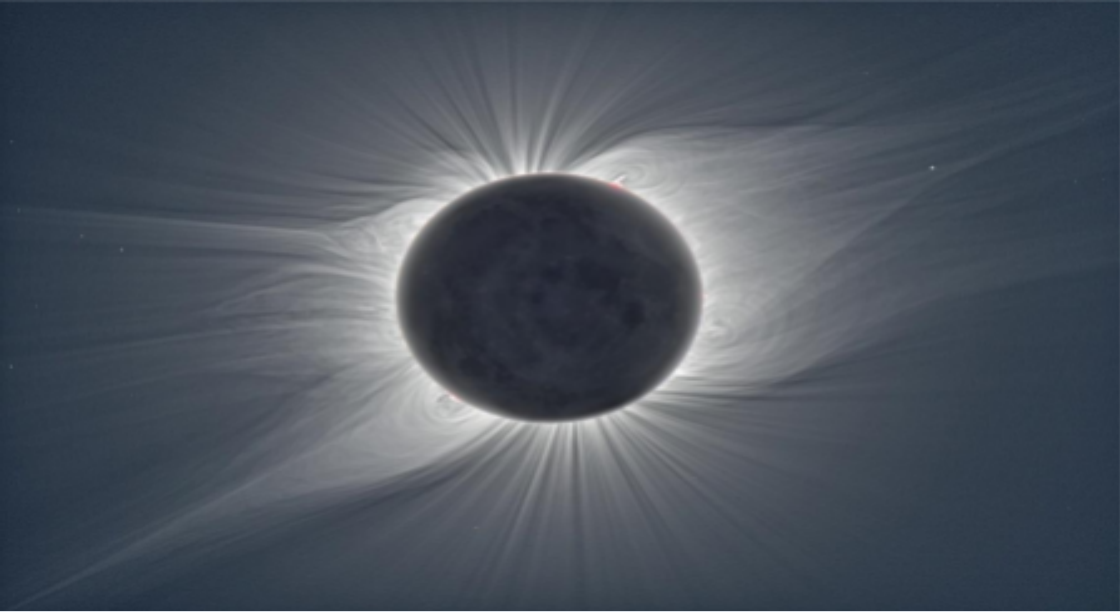


The Corona Haggadah



RABBI URI AND DR. JULIE GOLDSTEIN

Throughout the ages, the Haggadah has served as a platform for Jewish self-identification, values clarification, and a quest for redemption. The one Jewish text that from its inception begged for personalization, Jews have transposed their desires, concerns, joys, and sorrows into interpretations of the Haggadah, thereby rendering Pesah not only a festival of freedom but a festival of creativity and self-awareness. From medieval *haggadot* that betray Jewish anxieties in the face of persecution to modern *haggadot* that wrestle with acculturation, asking “Who is a Jew?” in a sometimes tolerant and sometimes hostile world, Jews have viewed and represented this unique text, both visually and in writing, through the lenses of their own experiences, both positive and negative.

The impetus for this lies in the Mishnah which famously states: “In each generation, a person must view himself as having left Egypt” (*Pesahim* 10:5). In his restatement of this Mishnah, Rambam adds the word “*atzmo*” (*Hilkhos Hametz u-Matzah* 7:6), to emphasize that he “himself” has left Egypt, intensifying the aspect of personalization in the telling of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim*, each person bringing to bear everything she is, all of her experiences, perceptions, thoughts, culture, and emotions.

Over the last few weeks, the outbreak of Corona has created a new reality for humankind all over the globe. Within the Jewish community specifically, the Corona virus has impacted the ways that we study, pray, observe Shabbat and holidays, shop, comfort and mourn, relate to each other, ask questions, rely on rabbinic authority, and perceive God.

As Corona upended our lives in the weeks immediately preceding Pesah, it is only natural for us to read and interpret the Pesah story against the backdrop of the cultural, theological,

and existential crises that Corona has brought about. As Jewish educators, community servants, Americans, Israelis, children of older parents and parents of children of varying ages, the authors of this Haggadah companion have been privy to an array of questions, conversations, and expressions of identity and ideology that Corona has precipitated in multiple demographics within the Jewish community. Assuming it inevitable that these workings-out will continue at Sedarim around the world, we have collected some thoughts in light of our conversations, to offer points for reflection and discussion for this unusual Pesah.

