

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yosef ben Dovid a”h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Pesach and Hagomel

PARSHAS METZORA 5776

(The following is based primarily on a dissertation of R’ Yeruchem Olshin in his sefer Yerach L’moa’dim [Pesach, vol. II, § 17].)

What was so bad about the experience of the Jewish people in Mitzrayim (Egypt)? To many, this might not seem like a particularly difficult question. What was so bad about it? What *wasn’t* so bad about it? It entailed years and years of backbreaking, torturous labor, Jewish babies were routinely killed, and the whole episode is summarized by the Torah as the “*kur habarzel* – the iron furnace” (*Devarim 4:20*).

Yes, of course it was a period of unprecedented affliction and misery. But how would we identify what the most severe facet of the experience was – the “worst” part of it, if you will? While many of us would still say that it was the sheer physical torment and mental anguish, we shall see that the Maharsha provides a much different answer.

Four Reasons for Gratitude

The Mishnah in Pesachim (*10:1*) makes reference to that most central aspect of the Seder night, requiring that provisions be made for even the poorest among us to partake in this ritual:

וְאֶפְלוּ עָנִי שְׂבִי שְׂרָאֵל... לֹא יִפְחָתוּ לוֹ מֵאַרְבָּעָה כּוֹסוֹת שֶׁל יַיִן.

“(Regarding) even a pauper in Yisrael... they shall provide for him, at the bare minimum, the **four cups** of wine.”

This cherished and familiar practice, as mentioned, is the focal point of the Seder, around which are conducted all the particulars of the evening. The comments of the Maharsha alluded to above emerge from a discussion of the significance of this number – why, indeed, did Chazal enact that we specifically drink *four* cups of wine?

The standard answer – which has its roots in the Talmud Yerushalmi to Pesachim – is that the “four” cups correspond to the “*arba leshonos shel ge’ulah*” – the four phrases of redemption, which are employed in the beginning of *parshas Va’eira* informing Yisrael of the imminent Exodus. However, the Maharsha (*Berachos 54b*) adds that the matter actually goes much farther. He explains that the four redemption phrases, in turn, correspond to something else – namely, the four classes of individuals who are required to give thanksgiving and recite the “*Hagomel*” blessing upon their deliverance from their personal travails. These include one who has completed a sea journey, traveled through the desert, recovered from an illness, or was released from incarceration. Through the Mitzrayim experience, B’nei Yisrael were subjected to some manifestation of all of these travails. The profundity of the *arba leshonos shel ge’ulah* is that they reflect a deliverance from these types of difficulties; and just as one spared from them must offer his thanks, so do the Jewish people offer thanks through the ritual of the four cups.

So what is the key factor that makes these experiences (and that of Mitzrayim) so difficult? Is it the physical pain? The danger involved? Somewhat surprisingly, the Maharsha highlights something else entirely. The prime source of anguish in all of the above, he writes, is that these situations *prevent a person from attaining sheleimus, completeness, in serving Hashem*. One who is weakened by sickness, for example, is unable to devote proper time and energy to the study of Torah. In other words, the worst part of the enslavement in Mitzrayim – more than the whippings, the crushing labor, the daily peril – was that the situation did not lend itself to proper spiritual development. And the most important aspect of their deliverance was that now they were at liberty to attain *sheleimus* in *avodas Hashem*.

The Ultimate Prayer

This notion is perhaps most clearly expressed in a classic passage from the *Mesilas Yesharim* (ch. 4), which states: *לְשֵׁלְמֵי הַדַּעַת... אֵין רַע גְּדוֹל מִחֻסְרוֹן הַשְּׁלֵמוֹת וְהַרְחַקָה מִמֶּנּוּ... שֶׁהוּא לָהֶם צָרָה* – “For *sheleimus*-minded people... there is no greater evil than a lack of wholesomeness, or remaining distant from this goal... for to them, this is a great travail and extreme tragedy.” Apparently, for those attuned to growth and completeness, there actually is no greater source of anguish than a deficiency in *sheleimus*.

This idea might account for something quite curious that we find in the daily prayers. R’ Yisrael Gustman made the following observation: Imagine if you overheard someone praying, asking Heaven for a specific thing. We would assume it to be a matter of importance, but might not necessarily be so overwhelmed from what appears to be a routine request. Suppose the supplication was extremely heartfelt, preceded by numerous titles and expressions of beseeching. Such a prayer might elicit more notice on our part, as we realize that something of great significance is at stake.

When we apply this distinction to the daily prayers, we discover something quite interesting. We ask for numerous things over the course of the *davening*: health, sustenance, forgiveness – to name a few. The formulation of these requests, however, is fairly straightforward, with little preamble: “*Selach lanu*” – forgive us; “*Refa’einu*” – heal us; and so on.

But there is one prayer in which we offer an extensive introduction before arriving at the main request. Imagine if we were overhearing someone recite this prayer, stating all of the following: “*Avinu*” – our Father, “*Av Harachaman*” – Merciful Father, “*Ha’meracheim*” – Who bears mercy, “*Racheim aleinu*” – Have mercy on us! We would think that this individual was practically begging for his very life.

And yet, what is the essence of this particular prayer? This is none other than the blessing recited before *Keriyas Shema*, in which we ask Hashem for more clarity in Torah study! “*V’sein b’libeinu vinah...*” – place understanding in our hearts... “*lilmod u’lelameid*” – to learn and to teach... “*es kol divrei salmud Torasecha...*” – all the words of the study of Your Torah...

This, in fact, is the lesson the four cups impart to us concerning the redemption: The greatest deliverance is the opportunity to achieve *sheleimus* in Torah and *avodas Hashem*.