human right of freedom from bondage, which modern civilized society now takes for granted, has taken thousands of years to be accepted in the world. Indeed, the entire Greek culture was based on slavery. The middle class relied on slaves to do all of their work, which allowed the Greek masters to pursue intellectual and physical pleasures. There was a similar situation in the Middle Ages in Europe. And without *yetzias Mitzrayim al yedei HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, there never would have been an abolitionist movement here in America, which resulted in President Abraham Lincoln freeing the slaves only some 125 years ago. In fact, even in our time, slavery has not been totally abolished; it still exists in certain parts of the world.

Therefore, the *baal Haggadah* continues, since we are talking about the miraculous personal involvement of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* in *yetzias Mitzrayim*, it makes no difference if we already know the entire story, and we are *התורה את הוֹדְעִים בְּלֵנוּ זְכוּנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה*, *even if we are all highly intelligent, all elders who are thoroughly familiar with the Torah, . . .* it is still a *mitzvah*, *לְסַפֵּר בִּיציאת מִצְרַיִם*, *to tell all the details of yetzias Mitzrayim*, and, therefore, *וְכָל הַמְדַבֵּר . . . הָרַי זֶה מְשֻׁבַּח*, *The more one tells . . . the more he is praiseworthy*. Just as *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is Infinite, so is there never an end to talking about the *nissim v'niflaos* that He brought about in connection with *yetzias Mitzrayim*.

This is further illustrated by the next paragraph: *מַעֲשֵׂה בְרַבֵּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר וְגוֹ' . . . שֶׁהָיוּ . . . מְסַפְּרִים בִּיציאת מִצְרַיִם*. The *baal Haggadah* uses the term *בִּיציאת מִצְרַיִם*, rather than *עַל יְציאת מִצְרַיִם*, to emphasize that these great *Chachamim* — among the greatest of our sages after the *churban* — who were gathered in Bnei Brak instead of Yerushalayim, in the absence of the *korban Pesach*, *delved into each and every detail* of the events surrounding *yetzias Mitzrayim* during that entire night. I am sure they had eaten the matzah and said *Hallel* before *chatzos*, and later, these all-night discussions centered around the details of *yetzias Mitzrayim*, and the many *hilchos Pesach*. All the discussions of *yetzias Mitzrayim* — and even *hilchos*

Pesach — have one goal: to see ever more clearly that *yetzias Mitzrayim* occurred through the personal involvement of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, and not through any intermediaries, be they *malach, saraf, or hashaliach*, “the messenger” (*Moshe Rabbeinu*). Consequently, these discussions on this ליל שה' שפדרימ לה can be limitless, in accordance with the wisdom of the participants.

Then, at the end of the night, as these great Torah sages had reached the pinnacle of their perception of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu's* personal intervention in the events of *yetzias Mitzrayim*, their *talmidim* arrived and announced: “Now is the time for *Krias Shema shel Shacharis*.” What could be a more natural culmination of these lofty discussions than for them to reaffirm, in their heightened state of awareness: שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד.

Our entire *emunah* is based on אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מוצרים, *I am Hashem, your God, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt (Devarim 5:6)*, and not on בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ, *In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth (Bereishis 1:1)*. Although the creation of the world by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, *ex nihilo*, is one of the basic elements of our *emunah*, however, we cannot relate to it because we were not there when it occurred. But *yetzias Mitzrayim* is something to which we can relate, because we, as a nation, actually experienced how *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* personally redeemed us from *Mitzrayim*. *This is the focal point of the entire Seder night.*

It is these thoughts that the father conveys to his son — if he is a *chacham* — in response to his keen observation that tonight is מדה נשתנה, how very different, from any other night!

Vehigadeta Levincha Bayom Hahu

We now proceed to the וְהִגְדַת לְבָנֶיךָ section of the *Haggadah*. This details the methods that a father is to use in dealing with the אַרְבַּעֵה בָּנִים, the four different kinds of children envisioned by the Torah.

However, before beginning this section, the *baal Haggadah* introduces it with: בָּרוּךְ הַמָּקוֹם בָּרוּךְ הוּא בָּרוּךְ שֶׁנָּתַן תּוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּרוּךְ הוּא *Blessed is HaMakom (Hashem), blessed is He; blessed is the One Who gave the Torah to His nation Yisrael, blessed is He.* It is important for us to understand the significance of this introduction.

The Name used here for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is מְקוֹם, which really means *place*. This Name is usually reserved for sad occasions, as in הַמָּקוֹם יִנַּחֵם אֶתְכֶם, *May HaMakom comfort you*, or הַמָּקוֹם יִרְחַם עֲלֵיהֶם, *may HaMakom have mercy on them*, where it is meant to convey the thought that in times of trouble and difficulties it may appear to those affected by such difficulties that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is absent. So we give them encouragement and hope by reaffirming our faith in the Omnipresence of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, and telling them that there is no empty place: *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is the מְקוֹמוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, *the "Place" of the world*. He is הַמָּקוֹם, *the "Place."* He is with us here, בְּכֹל מְקוֹם, even in times of difficulty and sadness, just as surely as "place" is here with us.

Before beginning the section dealing with the *arbaah banim*, the *baal Haggadah*, too, envisions people who may be sitting at their *Seder* tables in circumstances that are less than happy. This may be because *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* has not blessed them with children, and they are there without a child to ask מַה נִּשְׁתַּנְּחָה, and no one with whom to be *mekayeim* the *mitzvah* of וְהִגְדַת לְבָנֶיךָ. In such circumstances, one is to be מְצַדִּיק עָלָיו אֶת הַדִּין, *accepting of God's judgment*, when he says the words בָּרוּךְ הַמָּקוֹם בָּרוּךְ הוּא, with which he accepts the will of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* in not granting him children.

