Contents:

- Lindell (Page 1)
- Block (Page 5)
- Etshalom (Page 6)
- Brown (Page 7)
- Levy and Wiener Dow (Page 11)
- Bor (Page 13)

Contents (Cont):

- Weissman (Page 13)
- Sinensky (Page 13)
- Sinensky (Page 15)
- Margulies (Page 17)
- Zuckier (Page 20)
- Goldstein (Page 20)

Pesah Reader

The Lehrhaus team wishes everyone a healthy and hag kasher ve-sameeah to all our readers. May we share only good news in the days and weeks to come.

Think Passover Guides are Getting Stricter? Think Again

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Introduction: My How Those Guides Do Grow

In Egypt long ago, Moses told the Jews exactly how to prepare for Passover. In modern-day America, we've had Rabbi Avrohom Blumenkrantz to guide us instead.

A distinguished student of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Blumenkrantz was the rabbi of Bais Medrash Ateres Yisroel in Far Rockaway, New York, for many years. Like many other synagogue rabbis, he prepared a Passover bulletin for his congregants each time the holiday came round. But his guide was always different. Already in 1977, it was remarkably comprehensive and specific, featuring not only basic Passover laws and synagogue prayer times, but also a painstakingly researched list of permissible medications and choreographed instructions for conducting Shabbat meals on *Erev Pesah*.

In 1981, Rabbi Blumenkrantz took his guide nationwide. From then on, each year before Passover he released a new and longer volume of *The Laws of Pesach: A Digest* carrying the disclaimer that "all previous issues must be disregarded." As the decades progressed, the 52-page manual grew into a 600-page tome that became a wide-ranging guide to life covering everything from appropriate *Hol ha-Moed* trips to tips for relieving constipation due to the Passover diet. Upon Rabbi Blumenkrantz's untimely passing in 2007, the *Jewish Press* called the book "a universal tool to prepare and observe Pesach properly" relied on by tens of thousands of families and "the single Halachah bestseller of all time." In fact, his death did little to deter the guide's popularity; his children continue to put out a new guide each year in his memory.

While the Blumenkrantz guide was growing in readership and size, other Passover materials were following a similar trend. The Star-K's 50-page handbook and medicine list debuted in 2002, and by 2018 had swelled to over 200 pages. The Orthodox Union's (OU) glossy magazine now runs over 100 pages. Since the year 2000, there has been a virtual explosion of frequently updated books and online resources about how to keep Passover from halakhic figures across the Orthodox spectrum and beyond.

As there's no reason to assume that Passover should be immune from the well-documented slide to the right in American Orthodoxy, one might suspect that the guidance in these handbooks is getting stricter by the year. Their burgeoning size alone would suggest it. One can certainly point to instances of growing stringency: peanut oil, officially permitted by the OU for Passover use in 1948, was no longer deemed acceptable by the 1990s.

But as I'll explore below, bigger guides aren't necessarily stricter guides. As new materials and alternative guides proliferate in the new millennium, Passover guidance might actually be getting more lenient overall.

The Guides Grow Up and Get Strict

American Orthodox Jews have long relied on synagogue bulletins and English-language guidance prepared by major *kashrut* organizations to help them prepare for Passover. The Women's Branch of the OU created a short guide to the *Seder* and some other holiday laws just a few years after the OU got into the kosher certification business in 1924. By the 1930s, the Women's Branch was also issuing lists of foods certified by the OU as kosher for Passover. Around the mid-twentieth century, the OU put together a few lengthier Passover manuals that included information about *kashering* utensils and cleaning for the holiday. The Organized Kashrut (OK) Laboratories began publishing a monthly magazine called *The Jewish Homemaker* in 1969, which ran a Passover issue each year. But these materials were all relatively basic. You had to ask your rabbi for more detailed guidance.

This changed in the late 70s and early 80s with the publication of two important resources. The first was Rabbi Shimon Eider's *A Summary of Halachos of Pesach*. Initially published in seven slim softcover volumes between 1977 and 1983 as a companion set to a cassette tape lecture series, Eider's guidance is precise and comprehensive. He suggests nearly 80 places around the house to check for *hametz*. He addresses many situations, including unlikely ones: if you drink four cups of wine right after *Kiddush* before reciting the *Haggadah*, you still need to drink three more cups in their appropriate places during the *Seder*. The guide is also quite strict at times. He recommends placing two *kezayit*-sized pieces of matzah in one's mouth at once at the *Seder*, chewing them simultaneously, and then swallowing one and then the other. This is hard to do, particularly since Eider considers the two *kezeitim* (ostensibly olive-sized pieces, although that is a longer discussion) to be about half of a handmade

matzah. Eider's book was popular and went through several more editions. It's still widely-available today.

Rabbi Blumenkrantz's guide, which, as noted, was published annually from 1981 on, took matters to the next level. Here are some examples of what he has said over the years. Starting early on, he recommended using an oral irrigator (Waterpik) to clean one's braces the day before the holiday or, alternatively, to go to the dentist. He suggested that one visually inspect each piece of matzah for folded portions or air bubbles that could render it *hametz* despite the already rigorous production methods and certification process in place, as "nothing contains so much *chometz* as *matzoh*." The guide also frequently opines on matters unrelated to Passover. Even in his 1977 synagogue bulletin, Blumenkrantz forbade using birth control without consulting a rabbinic authority, warning that otherwise, one "is in violation of daas torah and halocho." He also said that when cleaning for the holiday, a woman should find her *ketubah*, and if there are problems in the marriage, take it "to a competent *rov* to check it out." By the mid-90s, the guide included a lengthy section on checking for *sha'atnez* (forbidden mixtures of wool and linen in garments). In its most recent volumes, it suggests that yoga could be idolatry.

The OU mostly stepped back during the 80s and 90s. In these years, it included virtually no information about *kashering* in its annual Passover product guide and handbook, instead instructing readers to consult with a "local Orthodox rabbi." And although in 1985 the National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY), the OU's youth division, co-published a step-by-step guide to the *Seder* by Rabbi Label Sharfman, it sounded a lot like Blumenkrantz and Eider. It provided vigorous directions for checking romaine lettuce for bugs, recommended using only *shmurah* matzah the entire Passover, detailed how high to lift the wine cup for *Kiddush*, and said to chew as much matzah as possible before swallowing because the two-minute time-limit for its consumption only begins once one swallows. Notably, this 1985 guide was significantly more detailed and stringent than a 1960 NCSY Passover guide, which was similar to the OU guides of its time.

The Guides Retreat Toward Leniency

But more guides appeared in the new millennium. The OU introduced a *kashering* primer in 2005, and each successive year, it has added more information to its Passover guide. These days, one who wants a detailed manual might be satisfied with the OU guide alone, which was not true in earlier decades. Similarly, the Star-K created a Passover handbook in 2002 by partnering with Rabbi Gershon Bess of Los Angeles to make his list of approved medications available to a wider audience. Before, only Rabbi Blumenkrantz's medicine list was readily available. Nowadays, there are also extensive and widely-circulated guides from the Chicago Rabbinical Council (CRC) and other *kashrut* organizations.

Nearly every one of these newer resources is free of at least some of the stringencies Rabbi Blumenkrantz prescribes. To compare the Blumenkrantz guide with recent OU magazines: the OU allows one to purchase any paper towels; Blumenkrantz is concerned they might have *hametz* or *kitniyot* (legumes prohibited to Ashkenazi Jews on Passover). The OU permits an individual to use most medications on Passover (if they aren't liquid or chewable) without concern for any *hametz* contained in them, but Blumenkrantz does not. Both guides allow microwaves to be *kashered* for Passover (not all do), but while the OU only requires one to heat a glass of water in the microwave for 10 minutes, Blumenkrantz says that the water must be boiled for a full hour. Blumenkrantz requires one to *kasher* or replace stovetop knobs; the OU makes no mention of such practice. And these are just a few instances among many.

In the last couple of decades, several other rabbis from the Haredi community in the United States, such as Yaakov Forchheimer, Dovid Ribiat, Elozor Barclay & Yitzchok Jaeger, and Pinchos Yehoshua Ellis published English Passover Halakhah books. Each is overall less strict than Blumenkrantz and more in line with guides like the OU's. Most recently, in 2014, the *Laws of Pesah* volume of Rabbi Eliezer Melamed's *Peninei Halakha* series—one of the most popular halakhic works in the religious Zionist community in Israel—was translated into English. Melamed tends to be more lenient than his Haredi counterparts. For example, although many Passover guides state that a dishwasher cannot be *kashered*, Melamed lists more than one acceptable method. And he says that one who eats a *kezayit* of matzah at the *Seder* without wasting time will certainly finish within the appropriate time period, so there's no need to look at the clock or engage in the extreme eating practices recommended by other books.

The Guides Go Online

Lenient trends may be accelerating in the internet era. Since anyone can publish material online at little expense, putting out Passover guides is no longer just the province of *kashrut* agencies and well-established players like Rabbi Blumenkrantz. Synagogue rabbis, for example, can put the guidance intended for their congregations on the internet. Some of these guides contain leniencies not found elsewhere. Rabbi Barry Dolinger of Providence, Rhode Island, for example, disagrees with nearly every other guide when he writes that although covering countertops that haven't been *kashered* "is certainly a valid custom," it's not required.

The Beltway Vaad, a recently-created rabbinic group in the greater Washington, DC, area, also published an internet guide that's more lenient than most others. The Beltway Vaad says one can *kasher* a self-cleaning oven by turning it to the highest temperature and leaving it on for 40 minutes instead of using its self-clean cycle because the cycle "causes the oven to get dangerously hot, and has been known to cause fires." A plastic dishwasher and its racks can be *kashered* by cleaning it, letting it sit unused for 24 hours, and running it with soap. Concerned for people's already strained budgets—and citing a host of other reasons to be lenient—the Vaad recommends purchasing *hametz* after Passover from all major supermarkets, even if they might use Jewish suppliers who did not sell their *hametz* over the holiday. And in 2018, Rabbi Haim Ovadia (a member of the Beltway Vaad) provoked a strong reaction by suggesting in the digital pages of *The Forward* something that goes against what nearly everyone else thinks: before Passover, one can cook food for the holiday in *hametz* pots because any flavor of *hametz* is nullified in a mixture as long as Passover has not yet begun.

The internet also provides a platform to contest stringencies, or *humrot*. So in 2014, when Rabbi Yair Hoffman, writing in the *Five Towns Jewish Times*, revived the notion that one should place two *kezeitim* of matzah in one's mouth at once at the *Seder*, two articles refuting him appeared online within days, calling out the practice as an unnecessary and potentially dangerous *humra*. When Rabbi Eider advocated just such a practice back in 1978, no one seems to have responded to him at all.

Finally, social media is becoming a new force to educate consumers about acceptable leniencies. Every year since 2015, Rabbi Efrem Goldberg of Boca Raton Synagogue in Florida has made an "annual public service reminder" on Facebook in February that excluding

ground meat, "All unprocessed raw meat and chicken is automatically kosher for Pesach and just needs to be rinsed well before use" and that people could buy and freeze before prices rise for the holiday. His post is usually widely shared by several rabbis and other individuals.

The Size of a *Kezayit* and Other Halakhic Flashpoints
Thus far I have highlighted a shift toward leniency by looking at Passover guides chronologically. When the Blumenkrantz and Eider manuals were the only materials on the market, stringency prevailed. Newer guides, however, tend to take a more moderate approach. In this section, I will consider three additional issues, each significant in its own right, where leniency is also on the rise.

1. **How Big is Your *Kezayit*?**

The minimum amount of matzah and *maror* that must be consumed at the *Seder* causes a lot of angst each year. I'm not here to wade into well-trodden debates about the size of a *kezayit*, which seems to have grown over the generations. However, it is interesting to note two things: first, that the English guides at least are not getting stricter—they've been relatively consistent about the measurements for half a century now; and second, that in recent years, alternative, more lenient positions are beginning to surface online.

Many may be familiar with the phenomenon of the *kezayit* chart, a laminated piece of paper which allows one to check a portion of matzah or *maror* against an appropriately-sized graphic. According to the chart in wide circulation, each cup of wine at the *Seder* must be filled with 3.3 fluid ounces, the matzah (the first time it's eaten) must be 6.25 by 7 inches, and the romaine lettuce leaves used for *maror* must cover an area of 8 by 10 inches. Sometimes people point to the very existence of such a chart as a prime example of increased stringency, and perhaps it is. It's hard to imagine people always used to measure out their matzah so precisely. But the chart is older than one might think: it dates back to at least 1976.

Further, the measurements used by the chart have been widespread for even longer and have not changed recently. In 1970, Rabbi Dovid Feinstein, son of Rav Moshe, published *Sefer Kol Dodi*, a Hebrew halakhic guide to the *Seder*, in which he provides the *shiurim*, or sizes, that found their way to the *kezayit* chart. Sometime after the book's publication, Beth Medrash L'Torah V'Horoah—a *Kollel* directed by Rav Moshe in which his son Rav Dovid was also involved—created an English pamphlet titled, "Do It Right on Pesach Night! What? When? How Much?" containing *Kol Dodi*'s *shiurim*. This short guide appeared in many places, such as the *Olomeinu* children's magazine from Torah Umesorah in 1974 and in Rabbi Blumenkrantz's synagogue bulletin in 1977. These *shiurim* spread rapidly; they are now mentioned or relied on by many English Passover guides, from Blumenkrantz to the OU. Although the OU only started including the *kezayit* chart in its guide in 2014, several of the *shiurim* from *Kol Dodi*—such as the one for romaine lettuce leaves—have been noted by the OU since at least the 1980s. And even though there are guides that provide alternate measurements, they tend not to differ substantially from the *shiurim* in *Kol Dodi*.

Thus, the size of a *kezayit* is one area where there's been little disagreement between the English guides. Certainly, there's no evidence that the guides have been promoting larger and larger *shiurim* as the years have gone on. Yet there are new trends afoot. People are growing dissatisfied with the sizes in the guides because actual olives are a good deal smaller. In 2010, Rabbi Natan Slifkin, known as the "Zoo Rabbi," published a monograph tracing the evolution of the size of a *kezayit* and arguing that even according to several contemporary *poskim*, one need not consume as much as the guides recommend. Others—including one writer in the OU's 2020 Passover guide and even a writer in the Haredi community—have agreed. It's hard to say whether these ideas are gaining traction at *Seder* tables, but Slifkin has noted that his *kezayit* article "seems to be the most popular piece that I have ever published" online, which says a lot for someone whose views on creation and evolution have attracted attention throughout the Orthodox world. He's even come up with his own *kezayit* chart, which—spoiler alert—is a picture of a single green olive.

2. **Thinking About Those Tiny Crumbs**

The images of Passover cleaning indelibly seared into my brain are those from Yeshara Gold's 1987 children's classic *Just a Week to Go* about a young boy Raffi's preparations in Jerusalem's Old City. On one page, Raffi is blowing "out the tiniest crumbs" from between the pages of every book his father owns. On another, his little sister is searching for *hametz* under the carpet. All told, the family is "working for weeks." And then there's the song "Pesach Blues," from Abie Rotenberg's third *Journeys* album released in 1992. The stressed housewife in this somewhat irreverent lament (portrayed by a man, of course) is dreading Passover cleaning, particularly the miniscule size of the *hametz* pieces she must account for: "But my heart is pounding and my brain feels numb / Thinking about those tiny crumbs!"

At the time, the guides weren't all that encouraging. In 1980, Rabbi Eider suggested that one ought to move the refrigerator and stove to check for *hametz*. Rabbi Blumenkrantz disagreed and allowed such *hametz* to be sold, and also assured readers that the only concern was "visible" *hametz* and not "microscopic crumbs or moldy substances which are probably inedible." Nevertheless, he still said that *hametz* baked onto cookie sheets had to be covered with tape or burnt off, even if the dish was being put away for the holiday. In fact, in guides from the 1950s and 60s, the OU also said that all *hametz* dishes must be "thoroughly scoured and cleansed" before being locked away for Passover. Eider similarly cautioned his readers. Overall then, the fact that Blumenkrantz maintained that one need not inspect the carpet "strand by strand" was hardly heartening.

