



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

The Four Cups at the Seder: Understanding Cups One and Three

Rabbi Moshe Berger

In the Gemara in Pesachim (109b-110a), Ravina states:

Our Rabbis instituted [that we drink] four cups [of wine at the Pesach Seder] as symbolizing liberty: each one is a separate obligation.*

These cups demarcate the Seder's four basic sections:

1. Kiddush
2. Sippur Yetzias Mitzraim – recounting the Exodus
3. The celebratory meal (following which Birkas Hamazon is recited over the cup of wine)
4. Hallel

The second and fourth sections obviously relate to the theme of חירות, liberty, in their respective sections: Recounting the story of the Exodus [section 2] and praising G-d for our liberation [section 4] certainly warrant a celebratory wine-toast to our freedom. However, at first blush, the first and third sections do not seem to address or evoke the theme of חירות at all. Kiddush and Birkas Hamazon are common to all festival and Shabbos meals, and are regularly recited over a cup of wine. How can we understand Ravina's statement that each of these cups was instituted specifically in connection with the Pesach theme of חירות?

On one hand, we might conclude that, although Kiddush and Birkas Hamazon do not celebrate our liberation from Egypt, those two cups of wine combined with the other two contribute cumulatively to the overall celebratory mood of the entire Seder.

Alternatively, we may suggest that both Kiddush and Birkas Hamazon do possess specific inherent connections with the Seder theme.

The Relationship Between Kiddush and Sippur Yetzias Mitzraim

The holiday Kiddush, unlike the Shabbos Kiddush, refers to Hashem's having "chosen us from all the other nations." This concept is included in the holiday Kiddush to allude to the fact that Israel, as a function of being chosen, is empowered and mandated to sanctify time by determining the monthly calendar – thus determining the precise day in which the holiday will occur. This mitzvah, known as Mitzvas Kiddush Hachodesh [the mitzvah of sanctifying each new month], entails determining which days are to be endowed with sanctity – קדושת היום.

The context in which Hashem communicated this first mitzvah is instructive: it appears in the beginning of Exodus chapter 12, as a prologue to the mitzvah of processing the Paschal Lamb which was to be consumed on the night of their liberation. The appropriateness of this mitzvah's placement in the context of our "liberation sacrifice" may be understood as follows: Mitzvas Kiddush Hachodesh indicates that Hashem has given us the ability – and the obligation – to control time. And control of one's time is indeed the major indicator of liberation, of not being a slave who is compelled throughout his life to work in

accordance with his master's schedule. On Pesach night, therefore, Kiddush is imbued with extra meaning and may be viewed as an appropriate toast to our G-d-given control over time, i.e. freedom.

The Relationship Between Birkas Hamazon and Sippur Yetzias Mitzraim

Birkas Hamazon is not a thanksgiving prayer for the food we have eaten; rather, it is an expression of gratitude for the *land* that has produced that food. Specifically, it acknowledges the gift of the Land of Israel. According to Torah Law, therefore, satiation from the produce of the Land obligates the blessing, which acknowledges the gift of the Land. See Deuteronomy chapter 8:

7. For the Lord your G-d is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and underground water springing forth from valleys and hills;
8. A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil, and date-honey;
9. A land where you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig bronze.
10. And you shall eat and be satiated, **and you shall bless the Lord your G-d for the good land which He has given you.**

The Pesach Haggadah does not only celebrate our liberation from slavery; it also celebrates the neutralization of our homelessness, the termination of our exile. The Dayeinu poem, for example, portrays a process in which, though each step may have been more than we deserved, one thing leads very deliberately to another - and the culmination of that process is G-d's bringing us into the Land of Israel and enabling us to build the Bais HaMikdash. Although this final step did not occur until the reign of King Solomon, the dating in I Kings 6:1 connects it explicitly to the Exodus:

And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year **after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt**, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the Lord.

In light of this "home-coming" aspect of the Exodus saga, Birkas Hamazon at the Seder symbolizes the culmination of **סיפור יציאת מצרים** – our possession of a homeland - and thus warrants its own cup in celebration of our freedom.