Or, one may have children, but either one or more have not followed in the parents' way, and ridicule their parents as "old fashioned" or superstitious in their "rigid" observance of *Torah u'mitzvos*. For this case, the *baal Haggadah* prescribes the words: בָּרוּךְ שֶׁנָּתַן תּוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּרוּךְ הוּא, *God gave the Torah for all of Yisrael; it has an answer even for the rasha*, and a method that may bring him back on the proper path.

The Torah has answers for any person, regardless of whether he is a

chacham, rasha, tam, or she'eino yodei'a lishol. Rav Samson R. Hirsch translates: תורת ה' תמימה משיבת נפש: *The Torah of Hashem is all-encompassing; it answers the questions asked by the soul (Tehillim 19:8)*. משיבת נפש here is used in the sense of *she'eilah u'teshuvah*, answers to questions. If questions of religion torment one's soul, it will be satisfied and refreshed by the answers found in a proper understanding of the Torah, which directs man in every aspect of his existence.

— חכם מה הוא אומר? מה העדרת והחקים והמשפטים אשר צוה ה' אלהינו אתכם? —
What does the wise child say? (He says:) What are the testimonial laws, and the statutes, and the civil laws which Hashem has commanded you?
 This question, utilizing the words of *Devarim* 6:20, is attributed to the *chacham*, not only because he categorizes the *mitzvos* of Pesach into groups — *eidot, chukim, and mishpatim* — but also because he wonders why the *halachos* connected with *korban Pesach* and *issur chametz* are so stringent that one violates them at the peril of the worst of all punishments, *kares*: *בִּי כֹל אֹכֵל מִחֻמַּצֵּת וְנִכְרְתָהּ הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעֵדֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל*, *Anyone who eats leavening — that soul shall be cut off from the assembly of Israel (Shemos 12:19)*; ... *וְחָדַל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח וְנִכְרְתָהּ הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַמִּיהָ* ... *And he refrained from making the pesach-offering, that soul shall be cut off from its people (Bamidbar 9:13)*.

The *chacham* is the first to understand the necessity for *hakaras hatov* and of remembering the great kindness that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* showed to His people by redeeming them from slavery with great miracles. He knows that it is very fitting and proper for the people to thank *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* on this day and remember it by eating matzah and *maror*, and the *korban pesach*. However, he is puzzled by the צווי, demand, by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* that *yetzias Mitzrayim* be remembered, and that it be remembered precisely the way it is detailed in the Torah, and why the failure to adhere to these exacting demands would result in the severest of all punishments, *kares*. His question, therefore, is *מה העדרת והחקים והמשפטים אשר צוה ה' וגו' וְחָדַל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח וְנִכְרְתָהּ הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַמִּיהָ*. What is the underlying reason for the *exacting demands* by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* in connection with Pesach? This same question could likewise be asked concerning other *mitzvos* of the Torah, as well.

It is to this insightful question that the father is to give the answer found in the Torah: *וְאָמַרְתָּ לְבִנְךָ עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרַיִם וְגו'*, *You shall say to your child, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt . . ."* (*Devarim* 6:21). The father tells his son that our origin as *avadim* to Pharaoh served as the training for our national destiny. When *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* redeemed us from Egyptian slavery by force, *וַיֹּצִיאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה*, *Hashem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand*, it was with the intention that we become His *avadim*.

This basic truth lies at the heart of the answer (ibid. 6:22-24), which continues: וַיִּתֵּן ה' אוֹתוֹת וּמוֹפְתִים גְּדֹלִים וְרַעִים בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּפָרְעָה וּבְכָל בֵּיתוֹ לְעֵינֵינוּ. וְאוֹתוֹנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשֵּׁם לְמַעַן הִבִּיא אֶתְנוּ לָתֵת לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם. וַיִּצְוֵנו ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת *Hashem placed signs and wonders, great and harmful, against Egypt, against Pharaoh and against his entire household, before our eyes. And He took us out of there in order to bring us, to give us the land that He swore to our Forefathers. And Hashem commanded us to comply with all of these laws etc.* The Torah here is telling us that while we may have some understanding of the reasons for some of the *mitzvos*, nevertheless, a father is to tell his son that, in the final analysis, all of God's commandments are *chukim* (laws and statutes), which we are to accept solely because וַיִּצְוֵנו ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת. . . . לְיִרְאַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ *Hashem commanded us . . . to fear Hashem, our God.* This is not an explanation of the *mitzvos*, but rather, it is the reason for the commandment to perform them. We became free of the domination of Pharaoh to become *avadim* to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, and He has commanded us to fulfill His will. And if we fulfill His will solely וַיִּרְאַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ, then we are promised לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל הַיָּמִים, that we will obtain the ultimate and everlasting goodness in *Olam Haba*. This will be in addition to לְחַיֵּיתנוּ כְּהַיּוֹם, keeping us alive, with a satisfying life, in this world.

The concluding sentence of the answer (ibid. 6:25) summarizes its essence: וַיְצַדֵּקָהּ תְּהִיָּה לָנוּ כִּי נִשְׁמַר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּאִשֶּׁר צִוֵּנוּ, *And it will be a merit for us if we are careful to perform this entire commandment before Hashem, our God, as He commanded us.* This means that it will be considered *especially righteous* on our part if we keep the *mitzvos* only because *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* commanded us to do so. *This is the ultimate reason for all mitzvos.* We may understand a most beautiful explanation for the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* that satisfies our intellectual curiosity, but at the moment we put them on, we are told here to do so לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּאִשֶּׁר צִוֵּנוּ, solely for the purpose of fulfilling the commandment of Hashem. This thought is expressed in all of our *birchos hamitzvos*, when we say: אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוֵּנוּ וְגו'.