The Gemara (*Pesahim* 115b) homiletically describes "*lehem oni*" as "*lehem she-onim alav devarim harbeh* (bread over which we say many things)," emphasizing the centrality of interpretation and discussion at the Seder. The Arizal too (cited in *Peri Eitz Hayyim, Sha'ar Mikra Kodesh*, ch. 4) connects Pesah to conversation by viewing the very name of the Yom Tov itself as a compound word consisting of "*Peh*" and "*Sah*," meaning that this is a time for mouths to speak. Our hope is that the text before you will aid you in your own reflections and allow you to discover timely and relevant meaning in the Haggadah.

Kadesh

Time and Space

Confined to our homes due to the Corona outbreak, we ask: What should we do with all this time? Current circumstances have compelled human beings across the globe to encounter time differently, to ask new questions

about it, and view life entirely through the dimension of time.

Under ordinary circumstances, we spend most of our time focused on the tangible, managing and conquering nature and space. We build homes, manufacture tools, invent machines, concoct medicines, and become masters of agriculture, the mountains, seas, and heavens. Most religions too are space-oriented: They have temples and shrines, and include rituals that appeal to the physical senses, so that meaning comes from what the eyes see, the mouth tastes, and the fingers touch.

But the Pesah season is focused more on time than on space. Beginning with the declaration of *ha-Hodesh ha-Zeh lahem* through the obligation to annually celebrate the Exodus—an event or moment in time, rather than a place or thing—this holiday reminds us that time is central to the Jewish religious experience.

Kadesh, in which we mark the sanctification of time, may be particularly resonant for us this year, as we reflect on the ways in which Corona has forced us to orient ourselves away from our everyday focus on space and towards considerations of time. Some of us have asked: How will I spend all this time with my children? How will I spend all of this time alone? Who am I without my daily focus on work? Is there meaning to time if it doesn't produce something tangible?

Because this Pesah during Corona is different than all other Pesahs, we may ask ourselves: What have I learned

about time over the past few weeks? How might my normal life be impacted by this period, in which I had no choice but to prioritize time over space?

Urhatz

Washing Hands and Social Distancing

What is the significance of handwashing at the Seder in the age of social distancing? The obligation to wash our hands at this point in the Seder is rooted in the laws of *tum'ah* and *taharah*, ritual impurity and purity, laws that were primarily relevant when the Temple still stood. *Tum'ah* itself was a form of social distancing: A lower level of *tum'ah* forced a person to stay away from the Beit ha-Mikdash or sanctified matter (for example: sanctified foods such as *terumah*), while a stricter level of *tum'ah* could require a person to leave society entirely and enter a form of quarantine. The process of purification, *taharah*, is thus a process of reintegration into society, and regaining the ability to interact closely with people, places, and things.

For the last few weeks, washing our hands has been a preoccupation that underscores our distance from each other. Tonight, as we wash our hands, let us do so with the hopes of once again achieving a symbolic *taharah* that will allow us to become close to one another once again.

Karpas

The Economics of Corona

The *Shulhan Arukh* (473:6) rules that one must eat less than a *kazayit* of the vegetable for Karpas to avoid the requirement of a *berakhah aharonah*. While most of the *mitzvot* of the Seder encourage us to inflate the quantities necessary to attain the minimum *shiur* (halakhic measurement), Karpas is unique in recommending less.

These days of Corona have made us more mindful of “*shiurim*,” so to speak, as we have been faced with rationing (in some places toilet paper, in other places eggs), as well as restrictions on mobility and consumerism. Precision has been key as we have edited our shopping lists, pared down our deliveries to only essential items, and even limited our movement to specific distances.

Corona has the ability to make us feel imprisoned and claustrophobic or prompt more thoughtful and strategic consumption, making us mindful of the difference between needs and wants. In what ways have the economics of Corona and Pesah intersected for you?

Yahatz/Ha Lahma Anya

Joy and Sadness

Can we muster the ability to feel joy on Pesah during this time of global crisis, one that impacts our communities and so many of our families? Is it possible to integrate joy and sadness?