But in 1993, Rabbi Yosef Wikler's *Kashrus Magazine*, an independent trade journal of sorts for the major *kashrut* agencies, which had been in circulation since 1980 and had an annual Passover issue, published an article titled "Clean for Pesach and Enjoy the Seder!" The article, based on the rulings of Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg in Israel, advocated a different approach. It notes that because modern families have larger homes than in previous generations but not the servants that were once commonly employed, "the pressure of pre-Pesach cleaning has reached unnecessary and overwhelming levels." Since the brunt of this burden falls on women, they are exhausted and unable to properly enjoy the *Seder*. The article therefore proposes several new guidelines, among them that "if the chometz is sold, then washing the pots, pans and dishes which are going to be locked away is not necessary." And if a crumb of *hametz* is both less than a *kezayit* and too dirty to eat, it's of no concern. These are not new suggestions. The *Mishnah Berurah* notes, for example, that some say that pieces of *hametz* less than the size of a *kezayit* are a non-issue when it comes to cleaning. (Such a crumb still can't be eaten on Passover, of course, so it would need to be removed from food areas.) Yet this article may be the first English resource that considers *kezayit* relevant to Passover cleaning. The piece was popular, and *Kashrus Magazine* reprinted it several times over the following years.

Rabbi Scheinberg's opinions spread to other guides as well, and are now nearly ubiquitous. Rabbi Pinchos Yehoshua Ellis wrote a book devoted to *bedikat hametz* (the search for *hametz*) in 2001, where he reprints a version of Scheinberg's article and adopts his views. Around the year 2000, Aish.com published an article by Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits with a folksy tone to "make Passover cleaning a little easier" and get people "to stop being frightened" because "Passover is not a monster." He too concludes that pieces of *hametz* smaller than a *kezayit* that one would consider "garbage" (such as crumbs on the floor) do not need to be cleaned up, and that inedible "gook" smaller than a *kezayit* remaining on *hametz* dishes is of no concern.

Recent resources from the Religious Zionist community suggest similar approaches. Rabbi Melamed's book makes clear that the Halakhah follows the lenient opinion that one need not look for crumbs smaller than a *kezayit*. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner agrees, insisting that Passover cleaning can be done "in less than one day." And the language about thoroughly cleaning one's *hametz* dishes before putting them away vanished from the OU guide years ago.

Women have also begun taking part in the conversation. In 2008, three women co-authored a self-help-style companion guide to Rabbi Ellis' book with the subtitle, "You really CAN make Pesach with a SMILE!" It carries Rabbi Scheinberg's approbation and incorporates his opinions. The book, "based on the successful positive experience of several Pesach preparation veterans," is endlessly encouraging, noting that "Pesach cleaning can be a positive family experience" and "a wonderful time for a family to work together... and earn mitzvos to boot." It contains a "personalized pre-Pesach calendar" and diagrams of the house where one can fill in the amount of time they plan to spend on cleaning each room. With the resources and charts in this book, one can schedule each day of preparations, make food shopping lists, and more.

The consistent message of these newer, more lenient materials is that it's time to bid farewell to those "Pesach blues."

3. Is Quinoa *Kitniyot*? Why Worry About *Kitniyot* Anymore?

When I've spoken with people about how Passover has changed, they often mention that peanut oil, once a holiday staple, is now verboten. As I mentioned in the introduction, peanut oil's demise (it's now widely considered a forbidden *kitniyot* derivative) is a clear example of increasing stringency. Yet it's worth noting that quinoa, another product that could have easily been written off as *kitniyot*, is still alive and well. Not only that, but in recent years, there's been an uptick in those questioning whether Ashkenazi Jews in Israel ought to abstain from consuming *kitniyot* at all anymore.

Quinoa, a seed often substituted for grain, began being imported from South America during the 1980s. Some wanted to prohibit it as *kitniyot* because it is grown too close to grains, making cross-contamination with *hametz* a potential concern, or because it is too similar to a grain itself. Yet although the OU refused to permit it and Rabbi Blumenkrantz only recommended it to those with special dietary needs, the Star-K approved its use in 1997, which was enough for many people. It quickly became indispensable, to the point that when, in 2011, the Star-K issued a warning that the quinoa crop might have gotten mixed with other grains, and some stores relegated the product to the *kitniyot* section, the outcry was even covered by the New York Times. Some feared that quinoa would go the way of peanut oil. Yet the quinoa controversy was short-lived, and before Passover 2014, after "an intensive, multi-year investigation and an internal debate," the OU changed its mind and decided to certify it for Passover too.

In some circles, the prohibition against *kitniyot* itself might be fading. It's somewhat well-known that in 2015, the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards voted, over a dissent, to permit *kitniyot* entirely. In Israel, similar thinking exists even in Orthodox circles. In 2007, Rabbi David Bar-Hayim of Machon Shilo permitted *kitniyot* for *Ashkenazim* in an effort to standardize Jewish practice in Israel and eliminate Diaspora innovations in light of the modern-day ingathering of the exiles. Although his ruling was widely criticized (perhaps rightly so—he went as far as to argue that kitniyot might have been adopted from Karaite practices), a 2009 article reported that in part because of the large Sephardic presence in Israel and the ubiquity of kitniyot products on supermarket shelves, some Ashkenazim were choosing to consume it. To address this concern, Rabbi Zvi Leshem of Efrat ruled in 2011 that Ashkenazim could purchase supermarket products when the *kitniyot* in them constituted less than a majority of the mixture and was not directly recognizable. While it's highly unlikely that the prohibition against *kitniyot* in Ashkenazi Orthodox circles—particularly in the United States—will disappear anytime soon, these changes on the Israeli front are nonetheless remarkable.

Conclusion and Analysis: Texts and the Changing Face of Passover
Despite everything I've said, I don't want to make it sound like there's been a complete revolution in the Passover guides. There's still a good deal of consistency among different handbooks, and stringency has always been part of this holiday in particular. Consuming *hametz* on Passover carries the penalty of *karet*, or spiritual excision. Rabbis are understandably reticent to promote leniencies when the consequences are so serious. The notion of *humra de-hametz*—adopting stringencies on Passover that one might not apply to other areas of religious life—is well-established in halakhic literature. Understandably then, one can also find counterexamples to the picture of increasing leniency I've sketched. The OU, for example, stopped providing a procedure for kashering a dishwasher in 2015, and it now suggests not to sell *hametz gamur*—bread and the like—to a non-Jew before Passover.

And yet, the overall trend in the new millennium is toward greater leniency. This is surprising, because it runs counter to the shift documented by Dr. Haym Soloveitchik in his famous 1994 essay "Rupture and Reconstruction." There he suggests that in the wake of the Holocaust, Orthodox Jews' abandonment of mimetic tradition and embrace of halakhic texts has led to greater punctiliousness, as people feel the need to literally live by the book to connect with God. This theory easily explains Rabbi Blumenkrantz's popularity: his strict and comprehensive manual fed a burgeoning desire for new material written in the vernacular that could help nearly anyone, regardless of their level of Jewish education, achieve maximal halakhic compliance. But it does not explain more recent leniencies. The textual culture described by Soloveitchik remains ascendant, and yet, new texts and guides are relaxing some stringencies. How can we explain this change?

I'll sketch a few possibilities, although there's much more to be said.

In part, what's occurring may actually be a consequence of the value we've placed on texts. Blumenkrantz, who was among the first to publish a guide, just happened to be unusually strict. As the thirst for English halakhic texts continues unabated, it's no surprise that new

and more moderate voices have joined the conversation too. And as recent reflections on Soloveitchik's essay note, one can turn to texts to justify leniency as easily as stringency, which is happening with increasing frequency in recent years. It's particularly true online, where, as Rabbi David Brofsky recently pointed out, "anyone and everyone can be a *posek*." By providing accessibility to an astonishing variety of Jewish texts in multiple languages, the internet has lowered the barrier to entering the halakhic conversation. Leniency may thus just be another feature of textual engagement, not a bug.

Moreover, although newer guides sometimes propose more lenient approaches, this does not change the fact that these guides retain an element often associated with text-based *humra*: the notion that detail and precision matters. Modern Passover manuals are far more specific than their mid-twentieth century counterparts. In 1959, the OU said that a conventional oven and stove could be *kashered* if "thoroughly cleansed and scraped"—preferably with the assistance of a blowtorch—and then "heated to a glow." This concise position lacks the level of detail found in the OU's modern annual guides, which explain what surfaces need particular attention during cleaning, how long to heat the oven and stove, and the temperature required, among other things. (Nor does the OU mention anything about using a blowtorch anymore.) Greater specificity could itself be seen as a *humra*, as it more tightly scripts the range of acceptable behavior. On the other hand, comprehensive instructions can also draw attention to leniencies that one might otherwise have overlooked. The best example might be the recent popularization of the position that *hametz* less than the size of a *kezayit* is of little concern. It's a leniency which assumes that people expect detail and nuance in halakhic guidance. Only in a time when texts are king must everything have a standard and everything need a size. So perhaps, even when modern books are more lenient, they have not drifted too far from Soloveitchik's paradigm after all.

Recent moves toward leniency may also be related to the way in which the Passover experience itself is changing. For one, more women and men alike are working outside the home, while at the same time, modern work culture is placing increasing demands on one's time. Society is also beginning to realize the importance of mental health, and self-care has become a byword. Perhaps that's why some guides have started to caution against stress-inducing practices. People ought to clean only what they must and no more, and they needn't put two *kezeitim* in their mouth at once either.

On the other hand, it's also not your *bubby*'s Passover anymore. Preparing for the holiday is getting a lot easier, and that itself may be driving leniency. Before I explain what I mean, I'll provide some examples of how getting ready for Passover requires less effort nowadays.

As I pointed out, in the 1950s and 60s, OU guides recommended using a blowtorch to *kasher* one's oven or purchasing an insert. This might be because the alternative was spending hours scrubbing every inch of the oven's surface with a caustic and malodorous chemical called Easy-Off, and according to some opinions, even that was insufficient because the oven could not get hot enough on its own to properly *kasher* it. But, in 1963, General Electric invented the self-cleaning oven, which, in reaching nearly 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit during its self-cleaning cycle, reduces residue to ash and *kashers* the oven without the need for additional cleaning.

Or consider the Passover diet. At one time, individuals subsisted on fresh food they prepared themselves or classics like jellied fruit-slice-shaped candies and sponge cake mix. The 1966 OU Passover products directory was 21 pages long, with only about 25 or 30 items listed on each page. The 2019 directory runs 43 pages, and there are around 250 items per page. Passover aisles and kosher stores throughout the United States are stocked to the brim with all kinds of products. In recent years, many restaurants even offer hamburgers or pizza on potato bread. In 1990, Rabbi Blumenkrantz noted that oat matzah "has become available in small quantities, from England" for those with gluten allergies. Now, the OU directory lists a host of low-gluten and gluten-free products.

And while kosher for Passover hotels date back to the early twentieth century, the OU supervised just 11 such resorts in 1966. In 2020, according to one guide, there were over 140 Passover programs scheduled worldwide before the outbreak of the coronavirus, some in exotic locations like Costa Rica or Thailand. Organizers stressed that participants will lack nothing; one email I received advertises a Florida resort "only minutes from Disney World" with a "shadchan on premises." In the modern era, Passover hotels and resorts are luxury vacations that promise a worry-free holiday where everything comes easy.

People I've spoken with recall a time when Passover felt markedly different than the rest of the year. But as preparations for Passover get easier, and as the holiday becomes a time of abundance, it seems less distinct a season. For many, excessive *humrot* and inconveniences might seem more a part of the Passover of times past than a reflection of their own lived experiences. Thus, perhaps the very expectation that Passover will present fewer challenges encourages a move away from halakhic stringencies.

As the decades go on, American Orthodox Jews are trading one peculiar Passover institution—the *Maxwell House Haggadah*—for another—the glossy halakhic handbook. These new guides tell a different kind of Passover story than the *Haggadah*, one that lives in the details. Yet I wonder if the *Haggadah* and the guides are really all that different from one another. In a way, the *Haggadah* is the first Passover guidebook. It gives the *Seder* a shape and structure, teaching that the great dramas of history survive when they can be transformed into rituals. In that sense, modern Passover guides are merely the latest iteration of a living tradition. The ways in which we choose to interpret this ever-unfolding tradition—as well as how we react to forces that come to bear from the outside—will dictate how things change and stay the same in the years and decades to come.

A Prayer for this Passover

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"How is this year different from all other years?" The answer is not too hard to muster. For most of us, it will be extremely challenging. Many will be without extended family and friends at our holiday tables, without conversations in *shul* about whose *Seder* went the longest, without *Yizkor* for a lost relative, without the communal element of the *hag* which usually animates the holiday and illuminates its depths.

I read something recently that struck a chord deep within me. In *With God in Hell*, R. Eliezer Berkovits highlights concessions that concentration camp inmates had to make regarding their Pesah observances, and it immediately had me thinking about our current circumstances.

Before I continue: I am very hesitant to mention the *Shoah* in the context of another crisis. To be clear: I'm not at all suggesting that the trials of the current situation are in any way akin to what those who went through the Holocaust faced (they obviously are not). I simply invoke the experiences of those concentration camp inmates because I learned something from them that allowed me to reframe my mindset heading into this Pesah.

Needless to say, matzah was hard to come by in the camps. And eating bread during Pesah was not just halakhically allowed, but absolutely necessary; their very lives depended on it. And yet, even as the religiously observant among them must have felt profound disappointment with their inability to keep the laws of Pesah, many took the opportunity to infuse their lack of action - or, what would otherwise be "transgressive" action - with religious meaning. Before they ate their *hametz*, where they would have normally said a "הנני מוכן ומזומן (I am ready and prepared to fulfill the *mitzvah*…)" prayer before fulfilling the *mitzvah* of eating matzah, they said the following *Tefilah*, composed by a number of rabbis in Bergen-Belsen:

> "Our Father in Heaven! It is open and known before You that it is our will to do Your will to celebrate the festival of Pesah by eating matzah and refraining from leavened bread. With aching hearts we must realize that our slavery prevents us from such celebration. Since we find ourselves in a situation of *Sakkanat Nefashot*, of danger to our lives (should we not eat this bread), we are prepared and ready to fulfill Your commandment, 'And thou shalt live by them (by the commandments of the Torah), but not die by them'; and we are warned by Your warning, 'Be very careful and guard your life.' Therefore we pray to you that You maintain us in life and hasten to redeem us that we may observe Your statutes and do Your will and serve You with a perfect heart. Amen!" *(Trans. Berkowitz, p. 32)*

Here is the original Hebrew, found in historian Mordechai Eliav's *Ani Ma'amin* (special thanks to Dr. Moshe Shoshan for helping me track it down):

אבינו שבשמים הנה גלוי וידוע לפניך שרצוננו לעשות רצונך ולחוג את חג הפסח באכילת מצה ובשמירת איסור חמץ, אף על זאת דאבה לבנו שהשעבוד מעכב אותנו ואנחנו נמצאים בסכנת נפשות. הננו מוכנים ומזומנים לקיים מצוותך "וחי בהם ולא שימות בהם" וליזהר מאזהרה, "הזהר לך ושמור נפשך מאוד," ועל כן תפילתנו לך שתחיינו ותקיימנו ותגאלנו במהרה לשמור חוקיך ולעשות רצונך ולעבדך בלבב שלם - אמן.

Instead of focusing on the *mitzvot* they could not fulfill, they looked to the one that they could: that of protecting and guarding human life. This religious commitment and focus - reminiscent of the story of R. Elimelekh and R. Zusha, who are reputed to have rejoiced in their ability to keep the Halakhah not to pray in the vicinity of a prison latrine, despite their painful inability to fulfill the *mitzvah* of prayer - is nothing short of breathtaking.