This is analogous to the laws of nature. Gravity, for instance, is the force that draws matter to the earth. While there have been many attempts by physicists to explain the reason for this phenomenon, in the final analysis, the reason for it is because it is a law of nature. It exists because the One Who created the world wants this law to exist. Very tellingly, we refer to the laws of nature as חֻקֵי שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ (*Yirmiyahu* 33:25). The words לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ are to be taken in the same sense. The laws of Torah exist — just as the laws of nature do — because that is what *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* wants.

To be sure, the understanding of the meaning of the *mitzvos* is an important aspect of *talmud Torah* — as is evident in many parts of the Mishnah

and Gemara, and Rambam and *Chinuch*, as well as many other *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, especially Rav Samson R. Hirsch. Very tellingly, however, the literal meaning of *taamei hamitzvos* is “the taste of the *mitzvos*,” but it is not its essence. One could make an analogy with the taste of food. *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* made the taste of food appealing and pleasurable to our taste buds, so that we would eat it and by eating it, our bodies would benefit from the nutrients therein, and that is its ultimate purpose. The body gains these nutrients even if the food is eaten because it tastes good and one enjoys it, and not because it keeps him alive. And if one were to eat without tasting the food, the body would still derive the same benefits from it. Similarly, the *taamei hamitzvos* are the “tastes” of the *mitzvos*, which appeal to our intellectual and emotional “taste buds” — which *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* gave us, so that we will derive pleasure from the understanding and performance of the *mitzvos*. However, the real essence of the *mitzvah* is, literally, what the word means, the fulfillment of God’s commandment: וַיְצַונוּ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לִירְאָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ. Philosophically, it is important to understand that a human being and his will are totally separate. If a person has no will, he still exists. However, with regard to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, He and His will are one and the same. His will is a revelation of Himself. Therefore, if a person — with his free will — subjects his will to that of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, he has made direct contact with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. One cannot come closer to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* than this.

The day before *Matan Torah* on *Har Sinai*, the Jewish people voluntarily accepted the Torah when they said וַנִּשְׁמַע וְנִשְׁמַע. However, on the very next day, the Torah describes (*Shemos* 19:16) the awesome scene at the actual lawgiving, of thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, accompanied by loud *shofar* sounds. The Torah tells us there that Moshe Rabbeinu brought the nation, trembling with fear, to the foot of the mountain: וַיִּתְיַצְבוּ בְּתַהֲתִיב הַהָר (ibid. v.17). And *Chazal* see in these words an indication that the Jewish nation was forced to accept the Torah, שִׁכְפָּה הַקַּב"ה עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיגִית, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* held the mountain over them as if it were a huge vat (*Shabbos* 88a).

Nevertheless, these two forms of *kabbalas HaTorah* are not contradictory. The frightful events accompanying the actual *Matan Torah* were intended to instill a sense of *yirah*, fear of the supremacy of God’s commandments, into the hearts of our people. The previous declaration of “*na’aseh venishma*,” when the Jewish people voluntarily agreed to fulfill the *mitzvos* of the Torah, was done out of their love for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, but this was only the first step of *kabbalas haTorah*. However, the highest form of fulfilling the *mitzvos* of the Torah is to do so out of *yirah*, simply because God commanded us to do so. This was impressed upon the minds of the awe-struck people at the time of the actual lawgiving. It was with fear and trepidation that the Torah

was presented by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* to the Jewish people at *Har Sinai*. Their descendants were to be — forever after — in fear of violating it. The purpose of the lawgiving was for the Jewish people to fear *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

The Gemara comments on the *pasuk*, אֵלֶיךָ שׂאֵל מִעַמְּךָ בִּי אִם לִירְאָה, מה ה' אֵלֶיךָ שׂאֵל, *What does Hashem, your God, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem, your God (Devarim 10:12)*; הַכֹּל בְּיַדֵּי שָׁמַיִם חוּץ מִירְאַת שָׁמַיִם, *Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven (Berachos 33b)*. Since human beings have free will, their fear of heaven is not in God's hands. The frightful events accompanying *Matan Torah* were intended to impress upon our hearts a sense of *yirah*, fear of God, to teach us that the ultimate purpose of Torah is *yiras Shamayim*.

It is this that the father tells his wise son: After everything has been said, the ultimate answer to the question of מַה הַעֲדַת וְהַחֲקִים וְהַמְשַׁפְּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לְעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֲקִים הָאֵלֶּה לִירְאָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲתֶכֶם וַיִּצְוֵנוּ ה' לְעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֲקִים הָאֵלֶּה לִירְאָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ is simply: הַטּוֹב לָנוּ כָּל הַיָּמִים לְחַיֵּינוּ בְּהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה. וְצִדְקָה תִּהְיֶה לָנוּ כִּי נִשְׁמַר לְעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּנוּ.

[Ed. note: The thought developed by the Rav in this section — that the ultimate and ideal form of performing the *mitzvos* of the Torah is on the level of *yirah* — is not in conflict with *Yoma* 86b, where the statement is made that *teshuvah mei'ahavah* is on a higher level than *teshuvah mi'yirah*. The reference in the Gemara there is to *yiras ha'onesh*, the pragmatic fear of punishment for the *aveirah*. This is quite different than *yiras haRomemus*, which is meant by וַיִּצְוֵנוּ ה' לְעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֲקִים הָאֵלֶּה לִירְאָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ: the awe-inspiring awareness that we, as *Bnei Yisrael*, have been chosen by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the All-Powerful Creator, to fulfill His commandments, and we do so because He has commanded us to do so (see *Maayan Beis HaSho'evah, Acharei* 16:30, *Sforno, Devarim* 30:1-2: תִּהְיֶה תְּשׁוּבָתְךָ כְּדֵי (לְעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן קוֹנֵךְ בְּלִבְךָ).]