A debate over the *mitzvah* of matzah may shed light upon this:

The matzah at the Seder balances two competing halakhic obligations: The obligation of *Lehem Oni*, “bread of poverty,” which requires us to have a broken matzah (see Deut. 16:3, *Pesahim* 116a), with the obligation of *simhat Yom Tov* (holiday joy), which obligates us to have *lehem mishneh*, two loaves of bread as on any other holiday (see *Berakhot* 39b). In these two obligations, we encounter brokenness, on the one hand, and abundance, on the other.

How are brokenness and fullness expressed simultaneously in the *mitzvot* of the Seder? Rashi (*Pesahim* 116a) rules that one must use three *matzot*: Two full *matzot* to complete *lehem mishneh* along with a third, broken matzah, to symbolize *lehem oni*. According to this opinion, the *simhat Yom Tov* remains in its fullness, alongside the affliction symbolized by the broken matzah.

Rambam (*Hilkhot Hametz u-Matzah* 8:6) rules that one must use one full matzah and one broken matzah, because the requirement of *lehem oni* takes away from our *simhat Yom Tov*: our *lehem mishneh* is incomplete as we commemorate the affliction of our ancestors in Egypt.

Each of these authorities gives us license to experience this evening in our own way, and allows us to ask ourselves what the matzah means to us tonight: Perhaps some of us can find joy despite the tension and sadness. Perhaps for others the illness and loneliness detract severely from the ability to experience joy tonight. Both of these can be found in historical and halakhic understandings of the Seder.

As we celebrate Pesah in the time of Corona, is our experience primarily one of *lehem mishneh* or one of *lehem oni*?

Maggid

Mah Nishtanah

Point of Reflection:

Mah Nishtanah accentuates the distinctions between “all other nights,” when we are free to eat what we want and in the manner that we want, and the night of Pesah, when our behaviors are regulated and regimented. Moreover, the Talmud notes that many of the things that we do during the Seder are designed to prompt questions from the astute children.

Consider:

- Over the last few weeks, large portions of our lives have radically changed, been regulated, limited, and even ritualized to some extent. Have children asked about this?
- Do the changes of routine that we have all experienced over the last few weeks make us view the nature of the Mah Nishtanah questions in a new light?

Mah Nishtanah if you are having the Seder alone:

One of the most difficult aspects of Pesah during Corona is the tearing apart of families. Grandparents and grandchildren are instructed to maintain distance from each other, and members of large families that would ordinarily gather around lively tables are remaining in their own homes. This will impact everyone's Seder, but what does it mean to be at a Pesah Seder alone?

The Talmud notes that while the Torah speaks of telling the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* to our children, even one who is alone must tell the story, and in fact must ask himself the questions that frame the Haggadah. This sort of Seder is qualitatively different from an ordinary one. The ordinary Seder is very much centered around performance: children perform the Mah Nishtanah for the adults, and adults perform the response to the children. According to Rambam (*Hilkhos Hametz u-Matzah* 7:2-7), everything we do at the Seder, from the Haggadah through the meal, must be informed by and infused with this sense of drama.

But what happens when you are alone and not in a multi-generational framework? The Seder is suddenly not performative. When you are compelled to ask yourself questions, you must remove the artifice that naturally accompanies the "Pesah performances," look deeply within yourself, and ask, "What does this all mean to me? In what way am I an individual, separate from those dear to me? What is most important to *my* understanding and experience of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*?"

A Seder without performance, without anyone else present, is a lonely experience. How are the questions that we ask ourselves different than the ones that we ask others?

Avadim Hayinu

Feeling Free

Is it possible to talk about slavery in the past tense in a moment in which many do not feel free? Oppression comes in many forms—physical, psychological, social, and economic, and the current pandemic has impacted all these areas, as some people who are out of work cannot put food on their tables, abused children have no escape from their abusive parents, elderly people whose *raison d'être* is time with their grandchildren have entered deep depression, and people are sick and dying alone in hospital beds. How can we say we are free?

The Mishnah (*Pesahim* 10:5) tells us that every generation is supposed to see itself as if it left Egypt, and R. Shneur Zalman, the Alter Rebbe of Habad (*Tanya*, 47), adds that every day, each person is supposed to see herself as if she left Egypt. So this is personal. How can we, as individuals who are experiencing various forms of oppression, some of whom are encountering very real horror, see ourselves as having left Egypt?