Thank God, most of us are in a position such that we do not have to compromise on any of the biblical laws (or even rabbinic restrictions and customs) of Pesah. Still, as we are set to begin a holiday bereft of some of the elements that are core to our celebrations - family, shul, *Yizkor*, inviting those less fortunate to spend the *Sedarim* with us - it is natural to feel sadness and disappointment. I think it's okay to feel that, to "mourn" the loss. But I also wonder if it's worth reframing our thinking by shifting from the sadness of what we aren't doing to the *simhah*, joy, of what we are doing in its stead. In that spirit, I offer the following adaptation of the holy *tefillah* originally composed in Bergen Belsen. Hopefully, our inability to fulfill certain elements of Pesah due to our extreme care for health and life can also be experienced through a lens of religious meaning.

> Our Father in Heaven! It is open and known before You that it is our will to do Your will to celebrate the festival of Pesah with our communities, families, and friends, to pray and recite Your praises together with our communities, to have an intergenerational conversation about the story of the Exodus, to take care of the elderly, to sincerely invite those less fortunate to partake of the *Seder* with us, as the *Haggadah* says, "Anyonewho is hungry - come eat, anyone who is needy - come and partake of the Pesah offering." With aching hearts we must realize that the current precautions around the COVID-19 pandemic prevent us from such celebration, since we find ourselves in a situation of *sakkanat nefashot*, of potential danger to our lives. Therefore, we are prepared and ready to fulfill Your commandment, "And you shall live by them (by the commandments of the Torah), but not die by them," and we heed Your warning: "Be very careful and guard your life." Therefore we pray to you that You maintain us in life and hasten to redeem us that we may observe Your statutes and do Your will and serve You with a perfect heart. Amen!

אבינו שבשמים הנה גלוי וידוע לפניך שרצוננו לעשות רצונך ולחוג את חג הפסח עם קהילתנו ומשפחתנו וחברינו, להתפלל ולספר תהילתך בציבור, לספר את סיפור יציאת מצרים בשיחה בין-דורית, לטפל בזקנים, להכריז בלב שלם: "כל דכפין ייתי וייכל, כל דצריך ייתי ויפסח." אף על זאת דאבה ליבנו שהמגיפה מעכבת אותנו ואנחנו נמצאים בסכנת נפשות. הננו מוכנים ומזומנים לקיים מצוותך "וחי בהם ולא שימות בהם" וליזהר מאזהרה, "השמר לך ושמור נפשך מאוד," ועל כן תפילתנו לך שתחיינו ותקיימנו ותגאלנו במהרה לשמור חוקיך ולעשות רצונך ולעבדך בלבב שלם. אמן.

[A Closing Note: In sharing these thoughts with R. Yitzchak Etshalom, a master *paytan* and Hebrew linguist, he too was moved by this idea and composed two beautiful *tefillot* that touch upon the same themes (both more eloquent and original than my above adaptation). While the above *tefillah* is meant to frame the holiday experience in general, R. Etshalom's are intended to be inserted at two different parts of the *Seder*, to help infuse *Maggid* and *Hallel* with special meaning. You can find his *tefillot* here.]

Our Bread of Isolation

YITZCHAK ETSHALOM is the Rosh Beit Midrash at Shalhevet High School and chairs the Bible Department at Yeshiva University of Los Angeles High School for Boys.

When my students ask me when the *Haggadah* was composed, I answer with the following: The core text of our *Haggadah* was composed by the generation of Yavneh (c. 80-120 CE) as is evidenced by the named rabbis who participate in the story itself and by the texts canonized in the Mishnah. There are, however, noted additions that made their way into the *Haggadah*

over the next thousand years, such as "*Dayyenu*" and the popular "*Haggadah* Math" *midrashim* (where the number of plagues keeps multiplying) - both of which only became standardized in the *Haggadah* at the end of the Middle Ages.

But the most accurate answer to my students' question is "2020." The *Haggadah* is a dynamic text, reflecting the *Seder*, which is an ever-evolving experience. When I was a young boy, the "Eliyahu moment" was about the *Shoah*, and we sang the Bergen-Belsen tune to "*Ani Maamin*." When I was a teenager, we left an open seat at the table with the "Matzah of Hope" for Soviet Jews, who were struggling to be free. A decade later, after the Iron Curtain had fallen, that same seat was reserved for Ethiopian Jews. The decade after that, many homes kept an empty seat for Gilad Shalit and other soldiers held in Arab captivity. *Dor Dor ve-Dorshav* – each generation has its teachers, and *Dor Dor ve-Haggadotav* – each generation has its *Haggadot*. There are *Haggadot* from Auschwitz and there are *Haggadot* from Gush Katif. Each contains the *Mah Nishtanah*, the *Arba'ah Banim* (but in some cases, there are some new questions voiced by the sons, as in the *Survivor's Haggadah*), *Avadim Hayinu*, and *Arami Oved Avi,* like all the rest. But alongside the universal components of the *Haggadah* commenting on and illustrating these passages - are descriptions of death camps and liberation, raised flags and flags taken down, underground *Sedarim* in Moscow, and flights landing in Lod. The sentiment expressed in *ve-Hi she-Amdah* – that the story we are telling happens generation after generation - animates and informs each new *Haggadah* conceived, written, and published, generation after generation.

We live in strange times. For many of us, the upcoming holiday will likely be the most unusual *Seder* we will ever experience. For many, it will be the most challenging and loneliest. The "bread of affliction" this year is also the "bread of isolation." The raised choir singing *Hallel* is now a solo performance.

My colleague, Rabbi David Block, penned a moving *tefillah* to give the celebrant a broad approach to the subdued feast. I have composed two "local" paragraphs which will hopefully give the participants a sense of context and meaning at this year's restrained *Seder*. The first echoes the pain of *Ha Lahma Anya* and its forward-looking prayer: whereas every year we pray to be together in Israel, this year we simply pray to be together. The second prepares us, both inwardly and facing God, to sing a *Hallel* whose harmonies might have to be imagined and whose spirit will have to be "the power of one – praising the power of One."

(לפני אמירת "הא לחמא עניא")

הָא לַחְמָא עַנְיָא דְּאָכְלִינַן בִּסְגֵרוּתָא
כָּל דִּכְפִין יֵיתֵי וְלֹא יֵעוֹל
כָּל דִּצְרִיךְ *יֵיתֵי* וְיִצְוַח
הַשַּׁתָּא הָכָא, לַשָּׁנָה הַבָּאָה בִּקְהָלָא דְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
הַשַּׁתָּא בְּדִידִי, לַשָּׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּפַרְהֶסְיָא רַבָּא.

בסגירותא :לשון" הסגר "כדין מצורע מוסגר .ולא יעול – על משקל" ייתי וייכול ".ויצווח – כנגד" ויפסח ."על לשון" צוחה על היין בחוצות) "ישעיה כד:י.) בקהלא דישראל – כנגד" ארעא דישראל – "נסתפק בשנה הבאה בקהילת הקהל יחד ואפילו אם נהיה מחוצה לארץ .בדידי – בבדידות .

Prayer Before *Ha Lahma Anya*

This is the bread of affliction that we are eating in solitude. All who are hungry – may approach but not enter. Those who are needy – may come and call out for help. This year, we are here; next year, among the communities of Israel. This year we are in isolation; next year – with a great public gathering.

(תפילה לפני אמירת הלל)

אָבִינוּ שֶׁבְּשָּׁמַיִם, הַמּוֹשִׁיב יְחִידִים בַּיְתָה, גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לְפָנֶיךָ שֶׁרְצוֹנֵנוּ לְקַלֶּסְךָ בָּרַבִּים וּלְרַנֵּן אֶת נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ קָבַל עִם וְעֵדָה. אַךְ הַשָּׁנָה, הִלּוּלֵנוּ שָׁקֵט, שִׁבְחֵנוּ מָתוּן וְקוֹלוֹתֵינוּ בּוֹדְדִים. וְאָנוּ יוֹשְׁבִים בַּד בְּבַד, כְּדֵי שֶׁלַּשָּׁנִים הַבָּאוֹת נִזְכֶּה לְפָאֵר אֶת שִׁמְךָ בָּרַבִּים, וְנָרִים אֶת קוֹלוֹתֵינוּ הַמְאֻחָדִים בְּשִׁירָה וְשֶׁבַח לְאֵ-ל הַהוֹדָאוֹת. שׁוּבָה ה' רִבְבוֹת אַלְפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל....אך...לא לנו...

המושיב: תהלים סח:ז .לקלס...ולרנן: מפתיחת "לפיכך." קבל עם ועדה: ע"פ מלכים ב טו:י (קבל-עם) ותהלים קז:לב (וירוממוהו בקהל עם). בד בבד: ירמיה נ:לז ע"פ ברכות (סג: " .(שובה ה': במדבר י:לו.)

Prayer Before the Recitation of Hallel

Our Father Who is in heaven, *who settles the solitary in a home:* It is revealed and known before You that it is our desire to extol You publicly and to sing about Your wonders before the congregation and the nation. This year, however, our Hallel is subdued, our praise is measured, and we sing as solo performers. Here we sit, each in his own house, so that in future years we will have the merit to beautify Your Name in public, and we will raise our united voices in song and praise to the God of Thanksgiving. Return, O God, the multitudes and thousands of Israel…

The Power of Secrets: Jacob, Laban, and the Passover Haggadah

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The French artist Nicolas Vleughels (1668-1737) depicts one of many moments of tension between Laban and Jacob.[1] A thin space splits the canvas in half, spatially communicating the adversarial nature of their relationship. Laban opens his arms in an indecipherable plea that meets Jacob's gesture of self-defense and anger. The sheep in the right-hand corner are on Jacob's side of the canvas, perhaps foreshadowing his exceptional sheep breeding to collect his rightful earnings. Hanging from the balcony as if floating above his father, it seems that one of Laban's unnamed sons displays his arm in a sign of strength and support.

[1] "Jacob, Laban and Rachel" (31cm by 38cm), oil on paper, currently held in a private collection. Date unknown.

Rachel and Leah are also on opposite sides of the canvas. Leah stands beside her father, the elder daughter of soft eyes, who in the biblical story is vanquished by the beautiful, younger daughter with a matrimony of deceit. Rachel weeps into a cloth.[2] Laban is taller than Jacob, more fully clothed and closed while Jacob's body is open and exposed. Jacob's posture of vulnerability that Vleughels captures with his brush is in evidence throughout the Jacob/Laban narratives and may provide an answer to a niggling, difficult question: Why is Laban mentioned in the *Haggadah*?

Laban in the *Haggadah*

The introduction of Laban marks the beginning of the *Haggadah*'s overview of Jewish history. All storytellers select the moment their story begins. Using Laban to frame the Exodus story is a curious literary decision, almost a distraction from the main order of business at every *Seder*:

> Go and learn what Laban the Aramean wanted to do to our father Jacob. For Pharaoh had issued a decree only against the male children, but Laban wanted to uproot everyone, as it is said: "The Aramean sought to destroy my father, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and he became there a nation – great, mighty and numerous" [Deut. 26:5].

Suddenly and with only the context that in "every generation, they rise to destroy us," the *Haggadah* mentions Laban. Comparing Laban to Pharaoh seems odd. Pharaoh tried to kill all male infants. There is no indication in Genesis that Laban intended to kill both male and female children or any children at all. "*La'akor et ha-kol*," to uproot everything, suggests a desire to decimate a people in its entirety: its members, heritage, and values. There was not actually much to uproot at this stage, just a large family in its third generation without a long history or any laws. Whatever we think of Laban's character when we read the Genesis narratives that tell his story, we never accuse him of destroying the Jewish people. Only in the *Haggadah* is this claim made.

To amplify our problem, according to a plain reading of the biblical text, Laban is depicted as a warm and demonstrative patriarch on several occasions. When Jacob arrived, Laban was quick to meet him: "On hearing the news of his sister's son Jacob, Laban ran to greet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and took him into his house" (Genesis 29:13). Later, when Jacob, his wives, and children fled, Laban is depicted as affectionate but distraught: "And Laban said to Jacob, 'What did you mean by keeping me in the dark and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me and not tell me?'" (Genesis 31:26-27). Even discounting Laban's claim to send the family off with "festive music, with timbrel and lyre," it is difficult to regard Laban as more hard-hearted than the callous Pharaoh. We hear the pathos Laban expressed at the family's departure - "You did not even let me kiss my sons and daughters good-bye!" (Genesis 31:28)- and cannot help but feel some sympathy for Laban's situation.

If anyone uprooted a family at this point, it was actually Jacob, who fled with his wives and children and uprooted Laban's universe. Jacob created a subterfuge to expand his flocks to literally fleece Laban. Successful, Jacob then abruptly evacuated: "Jacob kept Laban the Aramean in the dark, not telling him that he was fleeing – and fled with all he had…" (Genesis 31:20-21). In *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective*, Naomi Steinberg observes that although Rachel and Leah fought a fertility war for Jacob's attention, when they parted from Laban, there was no contention between them. They colluded with their husband against their father.[3] Rachel even stole Laban's household idols. "Why did you steal my gods?" (Genesis 31:30) Laban petitioned. His household gods taken, Laban was deprived of worship, a solace in dark moments such as these.[4] As we hover on the surface of Genesis, Laban does not strike us as an uprooter. Despite his obvious dishonesty and exploitative nature, there is a sense that Laban, too, is a man who suffers great losses.

Jacob in Laban's House

Laban's warm greeting and doleful parting with Jacob are endearing bookends to chapters filled with Laban's deceit, a dynamic apparent from the moment Jacob entered Laban's territory. Jacob arrived at a well covered by a stone after sleeping on stones, and would later make an altar of stone. Stones are emblematic of the "hard and unyielding nature" of Jacob's life.[5] At the well, Jacob greeted strangers waiting to graze their flocks: "My brothers, where are you from?" (Genesis 29:4). There was foreboding in his casual familiarity; the men neither acted fraternally nor extended the hospitality to strangers in sharp contrast to that associated with Abraham and his progeny. The men barely spoke, a portend of the poor communication to come: "'Do you know Laban, the son of Nahor?'

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[2] The woman weeping may alternatively be Leah, humiliated at this moment by her new husband's obvious disdain, reflecting this excoriation: "When morning came, there was Leah! So he (Jacob) said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? I was in your service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?'" (Genesis 29:25). The artist would not likely have known the *midrash* cited by Rashi, *ad loc.,* that Rachel was complicit in the wedding ruse out of compassion for her less eligible older sister. *Megillah* 13b records Rachel's internal dialogue: "'My sister may now be put to shame,' and she, therefore, readily transmitted these signs to her."

[3] Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 101-102.

[4] The "*teraphim*" were likely not objects of worship but estate deeds. See Barry Eichler, *Indenture at Nuzi: The Personal Tidennūtu Contract and its Mesopotamian Analogues* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973) and Moshe Greenberg, "Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," *JBL* 81:3 (1962): 239-248, reprinted in his *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 261-272.

[5] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 66.

They said, 'Yes we do,'" (Genesis 29:6) without offering to introduce the two. Curt and unkind, they left the difficult work of stone removal to a stranger.

Jacob then did what he continued to do throughout his tenure in Laban's house: work hard despite the sloth of others.[6] Jacob had an added incentive to remove the stone. Rachel, his charming first cousin, had to graze her sheep.[7] Upon meeting, Jacob kissed Rachel and then broke into tears. This was not a sensual kiss but a tonic of intimacy. This man of great strength ran away under the shadow of death and deceit to be swept into a refuge of love. Removing the stone, an act of extraordinary service, made Jacob feel worthy again of God's blessing and earned him the respect of family. Despite tricking his father and brother, Jacob was still capable of goodness.

Laban then came to greet Jacob, the latter hoping to secure a place of honor and affection in his uncle's home. "Laban said to him, 'You are truly my bone and flesh'" (Genesis 29:14). What more could a young man displaced from his own home desire? Laban described their relationship using the same words Adam used in his first observation about Eve (Genesis 2:23). It seemed that in his desperate hour, Jacob had found genuine shelter.