This answer to the *chacham* is summarized in the *Haggadah* as:

וְיֹאֵף אֶתְּךָ אָמַר לוֹ בְּהַלְכוֹת הַפֶּסַח, אֵין מִפְּטִירִין אַחַר הַפֶּסַח אֲפִיקוֹמֵן — You shall also tell him that, in accordance with the laws of *Pesach*, one is not permitted to eat anything after partaking of the *korban pesach*. The *Maharal* explains that this is an abbreviated version of the answer. The father must first give him the full answer as detailed in the Torah, beginning with עֲבָדִים הָיינוּ (from *Devarim* 6:21); and then וְיֹאֵף אֶתְּךָ אָמַר לוֹ וְגו', the father should illustrate the true meaning of this answer through one of the *hilchos hapesach*, which is אֵין מִפְּטִירִין אַחַר הַפֶּסַח אֲפִיקוֹמֵן. The *korban pesach*, or in our days, the *matzah*, must be eaten at the end of the meal. No sweet or dessert may be eaten afterward, so that the taste of the *matzah* may linger on in our mouths throughout the night. The lesson that the father gives his son

here is that the dessert of a *mitzvah* is the *mitzvah* itself. There is nothing sweeter than the *mitzvah* itself. The true answer to the question *מה הערת וגו'* is that the keeping of Torah and *mitzvos* is the will of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, and its ultimate meaning is to do so only because He commanded us to fulfill His will, *באשר צננו*.

The next son is the *rasha*:

מה רשע מה הוא אומר? מה העבדה הזאת לכם? — **What does the *rasha* say? What does this service mean to you?** This is derived from: *והיה כי תבאו אל הארץ אשר יתן ה' לכם באשר דבר ושמרתם את העבדה הזאת. והיה כי יאמרו אליכם בניכם מה אשך יתן ה' לכם באשר דבר ושמרתם את העבדה הזאת לה. ויקד העם וישתחוו*, *It shall be that when you come to the land that Hashem will give you, as He has spoken, you shall observe this service. And it shall be that when your children say to you, "What is this service to you?" You shall say, "It is a pesach feast-offering to Hashem". . . and the people bowed (their heads) and prostrated themselves (Shemos 12:25-28).*

On the face of it, this son seems to be asking a nonhostile and legitimate question. He is asking his father: "What is the meaning of this service which you are performing?" *Avodah*, meaning "service to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*," is the word generally used in connection with *korbanos*, and specifically for the *korban pesach*, as in *ועבדת את העבדה הזאת בחדש הזה* (*Shemos 13:5*). Furthermore, the Torah prescribes a proper answer to this normal question by this inquisitive child: *ואמרתם ובה פסח הוא לה אשר פסח הוא על בתי בני ישראל. במצרים בנגפו את מצרים ואת בתינו הציל*, *You shall say, "It is a pesach feast-offering to Hashem, Who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but He saved our households"* (*ibid. 12:27*).

In fact, this message itself was received by *Bnei Yisrael* as very good tidings, *besorah tovah*, which is evident from the end of it: *ויקד העם וישתחוו*, *they bowed down in gratitude to HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. And Rashi comments, in the name of the *Mechilta*, that they were grateful to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* because inherent in this message were His promises to redeem them, to bring them to their land, and to give them offspring: *על בשורת הגאולה וביאת הארץ ובשורת הבנים שיהיו להם*.

However, notwithstanding its basic and simple meaning, our *Chachamim* find in the words *מה העבדה הזאת לכם* additional circumstances whereby this question could be asked sarcastically by a hostile and rebellious child who does not accept the validity of the historic reason given by the Torah for this *avodah*. He sees it merely as an old-fashioned, superstitious ritual which is nothing but a burden. To him it is just "work."

The basis for this way of understanding the question is found in its introduction: *והיה כי תבאו אל הארץ . . . באשר דבר ושמרתם את העבדה הזאת*. This envisions *Bnei Yisrael* as having long been settled in the land, and the *korban*

Pesach as having been brought annually far many generations. כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר is a reference to the earlier promise אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ . . . וְנָתַתִּי אֹתָהּ לָכֶם מוֹרֶשֶׁה אֲנִי ה' and I shall give it to you as a heritage — *I am Hashem (Shemos 6:8)*. This son has witnessed his father and his grandfather offering the *korban pesach* year in and year out, and he has heard the explanation many times. However, now, for reasons of his own, he has decided that he does not wish to take part in this “ritual” any longer. He has rejected his heritage, הוֹצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן הַקֶּלֶל, and he mocks his father and his family with the words: מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם. “To me this old-fashioned ritual means nothing; why do you persist in keeping it!” Under these circumstances, this question — or rather, statement — takes on a completely different meaning, that of רָשָׁע מָה הוּא אוֹמֵר.

The answer to the *rasha* prescribed in the *Haggadah* is: וְאַף אֶתְהָה הַקֵּהָה אֶת שְׁנָיו, וְאָמַר לוֹ בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם. לִי וְלֹא לוֹ. אֵלֹהֵי הַיָּהוּ שֵׁם לֹא הָיָה נִגְאָל, *And you shall also blunt his teeth by quoting the pasuk, “Because of this did Hashem act on my behalf when I left Egypt” (Shemos 13:8). This means “for me (on my behalf) — but not for him.” Had he been there, he would, indeed, not have been redeemed.* Simply, this could mean that since the *rasha* has asked a sarcastic question, in which he has excluded himself from *Klal Yisrael*, and does not really seek an explanation, he deserves this sarcastic response.

