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a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

How Wicked is the *Rasha*?

PARSHAS TZAV 5777

Perhaps one of the most familiar aspects of the Pesach Haggadah is the passage of the *Arba Banim*, the Four Sons to whom we relate the notion of the Exodus. At the same time, it may also be one of the least understood. Who exactly are these individuals? What do they represent? What is the meaning of their questions – and the answers we supply?

These questions actually reflect just a few of the issues that demand attention in studying this matter. To properly elucidate this section in any form of completeness would obviously require a most substantial amount of space – well beyond the purview of this forum. For our purposes, then, we will have to suffice here with some basic coverage of one of (the most intriguing of) the Four Sons – the *rasha* (wicked one). He is addressed in the Haggadah as follows:

רָשָׁע מִהוּא אֹמֵר מַה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם, לָכֶם וְלֹא לוֹ, וְלִפִּי שְׁהוֹצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן הַכֹּלל כְּפֶר בְּעִיקָר. וְאַף אֲתָה הַקְהֵל אֶת שְׁנֵי וְאַמְרָ לֹ בְעֵבוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ד' לִי בְצִאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם, לִי וְלֹא לוֹ, אֱלֹהֵי הַיָּהוָה שֵׁם לֹא הָיָה נִגְאָל.

“What does the *rasha* say? ‘What is this service to you?’ (*Shemos 12:26*) – (the implication being) to *you* and not to him. Since he has removed himself from the collective, he has denied basic principles. (In your response), you should blunt his teeth, and say to him: ‘It is on account of this that Hashem has acted on my behalf when I left Egypt’ (*Ibid. 13:8*) – to *me* and not to him; for had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.”

The message of the Haggadah – it would seem at first glance – is to treat this son with much harshness. Apparently, he is full of scorn, deriding the others for their participation in the Pesach ritual: “What is this to *you*?” In response to his abject wickedness, we inform him that he is indeed completely unworthy and would not even be included with the rest of Yisrael in experiencing the Redemption. And, indeed, there are many commentators who do understand this passage in accordance with this standard view.

But there are others that take a much different tack. As we shall see, the Nesivos Shalom (*vol. II, p. 243, 253-4*) understands that the *rasha* of the Haggadah is not necessarily so inherently wicked. Furthermore, the content of the answer may not be as cutting as it initially seems.

The Question

Citing the teaching of the Rebbe of Kobrin, the Nesivos Shalom contends that the second son of the Haggadah is no standard, reckless rogue. His main issue – and error – is that he has consigned himself to discouragement. This is an individual who has grappled with his *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) and – even to his sorrow – has succumbed on a number of occasions. In his mind, he has failed too often and, as such, he thinks he is beyond redemption. If anything, he is a *rasha* of the type mentioned in the Mishnah in Avos (2:13), which exhorts us:

אַל תְּהִי רָשָׁע בְּפָנֶי עַצְמְךָ.

“Do not, in your own eyes, consider yourself a *rasha*.”

This, then, is the chief “offense” of this *rasha*: he assumes that he is hopelessly lost. He is not happy about his situation, or even scornful – just mistaken. When addressing his colleagues at the Seder, he does so not from disdain but from wistfulness. When he makes the point that

this *avodah* is just “for you” and not himself, what he really means is that they don’t suffer from the same challenges that he does. In effect, he is telling them: “Service of Hashem is well-suited to people like you, who must be blessed with special Divine assistance and inspiration. Unfortunately, it is not for failures like me who contend with an especially potent *yetzer hara*.”

The Answer

Although the response may appear harsh, the Nesivos Shalom asserts that here, too, there is no real intent for sharpness. Even when referring to him as a *kofer* – apparently, a veritable heretic – the reference is not necessarily to the most basic fundamentals of belief. This *rasha* actually does believe in Hashem and in the Torah. But there is one nuance that he is lacking, and it is this point that we aim to correct.

This son felt that, due to his sinfulness and lowly nature, he is irredeemable. What he overlooks, however, is the fact that – to a large extent – there is great precedent for his exact situation, for B’nei Yisrael in Egypt had likewise sunk to the lowest spiritual levels! Chazal tell us that they were steeped in idolatry like their Egyptian overlords, and had descended to the forty-ninth level (out of fifty levels) of defilement. And yet, they were redeemed and attained spiritual elevation to become Hashem’s chosen people. What was their secret? The *medrash* attributes it to the power of their belief: לֹא נִגְאָלוּ? שְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם אֶלָּא בְּשִׁכְרַת הָאֱמוּנָה – “Yisrael was redeemed from Egypt only in the merit of their faith” (*Mechilta, parshas Beshalach*).

But the *emunah* of this discussion likewise does not refer to the basic notions of Creation and Divine Providence. Rather, explains the Nesivos Shalom, the “faith” that catalyzed their salvation was the belief in the very idea that any Jew, no matter how seemingly distant, can still return and achieve rectification. Such is underscored by another *medrash*, which records a striking dialogue between the people and Moshe: “Moshe... said to Yisrael: ‘You shall be redeemed in this month (of Nisan).’ They said to him: ‘...How can we be redeemed, if the entire Egypt is sullied from our idolatry?’ He said to them: ‘Since (Hashem) desires your redemption, He will not look at your idolatry’” (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:22*). And, as we have seen, the people listened; they believed that they were, in fact, redeemable – despite their apparently lowly status. In the merit of this belief, they were delivered and transformed.

This, as well, is the meaning of our answer to this son. When we tell him that “if he were there, he would not have been redeemed,” the intent is not to disparage him. For it is not his sinful nature that would have precluded his deliverance, but rather, his lack of faith in his prospects for return and redemption. “You would not merit redemption,” we are saying to him, “because you don’t really think that you are deserving or able to be redeemed. But this is the crucial point of your mistake. For B’nei Yisrael had also reached rock-bottom, but they merited redemption *because they believed it was possible* – even for them.” The underlying message is actually one of hopefulness and encouragement; we are telling the *rasha* that if you, too, will believe in your capacity for elevation – you will attain it.

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