After a month-long stay, Laban's true colors surfaced; we glimpse the first of Laban's cruelties in the face of Jacob's vulnerabilities when the latter proposed a more long-term relationship with the family. Despite having two eligible daughters, Laban discussed wages with Jacob, not marriage. It was Jacob who boldly made the suggestion, presenting himself as a hard-working suitor. Laban reacted without enthusiasm: "Better that I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me" (Genesis 29:18). Laban neither praised Jacob nor regarded the match as advantageous. It benefited Laban exclusively, captured in the words, "Stay with *me*" instead of "stay with her."

Laban, ever the cunning, saw in Jacob's bid a chance to pawn off his older, less beautiful daughter. Jacob at this point, however, was oblivious to Laban's crafty nature. Being accepted in the family may have surpassed any capacity for suspicion. Only later did Jacob ask, "Why did you deceive me?" (Genesis 29:25). That it was not the custom of the younger to marry before the elder could have been communicated to Jacob earlier. We can imagine Laban's possible retort, "I deceived you because you are a man who understands a thing or two about deception." The question – why did you deceive me? – will be the ever-present query that undergirds the narrative and offers us insight into Laban's strange role in the *Haggadah*.

Empty-Handed Jacob

One verse, innocuous and often ignored, may explain the severe criticism Laban receives on the *Seder* night. It does not appear when Laban and Jacob were in open turmoil, but, paradoxically, when the two first met. After Laban's initial encounter, he took Jacob into his house, and Jacob "…told Laban *everything* that had happened" (Genesis 29:13). Medieval exegetes are divided in their explanation of the exchange. Rashi on 29:13 suggests Jacob revealed to Laban why he had come; Jacob was forced to do so because of Esau's anger. Rashi then adds a detail not conveyed in the text: all of Jacob's money had been taken from him, explaining why he showed up to Laban's house without gifts. Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, on the same verse opts for a simpler, less dramatic explanation: Jacob told Laban that "his father and mother had sent him to members of the family."

Abraham Ibn Ezra on 29:13 takes a different view. Jacob's "everything" in this verse refers to words of blessing that Jacob lavished on Laban. Laban's hug, his kiss, was everything a fugitive could hope for: the whole-hearted sanctuary of a relative stranger in a time of self-doubt, confusion, and grief. Jacob, in this reading, reciprocated with words of continuous praise summed up with the biblical word "*ha-kol*," everything.[8]

This "everything" also could have obliquely referred to the everything that Jacob would one day receive as the now-primary beneficiary of Isaac's inheritance (and as the expert sheep breeder in Laban's house). Although he arrived with nothing, Jacob was sure to tell Laban that he would one day inherit everything to enhance his status in his uncle's eyes. The French thirteenth century exegete, R. Hezekiah ben Manoah, on 29:13 takes this approach and weaves various interpretations together: "'*He told Laban in detail about all these events*' - how he had acquired the birthright and subsequently the blessing, in order that Laban would agree to give him Rachel in marriage. He also told him that he had been forced to flee from his brother Esau in order to explain why he arrived empty-handed." Nahum Sarna, in the *JPS Torah Commentary to Genesis*, does not believe Jacob would have been so forthcoming: "It is hardly credible that Jacob reported that he cheated his own brother and father. More likely, he told how his parents had sent him to find a wife from among his kinfolk and that his misadventures on the journey had brought him empty-handed."[9]

We do not know from any explicit biblical verse that Jacob brought nothing with him, yet this is assumed by all of these commentators, both ancient and contemporary. They surmise that since no mention is made of any gifts - as was true of Eliezer when seeking out a wife for Isaac[10] - that Jacob had nothing to give. Laban was present during

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[6] Later, we see similar behavior from other minor characters, Laban's sons. We have no record of their industry, only their indignation. In unison, they complained to Laban: "Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from that which was our father's he has built up all this wealth" (Genesis 31:1). They made no mention of how long or hard Jacob worked to build up Laban's vast holdings.

[7] Scott B. Noegel in "Drinking Feasts and Deceptive Feats: Jacob and Laban's Double Talk," discusses linguistic puns throughout the Jacob narratives. The verse "Behold, Rachel, his daughter is coming with the sheep" (Gen. 29:6) plays off Rachel's name, "ewe lamb," with the Hebrew – *"ba-ah,"* is coming – playing off the sound of a lamb, suggesting, Noegel contends, that "she was grazing." Alternatively, lamb/sheep images foreshadow how entangled Jacob's future would be with Laban's flocks, both progeny and sheep. See *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2000), 164-165.

[8] I am grateful to Andrew Borodach and Michael Herskovitz who offered a number of insights on this essay. Michael drew my attention to the use of the word "*ba-kol*" in Genesis 24:1; Abraham, near the end of his life, was blessed with "everything." This "everything" is regarded as a reference to offspring (see Rashi *ad loc.*) that could have a similar nuance here. Jacob told Laban here that he was searching for a bride, which allowed Laban to manipulate the situation to serve him.

[9] Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary/Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 203.

[10] See Genesis 24:22: "When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two gold bands for her arms, ten shekels in weight." Later, even more gifts were

Eliezer's gift-giving (Genesis 24:50), and may have expected more of his sister's progeny than to send a son to visit with nothing in hand. In *Understanding Genesis*, Sarna underscores the "glaring contrast" between Abraham's earlier well-laden entourage and "Jacob's precipitate, lonely flight, on foot and empty-handed" to emphasize that Jacob put himself in this predicament.[11]

How Much is Nothing?

Jacob's appearance without all the trappings associated with his father Isaac's betrothal signified more than an empty purse. Jacob was an empty being. What, after all, did Jacob have to offer? In principle, he had his mother's love and a birthright, but Jacob could not access either without risk to his life. Jacob had nothing because, at this point in his story, he was nothing, only an amalgamation of fears about his past and future with a promise from God that must have felt thin and remote. When Laban put Jacob to work, he understood that what Jacob had to offer was only himself, his raw ambition, and his diligence.

The Italian scholar, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzato, comments simply that the "everything" from verse 29:13 is all the peril that occurred to Jacob in his short life: "All of the reasons that he fled." Jacob came to Laban's house choked by a story of his failings. And it is Jacob's failings that hold the secret to Laban's true evil. Jacob likely *did* tell Laban everything that he did and all that resulted from his mishaps and poor judgment. It must have been an immense relief to unburden himself. After all, Laban called Jacob his flesh and bones; Laban showed Jacob love when Jacob was only able to feel self-hate, cringing at his duplicity and weathered by self-recrimination. We can imagine Jacob falling into his uncle's arms as a safe haven, buffeted from his problems while slipping away to the edge of his known world. And then Jacob's secrets tumbled out of him. He told Laban of his misdeeds before Jacob knew anything of Laban's true nature - how, in the future, Laban would hold Jacob's secret as a powerful weapon through which to exploit his relative and future son-in-law. Laban knew that if Jacob could lie to his father on Isaac's deathbed, Laban could hold this lowest of moments against his future son-in-law, torturing Jacob with guilt, burdening him with extra work as a penance, making him feel unworthy, keeping Jacob small and unimportant in his household and depriving him of all the rights that the blessing Jacob stole promised him.

Anita Brookner opens her novel *Look at Me* with an observation about all revelations: "Once a thing is known it can never be unknown."[12] In this "everything" that was Jacob's confession, he revealed too much. He shared with Laban the "everything" that he had shared with no one else. The "everything" had Jacob traveling the familiar contours of his sin, his collusion with his mother Rebekah, the whispers, the minimal attempts at resistance, all of it outlined in Genesis 27. In that chapter, we are in the room with mother and son just before all would change in this small family. Rebekah charged Jacob to mimic Esau, even though the two were nothing alike. When Jacob tried to refuse, he was met with Rebekah's dismissiveness: "But his mother said to him, 'Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me'" (Genesis 27:13). She then prepared the clothing, dressed her son as if he were but a child and put the food into Jacob's hands, while her son stood passively.

"Who are you?" Isaac asked Jacob. Jacob knew exactly who he would forever be to his revered, blind father: a cheat, a liar, and a trickster. Jacob's smooth skin was too smooth and slippery in this dialogue. Did Jacob believe Rebekah when she told him the curse would be upon her, as if existential states were transferable? Jacob may have sensed he would ultimately bring a curse upon himself for his dishonesty, a human stain not easily removed. Arriving at Laban's house with a chance to work, marry, and reinvent himself, Jacob may have thought that with his confession, by spilling everything, he could put the curse down at Laban's doorstep. Yet in that everything, Jacob made himself dangerously susceptible to ill treatment, naked but for his truth. He kept no secrets. Like his depiction in Vleughels's painting, Jacob was exposed while Laban was covered.

Perhaps all of the deception Jacob suffered at Laban's hand was a direct consequence of initially admitting his own misdeeds and opening himself up to the ferocious and consuming power that Laban would suddenly have over him. Exploiters know that those most vulnerable make easy prey. Those who hold secrets without telling any of their own create an imbalance of power in a relationship; those who spill their deepest insecurities can become prey to blackmail and manipulation.

Jacob's revelations, far from liberating him, actually created a trap from which he struggled to escape. Jacob's willingness to do his mother's bidding and cede his moral autonomy laid him bare for Laban to do the same, as Shmuel Klitsner observed: "Through the act of relinquishing his moral autonomy and disassociating from his own identity (I am Esau), Jacob has become a man whose life is not his own."[13] Telling someone secrets gives them power. Jacob willingly gave Laban command over him, an act he would later come to regret.

Back to the *Haggadah*

Pharaoh was never regarded as the Bible's characteristic enemy. When he enslaved the Jews and sought to reduce their number by having male infants thrown into the Nile, he did so out of a genuine military conundrum. The Israelites, through their sudden population growth, were becoming to Pharaoh a fifth column; Egypt was unprotected. His solution, though brutal, was to rid the people of male strength, the very strength that might one day challenge his authority.

Contrast this to the biblical enemy we mention regularly and with disgust: the Amalekites. We despise them for attacking the weak and commit, without a touch of irony, to erase them from memory by recalling them regularly. "I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!" (Exodus 17:14). The reason is unclear until we get to Deuteronomy, where we read:

> Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and

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presented, "The servant brought out objects of silver and gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; and he gave presents to her brother and her mother" (Genesis 24:53).

[11] Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 186.

[12] Anita Brooker, *Look at Me* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 5.

[13] Shmuel Klitsner, *Wrestling Jacob: Deception, Identity, and Freudian Slips in Genesis* (Teaneck, N.J.: Ben Yehuda Press, 2009), 91. Klitsner supports this reading by showing how Jacob's defining decisions were made by someone else. Laban, rather than Jacob, decided on his bride. Rachel and Leah decide their children's names. Even when he has a family and flocks of his own, "…he oddly still sees himself as disenfranchised," p. 93.

> weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deuteronomy 25: 17-19).

The Amalekites were evil because they attacked those with no ability to fight back. The famished, the weary, and the straggler were all fair game to those who devalued human life. Had Pharaoh desired, he could have killed all the Jews in Goshen by throwing every newborn into the Nile's maw, but Pharaoh's driving reason was to guard his people and himself, not to destroy the Jews.

In the *Haggadah*, when Laban is compared to Pharaoh, Laban is deemed the more corrupt of the two. Pharaoh wanted to rid himself of the strong. Laban wanted to destroy the weak, to exploit a vulnerable Jacob who confessed all. Even moments when Laban seemed charming or bereft are suddenly open to reinterpretation. Was Laban trying to look and act as vulnerable as Jacob, but only more so, to have the upper hand yet again?

Jacob came to the brink of losing his entire earlier identity and promise in service to Laban's material needs. After decades, Jacob would have become fully assimilated to Laban's ways. Jacob was already dreaming of sheep; the mystical dream ladder covered in divine angels was now a distant memory. Jacob realized that his relationship with Laban had soured, yet it was only God who interposed: "Jacob also saw that Laban's manner toward him was not as it had been in the past. Then the Lord said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers where you were born, and I will be with you'" (Genesis 31:2-3). It was time for Jacob to understand that although Laban had power over him, Jacob still had choices to make, and God was the ultimate authority.

Had God not intervened, we recite in the *Haggadah*, we would still be slaves in Egypt. But had God not intervened and sent Jacob back to the land of his ancestors – our ancestors – the Israelites would never have gone down to Egypt in the first place. Jacob would have been fully absorbed in Laban's house and his habits because of his failure to protect himself. Uprooted and helpless, Jacob's secrets could have led to his ultimate undoing. The desire to tell all must be weighed against the need to say nothing. Silence, too, is power.

Secret Weapons
In her poem, "Privacy,"[14] Lee Upton writes:

> Privacy is a kind of power, that must be obvious.
> Who cares? One of my friends said.
> I tell everyone everything about myself, she said.
> And that's when I knew she was the one
> who told my secret.

When we share our weaknesses, frailties, and secrets, we lose a certain kind of control over ourselves, over our narrative, over the construction of our personal identities. The choice to reveal our deepest selves to another can creates closeness and strengthen a relationship at the very same time it skirts danger. The impulse to connect often overrides the impulse to protect. The worry is that our failings will be used against us and weaken us further. In loving relationships, admissions of failure are part of emotional reciprocity; we express weakness to connect with another through our shared vulnerabilities. But in a non-loving relationship and to those who would use our frailties against us, such admissions can become our undoing.

Sissela Bok in *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, observes that, "Whereas every lie stands in need of justification, all secrets do not. Secrecy may accompany the most innocent as well as the most lethal acts; it is needed for human survival, yet it enhances every form of abuse."[15] When the burden of keeping our secrets and the confidences of others weighs heavily upon us, and the words are about to tumble out, we remember Jacob and tuck our inner treasures far from sight. The temptation to reveal all is overwhelmed by the desire to preserve a fragile privacy, to trust in quiet dignity. "Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered" (Proverbs 11:13).

Corona and Seder-ing Along

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The COVID-19 virus has at once made the world larger and smaller, connected and disconnected. A plague of truly biblical proportions, we are united – arrestingly bound up – with all of humanity, while at the same time supremely isolated, as each of us hunkers down at home in an effort to thwart the pandemic's rapid spread. Trapped inside, we must refrain from communal gatherings such as *beit knesset* that nurture our social and spiritual selves. Nor can we enjoy the physical presence or embrace of friends and extended family, or commune around the table to share in meals. In this situation we have turned to the screens and technologies that allow us to connect from afar, but we are keenly aware of the limits of those technologies.

The Passover *Seder* – one of the most widely-observed Jewish rituals – appears to be under threat this year. Given our home-bound realities, many of us feel great sadness and anxiety, as we fear the loss of the perceived essence of the *Seder* – the familiar gatherings and the ensuant sense of togetherness, the extended friendship units that make Passover such a powerful conduit for unparalleled conversations of meaning and spiritual sustenance. Must *Seder* suffer the same suspension that has been hoisted upon the entirety of our lives?

Some halakhic authorities have offered dispensations for the particularly vulnerable (such as elderly grandparents) to participate in Zoom *Sedarim*, a move that has augmented a sense of allure of this solution for many others, despite the controversy it engendered. We would like to offer a different take on how to observe the *Seder* during the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that at least for some of us, the unprecedented demands of our current situation present a spiritual opportunity, allowing us to access one of the deepest elements of the *Seder* that early rabbinic sources sought to foster. *Seder*-ing alone or with the people with whom we are confined – and

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[14] Lee Upton, "Privacy," *The New Yorker* (April 29, 2019): 46.

[15] Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), xv.

refraining from Zoom – may offer a rich and unexpectedly meaningful Passover.