However, the meaning of this question goes much farther. It could be asked also by a person who does not really want to cut himself off from his people, one who still wants to be “Jewish,” albeit not a religious Jew; even one who associates himself with Jewish charitable causes, and sincerely feels the pain of Jews who are oppressed in the world, but just refuses to accept the *mitzvos* as binding on him. Nevertheless, this person is still referred to as a *rasha*. By his refusal to accept the mandatory nature of the entire Torah and its *mitzvos*, he has, in effect, excluded himself from the essence (*ikkar*) of Judaism. לִפִּי שְׁהוֹצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן הַקֶּלֶל כִּפְר בְּעֵקֶר. The father tells him that there can be no “Judaism” or “Jewishness” without the acceptance of the *Torah u'mitzvos* as binding. If he is to be considered part of the body of the Jewish nation, he must accept the Torah and all of its *mitzvos*.

Rambam, in his *peirush* on the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin, Perek Chelek*), in detailing the thirteen essential principles of Judaism, the י”ג עִקְרֵי־מַדְבָּר, states the following:

וְכַאֲשֶׁר יֵאֱמָר הָאָדָם אֵלֶּה הַיְסוּדוֹת בְּלִם וְנִתְבָּרַר בָּם אֲמוּנָתוֹ בָּהֶם, הוּא נִכְנָס בְּקֶלֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִצְוָה לְאַהֲבוֹ וּלְרַחֵם עָלָיו . . . וְנִפְּלוּ עָשָׂה מִה שְׂיָכוֹל מִן הָעֲבִירוֹת מִחֲמַת הַתְּאֵנָה וְהַתְּגַבְרוֹת הַטְּבַע הַגְּרוּעַ הוּא נִעְנֵשׁ כְּפִי חֲטָאָיו אֲבָל יֵשׁ לוֹ חֹלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא וְהוּא מְפוֹשְׁעֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וּבְשִׁנְתֵּקֶלֶל לְאֵדָם יְסוּד מֵאֵלֶּה הַיְסוּדוֹת הָרִי יֵצֵא מִן הַקֶּלֶל וְכִפְר בְּעֵקֶר. וְנִקְרָא מִין וְאִפְּיִקוּרוֹס וְקוֹצֵץ בְּנִטְיֵעוֹת וּמִצְוָה לְשׁוֹנְאוֹ וְלֹא אֲבָרוֹ וְגו'.

Paraphrased, this means if one accepts the thirteen essential tenets of our

faith, even if he does *aveiros* — he may even be a *mechallel Shabbos* — while he is called a *poshei'a Yisrael*, and will be punished for his *aveiros*, he, nevertheless, is still considered a part of the Jewish people in every respect, and is entitled to be rewarded for his *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim* in *Olam Haba*. However, if he does not accept all of the עיקרים he is considered יצא מן הנבדל ונפרד בעיקר. By refusing to accept all of the thirteen essential elements of Judaism, he has effectively removed himself from the body of the Jewish people.

To illustrate this concept, I would like to relate a brief personal story. When I was a child, approximately 5 years of age, I contracted whooping cough, which made my breathing very difficult. The doctor, not having the benefit of today's antibiotics, prescribed hot steam vapor to help me breathe easier. Unfortunately, the boiling hot kettle on the stove which provided the steam inadvertently tipped over and scalded my left arm, causing me to scream in pain. The scar remained visible for almost one year, at first red, then brownish, until it finally disappeared. This was due to the fact that the cells of the living body constantly renew themselves; the old ones die and are replaced by new ones. Despite the fact that the scar has completely healed, and my arm has, in the meantime, grown to about three times the size it was at the time of the burn, and consists of completely new tissue, I can still point to a spot on my left arm, and say, in all honesty, "Here is where I was severely burned as a child."

The analogy is clear. The body of the Jewish people, *Klal Yisrael*, personally experienced *yetzias Mitzrayim*. And, for all future generations, when a descendant of the Jewish people relates the story of the miraculous events connected with it, he is doing so as a part of the "body" of the Jewish people. Although he was not personally there, and neither was his father or grandfather, nevertheless, he, as a part of the body of the Jewish people, was there. This is conveyed by the statement later in the *Haggadah*: כָּבֵל דּוֹר וָדוֹר יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם חַיֵּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם. *In every generation a person is obligated to consider himself as having experienced the Exodus from Egypt.*

Therefore, the father tells his son, "If you don't accept the *korban pesach*, or the other *mitzvos* connected with our commemoration of *yetzias Mitzrayim*, or, for that matter, any other *mitzvah* mandated by the Torah, as binding on you, you are not Jewish. You are not a part of the Jewish people." There is no "ethnic Judaism." This son is therefore told: "There were people like you in *Mitzrayim*, and, indeed, they were not redeemed."

The father tells his son that which the son does not want to hear: "My dear son, I want you to be Jewish, but I also want you to know that you cannot be a Jew without a firm commitment to uphold all of the *mitzvos* of the Torah. And if you do not accept this basic tenet of Judaism, then I must tell you לֹא לְךָ, you are not a part of our nation and its history. Make up your mind:

either you are Jewish in the full sense of the word, or you are not at all Jewish.”

The advice given by the Torah to a father who wants to see his son become a *baal teshuvah* is not to countenance in him some watered-down, “ethnic” form of Judaism without the acceptance of the *mitzvos*, but rather, he must make it absolutely clear to him that there can be no “*klal*” of *Yisrael* without a full and unconditional commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*.

However, once one admits that there is a Judaism without a full commitment to Torah, he has effectively closed the door to potential *baalei teshuvah*. Why should such a person want to accept the full weight of Torah and *mitzvos* if he can be a Jew without it? Furthermore, a form of Judaism that is not fully committed to Torah and *mitzvos* could lead to one marrying a non-Jew, and having children who consequently are not Jewish, but still be buried with a *tallis* on *Har HaZeisim*, with a “rabbi” offering a *hesped*, because “after all, he was a good Jew.”