Pesah presents us with complex and multi-faceted definitions of freedom, one of which is national freedom. Focusing on the specific event of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, when

the Israelites were first bound by their suffering and then redeemed as a collective, Pesah tells us we are all free this year and every other year for that matter, simply because, as the sum of its parts, a nation that is freed renders each and every individual within it as free.

Pesah also presents us with a spiritual definition of freedom. Previously in a bondage that inhibited all of these aspects of human life, we now have the ability to think, learn, discover, make decisions, respond to circumstances, express ourselves, love, enjoy, connect with each other, and transcend the physical. If we focus on the spiritual dimensions of Pesah, we may find that we can appreciate at least some elements of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* today.

However, we must also recognize that for some of us experiencing profound crises in this moment, neither the national nor spiritual notions of freedom suffice to make us *feel* free, even if we know and understand them on an intellectual level.

Perhaps, that is precisely why the Mishnah in *Pesahim* had to advise us to do so: **בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים**.

The Tannaim who provided this directive acknowledged, by its very formulation, that there would be times and circumstances under which people understandably would not naturally see themselves as free (indeed, the Tannaim themselves lived under oppressive Roman rule). And so, they advise us to imagine ourselves as such; *Lir'ot*—to

envision freedom; *Ke-ilu*—to create a subjunctive “as if” reality and pretend, if you will, that we are free.

Why? What is the point in pretending to be free when one does not feel free, to engage in a ritual without sincerity? One reason is simply because other people, some of whom genuinely feel free, are engaging in it too. We as a people are bound together by it.

More important, though, envisioning freedom is perhaps even more necessary at a time when one does not feel free. During particularly difficult times, having the capacity to envision freedom can be a critical first step in the direction toward actually achieving it.

Afilu Kulanu Hakhamim...

וְאִפִּילוּ כְּלָנוּ חֲכָמִים כְּלָנוּ נְבוֹנִים כְּלָנוּ זָקֵנִים כְּלָנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת
הַתּוֹרָה מְצוּהָ עֲלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרָיִם.

Point of Reflection:

Even the most erudite, well-versed, and knowledgeable person must engage with the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* each year. In this age of information, before the Corona outbreak began, we were confident in our mastery of science and medicine. How have these days of Corona humbled us?

Ma'aseh be-Rabbi Eliezer

Weighing Mitzvot

וְהָיוּ מְסֻפְּרִים בְּיִצְיַת מִצְרַיִם כְּלֹאֹתוֹ הַלֵּילָה, עַד שֶׁבָּאוּ
תְּלִמְיֵיהֶם וְאָמְרוּ לָהֶם רְבוּתֵינוּ הִגִּיעַ זְמַן קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע שֶׁל
שְׁחָרִית.

This passage of the Haggadah presents us with a situation in which one *mitzvah*, to tell the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, was pitted against another, to say *Shema* by the correct time. The rabbis were so absorbed in the former that they needed to be pushed by their students to stop and perform the latter.

How resonant is this in our times! *Mi ke-amkha Yisrael*, that so many of us have yearned deeply to continue to perform *mitzvot* and have literally had to be torn away from doing so, in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *pikuah nefesh*. How many of us shed tears over the inability to go to *shul*, *mikveh*, or the *beit midrash*? As rabbis and halakhic experts continue to be flooded with *she'eilot*, the days of Corona have seen an enormous and constant but careful weighing of *mitzvot*.

Arba'ah Banim

Rasha: Adhering to Guidelines

לְכֶם – וְלֹא לִי. וְלִפִּי שֶׁהוֹצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן הַכָּלָל

In an average year this reaction to the child who charts his own path may seem judgmental. However, we have learned from the spread of Corona and from attempts to stop its spread, the necessity of communal consciousness,

the need to work as a group and how one person who decides to disregard standards has the ability to harm countless others. There are times that independent thought and action are laudable, and there are times that the whole community must work together.

She'aino Yodea Lishol: Talking to Our Youngest

וְשֵׁאִינוּ יוֹדְעֵי לְשֹׂאֵל – אֶת פֶּתַח לוֹ

How do we speak to our youngest children about this? How do we explain why school has been closed, why they cannot see friends, why all of the adults in their lives are so full of anxiety and fear?