The Beginning of Us

The Exodus from Egypt – or, to be more precise – the ritual observance marking the Exodus (in our days, the *Seder*; in Biblical days, the eating of the Paschal lamb) is the very first Jewish communal act. As such, it is constitutive of the Jewish collective. This explains why even secular Zionists enlisted the *Seder* as a method for fostering a Jewish collective sensibility. And it is for this reason that Rashi (to Genesis 1:1) asks why the Torah begins with the creation narrative, rather than with the opening verses of Exodus 12, which seems to offer a more logical starting point given the centrality of Israel's communal obligations. After describing the creation of an Israelite calendar in verses 1 and 2, Chapter 12 proceeds to describe the process of selecting and eating the Pesah offering:

> (3) Speak to the entire community of Israel, saying: On the tenth day after this new moon they are to take themselves, each person, a lamb according to their father's house, a lamb per household. (4) But if there be too few in the house to finish a lamb, he is to take (it), him and his neighbor who is near his house, by the computation according to the number of people; each person according to what he can eat you are to compute for the lamb.

Verse 3 contains the two critical markers of the Jewish collective: an address to "the entire community of Israel," and the observance of a shared historical consciousness played out in shared time: a communal calendar. But then the verses take an unexpected turn: Jewish communal sensibility will be formed not in the wide-open, but in the confined spaces of homes – by individual family units. The marking of the beginning of Jewish peoplehood takes place not in the public square, nor even in a place of communal gathering such as the *beit knesset*. Ironically, it transpires in the private domain.

Nuclear and Intimate

Thus far, we have established only why the *Seder* takes place in the private domain, in relatively small units. But the *Mekhilta*, the earliest rabbinic *midrash* on the book of Exodus, goes even further:

> Suppose there were ten families belonging to one father's house. I might understand that in such a case only one lamb should be required for all of them. The Bible therefore states: "*A lamb per household*." (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Bo*, 3)

The Rabbis seem to know that we want to observe this moment that establishes the collective in the widest possible familiar circle, as a clan or extended family. But they go against that grain, emphasizing the biblical command for each household, the nuclear family, to constitute its own unit.

Yet the Rabbis do not stop there. They offer two alternatives to the nuclear family unit, all the while adamantly refusing to extend the circle to the larger family unit:

> "*He is to take (it), him, and his neighbor*":
> Rabbi Akiva says: From where do we know that if a person wants to have his Pesah offering on his own then he is permitted to do so? As it says, "*He is to take (it)*."
> Rabbi Yishmael says: From where do we know that if a person wants to enroll others in his Pesah offering then he is permitted to do so? As it says, "*He is to take (it), him, and his neighbor*" (*Mekhilta*, ibid.)

Rabbi Yishmael reads the verse in a way that redraws the lines of the household, and the Passover observance: it is not about blood relations, but rather about intimacy and proximity. If a person wishes, one may invite someone else – *anyone else* - to join. But the truly radical move belongs (as usual) to Rabbi Akiva, who reads the verse to open up the possibility that the individual may have the Pesah offering – and, by extension, observe the *Seder* – by oneself. Of course, Rabbi Akiva is not saying that such a situation is preferred. Still, his teaching is not merely unexpected or unfamilial; it is subversive.

Why would Rabbi Akiva stake out such an extreme position? Rabbi Akiva understood the *peshat* (plain) meaning of these biblical verses: that the size of the group participating in each Paschal offering should be the "right size" in order that they should together completely consume a whole lamb. When he suggests that the individual may eat the Pesah offering alone, he's not endeavoring to find a solution for someone with an enormous appetite. More important, Rabbi Akiva was not living during the modern age, when the individual's autonomy is considered a supreme value. So he's not advocating the atomization or privatizing of communal religious practice in an effort to meet the norms of his day. Moreover, his sights remain affixed upon the aim of establishing communal consciousness through this ritual. Rather, he's saying something profound about the way that – or, better still, the *locus where* – Jewish collectivity is formed: in the consciousness of the individual.

No Pack Mentality, No Oppressive Freedom

In his masterpiece *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr grapples with a vexing question: if the individual shows such inspirational ability to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of acting out of moral agency, why does the collective have so difficult a time doing so? In two important senses, Rabbi Akiva's position in the *Mekhilta* seems to preempt Niebuhr's quandary, prescribing a method for fostering communal consciousness that places at its center the moral capability of the individual.

First, we can say that by insisting that communal belonging transpires within the individual, Rabbi Akiva offers a vision of communal cohesion that rejects the pack mentality. The moral failure of a community occurs at precisely those moments when the individual ceases to think autonomously, sacrificing the dictates of her conscience on the altar of the existent communal norm. For Rabbi Akiva, the individual's sensibility becomes the birthplace and source of communal consciousness.

But Rabbi Akiva's insistence that the individual can observe *Seder* alone offers an additional answer to Niebuhr's concern. If the cornerstone of the building of Jewish historical memory is the Exodus from Egypt, then the central, hallowed space of that building is the unrelenting command, worked and reworked throughout the Torah, that because the Jew knows what it was to be a stranger in Egypt, she must act with moral sensitivity and compassion toward the stranger. A Jew's newfound freedom must not and cannot become a source of oppression of others, or else he has betrayed Jewish collective consciousness. Thus at the heart of our communal identity is the command aimed at the individual moral conscience. This ethical excellence may well become the trademark of our people as a group, but the starting point of that path lies deep within the recesses of the individual. Rabbi Akiva's insistence that the individual can eat the Pesah offering alone finds a foothold in the verse, but its true

religious telos reaches the highest and widest aspirations of Jewish peoplehood.

***Seder*-ing Alone**

How will this *Seder* be different from all other *Sedarim*? For some, it will be different because of the allure of linking themselves to others electronically. For many, it will simply be difficult, even painful. But for some, there is a silver lining, the opening of a new spiritual possibility. By conducting *Seder* at home, we can explore in new depth what we as individuals are capable of achieving as the constitutive locus of Jewish collective consciousness.

At the same time, we may be forced into the narrow straits of a powerful discomfort of having to speak and lead where we are normally silent or acquiescent. No one can do the work of leading the *Seder* for us – framing the questions, suggesting themes, offering inspiring interpretations. We will hear our own still small voices. We can give them much-needed airtime. If until now we have been the passive recipients of the *Seder*, this night will be different because there will be no one else to shield us from our own responsibilities, dreams, and inadequacies.

The Talmud (*Pesahim* 116a) even goes so far as to say that when a person eats alone during the *Seder*, she must ask herself the Four Questions. Our inner dialogue, the deep questions that we so often leave silenced or unarticulated, are waiting to emerge. From them – and only from them – can the larger Jewish narrative be woven. This year, let us not be enslaved to our preexistent sense of the conditions of a meaningful *Seder*.

Passover 2020

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We danced that night like the end of the world was coming
We knew it was, a Purim unconcealing, reckless and absurd
Before the shutters closed, and silence descended
And we took to our homes with matzah and bitter herbs
Did we imagine such re-enactment of our great ceremony?
The entire world in lock-down waiting for the mist to pass
A shadow across the globe
He and no angel, He and no emissary
The lintel shakes, the curtain drifts
The blood on the doorposts is ours, the lamb we worshipped
The hyssop, a token from nature's poisoned lung
Over our heads He passes, through deserted cityscapes
Pharaoh's ashen face stares grimly
From my parents' *seder* plate
The source of childhood nightmares, signals a new reality
Is this what we have trained for all these years?
To insist like our forebears did
That in war, and plague, and death
His arm remains outstretched
Reaching for our fingertips?

Hope

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I hope this virus passes
out our world even though matter
cannot be created or destroyed
unless it's an angel
who ascends the laws of Creation
and we know there are those sent
to take life, but the life of angels
feels beyond our reach too
unless science science science
can rid it from us, rationalize its
flesh away and leave us with only
bone, and that bone becomes light
and that light becomes the glow
under a microscope
the virus passes
through us, killing
many of us, sickening most of us, asking
all of us to be different
if not the angel of death
won't pretend next time he can
be conquered by the deeds of man

The Passover Pandemic

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Our confrontation with tragic realities sometimes provides a new lens through which to view familiar categories. This year, our experience of the novel coronavirus offers us new insight into the Ten Plagues, which are central to the coming holiday of Passover. Above all, it is the most lethal of the Ten Plagues, the death of the Egyptian firstborns, that resonates most forcefully.

The assertion that *makkat bekhorot* is pivotal to Passover is straightforward enough. The Torah, in describing how a parent should respond to a child who inquires as to the meaning of the Passover rituals, makes the point plain: "And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses'" (Exodus 12:26-7). *Makkat bekhorot* is, of course, the basis for the institution of the *Korban Pesah*, named after God's decision to "skip over" the houses of the Jews who had spread the blood of the lambs on their doorposts. And the *Pesah* meal was, in 15 Nissan's earliest iteration, the central event of what we have come to call the *Seder* night.

But when we examine *makkat bekhorot* more closely, a more subtle insight becomes evident: our commemoration is *not so much about the death of the Egyptians' firstborns, but about the sparing of the Jews' firstborns*. The parents' first response to the son stresses that "[God] smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses." And the obligation incumbent upon parents to designate their firstborns to

God suggests that, by right, the children should belong to Him, for the Jewish firstborns owe their lives to God.

The same motif is manifest in the custom for firstborn children to fast on *erev Pesah*, which is particularly unusual given the general prohibition against fasting during the month of Nissan (*Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 429:2). As the *Tur* (*Orah Hayyim* 470) explains, "the firstborns fast on Passover eve… as a commemoration of the miracle in which they were saved from the Plague of the Firstborns."

Ibn Ezra (*Peirush ha-Katzar*, Exodus 12:42 s.v. "leil shimurim") takes this idea one step further, interpreting the concept of *leil shimurim* (lit. a night of watching), taken in the *Haggadah* to indicate that God provides special protection for the Jews on the *Seder* night, as revolving around the miracle of the saving of the firstborns. The verse reads: "That was for the Lord a night of vigil (*leil shimurim*) to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that same night is the Lord's, one of vigil for all the children of Israel throughout the ages" (12:42). While the commentators offer numerous interpretations, Ibn Ezra understands the text to mean that the Jews observe the holiday of Pesah because God saved the Jewish firstborns. This remarkable reading suggests that the miracle of the firstborns was not only a seminal element in the Exodus, but *the* seminal event.

Yet all this begs the question: Why was the survival of the Jewish firstborns considered a distinct miracle? God had stricken the Egyptians with nine plagues, yet in no other instance does the Torah require unique rituals to commemorate the divine intervention. What makes the tenth plague different from the rest?[16]

Seeking to account for this enigma, the Gemara (*Bava Kama* 60a; see also *Rosh Hashanah* 11b) explains:

> Rav Yosef taught: What is that which is written: "And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning" (Exodus 12:22)? Once permission is granted to the destroyer, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked.

Not explained in the Gemara is *why* the Destroyer is granted such permission. It would appear that this permissibility is tied into the unnaturalness or incomprehensibility of the plague. *Makkat bekhorot* differed from the other plagues not only in its intensity and sudden onset, but because it was unnatural and therefore terrifyingly unpredictable. Everyday plagues don't afflict just the firstborns, and the plague itself - at least in the case of the first nine plagues - is typically visible. This, according to Netziv (Exodus 11:4 s.v. "ani"), is the significance of the notion that it was God Himself who went out among the Egyptians (Exodus 11:3): the invisible, unnatural Source of affliction struck terror in the hearts of Egyptians and Jews alike, requiring a miraculous intervention on the part of God for the Jews to survive.[17]

This terror and bewilderment are evident in our response to the mystifying appearance of plagues throughout *Tanakh*. The commentators struggle to explain why collecting a half-shekel helps to avoid a plague (Exodus 30:12). The Tabernacle possesses the quasi-mystical potency to cause a plague to befall the priest who enters (Numbers 8:19). And the people's raw fear is evident in the episode in which Aharon intercedes at the final moment, utilizing the incense to save the Jewish people from a plague (Numbers 17:11-12). In all these cases, the source of the plague is ultimately God Himself: mystifying, terrifying, and utterly debilitating.

Makkat bekhorot's uniqueness as such an invisible, indiscriminate, and psychologically debilitating plague sheds new light on Passover. We generally use the term "*eser makkot*" or "ten plagues" to refer to all ten as a whole. This certainly has a substantial basis in rabbinic texts, not least of which is the *Haggadah*. Yet this phraseology threatens to obscure some key points. First, we tend to underestimate the extent to which the tenth plague was radically different from the others. (The Rabbis make the point by stressing that it was God Himself who performed the plague.) Indeed, it is striking that while we refer to them as the Ten Plagues, the Torah itself uses the term "*negef*" almost exclusively in reference to *makkat bekhorot*, with the exception of single usage in regard to *tzefardeia* (Exodus 7:27; see also Joshua 24:5). Elsewhere in *Tanakh*, the noun *negef* is used regularly, if not exclusively, to denote a plague - what today we might call an epidemic - reinforcing the terminological evidence that the last plague differs qualitatively from its predecessors.

If it is so obvious that *makkat bekhorot* should be viewed as a plague, why do we tend to overlook this insight? For one, it's not the major focus of the *Seder* as we know it. Having developed in the wake of the Temple's Destruction and parallel to the evolution of Christianity, as well as throughout the Middle Ages, today's *Seder* is far more focused on God's role in saving us from human enemies, not plagues. For centuries, almost by design, we have downplayed the relevance of divine mercy in the face of epidemic to the *Seder* night.

Of course, modernity has only exacerbated this tendency. We have become far less accustomed to plagues, and have even traded in the term "plague" for "epidemic" and "pandemic," reflecting our increased scientific understanding of the causes of disease.

But this year has changed all of that, perhaps irrevocably. We are experiencing a plague. Of course, we understand more of the science behind the current plague, but it remains invisible to the naked eye. Indeed, as we know, countless people throughout the world are afflicted despite showing no symptoms, capable of passing on the lethal virus to unknowing potential victims. Many of us are rightfully terrified, even as we do our part to stay safe and care for others. And so the relevance of plagues to Passover, for once, is not lost on us this year.

Yet the parallels also offer a glimmer of hope. On Passover, we celebrate the fact that God miraculously spared the Jewish firstborns from affliction, blocking the otherwise inevitable march of the Destroyer. May this Passover serve as a harbinger for a respite from the coronavirus plague that is ravaging our world - without discrimination - today.

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[16] For variations on this question regarding the need for the Jews to paint their doorposts with blood, see *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael Bo* 12:13; and Abravanel, Exodus 12, question five.

[17] The majority of commentators, including Rashi (to 12:22), maintain that the Jews remained inside to avoid being affected by *makkat bekhorot*. Ramban (ibid.), however, explains that they remained inside in order to avoid being harmed by direct contact with God's Presence, which was present during *makkat bekhorot*. In any case, the Jewish firstborns would have been harmed by the plague or its Source, and thus required a miracle to survive.

(Re)Reading Shir Ha-Shirim During COVID-19

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This year's confluence of Passover and a pandemic has spurred countless halakhic questions. Among them: given that synagogue services are impermissible, should one praying individually still read Shir ha-Shirim on *Shabbat Hol ha-Moed*?

On one level, this can be analyzed as a strict halakhic matter. The question hinges on whether we view the custom of reading the five *Megillot* (except for Megillat Esther on Purim, which we can assume occupies a category unto itself) as incumbent upon the individual or the community. R. Hershel Schachter, for instance, recently ruled on the basis of a comment of the Vilna Gaon, that while the reading of Megillat Esther on Purim is an individual obligation, the reading of the other four *Megillot* (as well as weekly Shabbat Torah readings) devolve upon the community. Accordingly, he rules that an individual need not read Shir ha-Shirim this year. R. Schachter even discourages such private readings, citing his teacher R. Soloveitchik's opposition to the observance of customs that lack halakhic basis. Following R. Schachter's ruling (although arguably softening R. Schachter's discouragement of private readings), the Rabbinical Council of America publicized a *luah* (calendar) for this year, which instructs that "the custom to read Shir HaShirim on Pesach was clearly instituted only for a tzibur. Nonetheless, there is nothing prohibited about reading Shir HaShirim on Pesach without a tzibur. One should be conscious of the fact that such a reading would not constitute a fulfillment of the original minhag."