This method of unequivocally and clearly defining the nature of the Jewish people was practiced by Yehoshua before his death, in his fiery speech (*Yehoshua* 24:2,15), part of which is quoted later in the *Haggadah*:
... וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל כָּל הָעָם כֹּה אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר יָשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מֵעוֹלָם ...
וְאִם רָע בְּעֵינֵיכֶם לָעֶבֶד אֶת ה' בְּחַרְוּ לָכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת מִי תַעֲבֹדוּן אִם אֶת אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ
אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר מֵעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר ... וְאִנֹּכִי וְכִיתִי נֹעֲבֹד אֶת ה'
Yehoshua said to the entire nation, "Thus said Hashem, the God of Israel: 'Your forefathers historically dwelt beyond the river' ... If it is evil in your eyes to serve Hashem, choose today whom you will serve: the gods your forefathers served across the river ... But as for me and my house, we will serve Hashem."

It was also practiced by Eliyahu HaNavi when he said: עַד מָתַי אַתֶּם פֹּסְחִים עַל שְׁתֵּי הַסַּעֲפִים אִם ה' הָאֱלֹהִים לָכֵן אַחֲרָיו וְאִם הַבַּעַל לָכֵן אַחֲרָיו, “How long will you dance between two opinions? If Hashem is the God, go after Him! And if the Baal, go after it” (*Melachim I* 18:21).

The Torah does not want any child to be lost from the fold of our people, as is evident by the words of our *Chachamim*, בְּנִגְדַר אַרְבָּעָה בְּנִים דְּבִרְתָּה תוֹרָה, *The Torah speaks to all four categories of children*. But the previously described method of bringing a child back to Torah-true Judaism is tried and proven, and will give a child who is now a *rasha* — or has the potential to become one — pause for thought, so that hope can exist that one day he will return to his people.

Following the *rasha*, we would have expected the next son to be the opposite: the *tzaddik*. However, he does not appear at all, and the next son listed is the *tam*. The word “*tam*” is used in the Gemara to denote a tame ox, *tam* (the word “tame” means the same as *tam*), as opposed to a wild ox, *muad*. The Torah tells us יָשַׁב אֹהֲלִים תָּם יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים, *Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents* (*Bereishis* 25:27), on which Rashi says that תָּם

describes a person who is honest, and it is not within his nature to outsmart people.

The absence of the *tzaddik* from the listing of the children is a very significant lesson in the education of our children: *One cannot be a tzaddik unless he is a chacham*. One who attempts to be a *tzaddik* without Torah knowledge can be — at most — a *tam*, “a simple Jew.” We would call such a person “*frum*” (in German, “*fromm*”). He tries his best to do the right thing, and he does not purposely do anything wrong, but since he does not learn Torah, his activities are not guided by Torah knowledge.

Accordingly, the question of the *tam* is a simple one, as opposed to the *chacham* who has already, in his mind, subdivided the Torah into *eidos*, *chukim*, and *mishpatim*. He asks a very unsophisticated question: *מה זאת* “*What is this?*” or “*What are we commemorating by this Seder?*” And the answer the father gives him is also a very general statement: *בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים* *With a strong hand Hashem took us out of Egypt from the house of bondage* (Shemos 13:14).

Upon reflection, though, we must understand why our *Chachamim* have attributed this question, *מה זאת*, to a *תם*, a “simple-minded” person. On the surface, it seems to be a very legitimate question in the context in which it is framed in the Torah, which is the *mitzvah* of *bechor*. The Torah states: *וְהָיָה בִּי וְיָבֵאָה ה' אֶל אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי . . . וְהִעֲבַרְתָּ כָּל פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם לָהּ . . . וְכָל פֶּטֶר חֲמֹר תִּפְדֶּה* *And it shall come to pass, when Hashem will bring you to the land of the Canaanites . . . then you shall set apart every first issue of the womb to Hashem . . . every first-issue donkey you shall redeem* (ibid. vs. 11-14).

This paragraph continues: *וְהָיָה בִּי וְשָׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מַה זֶה* *When, tomorrow, your child will ask you, “What is the meaning of this?”*, *וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו* *say to him*, *בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים* *With a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt from the house of bondage*. This is the *pasuk* that is quoted in the *Haggadah*.

However, the quotation in the *Haggadah* is missing the notation *וגו'* after it, because this sentence is only the beginning of the answer. The answer continues, and explains the reason why the *חֹזֶק יָד* was necessary: *וַיְהִי בִּי הַקְּשָׁה* *פרעה לשלחנו וַיְהִיג ה' כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכֹר אָדָם וְעַד בְּכוֹר הַבְּהֵמָה* *עַל כֵּן אָנִי זֹכֵר לָהּ* *לְשִׁלְחָנוּ וַיְהִיג ה' כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכֹר אָדָם וְעַד בְּכוֹר הַבְּהֵמָה* *עַל כֵּן אָנִי זֹכֵר לָהּ* *כָּל פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם הַיְּבֵרִים וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּנֵי אִפְרָיִם*.

With this, the father tells his son that in commemoration of this miraculous event — in which Pharaoh was forced, by the sudden death of all male firstborn offspring of men and animals, to let us leave *Mitzrayim* — we were given the *mitzvah* of *bechor*.

Therefore, in its proper context, the question *מה זאת* quoted in the *Haggadah* is only peripherally related to *yetzias Mitzrayim*. The same question could actually be asked of any *mitzvah*. But since the answer is connected with *yetzias Mitzrayim* it is included in the *Haggadah*.

It remains for us to understand what is so simple minded about the question, *מה זאת*, that it prompted our *Chachamim* to characterize the son who asks it as a *tam*. Furthermore, in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Pesachim* 10:4), this son is actually called a *tipeish*, a fool! In its proper context, it is a perfectly intelligent question.

