

Parsha Ponders

Pesach | April 18, 2019 | 13 Nissan 5779

The mighty hand of Hashem¹

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות, שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלים חמץ ומצה וכי

Why is this night different from all other nights? For on all other nights, we eat leavened and non-leavened bread etc...

עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים ויוציאנו יקוק אלקים משם ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and Hashem, G-d, took us out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm²

The *Ma-Nishatana* is a classic moment at everyone's Seder. The youngest member of the house proudly gets up and asks the Four Questions. The Haggadah continues by declaring that we were slaves in Egypt to Pharaoh. This would seem to be an attempt to answer the child's questions. However, what connection is there between the parent's response and the child's questions? They seem totally incongruous.

Although it appears that there are four questions, regarding the matzah, marror, dipping, and reclining, in reality there is really only one question: why is this night different? The rest are just examples of how the night is different. However, these questions are highly unusual. If they're focused on the *mitzvah* itself, asking why is it this way, why don't we do this with other *mitzvos*? Throughout the year we do *mitzvos* that are infrequent or seasonal, and we don't ask why we are performing them.

In fact, while we can try to discern the reasoning behind certain *mitzvos*, many are completely beyond our grasp. Regardless, they're all incumbent upon us to perform, whether we understand them or not. So too with these four *mitzvos* on the night of the Seder³. Why then are we encouraging our children to ask what their reasoning is?

The answer is based on what we said above. The main question being asked isn't the reasoning behind the *mitzvos*. It's why are we **specifically** doing things that are abnormal. We're almost going out of our way to do so⁴. For example, throughout the year when kneading dough, we specifically expend effort so that the bread will rise. That's the whole point of the baking process. Why then on this night are we specifically avoiding the bread rising? Why are we only eating matzah? Also by the marror. Throughout the year we seek out vegetables that are enjoyable and tasty. Why on this night are we picking the most bitter and difficult to eat vegetable⁵?

¹ Based on the Be'er Yosef's commentary on the Haggadah (found at the end of Volume I, also published in a separate book)

² Haggadah Shel Pesach

³ Technically only two are *mitzvos*. Matzah is biblical (Exodus 12:18), and while marror was biblical (*ibid* v. 8) these days its rabbinic (Pesachim 120a). Dipping (*ibid* 114b) and reclining (*ibid* 108a) are rabbinic institutions, to intrigue the children and convey aristocracy, respectfully, but they are not *mitzvos* in the technical sense

⁴ For example we take away the Seder plate at the beginning of *Maggid*, solely so the children will ask what's going on (see Pesachim 115b and Rashbam ad. loc. s.v. פטרתי Cf. Tosafos ad. loc. s.v. כדי)

⁵ It's also unusual to dip vegetables before the meal, and we definitely don't recline while eating throughout the year (see the Gra's commentary on the *Ma-Nishtana*, who points out that in the times of the Mishnah it **was** normal, which is why Pesachim 10:4 doesn't list it as one of the four questions. The Aruch HaShulchan Orach Chaim 472:3 also says this)

How then is “we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and Hashem, G-d, took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” a proper answer to this question? The last part of the answer might be the clue. What does it mean that Hashem took us out with a mighty hand? Is there any need for strength on His part? He created the entire universe with just words alone, and everything from then until now. He really needed to apply strength to take us out of Egypt?

The mighty hand of Hashem in this context can refer to a change in nature. When Hashem created the universe, He implanted in everything its set nature. The way things work has been the same ever since. However, Hashem, in order to redeem the Jews and increase their faith in Him, made a change of nature. He created the Ten Plagues. Our sources tell us⁶ that Hashem very much prefers to keep things going according to nature. Any deviation from that can be referred to as a mighty hand.

With this, we can understand the response to the child’s question. Why are we going out of our way to do things outside the norm on the Seder night? Because we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Hashem took us out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Meaning, Hashem went out of His way, so to speak, to change nature, which had been set since creation, in order to take us out. For us to properly understand and appreciate the good and the kindness that was done for us by creating these drastic changes to nature, we ourselves perform drastic changes. We publicize the changes, to thank and praise Him for all that He was done for us.

Good Shabbos and Chag Kasher VeSameach!

⁶ For example, Vayikra Rabbah 2:1. See Eitz Yosef *ad. loc.*