On the other hand, one might argue that the initial presentation in *Masekhet Sofrim* (14:18) seems to suggest that Shir ha-Shirim was originally read privately on the last two nights of Pesah, unlike the current Ashkenazic practice to read it in *shul* on *Shabbat Hol ha-Moed*, lending support to the view that it is a private obligation and should apply this year. Further, one might maintain that even if the custom does not formally hold this year, it is best for us to approximate a typical Pesah experience so as to retain the flavor of the holiday - of course, while reading (even from a *kelaf*) without a *berakhah*.

Of course, given the high stakes of the many burning questions confronting us this year, this issue seems relatively minor. Yet the question of the recitation of Shir ha-Shirim must be considered not only on halakhic grounds, but also concerning whether its recitation is congruous with the mood of this Pesah. As one friend put it, referencing Kohelet and Shir ha-Shirim,"This Pesach הבל הבלים seems more appropriate than ישקני מנשיקות פיהו." Setting aside the question of individual versus communal obligation, doesn't the youthful love story of Shir ha-Shirim stand in stark contradistinction to the grim scenes emerging from New York City hospitals and throughout the world?

Two answers come to mind immediately. First, we might insist while Shir ha-Shirim does not match our mood this year, our responsibility as halakhic Jews - or as *Halakhic Men* - is to experience Pesah fully as the holiday of redemption, no matter the circumstances.

Second, we might claim that Shir ha-Shirim, far from being a youthful love song brimming with verdant optimism, is in fact a far more complex story about the intense struggle of the Jewish people (or individual spiritual seeker) and our burning desire for redemption. Indeed, one group of commentators – including Rashi, Rashbam, Metzudat David, Lekah Tov, and Akeidat Yitzhak – see the book as the Jewish People's retrospective, in which they reflect from exile and aspire to be reunited with their beloved God.[18] On this reading, Shir ha-Shirim is a sober work, one that ultimately offers a glimpse of hope into an otherwise dark and gloomy world. This reading is perhaps best exemplified by the verse, "My beloved is like a gazelle or like a young stag. There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the window, peering through the lattice" (Shir ha-Shirim 2:9). It is perhaps in this spirit that we can appropriately read Shir ha-Shirim in the throes of a pandemic.

Yet there is another response, one which opens the path toward a novel understanding of Shir ha-Shirim, as well as its relevance to Pesah, both in general and particularly this year. Ask the average reader, and he would likely say that, at least on the *peshat* level, the central drama of Shir ha-Shirim is the love story between the *dod* and *ra'ayah*. In fact, however, a closer reading of the *sefer* suggests that the real drama takes place *inside* the female protagonist, who undergoes a profound process of self-transformation throughout the course of Shir ha-Shirim.

To explain, let us briefly review Shir ha-Shirim from 10,000 feet. Many read Shir ha-Shirim as a single extended drama involving a *dod* and *ra'ayah*. Others insist that the book is more convincingly read as a series of distinct, loosely-related scenes that are bound together in a single work. In between these two positions, I would contend that there are two narratives that run in parallel throughout the *sefer*, one between the *ra'ayah* and a prince, and the other between the *ra'ayah* and a shepherd. Let us review the contours of each narrative in short.

The first, which is detailed in greatest depth in chapters 2-4 and 7, is blessed with "smooth sailing": the couple does not grapple with any tensions, and consummates their relationship with marriage (chapter 4). The verses detailing this relationship focus on the physical aspects of their mutual attraction, particularly the beauty of the *ra'ayah*, as well as the couple's communion in nature. The *ra'ayah* has no friends that we know of; we hear only of the women who unsuccessfully call upon her to rejoin the dance (7:1). She lacks a clear-cut biography. Finally, this relationship seems to climax in chapter 7 with an intensification of that physical attraction. This relationship is lacking in drama or complexity, and typifies an uncomplicated love story between man and woman.

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[18] This reading of Shir ha-Shirim is reinforced by the lesser-well known opinion in a well-known *midrash* regarding Shlomo's age when he composed Shir ha-Shirim. A classic opinion (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:10) asserts that Shlomo was a youth, but another view maintains that he composed the three books attributed to him in the rabbinic tradition, Shir ha-Shirim, Mishlei, and Kohelet, at the same time. To this *midrash* we may add that the Gemara *Bava Batra* 14b, in listing the *sefarim* in *Tanakh*, enumerates Mishlei, Kohelet, and then Shir ha-Shirim. Rashi (s.v. *shir*), seeking to account for the language of the Gemara, writes that it appears Shlomo composed Shir ha-Shirim close to his old age. This view may lend itself toward a more sober view of the challenges posed throughout Shir ha-Shirim, and toward seeing it as a work written out of a place of pain that desperately anticipates a period of reunion.

The second narrative tells a different story, a *bildungsroman* of sorts. The woman's beloved is a shepherd, and their relationship is plagued by drama. We are privy to both the physical and especially the emotional aspects of their relationship, and we know much more about the woman's biography. Looking especially at the opening chapter of Shir ha-Shirim, we learn that she apparently has no relationship with her father; he has either died or is no longer involved in his children's lives. Her brothers have taken advantage of her, subjecting her to brutal physical conditions by instructing her to guard their vineyards and not tend to her own. Her appearance and self-confidence suffer as a result. She begins the book as a self-conscious young woman, convinced that she is better off dreaming about a romantic relationship than actually attempting to engage in one, and twice adjures her friends, the Daughters of Jerusalem, to precisely this effect: "Do not wake or rouse love until it please" (2:7, 3:5). She wanders the streets searching for her beloved, but is physically harmed by the city's watchmen (5:7).

Yet despite the considerable challenges she confronts, the woman ultimately recognizes that her beloved will disappear from her grasp if she does not act swiftly. After he knocks on her door and she opens it too late, she becomes determined not to allow him to disappear. Instead of satisfying herself with an idealized imaginary relationship, she passionately describes the shepherd's qualities to her friends and begins to overcome her initial reservations.

By the end of the *sefer*, she has transcended her brothers' abusive treatment, asserting her physical and emotional maturity. Setting aside any concern about the public propriety of the relationship, she determines that her love is too valuable to squander over the possibility of social opprobrium. She declares her love to be as intense as death and that she prefers this love (represented by her vineyard) to a royal relationship (represented by Shlomo's vineyard). Most crucially, the *dod* recognizes her internal transformation: "Then I became in his eyes as one who had found peace" (8:10). Having reached a healthy self-understanding, she does not require the status of owning a royal vineyard in order to find internal validation; she is perfectly satisfied with the vineyard of her own (8:12).[19]

Of course, the woman's ability to find herself emerges not while in solitude, but through a series of interactions with others. But in the end, it is her own inner world, her determination not to permit her childhood traumas to interfere with her self-confidence and capacity to establish healthy relationships, which is the axis around which the true drama of Shir ha-Shirim revolves.

This reading of the *sefer* not only offers an innovative reading of the biblical book, but also opens a path toward a new appreciation of the connection between Shir ha-Shirim and Passover. The night of 15 Nissan centers on the gratitude with which we shower God for the redemption. This parallels the relatively uncomplicated relationship between the woman and the prince, and focuses on the loving intimacy between God and his beloved people. Indeed, some have the practice to read Shir ha-Shirim following the *Seder* (*Hayyei Adam* 130, *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* 119), accentuating this dimension of the *sefer*.

But as we enter *Hol ha-Moed* and the final days of Pesah, the focus begins to shift from God's miraculous activities to the Jewish people's internal world, which was, to put it gently, a work in progress. From the moment they left Egypt, the Jews were wracked by internal doubts owing to the slave mentality they had imbibed. The very opening verse of *Parshat Beshalah*, which immediately follows the Exodus, explains that "God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer [to Canaan]; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt" (13:17). As Ibn Ezra (*Peirush ha-Katzar* s.v. "ve-ta'am") notes, "They had not previously encountered war, and were enslaved under the hands of others. And when Pharaoh would emerge after them, none of this [people] would lift a hand [in self-defense]. Similarly, Amalek came out against Israel with a small number, and snaked around [Israel], and [Israel] would have been weakened before [Amalek] if not for Moses His chosen one."[20]

Ibn Ezra (14:13 s.v. "va-Yomeru") reiterates the point a bit later on in the same narrative:

> One has to wonder: How can a camp of six hundred thousand people fear from those who chase after them, and why not fight for their lives and their children? The answer: Because the Egyptians were masters of Israel, and this generation that came out of Egypt learned from its youth to suffer the burden of Egypt, and its soul was depressed, and how can he now fight with his masters? And Israel was weak and not skilled at war. You can see this, inasmuch as Amalek came with a small group of people, and if not for Moses' prayer, would have weakened Israel.

This also helps to explain the curious conclusion to the Torah reading on the seventh day of Pesah. Instead of concluding with the end of the Song of the Sea, we read five more verses:

> Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water.
>
> They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah.
>
> And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"
>
> So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test.
>
> He said, "If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the Lord am your healer." (15:22-26)

The seemingly unnecessary inclusion of this section in the *keriat ha-Torah* intimates that even after the Splitting of the Sea, the Jews still struggled to tear themselves away from psychological enslavement, disbelieving in God's ability or desire to provide materially for them. This, of course, is part of the purpose of *Sefirat ha-Omer*, which, as R. Soloveitchik explains, was intended to enable to Jews to gain mastery

[19] See my discussion, https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-18-understanding-sefer-according-our-reading.

[20] See Alex Israel, https://www.etzion.org.il/en/beshalach-slave-mentality.

over time.[21] For this reason, it is appropriate that the *Omer* count toward Shavuot begins on the night of 16 Nissan, immediately following the day of the Exodus: as soon as we leave Egypt, we begin the internal work of gaining self-mastery. The story of the Jews' march from Egypt is the beginning of their tortured attempts to shake themselves free of the psychological terror inflicted by a 210-year-long trauma.

The parallels between the stories of the *ra'ayah* and the Jews of the Exodus are as unexpected as they are tantalizing: both are coerced to engage in difficult work in the heat of a Middle Eastern day; both are subject to physical violence at the hands of enforcers; both struggle to act upon the obvious good of their beloveds; and, above all, both most struggle to achieve psychological freedom from youthful trauma. While Shir ha-Shirim and the larger arc of the Exodus end with intimacy (in the latter case, *Matan Torah*), both begin with an inner odyssey toward psychological freedom and self-discovery.

Seen from this perspective, we may appreciate a new dimension of the affinity between Shir ha-Shirim and Pesah. Each of these two storylines features not only relationships between caring parties, but an internal struggle in which one party (the woman or the Jewish people) struggles to overcome trauma in order to enter into a healthy relationship with her beloved. Shir ha-Shirim and the aftermath of the Exodus remind us that the process toward building healthy relationships, with God and any other loved one, begins from a journey within.

The past number of weeks have posed profound difficulties for nearly all of us, and trauma for too many. In seeking to confront the sense of isolation so many of us are experiencing this year, perhaps there is at least something of a silver lining in the custom of reading Shir ha-Shirim on Pesah. We may turn to the model of the *ra'ayah* and the Jewish people, who were forced to turn inward in order to find the spiritual strength to establish full relationships with those around them.

[21] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha--Omer,and Shavuot, 147.

The Hazon Ish Wasn't Writing About Using Computers

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The recent *psak* which was issued by several prominent *Sepharadi* rabbis in Israel concerning the use of video-conferencing technology on Yom Tov to facilitate the participation of isolated individuals in a family *seder* during the current pandemic, and the responses from *poskim* opposed, bring to the forefront the more theoretical question of how to classify the use of electricity on Shabbat and Yom Tov. Specifically, this ruling leads us to consider and interpret the position of the Hazon Ish, Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, regarding electricity. Unlike most other *poskim*, who if they see any biblical violation of *melakhah* at all in the use of electricity on Shabbat (and Yom Tov), view it as *hav'arah*—igniting or kindling a fire—the Hazon Ish's position is notable both for its originality and its stringency[22] in that he assigned the use of electricity to the *melakhah* of *boneh*—building.

The commonplace presentation of the Hazon Ish's position is that the violation of Shabbat occurs when one completes, i.e. builds, an electrical circuit.[23] The electrical connection formed when a switch is closed, bringing two wires in contact, is classified as "building." Some note as well that the Hazon Ish also thinks this is a violation of the *melakhah* of *makeh ba-patish*, since the completion of the circuit is the finishing touch to complete the usefulness of the circuit itself.

I would suggest that the application of the Hazon Ish's position to prohibit any use of *any* electronic device at the biblical level, (which would obviously extend to webcams, computers, and smartwatches, besides those appliances which he was explicitly considering in the 1950s like lamps, refrigerators, and fans), is based on a misreading of the Hazon Ish's central argument about how and why he considers the use of electricity on Shabbat and Yom Tov to be a violation of the *melakhah* of *boneh*. I would offer instead that a precise reading of the Hazon Ish's position would prohibit specifically to turning on or off an electrical or electronic appliance or device, but would not assign a biblical *melakhah* violation to the use of a device that is already on, and further, that the technical details of which switches and circuits are being closed and opened are not really his concern.[24] My excerpted and annotated translation of *Hazon Ish Orah Hayyim 50* follows.

> [Turning on an electric light] constitutes fixing an object, since it sets it to its use to continually transmit the electric current. This is close to [a violation of] building, [which is prohibited] by the Torah like making a new device, and all the more so in this case, since the wires are attached to the building and it is thus like building something attached to the ground.

Initially, the Hazon Ish engaged with what was the dominant view of other *poskim* at his time, that the use of electric lights (*sc.* incandescent bulbs) on Shabbat constitutes a violation of Shabbat at the biblical level due to either the prohibition of cooking (which applies to heating a metal to the point that it softens) or burning (which applies to heating a metal to the point it is at least red hot). He then introduces his own view, that introducing an electric current into an electric bulb or other device is comparable to building the device or fixing a broken device, because until the point that the current flows through it, the device is useless for its designated purpose.

This is a very different idea from the claim that completing the circuit is an act of building. The Hazon Ish is less concerned with the physical action (bridging a gap in a wire) that takes place when an electrical device is activated; he is instead concerned with the pragmatic or result-oriented change that occurs when the device is powered on and becomes usable. He frames this using metaphysical terminology

[22] Classifying electricity as *boneh* is particularly stringent because, unlike *hav'arah*, there is no permission to employ actions otherwise prohibited as *boneh* for immediate benefit on Yom Tov, called *okhel nefesh* (however, see Tosafot *Shabbat* 95a s.v. "Ve-harodeh").
[23] See Rabbi Yair Hoffman, Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky, and Rabbi Ike Sultan.
[24] Some of the ideas in this article were developed through correspondence with Moshe Schorr, and appear here with his permission.

(*geshem* and *tzurah*—substance and form) which are parallel to, for example, Rambam's description of the classes of created beings in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:3-8. According to the Hazon Ish, before the power is turned on the device is considered broken, destroyed, or dead—mere substance without form—and after the power is turned on, it is fixed, newly-built, or alive—the substance of the device has been imbued with its intended form (the energy which makes it operate) in the form of electrical power.

The Hazon Ish's main support for his opinion comes from an innovative reading of an example from *Tosefta Shabbat* as quoted in the Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 47a, as he explains:

> They said that "With regard to the plasterer's pole, which has several component parts, one may not reassemble it in the first place, but if he did reassemble it, he is exempt from bringing a sin-offering, although it is prohibited."[25] Seemingly, the *Tosefta*'s ruling regarding the plasterer's pole is comparable to its ruling regarding [the pole of] a lamp as appears in the prior clause, in that we are discussing attaching the pieces tightly, and nonetheless in the case of a plasterer's pole one is exempt [from a violation of Shabbat at the biblical level]. The reason why is that the lamp is primarily used assembled, and when one disassembles it, it is not in order to use it but rather for a different purpose [DM: i.e. to store it away]; however, the plasterer's pole has two usable forms: to reach a low place a long pole is unsuitable, and to reach a high place a short pole is unsuitable. Thus, when one lengthens it temporarily, even if it is tightly joined, it is like stacking one tool on another to reach a high place and it is never [formally] designated a "long pole."