To explain this, I would like to offer an insight which I heard from my saintly Rebbe, Rav Yosef Leib Bloch, the Telzer Rav and *Rosh Yeshivah*. He illustrated the meaning of the *pesukim*, *מה גדלו מעשיך ה' מאד עמקו מחשבתך*, *איש בער לא ידע ויבין לא יבין את זאת*. *בפרח רשעים כמו עשב ויציצו כל פעלי און וגו' How great are Your deeds, Hashem, exceedingly profound are Your thoughts. A boor cannot know, nor can a fool understand this: When the wicked bloom like grass and all the doers of iniquity blossom, etc. (Tehillim 92:6-8)*. My Rebbe depicted a setting which I will update to reflect our modern-day world. Imagine an uneducated person standing before the control panel of a spacecraft, with its many rows of lights, dials, switches, clocks, and counter clocks, of many sizes and shapes, illuminated by different colored lights. Noticing that one of the lights is flickering, the person asks the chief engineer, "Why is the light in the fourth row, seventh from the left, flickering?" Knowing that his visitor is totally unschooled in engineering, electronics, flight or space science, the engineer would tell him, "You are asking me about that one particular light while not being schooled in even the basic sciences needed to understand this. Without your knowledge of these sciences, I cannot begin to explain any of this to you."

My Rebbe explained this *pasuk* in a similar way. An intelligent person who looks at nature and the vast cosmos, with all of its wonders, can only marvel and exclaim: *מה גדלו מעשיך ה'*. And when he looks at the events of world history, and the development of human civilization, his mind cries out *מאד עמקו מחשבתך*.

And *איש בער לא ידע*, *the unlearned person, does not know*. An unthinking person is not even aware of his marvelous surroundings.

But the fool, *ויבין לא יבין את זאת*: This unlearned person, who is devoid of knowledge, has only one question — only one thing, *זאת*, bothers him: *בפרח רשעים כמו עשב ויציצו כל פעלי און*. Why does *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* permit the *reshaim* to attain such success and to flourish? My Rebbe explained that he is called "a fool" because he picks out and expects to understand this one particular aspect of the overall plan of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* in the management of the affairs of the world, when he has absolutely no concept at all of that master plan.

I would like to apply this same idea to the question *מה זאת* of the *tam*. He looks at the Torah with its hundreds of *mitzvos* — sixty-two of which apply to *korban pesach* alone — and thousands of *halachos*, but he does not say, "I would like to start learning Torah and broaden my knowledge of it; there are

so many things I don't understand." Instead, he picks out one *mitzvah*, and asks, *למה זאת*, "What is this particular law for?" And when he receives an answer for his very narrow inquiry, he is satisfied. That, indeed, is the sign of a *tam*, a simpleton, or as the *Yerushalmi* calls him, a *tipeish*, fool.

Nevertheless, if a father happens to have such a son, he is obligated to teach him on his level, one *mitzvah* at a time, and then, hopefully, he will ask another question, *מה זאת*, and another, until slowly but surely his interest in the broader spectrum of Torah will be awakened.

Our *Chachamim* tell us, *לפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו*, a father must teach his son in accordance with his abilities and mindset (*Pesachim* 116a, in the Mishnah). Therefore, if a child is not too bright, the father, or teacher, must concentrate on teaching the subject matter to him in a form that is suitable to that particular child.

The next son is the *שאינו יודע לשאול*, the one who does not know enough to ask.

On the surface of it, the father is faced here with a child who is not even interested enough to ask any questions. And to deal with this child, the *Chachamim* tell the father, *אתה פתח לו*, You must begin the conversation, in fulfillment of the *pasuk*: *והגדת לבנה ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים*, And you shall tell your son on that day, saying "It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt" (*Shemos* 13:8).

(By the way, the word *אתה*, in the language of the *Mechilta*, from which it comes, is the same as *אתה*, in standard *lashon hakodesh*, and, therefore, does not suggest that this child is best dealt with gently by the mother and not the father — as has erroneously been taught.)

An attempt should be made to prompt this child to ask questions by drawing his attention to the especially beautiful and unusual table setting. For instance: "Look at the table and how it is set. Don't you see anything different here tonight?" And if, after piquing his interest by gifts of candy and nuts, he still does not ask anything, then simply begin by telling him, as the Torah prescribes: *והגדת לבנה ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים*. The father is to tell his child that this night is dedicated to remembering and talking about *yetzias Mitzrayim* and the great *nissim* that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* did for our forefathers to free them from Egyptian bondage.

And, as the *Haggadah* subsequently details, *היום ההוא* teaches us that it must be told on the fifteenth of Nissan; *בעבור זה* teaches us that it be told in the presence of *matzah* and *maror*; and when *korbanos* are brought, the narrative is told in the presence of the *korban pesach*. Pointing to these objects, the father is to tell his son, "Because of this, did Hashem act for me when I left Egypt." And further on in the *Haggadah*, *Rabban Gamliel* explains the specific meaning of each of these objects, based on our experiences before and during *yetzias Mitzrayim*.

However, in addition to its simple meaning, שְׂאִינוּ יוֹדֵעַ לְשִׂאוֹל has a secondary and deeper meaning, which is borne out by the answer given: בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְצִאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם, as we shall explain. And this secondary meaning applies not only to a child, but also to most of us. שְׂאִינוּ יוֹדֵעַ לְשִׂאוֹל does not mean only *He who does not know enough to ask*, but it also means, *He who does not know enough to ask the right question*. And the unasked question to which we are referring is: “With what *zechus* did our forefathers merit their freedom from slavery and *yetzias Mitzrayim*?”