A personal anecdote: Last week I went into the front yard with our youngest child, who had just turned six. We were simply going to step out of our front gate for a moment to get something from the car, when she turned to me and said “I’m scared to go out to the car.” Why? “I don’t want to get Corona.”

Perhaps the approach to our youngest children lies in the Haggadah’s child who does not know how to ask: *At petah lo*, literally meaning “You open for him.” A commentary attributed to Rashi explains: Give the child the ability to ask the question. Put differently: Parents confronting their child’s anxieties may not have all of the answers, and may not have the ability to fully put the child at ease. What we can give them is validation that their anxieties are not something to be dismissed, that their questions about the situation in the world around them are legitimate, that the

grown-ups ask them as well, and most of all that we are there for them when they ask them.

Lo le-Hishtakeia be-Mitzrayim

Not Defined by Crisis

**וַיִּגְר שָׁם. מִלֵּמַד שְׁלֵא יֵרֵד יַעֲקֹב אֲבִינוּ לְהִשְׁתַּקֵּעַ בְּמִצְרַיִם אֲלֵא
לְגֹר שָׁם**

One of the Jew's fundamental beliefs is that the crisis of displacement is temporary. How temporary? When will it end?

Rambam's formulation regarding Mashiah (borrowed from Havakuk 2:3) - "*Im yitmahamah hakeh lo* - if he carries, wait for him," is a mission statement: *galut/crisis* dare not be normalized. We walk a line between functioning as best as we can—as Yirmiyahu instructed the Jews who were about to be exiled to Bavel to build homes, plant gardens, and raise families—and not getting mired in that situation.

When the Haggadah states that Yaakov did not descend to Egypt in order to settle there permanently, merely to dwell there temporarily, what it is saying is that while Yaakov lived in Egypt, he never intended for himself or his children to be defined as Egyptian. Put more broadly: A Jew might experience crisis, but a Jew cannot allow himself to be defined by crisis.

Vayareiu Otanu ha-Mitzrim

Pointing Fingers

וַיַּרְעוּ אֶתְנוּ הַמִּצְרִים וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ

This passage in the Haggadah serves as a *midrash*, connecting the evil actions of the Egyptians against the Israelites, as presented in the verse in Devarim, to the Egyptians' fear that the Israelites would join their enemies and rise up against them, as presented in verses in Shemot. The verse in Devarim-- וַיַּרְעוּ אֶתְנוּ הַמִּצְרִים, is routinely translated to mean "they did bad things to us" or "they turned us into bad people (by negatively influencing us)."

Some of the commentaries, including the Abarbanel and Rashbatz, explain the verse psychologically and perhaps philosophically, as making a statement about perception and social construction: וַיַּרְעוּ אֶתְנוּ הַמִּצְרִים means that the Egyptians, in their own minds, conceptualized the Israelites as evil, crafting an image of them as the enemy.

The last few weeks have compounded the human impulse to craft an image of the Other as Other. In an effort to create order from chaos, explain the ostensibly inexplicable, and account for the havoc that Corona has wrought, people have sought out scapegoats, pointing fingers at entire nations, communities, or segments of the population that they disagree or do not identify with. Whether Corona is used as a pretext for long-held biases and complaints or has engendered new ones, we may discern *ma'aseh Eretz Mitzrayim*, the modus operandi of Egypt, in the vilification of others.

Vayar Et Onyeinu, Zo Prishut Derekh Eretz

Women, Intimacy, and Family Life

וַיִּרְא אֶת-עֵינָיו. זוֹ פְּרִישׁוֹת דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ

The commentaries ask: Was the separation of spouses and the abstention from having children, implied by the phrase פְּרִישׁוֹת דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ, imposed upon the Jewish people by the Egyptians or perpetuated by the Israelites themselves (to elude the decree requiring them to throw baby boys into the Nile)? In either case, the circumstances in Egypt were such that human beings ceased to function naturally and the most fundamental aspects of human existence, including intimacy and the ability and desire to bring children into the world, were called into question.

