

D'var Torah: Pesach

by Benjamin Gee - Wednesday, April 17, 2019

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As we approach the festival of Pesach, we teach our children to never stop asking questions.

How short can a Pesach Seder be?

This can actually be a particularly relevant question, for example for a soldier who is on guard journey in the army, or a doctor who is engaged in life saving work, and many other people who are doing important work and want to snatch a few minutes to fulfil the mitzvah of 'v'higadeta le'vincha' – you must relate to your children the details of what happened when we left Egypt.

The answer to this question appears in the Hagadah itself. Raban Gamliel taught “Kol shelo omar shlosa devarim eilu b'pesach, lo yatza y'dei chovto”, in order to fulfil your obligation of the 'hagadata', to relate the story of the exodus of Egypt, you must refer to three things. What are they? Pesach, Matzah and Maror!

Pesach refers to the pascal lamb offering, Matzah – to the unleavened bread that we eat, and Maror – to the bitter herbs that we eat. So all you need to do is to refer to these three things, it will take a few minutes and you will have fulfilled your obligation! And the Hagadah helps us by presenting three brief passages in which there are details of these three mitzvot.

I find it fascinating that actually within these passages we go one step further. In each instance for the Pesach, the Matzah and the Maror we ask the same question – “Al shum ma?” – for what reason? Why do we perform these mitzvot? We didn't have to ask the question. All that is required is to mention these mitzvot – but it is central to our Jewish psyche that we are inquisitive, that we always ask questions – we want to know why we do things! Even though to fulfil the precept, all you have to do is to say something, we want to know the rationale behind it. Once you understand the reasoning, it enhances the activity.

It is for this reason that the asking of questions comes right to the heart of our Seder experience. We encourage our children lovingly to ask, to enquire, to be inquisitive. We let them know that there is no such thing as a stupid question. We encourage them, as they enter into adulthood, to never stop asking.

The “al shum ma” needs to be an integral part of our Jewish experience always. Even when we have a 'chok', a law from God which hasn't any apparent reason that is obvious to us - even there we should enquire - what are the benefits? what could be the rationale? The “al shum ma” needs to be a constant feature of our lives.

The Hebrew words for a reason is “ta'am” which literally means taste. When you have the reason for doing something, it makes the experience all the more sweet – and you will certainly come back for more.

I wish you all 'Chag kasher v'sameach'.

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