We know that *Bnei Yisrael* had become almost completely assimilated into Egyptian life. They had neglected the *bris milah* until shortly before their departure from Egypt, and had sunk deeply into the morass of Egyptian idolatry. Our *Chachamim* tell us that on the scale of the “forty-nine” possible levels of *tumah* (מִטְּעָרֵי טְמֵאָה), *Bnei Yisrael* had sunk almost to the lowest one. Yechezkel HaNavi, in his lengthy chastisement (*Yechezkel* 20:8), decries the condition of our forefathers in Egypt: וְאֵת גִּלְוֵי מִצְרַיִם לֹא עָזְבוּ וְאָמַר, לְשִׁפְךָ חֲמָתִי עֲלֵיהֶם לְכַלּוֹת אֶפְי בָהֶם בְּתוֹךְ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, *They did not forsake the idols of Egypt, so I had thought to pour out My wrath upon them, to spend My anger on them, in the midst of the land of Egypt.*

And our *Chachamim* tell us (see *Mechilta, Beshalach*), even at the moment of *krias Yam Suf*, the *sar shel yam*, the “master of the sea,” the spiritual force which Hashem empowered over the sea, argued against saving *Bnei Yisrael*, saying that they were no better than the Egyptians, הִלְלוּ עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדַת הַיָּם וְהִלְלוּ עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדַת הַיָּבֵשׁ.

To be sure, they still kept their “old customs” of distinctive clothing, names, and language — and in this sense they were מְצִיּוֹנִים שָׁם, “an ethnic minority” — but they were just as much Egyptian as the American Indians are Americans, notwithstanding the Indians’ particular ethnicity.

So the “unasked” question remains: “With what *zechus* were our forefathers redeemed from Egypt?”

The answer to this question is that our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt in the merit of their emunah that HaKadosh Baruch Hu would redeem them. This is evident from the following.

The Torah tells us: וְאָכְלוּ אֶת הַבֶּשֶׂר בְּלֵילָה הַהוּא צְלִי אֵשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עַל מַרְרִים יֹאכְלֶהּ יוֹ (Shemos 12:8), which means that *Bnei Yisrael* ate the *korban Pesach* together with *matzah* and *maror* while they were yet in *Mitzrayim*. The obvious question here is: When our forefathers ate the first *korban Pesach* in *Mitzrayim*, during the night of the fifteenth of *Nissan*, together with *matzah* and *maror*, not a single *bechor* had yet died in *Mitzrayim*. The *korban Pesach* had to be eaten בְּחֶזֶק זְרוֹעַ, *quickly*, before *chatzos*, even though *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* had not yet “spared the Jewish houses,” פָּסַח עַל בְּהֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, during *makkas bechoros*. Also, the *neis* of the unleavened dough was yet to occur the next morning, hours later. Therefore, our forefathers ate the

korban pesach and matzah, seemingly, in “commemoration” of something which was yet to happen!

And furthermore, astonishingly, while still in Mitzrayim they were commanded to eat the *maror* to remember their bitter lives: וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעִבְדָּהּ קָשָׁה, *They embittered their lives with hard work* (Shemos 1:14). Does one have to eat *maror* while still in a concentration camp? At this point, they certainly did not need to refresh their bitter memories — they were still in Mitzrayim!

The answer to these questions is inherent in the father’s answer, בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה, which must be given in the presence of matzah and *maror*, and, if possible, *korban pesach*. And the meaning is that when *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* commanded our forefathers to eat the *korban pesach* with matzah and *maror* while still in Mitzrayim, they did so with absolute *emunah* that the promise of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* to redeem them would occur. They ate the *korban pesach* and matzah as if the events that these symbols were to commemorate had already occurred; and the *maror* as if their redemption had occurred so long ago that they had to be reminded of the bitterness that they had experienced. And it was in the merit of this *emunah* — בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה — that Hashem acted on our behalf, עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְצִאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם. I merited the redemption, because I kept the *mitzvos* of *pesach*, matzah, and *maror* as I was preparing to leave Mitzrayim. I kept these *mitzvos* before the events that they were to commemorate actually occurred. My *emunah* was so strong that I considered these events as if they had actually already occurred.

And this story has to be retold again every year, in the presence of *pesach*, matzah, and *maror*, on the night of the fifteenth of *Nissan*, בְּיוֹם הַהוּא, to emphasize that we merited our redemption from Egypt because of our total *emunah* in *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* — that night in Egypt — that the *geulas Mitzrayim* would actually take place.

The power of emunah is such that it converts the future into the present.

We express this concept in our *tefillah*. The text of the *berachah* of *techiyas hameisim* is, וְנִאֲמָן אֶתְּהָ לְהַחְיֹת מֵתִים. At the end of time *techiyas hameisim* will occur, and we are so convinced that it will occur, that we end the *berachah*, מְחַיֶּה הַמֵּתִים, *You revive the dead*, in the present tense, as if we have already witnessed the *meisim* (corpses) rising from their graves.

Similarly, in וְנִאֲמָנוּ לְמַעַן שְׁמַרְהָ בִּי גּוֹאֵל חֶזֶק אֶתְּהָ, we say *ראה בענינינו*, and although we are not yet redeemed, we end the *berachah* with גּוֹאֵל ה' בְּרֹחַ אֶתְּהָ ה' בְּרֹחַ אֶתְּהָ, in the present tense, as if the redemption had already occurred.

Also, בּוֹנֵה יְרוּשָׁלַיִם and שְׂבִינְתוֹ לְצִיּוֹן are in the present tense, as if Yerushalayim were already rebuilt, and the *Shechinah* were present there.

It is in this sense that בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְצִאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם is the answer given on Seder night to the “unasked question” of the לְשֵׁאוֹל. However, it is one of the important basics of our faith in that it also serves to remind us that we merited our redemption only because of our *emunah*.