Over the past few weeks, the Corona pandemic has called this into question again, as women have struggled to ascertain the level of safety in their local *mikvaot* and weigh their fears of contracting the virus against their needs for intimacy as well as the profound value they assign to keeping the *mitzvot* of *Niddah* and *Peru u-Revu*. The preponderance of *she'elot* has led to new conversations amongst ordinary women, in Whatsapp groups, social media and Zoom meetings, about the halakhic process, autonomy and authority in Halakhah, rabbinic leadership and decision-making, gender and Halakhah, reproduction and Halakhah, and the history of Halakhah. The discussions taking place outside of the *beit midrash* have assumed a new level of sophistication and complexity, as

women seek precise criteria and definitions of mikveh (can my bathtub serve as a mikveh? Why or why not?), understand the difference between the status of *minyan* and *mikveh* in Halakhah (why were leading *poskim* quicker to offer a dispensation and ultimately prohibition when it came to the former than to the latter?), and look to examples in past times of crises as precedence for behavior today.

Many, aware of the *midrash* in Sotah 11b that attributes *Yetziat Mitzrayim* to the “*Nashim Tzidkaniyot*” who continued to be intimate with their husbands in Egypt, feel guilt at their own comparative impiety or anger at the very notion that they ought to put their lives at risk for the sake of “*Derekh Eretz.*” Putting things into perspective and recognizing that thankfully most *mikvaot* are safe and usable at this time and, more importantly, the current crisis is not as profound as crises past, including the Crusades, pogroms, the *Shoah*, and certainly *Avdut Mitzrayim*, the questions women are asking---both halakhic and theological---nevertheless attest to their commitment and desire to learn and be tremendous *ovdei Hashem*, and require serious consideration and investigation.

Zo Ha-dehak...

וְאֵת לְחֻצְנוֹ. זֹה הַדְּחִיק

Point of Reflection:

The “*dehak*,” or pressure, in this context is explained by Rabbenu Behaye (in his commentary on the Torah) as a reference to the living conditions of *Klal Yisrael*. As the Israelites reproduced, the land of Goshen, where they initially settled at the behest of Yosef, became overcrowded and congested, but the Egyptians did not allow them to spread out into other areas, instead forcing more and more people into Goshen.

In this time when we are limited in our ability to travel, how can we ensure that our homes do not become confining or induce claustrophobia?

Lo Al Yedei Shaliah...

Appreciating God’s Agents

וַיִּצְאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם. לֹא עַל־יְדֵי מְלָאךְ, וְלֹא עַל־יְדֵי שְׂרָף, וְלֹא
עַל־יְדֵי שְׂלִיחַ, אֲלֵא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּכַבּוּדוֹ וּבְעֶצְמוֹ.

One of the most famous anomalies of the Haggadah is the complete absence of Moshe Rabbeinu from the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. The traditional explanation points to this passage, and explains that the goal of the Haggadah is to emphasize that God took us out of *Mitzrayim* and that God alone is the redeemer of the Jewish people. Rav J.B. Soloveitchik connects this to a *midrash* in Shir Hashirim that expounds upon the following verse: Upon my bed at night I have sought him that my soul loves, I have sought him but not found him. The *midrash* interprets as follows: The night in that verse refers to the “night of Egypt,” and the one whom my soul loves is Moshe who was nowhere

to be found. Rav Solovetchik (*Harerei Kedem*, vol. 2, 103:3) explains that this *midrash* may be referring to the Haggadah: On the night of Egypt, i.e. Pesah when we commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, we seek out Moshe as we recite the Haggadah-i.e. the Jew naturally wants to find Moshe because of our deep gratitude to him, but he is nowhere to be found, as this is not the theological agenda of the Haggadah.

It is worthwhile to focus on one point that R. Soloveitchik makes: That we naturally want to find Moshe in the Haggadah-that we naturally wish to express gratitude to those responsible for our salvation and wellbeing. And indeed, in all contexts other than *Yetziat Mitzrayim* we believe that God does work through human agents to bring about health, healing, and assistance to those in need. At a time when great strain is placed upon the medical establishment-and upon the individuals who work in it-it is very appropriate that we recognize the work of doctors, nurses, and others in the helping professions as doing God's work on earth.

The Ten Plagues

Who Runs the World?