*רבינא אמר: ארבעה כסי תקינו רבנן דרך חירות כל חד וחד מצוה באפי נפשה הוא.

“The mitzvah of Kiddush HaChodesh: The establishment of a calendar...or something more?”

Leonie Jacob

The month of Nissan marks the start of spring, a time of new beginnings. It is no coincidence that this is the time chosen for the Jewish people to be redeemed from slavery and thereby emerge as a new entity.

The first commandment Hashem gives to mark this occasion is identified by Rashi in his very first comment on the Torah:

Rabbi Yitzchak says that the Torah should have started with ‘This renewal of the moon shall be to you [the beginning of new moons; it (Nissan) shall be for you the first among the months of the year.’ (Shemot, 12:2)], which is the first commandment given to (the people) of Israel.

The establishment of a calendar, setting Nissan as the first month, is deemed of such great significance to the existence of this new people that it is the first mitzvah they receive.

It might seem, however, that this first commandment is merely a re-statement of an obvious fact. According to Rabbi Yehoshua (Rosh Hashana 11a),¹ the whole world was created in Nissan, making Nissan the first month in existence.

He brings proof directly from the account of Creation itself:

‘And the earth brought forth grass, herb yielding seed according to its kind and a tree that bears fruit...’ (Bereshit 1:12) - Which is the month in which the earth is full of grass and trees bear fruit? The month of Nissan!

Nissan is therefore the obvious choice of months to start the year, because it is the point at which the concept of months began. When else *would* we begin our count, but at the beginning? Why would Hashem give His newly formed nation a directive that seems almost unnecessary as their first ever commandment?

Some suggest that this choice of mitzvah carried a fundamentally significant lesson to a people whose life experience had consisted primarily of slavery. For slaves, time has no meaning. One day blends into the next with nothing to distinguish it from any other. Time, for a slave, belongs to the master – the master decides what is to be done with the time and the slave obeys. There is no autonomy over time, no real relationship to time.

The establishment of a national calendar, however, is a clear statement of freedom. Each day is now distinct, has its own character, and fits into a broader framework. There is now a rhythm to the flow of days that didn’t exist before.

1. *The other opinion, brought by Rabbi Eliezer, states that the world was created in Tishrei.*
2. *Quotations from Rav Hirsch’s commentary are taken from the Haberman translation.*

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (Shemot 12:1-2) points out, however, that there may be another, perhaps even more significant, aspect to this mitzvah.²

The Jewish people had lived in Egypt throughout their years of slavery, surrounded by a society characterized by paganism. Paganism represents a group of philosophies which relate to life as a blind unchanging stream, unable to veer from its designated course; freedom is but an illusion. The cornerstone of being G-d’s chosen people, however, lies in complete contradistinction to this idea. We believe in free choice, in real freedom: each person has the opportunity to become “morally free and master of his own destiny.”

The mitzvah of determining the new months is an invitation from G-d to develop that moral freedom by meeting with Him on a regular basis, thereby renewing our dedication to strive towards our moral and spiritual goals.

These recurring meetings are intended to be “voluntary from both sides,” the time of meeting arranged through mutual choice. G-d specifies the time in “general terms and allows a certain degree of latitude for us to set the exact date” through the pronouncement of the Jewish court. It is not simply the occurrence of the new moon, astronomical calculations, or historical reality of the anniversary of the world’s creation that determines the time of our next meeting. Rather, the decisive factor is the sanctifying enactment, the pronouncement “mekudash” by the representatives of the Jewish community.

The formulation of the mitzvah, “The renewal of the moons shall be for YOU...” provides us with the insight that this is not just about a calendar. G-d is giving us a tremendous gift: the opportunity to undertake a monthly renewal in our relationship with Him as a free nation.

Encapsulated within this commandment is a vision of relationship with the Divine that is fundamentally different from what the Jewish people had experienced through their surrounding society. This stands as the foundation stone of Jewish consciousness, distinguishing it from paganism and thereby marking the beginning of our journey as the Jewish people.

It is not just the creation of the world, but the creation of a relationship, forged through G-d’s redemption of His people, that occurred in Nissan. What better point for our journey of renewal and relationship to start?

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