Before the Hazon Ish, the interpretation of this passage from the *Tosefta* focused entirely on how tightly the pieces were joined. In the case of the plasterer's pole, the pieces were commonly assumed to be only loosely attached, and thus only a rabbinic prohibition is involved in its assembly, while in the case of the lamp-pole, the pieces were assumed to be tightly attached, and thus their assembly would constitute a biblical act of building (cf. *Ramban, Ritva ad. loc., Rambam Hil. Shabbat* 22:26, *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 313:6).

However, as the Hazon Ish explains the *Tosefta*'s cases, it is prohibited to build a new tool or device on Shabbat because of "building." Tools constructed of component parts which are then joined tightly are problematic for this reason. However, if the tool has two useful states—e.g. a plasterer's pole which is used in both a long and short configuration—then no biblical violation is ever violated, since although the pieces are tightly joined, the tool always exists in an incomplete state of sometimes-short-sometimes-long.

In order to claim that the use of electricity on Shabbat constitutes a biblical violation, the Hazon Ish argues that (a) the joining of parts involved is considered "tight," (b) that any electrical device is more similar to the lamp-pole (with one useful state) than the plasterer's pole (with two interchangeable useful states), and, most importantly, (c) that this is an apt analogy to use as the basis for an entire model for the use of electricity in general. He continues:

> Opening the [flow of] electricity, which deposits the current in the wires, must be unambiguously considered "tightly" attached. Even if you would suggest that in the case of the plasterer's pole even something tightly attached is only rabbinically prohibited on Shabbat, that was specifically in a case of two objects [*geshem*] which can be thought of as two partners together in one action such that the fact that they are tightly joined does not transform them into a single object, as long as it remains necessary to separate them in order to plaster a low place. But transforming the form [*tzurah*] of the object such that it becomes usable is certainly considered building even if the use will be only temporary and afterward it will be terminated, since the termination would be from that point going forward, but the original form cannot be separated from the object.

The Hazon Ish dismisses the question of "tightness" (point [a]) as obvious, although in his later correspondence he addresses it. Instead, he focuses on why he thinks the use of electricity on Shabbat is *worse* than the assembly of the plasterer's pole (point [b]), itself only rabbinically prohibited on Shabbat.

The Hazon Ish claims that any electrical device is considered by Halakhah to be broken when the current is not flowing within it, since the "object" does not have the "form" necessary to be useful in the way in which it is normally used. When the electric current is connected to the "object" and its electrical components are activated, it attains the "form" necessary to become useful. In the case of the plasterer's pole, the two lengths of wood which comprise the long handle are both objects. According to the Hazon Ish joining two objects together is a less intrinsic change than joining together an object and the electrical power which changes its form. Thus, the act of causing the current to flow through the electrical components constitutes an act of building the device itself—transforming it from a form in which it was unusable to a form in which it is usable. The analogy the Hazon Ish gives in a later paragraph illustrates this point further:

> So too one who is practicing how to sharpen a knife for slaughter who [on Shabbat] prepared the knife to be able to slaughter with, even though he intends to nick it immediatly after the slaughter, nonetheless this is considered building, since temporary building is still classified as building.

Here the Hazon Ish makes clear that it is his opinion that Halakhah equates imbuing an object (the knife) with a new form (sharpness) with the act of causing an electric current to flow through an electrical device. It is not, as many have suggested, that the act of closing or opening a switch builds or destroys the circuit itself—i.e. the wire path—but that the current flowing through the device "fixes" it in so far as it becomes useful for its designated purpose.

It was this highly original opinion (indeed one which went against the precedent for how to interpret the passage from the *Tosefta*) which initiated a halakhic controversy. Other *poskim*, most notably Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, were not satisfied with the suggestion that when an electrical device is powered down, Halakhah sees it as broken, and that the act of causing the current to flow through it builds or fixes it, since in no discernible way is a powered down object broken. One does not go out and replace a powered down electrical device; it is functioning normally. It is designed to be shut down when not in use and to be activated when ready to be used. This disagreement rides on the aptness of the analogy between

[25] *Patur aval assur*—the common talmudic idiom generally referring to a rabbinic prohibition.

electricity and the lamp-pole, which is also only useful when assembled (point [c]); although the comparison is clear, the general applicability of the Hazon Ish's entire model to the question of electricity is debatable.

What is not debated, however, is that if the Hazon Ish's assessment is taken as correct, that this would be universally applicable to any and all uses of electrical or electronic devices, as he clarifies further when he describes what he sees as the intrinsic change that constitutes the *melakhah* of *boneh*. In *Hashmatot* 156, a correspondence between the Hazon Ish and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach published as an addendum to *Hazon Ish Orah Hayyim* 313, he explains his original formulation with an even starker choice of words:

> This matter is dependent on *shikul ha-da'at*.[26] Heating metal does not introduce a new nature in the metal, rather the heat resides temporarily in the metal and the metal tries to expel it; however, the wire's electrical connection awakens the electric power which is inherent in the wire itself and which is part of its natural composition since its initial creation. This use is continuous and we are concerned that putting it into place by way of the [wire] attachment such that the severed wire becomes a single body conjoined with the power station is a violation of [the prohibition of] building. First, because of attaching the pieces together, to which the leniency of "loose" does not apply since the flow of current connects them in a way which is classified as "tight," and second, since **fixing the wire itself from death to life is building**.[27]

As one can see from his own words, the Hazon Ish's understanding of how Halakhah should classify electrical processes — that the electrical power is a quality inherent in the metal which is awakened by attaching the wire to a source of voltage, that an electrical device is "dead" or broken when off and "alive" or repaired when on, and that the ability to conduct current across a switch is indication that the switch is tightly attached — is poorly summarized by the claim that the closing of a circuit constitutes an act of building and that its opening constitutes an act of destruction. The Hazon Ish's opinion relies on more subtle halakhic arguments (which he admits, in acknowledging the significance of *shikul ha-da'at*), and is not in direct conversation with the terminology used by engineers or physicists to describe the phenomena of electricity.

Poskim issuing halakhic rulings about the use of electricity on Shabbat are obviously entitled to agree with the arguments of the Hazon Ish if they find them compelling. And they are entitled to show deference to his opinion even if only as a reason to be more inclined to stringency given the severity of the prohibition that results from his analysis. But the Hazon Ish did not think that completing a circuit on Shabbat constituted a violation of *boneh*. He did think that enabling electrical current to flow through an electrical device currently powered down constituted building or repairing that device from a useless or unusable state to a useful one.

Although he disagrees with the Hazon Ish about the aptness of the analogy from the *Tosefta*, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach corrects some of his contemporaries in their (over-)zealous application of the Hazon Ish's position beyond what he intended. He notes in *Minhat Shlomo* 1:11:

> Subsequently I saw in Rabbi Chaim Shaul Grainiman's *Hidushim u-Beurim Orah Hayyim* 2 that he wrote according to his own reasoning that the opinion of the Hazon Ish should even forbid [someone from pushing a button on an electric device] even at a time when the current is not flowing [DM: by implication, that pressing the button completes the circuit even when no current is flowing].
>
> But in my humble opinion it seems, and I will explain later on, that the Hazon Ish only forbade in a case like this, where through one's action he creates new forces within the wires which seem to us like "from death to life," and he so wrote explicitly in his book that it is because of connecting the form [*tzurah*] to the object [*geshem*].

It directly follows from the repeated emphasis that the *boneh* paradigm being "from death to life" or "transforming the form [*tzurah*] of the object [*geshem*] such that it becomes usable" that the Hazon Ish only intended *boneh* to apply to turning on (and therefore for *soter* — destroying — to only apply to turning off) a device, but not to normal operational usage of a device which is on.

The Hazon Ish's argument that electrical devices are prohibited on Shabbat is predicated on the assumption that every electrical circuit has an "off" state and an "on" state, and that the "off" is unusable but the "on" is usable. Thus, the sort of building that combines the object [*geshem*] of the device with the electricity which provides its form [*tzurah*] is more comparable to assembling a lamp-pole on Shabbat (which is biblically prohibited) rather than assembling a plasterer's pole (which is only rabbinically prohibited). However, as Rabbi Ike Sultan notes in his discussion of the inner workings of a smartwatch (and this is true of almost all modern electronics):

> Turning to the smartwatch, although no circuits are noticeably being opened and closed, the inner workings of the silicon chip involve opening and closing circuits constantly. On the silicon chip inside the smartwatch, as is the case of a smartphone and computer, are thousands or millions of tiny transistors and circuits that are constantly being changed in order to enable different processes and apps …
>
> In general, closing an electric circuit on Shabbat is forbidden either Biblically or rabbinically.

The operation of any electronic device involves the opening and closing of many circuits in the thousands or millions of transistors needed to complete even basic computational functions. However, since a transistor performs calculations and stores data with both the "on" and "off" states playing necessary and useful roles, the Hazon Ish would concede within his own paradigm that the operation of these electronics cannot possibly constitute a biblical violation of Shabbat, since their function is closer to the more lenient case of the plasterer's pole than the more stringent case of the lamp-pole. Further, since the device as a whole remains on the entire time, and is never "dead" or without its *tzurah*, there can be no biblical violation of *boneh* as the Hazon Ish described in the normal use of an electronic device which remains on.

Although many *poskim* cite the opinion of the Hazon Ish as a knock-out punch in support of prohibiting the use of electronics, computers

[26] Judicial discretion, cf. *Sanhedrin* 33a, *Tur-Shulhan Arukh Hoshen Mishpat* 25

[27] Consider the idiomatic English phrase "live wire."

and the like on Shabbat and Yom Tov, in fact, as a close reading of his own writing demonstrates, the paradigm which he developed is based on distinguishing between devices which can be interchanged between two useful states (and are thus only rabbinically prohibited to assemble on Shabbat) and those which can be interchanged between a useful state and a useless state (which are biblically prohibited to assemble). To turn on an electrical or electronic device which is off (and useless) would constitute the prohibited joining of the *geshem*—the object of the device itself and the *tzurah*—the electricity which powers it. But to use a device which remains on, even though its normal use involves opening and closing thousands of circuits is not the sort of *boneh* the Hazon Ish was concerned with.

Making Seder out of the Zoom Seder Controversy

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Introduction

The crisis precipitated by the novel Coronavirus and the distancing measures in its wake have led to a flurry of halakhic decisions, many of which reflect deep questions of Jewish law and values. Placing any system under stress serves to reveal its tensions and gaps, and Halakhah is no different.

Possibly the most acute example of this appears in the case of Zoom *Sedarim*, which featured a controversy starting around Rosh Hodesh Nisan on both sides of the Atlantic. As we will see, these discussions are complex, as several different scenarios are being discussed, and a variety of halakhic and meta-halakhic issues are at stake - the halakhic status of electricity, questions of unity and diversity in halakhic decision-making, and the phenomenology of virtual reality.

The goal of this article is to make some *seder*, some order, out of the controversy, to separate out the various issues at hand and emphasize both new trends as well as consensus views that emerge from the discussion. The decisions presented on a variety of issues reflect in many cases surprising developments or applications of Halakhah, and we will find several cases of unlikely alliances between divergent parties.

Recap of Events

The debate began with the pronouncement of the "Association of Rabbis of the *Maghreb* in Israel," a group of fourteen Moroccan rabbis who asserted that, in order to allow families to include grandparents in their *Seder*s this year as usual, despite social distancing, it would be permissible to set up a Zoom call before *Hag* and include the larger family together in one festive *seudah*. The response was immediate and powerful: it was attacked by current Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel David Lau and even more forcefully by former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar. Rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein, a major decisor for the *Haredi* world, penned an objection as well. Several rabbis retracted their endorsement of this position almost immediately, and the decision was reissued with a mere seven of the original fourteen signatories. Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Rimon offered an alternative – having a Zoom pre-*Seder* on the afternoon of *Erev Pesah* to sing songs with extended family prior to logging off and holding a classical *Seder* with the smaller group in the room – a suggestion that has gained much traction, echoed by both Israeli and American colleagues.

In America, while some have addressed the question of using Zoom to facilitate multi-generational *Seders*, most of the discourse surrounds a different issue, those who live alone and for whom being alone for three days might lead to mental health challenges. In cases of danger to life there is an uncontroversial permission to violate the usual rules of Yom Tov; the question here has primarily been what exactly is included in *pikuah nefesh*, life-saving measures.

It is interesting that there are really two separate discourses going on – an Israeli discussion over family unity and preserving the multi-generational *Seder*, and an American discussion over preserving life through Zoom meetings. This is at least partially a function of circumstance: the calendar outside Israel features this year a so-called "three day Yom Tov," over 72 hours without electronic communication, a real challenge for some who are isolated physically and may have a history of mental health challenges. One wonders whether certain deep-seated cultural differences may play a role as well: Israel, and particularly its sizable Sephardic community, is very committed to the *hamulah*, close familial kinship, and especially joint religious experiences. As some of the decisions indicate, it is not clear that everyone will partake in a *Seder* if it does not include the extended family. On the other side, Orthodox communities in the United States are increasingly weakening the stigma of mental health and raising publicly more halakhic issues in that vein.

I would like to consider here three different debates or shifts that have occurred as a part of these discussions, and to analyze what underlies these debates.

Zoom *be-Seder*?

The dispute here does not feature much halakhic discussion aside from one major, longstanding debate. On both sides, the Israeli decisors have rarely invoked purely halakhic considerations in their decisions, preferring to focus on the broader policy concerns: will people follow the details and scope of the permissive view? Will this lead to disunity among rabbinic decisors? Will this facilitate increased observance and health?

The major halakhic debate lurking in the background is the question, first raised in the late nineteenth century, as to how electricity should be viewed by Halakhah. All agree that the use of electrical appliances is prohibited on Shabbat, but there are four different theories that have been offered as to why this is the case. Everyone knew electricity must be prohibited, but they just didn't know what the precise basis of the prohibition would be. The approaches, discussed at length in many volumes, can be roughly summarized in bare-bones fashion as follows:

1. *Eish* – Electricity is like a fire in the wire, prohibited due to the m*elakhah* of *Eish*.
2. *Boneh* – The use of electricity, which entails building circuits and empowering electronic appliances, entails the completion of a building project, prohibited due to the m*elakhah* of *Boneh*. This view is most closely associated with the Hazon Ish.
3. *Derabanan/Molid* – Electricity is not biblically prohibited, but it entails a rabbinic prohibition (or possibly a "strong *minhag*," in some formulations), possibly because it creates something new. This is the view attributed to R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, and is also the most prevalent view today.

4. *Makkeh be-Patish* – Since using electricity involves a constructive, creative act, it is included in this "catch-all" *melakhah*. This view is championed by R. Asher Weiss.

There are many differences between these views in their application on Shabbat. Possibly the most significant difference between these views applies in connection with Yom Tov. Since fire is permitted to be used on Yom Tov for a purpose, those who see electricity as *Eish* may generally use it. This is not only the view of many Moroccan decisors, but of other Sephardic and Ashkenazic *poskim* as well, most prominently the *Arukh ha-Shulhan*. (Several students of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik have related that it was his practice to turn on and off lights on Yom Tov, as well.)

Over the past half-century, the consensus view has been primarily to follow approach 3, which gives a fair amount of flexibility in applying the prohibition of electricity on Shabbat, although it means it is also prohibited on Yom Tov. Generally, Moroccan and other decisors have minimized communal reliance on the opposing position, despite still accepting it "*me-ikkar ha-din*," as the basic law. There seems to have been a preference for uniform communal standards: if Morroccan and other Sephardic Jews use electricity on Yom Tov while their Ashkenazi neighbors are told not to, that would weaken that prohibition and create an unusual communal dynamic. (Consider the parallel scenario of *kitniyot*, where Israel has seen a trend in recent years of *Ashkenazim* giving up the practice.)