אלו עֲשָׂר מִכּוֹת שְׁהִבִּיא הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא

According to the Maharal (*Gevurot Hashem*, 57) and R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (Shemot 7:15-17), the ten plagues served to progressively overturn the Egyptians' understanding of themselves and their surroundings, their

existential status, and the very way that nature works. Viewing Rabbi Yehudah's categorization of *DTzKh*, *ADSh*, *Be-AHB* along the lines of the *pshat* regarding when warnings were and were not given before each plague, and viewing the plagues as mirroring the oppression that the Egyptians inflicted upon *Bnei Yisrael*, both commentators focus on their psychological purposes. The Maharal sees the three sets of plagues as increasingly stripping Egyptians of their perceived control over various realms, including the lowest realm of land/sea, middle realm of living space, upper level of the heavens, and the transcendent levels that included their own psyches and the cosmos. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch sees the three sets of plagues as revealing an upward swing in the severity of psychological affliction, from mere alienation (where one is made to feel as a foreigner in what once seemed familiar territory), to more intense enslavement (in which one is exploited to serve institutional needs), to the most severe persecution (which goes beyond reason, is entirely counterintuitive and parallels torture).

In both commentators' views, the *Makkot* serve to upend that which human beings ordinarily find predictable and controllable and, on a psychological level, call into question humans' sense of self and their role in the world. Recent events have certainly left many of us feeling displaced and a loss of control. The Gemara (*Berakhot* 33b) tells us "*Ha-kol be-y'dei shamayim, hutz mi-yir'at shamayim* (everything is in the hands of heaven, except for fear of heaven)," which may indicate that there are some realms in which we do not have control. However, one thing we can control is our response to circumstances. Perhaps the days of Corona

are a humbling time, in which we are more poised to recognize and be in awe of God's power.

Dayenu

Giving Thanks While Others Suffer

אלו קרע לנו את הים ולא העבירנו בתוכו בחרבה, דינו.

After a difficult pregnancy and childbirth, our youngest child was named under the famous Chagall windows in the synagogue of Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem on a Shabbat morning. When finally called to the Torah to name her--the ninth of nine girls to be named that morning--we instinctively looked around the room, inviting everyone to share in our joy. As we saw the range of expressions on people's faces, we suddenly became cognizant of the reality that not everyone in that hospital *shul* was there to celebrate. Alongside the *simhah* of those 9 sets of parents were also illness, pain, and suffering. That room encompassed the human condition in its varied forms.

In the current situation, when health professionals inform us that the majority of people stricken by the Coronavirus are expected to recover, how are we to respond when we are healthy and well but so many continue to suffer?

This question is compounded by a well-known *midrash* that states that when *Klal Yisrael* passed through the *Yam Suf*, the angels wished to sing songs of praise but God silenced them, stating "My handiwork is drowning in the Sea, and you wish to sing?" While the angels, who looked

down from the heavens, a point of remove, were precluded from singing, *Klal Yisrael*, who had actually experienced the salvation of *Keriyat Yam Suf*, did sing at that time. Likewise, at the Seder, we recite or sing, “How many great things has God done for us,” while enumerating several disasters that befell the Egyptians.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 54b) states that one of the four people obligated to give thanks to God is someone who has recovered from illness. The Talmud does not distinguish between someone who has experienced illness alone, and someone who becomes ill during an epidemic that impacts others. And so, one who recovers from this illness may ask if, like *Klal Yisrael* at the Sea, he who has had a first hand experience of salvation may give thanks to Hashem, despite the fact that “God’s handiwork” continues to suffer, or whether during times of plague my illness and recovery are not my own, and as long as others suffer, my salvation is incomplete.

Rabban Gamliel/Pesah Sacrifice

Bringing families back together

פֶּסַח שְׁהָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אוֹכְלִים בְּזִמְן שְׂבִית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ הִיָּה קַיָּם, עַל שׁוּם מָה?

One unique halachic element of the Pesah sacrifice, which can be traced back to the original commandment, was that it had to be eaten in groups, and specifically, as the Halachah would later elaborate, by members of a group who had reserved their place in the group in advance. A

quick perusal of the laws of *Korban Pesah* show that the groups were required to have some degree of heterogeneity: A group could not consist entirely of the elderly and infirm, of children, of women, etc. The Pesah sacrifice was thus a profoundly and intentionally social activity-the precursor of the modern Seder in more than name alone. In an ordinary year, when we recite Rabban Gamliel's "Three Things," we naturally focus more upon the matzah and maror, which are physically present at our table and of which we will partake in short time. This year, though, perhaps we should spend a bit more time on the *Korban Pesah*, focusing on what we are lacking and what we hope will be restored very soon.

Eliyahu ha-Navi

The Great Unifier

One of the dark jokes floating around social media in recent days has asked how Eliyahu ha-Navi will be visiting each home if we must practice social distancing. Will he not be spreading the virus?

This provides food for thought with regard to the role that Eliyahu ha-Navi was always meant to play at the Seder and what his role means particularly this year.

Conceptually, Eliyahu ha-Navi is a great unifier of the Jewish people. The prophet Malakhi says as follows about him: *Hineh Anokhi Sholeah Lakhem Et Eliyah[u] ha-Navi*, 'behold' says Hashem, 'I sent to you Elijah the Prophet', *Lifnei Bo Yom Hashem ha-Gadol Ve-ha-Nora*, 'before that

great and awesome day of Hashem.’ *Ve-heishiv Lev Avot Al Banim Ve-lev Banim Al Avotam*, ‘the hearts of parents will be inclined towards their children and the hearts of children will be inclined towards their parents.’

So, on *leil ha-Seder*, there is no better symbol of togetherness of the Jewish people than Eliyahu ha-Navi. Especially during a year when grandparents cannot be with their grandchildren and we cannot open our doors to friends, guests, and those in need, our invitation to Eliyahu ha-Navi is all the more poignant and necessary. When Eliyahu walks through your door this year, remember that he has just come from the homes of others with whom you have not been able to physically connect but with whom you ultimately share a connection. By sharing the Seder with him, all of us partake of one great Seder together.

Hallel

Facing Challenge

How is Hallel during Corona different from other Hallel?

Hallel is generally seen as joyous songs of praise to Hashem, reserved for our happiest occasions. However, if one is to study the chapters of Tehillim that comprise Hallel closely, a different picture will emerge—the mood of Hallel is actually more complex than just simple joy. The verses of Hallel are actually rife with fear and anxiety, with enemies, crises, and self-doubt. Beginning with the very first passage of Hallel said at the end of the Seder, “*Lo Lanu*,” David describes a struggle with enemies who deny

God, with darkness and fear of death, with deceptive people and with foreign nations that besiege him. Ultimately, David overcomes them all and gives thanks to God accordingly. The thanks and praise, though, are never just that, rather they are always accompanied by some level of beseeching. Hallel is not just “*Hodu Lashem Ki Tov* (give praise to God for He is good,)” but it is also “*Ana Hashem Hoshiah Na* (Please, God, save us!)”

In many ways this is the broader ethos of the Seder: The Mishnah famously describes the structure of *Sippur Yetziah Mitzrayim* as “*Mathil be-genut, u-mesayem be-shevah*”-- One begins with shame and concludes with praise. Thus we open the Haggadah by proclaiming that we were slaves in Egypt and that our ancestors were idol worshipers, but in each case we immediately contrast it with what has ultimately become of us: The slaves were taken out of Egypt, and the descendants of those idolaters grew close to [the true] God. What lies behind this schema is the belief that to truly appreciate the “*shevah*,” that is the greatness that the Jewish people has attained, you must understand it in context of what came before. If you do not know about the slavery, you cannot appreciate the freedom.

Similarly, when King David sings songs of praise to God, he frames his victory and salvation in terms of his struggles. To truly be able to praise God, one must see the big picture and the big picture is one in which difficulty is real, in which struggle is real, in which threats, danger, failure, and self-doubt are all parts of life. A true Hallel is a Hallel in which we are able to clearly state that life is full of difficulties, and we give thanks to God for helping us

through them. A true Hallel is one in which even after proclaiming “*Hodu Lashem Ki Tov*,” we still need to shout “*Ana Hashem Hoshia Na!*” It is one in which we do not pretend that life always feels good, but that despite it all we can see a larger picture and give thanks to God. That is the genius of Hallel, and perhaps, as we face hard times, that is what allows us to say it tonight. A true praise of God is one that recognizes difficulty, challenge, and even tragedy, not one that pretends that they do not exist.