The question is, what happens in a moment of crisis? Is there room to rely on that permissive position once again? The Moroccan rabbis' decision asserted that, with the proper safeguards, they could rely on it. In a scenario with the computer set up before Yom Tov (so adjusting it hopefully wouldn't be necessary), very clear statements that this be done only in extreme circumstances like this year for those who need it, and a clear purpose serving the sanctity of the day, they saw fit to allow Zoom *Seder*s.

The opposite view does not attempt to delegitimize the position itself, but instead to raise policy questions surrounding it that serve to render the position moot. Several of these are raised by the original *pesak* and parried, only to be resurrected by its critics - concerns of a slippery slope and the argument that using Zoom is *uvdin de-hol*, a weekday-like activity.

In addition to these policy questions, the main animating force behind the Israeli discussion is how to apply the widespread view among some Moroccan and Ashkenazi decisors of the previous generation that electricity may be used on Yom Tov for one's holiday needs. It is for that reason that the attacks on that decision, as well as the retractions, invoked considerations such as "rabbinic unity," "the nature of halakhic decision-making," and the like. While several of the oppositional arguments refer in a general sense to issues of Jewish law that permitting Zoom raises, they generally do not make sustained halakhic arguments. This can be attributed to the fact that, at least before one gets to the meta-halakhic issues, all agree that there is a strong argument to be made in the Moroccan tradition to permit.

In fact, one argument offered against the Zoom *Seder* by an Israeli decisor indicates the difficulty of using meta-halakhic categories. Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein, a prolific author on halakhic topics, was asked by his brother-in-law and acknowledged Torah *gadol* R. Chaim Kanievsky to offer a response to Zoom *Seders* stemming from the *Haredi* world. His response draws primarily on a responsum by Rav Moshe Feinstein disallowing use of timers to set automatic activities to take place on Shabbat because that entails *zilzul* Shabbat, a denigration of the day. Hosting a Zoom *Seder*, even if set up before Yom Tov, would similarly serve as a denigration of Yom Tov. The problem with this position is that *ziluta* is inherently a subjective thing; the greatest proof to this is that, at least in American observant communities, the use of timers and "Shabbos clocks" is widespread, relying on several opposing positions. Presumably this shift away from Rav Moshe's decision is at least partially due to the fact that as various technologies became more widespread, it became less of a denigration to Shabbat for them to happen automatically.

Thus, one might raise the question as to whether Rav Zilberstein's decision works to prohibit Zoom on Yom Tov today, but might not work at some future point when automated videos are more widespread and less of a denigration to the day. Consider the fact that many *shuls* have rotating screens running all Shabbat giving the day's schedule, which would have felt antithetical to the spirit of the day just 25 years ago. If one might theoretically find a permissible way to use Zoom on Yom Tov, though, would the day still offer the experience we have come to associate with it? Or has the phenomenon of "twenty-four hours without screens" merged with the identity of Yom Tov to such a degree that such a distinction is not possible? This question might reveal a tension between technical and experiential ways of approaching Yom Tov here, to which we will return below.

The meta- and para-halakhic arguments deployed against the Moroccan permissive ruling thus argue against relying on that decision, but do not attack its fundamental basis. As reliance on electronic appliances and communication becomes more central to day-to-day life, these broader arguments might militate either for greater stringency (to distinguish Shabbat from weekdays) or, alternatively, greater leniency in applying existing halakhic categories to use of Zoom and similar applications.

Zooming to Save Lives

Across the pond, the discussion regarding saving lives has also been an interesting one. Once again, the core halakhic issue has been laid out long ago – this case in consensus rather than debate. As the Talmud and *Shulhan Arukh* set out, when a person's life is endangered, one may violate Shabbat or Yom Tov without any worry. The divergences among different opinions thus hinge on questions of where to draw the line, as well as how exactly to implement this permissive ruling.

As to the extent of *pikuah nefesh* that would justify performance of *melakhah*, Rav Hershel Schachter published an important and fairly wide-ranging permissive position. He writes that it is permitted to violate Yom Tov through whatever means would be helpful, not only in a case where there is certain risk to a person's life (through self-harm), but even in a case where there is a minor possibility of risk. Furthermore, even in cases that don't carry any risk to a person's life, but would potentially lead to significant downgrading of one's mental health ("losing one's mind"), it is permitted to violate Yom Tov by whatever means necessary, including phone or Zoom calls to the relevant individuals. This is an extremely permissive position, although it draws upon earlier principles, both that of the aforementioned *Shulhan Arukh* and the position of the Soloveitchik family that loss of mental health qualifies for *pikuah nefesh* as well. Rabbi Yoni Rosensweig went into even greater detail in delineating specific scenarios and where he would see the threshold of health risks permitting the violation of Yom Tov.

Maybe the most significant shift is one focused on messaging rather than content. Rav Schachter's important decision was originally communicated to rabbis with the stipulation that it not be publicly disseminated, presumably based on the fear that it might be misconstrued or misapplied. Days later, presumably after consultation with rabbis and others regarding the risks, the same decision was publicized in fleshed-out form for public consumption. Presumably the decision was made that the risk of publicizing the *pesak* and having it be misunderstood was dwarfed by the risk of not having enough people be aware of the permissive position, which might lead to them endangering their lives.

Is Zoom for Real?

One other set of discussions taking place primarily in America relates to the way that one classifies the use of electronic communications. This discourse builds upon but extends beyond the various positions noted above as to why electricity is prohibited on Shabbat. It focuses on the question of how to understand virtual communication, as part of the broader question of how to understand and classify virtual reality. In a sense, these questions are pressing not only because it is necessary to consider the nature of Zoom and other technologies in evaluating their permissibility, but also because the world we live in has migrated communication beyond the household almost exclusively to the medium of texting, e-mail, WhatsApp, Zoom, and other virtual means. This can be seen as a question not only of Halakhah but of phenomenology as well.

This question carries countless ramifications. For example: Is sending someone a text message, or writing on a computer screen, considered a form of "writing" that is prohibited on Shabbat? If one hears a *berakhah* over Zoom, should she say Amen? Can one fulfill *mitzvot* through that mode of communication?

There are essentially two views of this issue of how to view virtual reality from the perspective of Halakhah: a realist and a formalist view. Do we say that, in real terms, typing a text on a computer or phone accomplishes the same goal of writing letters and is to be considered "*Kotev*?" Or do we say that, formally applying the halakhic categories, the text needs to be written on paper with some form of ink (see *Shabbat* 104b), and this does not qualify?

As should be clear, this is not a question of leniency vs. stringency – it runs in both directions, and is primarily a question of phenomenology and definition of categories. Every legal system has to define and redefine its categories as it faces new realities. With the shift in human interaction, and the corresponding new halakhic realities, this question of defining virtual reality emerges. (And, of course, it is possible to distinguish between different scenarios and have complex views that depend on the particular category at hand. Still, there is a certain commonality among the examples that make them worth exploring together.)

This question first arose not in the context of Pesah but a month previous, prior to Purim, when Rav Schachter wrote, drawing upon a position of Rav Moshe Feinstein, that those in quarantine with no other option could listen to the *Megillah* via Zoom or a phone call and fulfill the commandment in that way. This presumes that listening to the *Megillah* through a virtual medium qualifies as "hearing it" rather than serving as a detached experience. There is another hint of a realist view in Rav Schachter's distinction between phone calls and Zoom meetings. He asserts that, in cases that do not rise to *pikuah nefesh* but have some other overriding reason to allow contact (such as helping someone carry out their *Seder* despite lacking other options), it is possible to start a phone call before Yom Tov and continue it over the *Seder*. (He is very hesitant in embracing this, and suggests that every alternative option be considered.) However, he asserts, one should not have a Zoom meeting, because that would violate *Roshem*, a subcategory of the prohibited action of *Kotev* (writing), as participating in a video means one is broadcasting a particular picture. While, he asserts, it is not prohibited to look into one's own computer, because that is "like a mirror," communicating that image to others over Zoom qualifies as *Roshem*. The difference-maker between a case of turning on one's own camera and the scenario of sending it to others is presumably based not on electronic differences but on experiential ones – the real effect of having others see one's video at a distance, qualifies as the prohibition of *Roshem*. There are limits to this realist view, however: while one can "hear" or "write" from a distance, one cannot form a virtual quorum; presence is still lacking, as Rav Schachter spells out in another recent decision.

None of the Israel-based decisors raise these issues. Presumably, part of this is that they do not share the same view of how to apply *Roshem*. But there is also presumably an opposition to the realist approach reflected here.[28] Some of the Israeli *teshuvot* go out of their way to note that one cannot fulfill the *mitzvot* of the *Seder* by hearing it over Zoom. Generally speaking, the formalist approach will continue applying the previous, technical categories – use of electricity and the like - and not consider emergent categories such as *Roshem*. This seems to characterize both sides of the Israeli discourse fairly well.

On the other hand, Rav Schachter has some unlikely allies in conceptualizing virtual communication as "real" – Rabbi Ysoscher Katz of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and two rabbis of the "egalitarian halakhic" Yeshivat Hadar, Rabbis Ethan Tucker and Aviva Richman.

R. Katz published a primer giving practical advice as to how to use Zoom over Yom Tov for those at mental health risk. While generally following the guidelines that R. Schachter did, R. Katz asserts that both activating a new Zoom session and turning on a computer may be prohibited biblically, which has implications for how one might try to use a *shinui* in doing so, where possible. This argument has not, to my knowledge, been asserted by any of the many articles that have discussed this issue. R. Katz notes further that, in cases where there is no risk, using Zoom on Yom Tov "is not merely a biblical or Rabbinic prohibition; it is, in fact, much worse… [it] will undermine the core essence of Shabbat and *chag."* Here an appeal is made to the human experience of interaction with technology as something that should be prohibited, and severely so, regardless of one's views of the technicalities of electricity, a realist perspective. It appears that R. Katz is self-aware of his phenomenological stance; he argued several months ago that "once the definition of what is considered 'doing' changes, our understanding of what constitutes a 'melacha' has to change as well."

The Hadar article regarding Zoom goes in several other interesting directions. It not only invokes "writing" as a prohibition for scenarios of using chat functions, saving the recording, or possibly having one's image be seen (the last in agreement with Rav Schachter), but it also suggests some new potentially forbidden activities involved in using

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[28] Additionally, Rav Eliezer Melamed of Yeshivat Har Bracha, who allows saying *Kaddish* and *Barkhu* over "virtual *Minyanim*" (a topic for another occasion!) does so on the basis that there is no prohibition of taking God's name in vain in doing so, but not that there is any constituting of a *Minyan* in doing so.

Zoom. One is the issue of *Hashma'at Kol*, making noises, which is not usually applied for transmission of regular human speech. Most surprising is the invocation of the prohibition of *Tehum*, the prohibition to walk outside of one's area on Shabbat and Yom Tov. While applying this category is "admittedly more of a metaphoric concern" as no one is moving, the article argues that "part of Shabbat and Yom Tov is remaining local and making do with the things and people who were in your spatial civilization when you began Shabbat." (One reading this line hears echoes of a critique of the Conservative movement's *teshuvah* permitting driving to *shul* on Shabbat.)

While I don't think arguments of this type have been offered in halakhic sources in the past, and I don't see them gaining traction within Orthodoxy in the future, this view does reflect a similarly realist conception of technology. If on Shabbat one is meant to interact only with their local geographic community, that should remain true for interaction through technology as well. This realist view appears in a different context in the letter, as well. Specifically, Rabbis Tucker and Richman are open to the possibility of fulfilling various verbal and aural obligations at the *Seder* over a Zoom or phone call, although they assert it is better for one to express it oneself, if possible. This reflects that same realist approach, although applied for the sake of a leniency.

Conclusion

The halakhic debates over Zoom and Pesah, when dissected into their component parts, bring to light deep-seated debates on a variety of halakhic and meta-halakhic issues. Questions of the halakhic status of electricity as well as its phenomenology and the ramifications of offering differential decisions for various groups and doing so publicly or privately, all shape various parts of this debate. When one boils down the questions that divide between the various positions, rather than the standard "right wing versus left wing" explanation, one finds a distinct set of differentiating factors:

1. What are one's views about the permissibility of electricity on Yom Tov, both in theory and in practice? This largely breaks down along communal lines, between Moroccan rabbis (with some Ashkenazi precedents as well) and the mainstream view.
2. To what extent is one thinking locally or globally in deciding these halakhic issues? For example: Should one worry about implications for different communities? The "slippery slope" to future scenarios? For what Yom Tov and Shabbat might look like in the future? Is it better to keep a decision "under wraps" or to disseminate it?
3. Is one a realist or a formalist regarding virtual reality technology? Does hearing over Zoom constitute actual halakhic hearing? Does commenting online or appearing one's image over Zoom constitute halakhic writing? Can one fulfill various *mitzvot* like the *Megillah* and parts of the *Seder* virtually?

Amid the great challenges posed by the novel Coronavirus, we find fascinating new developments and halakhic disputes coming to the fore. The changes to daily life, caused by advances in technology and exacerbated by social distancing, present both new realities and new questions of Jewish law. The debate over a Zoom *Seder* lays bare several of these issues and their unresolved nature. Although there is widespread agreement on the practical rulings this year, the divergent reasoning employed by the various decisors makes it clear that tensions still remain and that we can expect these fundamental questions to continue rearing their heads for years to come.

The Corona Haggadah: Reflections and Discussions to Accompany the Haggadah for Pesah 5780

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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*" (*Hilkhot 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 Etz 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 (*Hilkhot 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 me 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'etre 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…

וַאֲפִילוּ כֻּלָּנוּ חֲכָמִים כֻּלָּנוּ נְבוֹנִים כֻּלָּנוּ זְקֵנִים כֻּלָּנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מִצְוָה
עָלֵינוּ 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 מְסַפְּרִים בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם כָּל־אוֹתוֹ הַלַּיְלָה, עַד שֶׁבָּאוּ תַלְמִידֵיהֶם וְאָמְרוּ
לָהֶם רַבּוֹתֵינוּ הִגִּיעַ זְמַן קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע שֶׁל שַׁחֲרִית.

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

לָכֶם – וְלֹא לוֹ. וּלְפִי שֶׁהוֹצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן הַכְּלָל

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

וְשֶׁאֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ לִשְׁאוֹל – אַתְּ פְּתַח לו

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

וַיָּגָר שָׁם. מְלַמֵּד שֶׁלֹּא יָרַד יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ לְהִשְׁתַּקֵּעַ בְּמִצְרַיִם אֶלָּא לָגוּר 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 tarries, 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

·וַיָּרֵעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִים וַיְעַנּוּנו

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-- וַיָּרֵעוּ אֹתָנוּ 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: וַיָּרֵעוּ אֹתָנוּ 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

וַיַּרְא אֶת־עָנְיֵנוּ. זוֹ פְּרִישׁוּת דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ

The commentaries ask: Was the separation of spouses and the abstention from having children, implied by the phrase פְּרִישׁוּת 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…

וְאֶת לַחֲצֵנוּ. זוֹ הַדְּחַק

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

וַיּוֹצִאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם. לֹא עַל־יְדֵי מַלְאָךְ, וְלֹא עַל־יְדֵי שָׂרָף, וְלֹא עַל־יְדֵי שָׁלִיחַ,
אֶלָּא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא בִּכְבוֹדוֹ וּבְעַצְמוֹ.

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?

אֵלּוּ עֶשֶׂר מַכּוֹת שֶׁהֵבִיא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ 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

אִלּוּ קָרַע לָנוּ אֶת־הַיָּם וְלֹא הֶעֱבִירָנוּ בְּתוֹכוֹ בֶּחָרָבָה, דַּיֵּנוּ.

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 שֶׁהָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אוֹכְלִים בִּזְמַן שֶׁבֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ הָיָה 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 Hallels?

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 Yetziat 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.

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