



Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya and the *Seder* in Bnei-Brak  
By David Silverberg

Towards the beginning of the *maggid* section of the *seder* we read the fifth Mishna of Masekhet Berakhot, which addresses the topic of *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* – the obligation to make mention of the Exodus each day during the year:

Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said: Behold I am like seventy years old, and yet I was not privileged to mention the Exodus at nighttime, until Ben Zoma expounded [on the following verse]: "...in order that you remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life" (Devarim 16:3) – "the days of your life" refers to the days, and "all the days of your life" refers to the nights. But the Sages said: "the days of your life" refers to this world, and "all the days of your life" serves to include the Messianic era.

The Mishna records a debate between Ben Zoma and the other Sages in identifying the purpose served by the otherwise superfluous word "all" in the phrase, "all the days of your life" (*kol yemei chayekha*). Ben Zoma understood that the Torah here alludes to an obligation to verbally recall the Exodus even at nighttime, whereas the other Rabbis felt that the extra word serves to extend this obligation even to the Messianic era. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, the author of this Mishna, begins by expressing his bewilderment over his having never heard Ben Zoma's inference over the course of his many years of halakhic study. As a result, he lost the opportunity to mention the Exodus during the evening prayers for many years.

The question arises as to the relevance of this passage to the Pesach *seder*. The context in which the *Haggada* inserts this Mishna is the introductory section of *maggid*, where the author of the *Haggada* impresses upon us the importance of discussing the Exodus at the *seder*. The immediately preceding passage tells of the five Sages who conducted a *seder* in Bnei-Brak and remained awake throughout the night, engrossed in telling the story of the Exodus. After recording this Mishna, the *Haggada* presents the prototypes of the four sons, to each of whom the father is enjoined to offer an appropriate response. What place does the Mishna of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya have in this context?

Numerous commentators to the *Haggada* have noted the answer that immediately emerges from Maimonides' text of the *Haggada*, which he presents as an appendix to the Hilkhos Chametz U-matza section of *Mishneh Torah*. Maimonides adds one word that does not appear in other editions – but this single word might shed an entirely new light on this Mishna: "*Amar LAHEM Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya*" – "Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said **to them**..." (It is told that Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk made a point of reciting this version of the text at his *seder*.) According to this text, this Mishna actually continues the narrative of the previous passage – the *seder* of the five sages in Bnei-Brak.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya is named as one of the five rabbis who attended that *seder*, and it thus appears that, according to Maimonides, it was during that *seder* that Rabbi Elazar made this comment. At one point during the dialogue, Rabbi Elazar turned to his colleagues and noted that for many years he had not mentioned the Exodus during the evening prayer service, because he was unaware of Ben Zoma's ruling. Thus, the Mishna is recorded in the *Haggada* as part of the account of the famous *seder* conducted by the five illustrious sages in Bnei-Brak.

This point itself, however, requires some explanation. The *Haggada* relates about the five rabbis, "...*hayu mesaperin bi-yetzi'at Mitzrayim kol oto ha-layla*" – "...they were telling about the Exodus from Egypt throughout that night." This account is undoubtedly intended as a precedent for, or proof of, the *Haggada's* previous assertion that "*kol ha-marbeh le-saper bi-yetzi'at Mitzrayim harei zeh meshubach*" – "Anyone who indulges in telling about the Exodus from Egypt is indeed praiseworthy." The *Haggada* encourages us to speak at length about the Exodus at the *seder*, to go beyond the minimal requirement to review the basic storyline of the Egyptian bondage and the slaves' miraculous departure. The *seder* in Bnei-Brak provides an inspiring example of the desired standard, as the five participants involved themselves in *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* (telling of the Exodus) with such diligence and focus that when morning broke, their students had to remind them to read the morning *shema*. The question thus arises, according to Maimonides' version of the text, why were these sages discussing the topic of *zekhirat yetzi'iat Mitzrayim* – the obligation to verbally recall the Exodus each day? How does the issue of mentioning the Exodus each night relate to the discussions about the Exodus itself, the topic which, according to the narrative, occupied the rabbis throughout the night? If they devoted the night to speaking about the Exodus, why did they also engage in halakhic deliberations concerning the mention of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* in the evening prayer service?

### **Halakhic Study as *Sippur Yetzi'at Mitzrayim***

One possible explanation relates to the theory espoused by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, among others, claiming that the obligation of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* includes the study of the *halakhot* pertaining to the *seder*. We are enjoined to not only discuss the wondrous events of the Exodus, but also to probe and analyze the halakhic requirements that the Torah established as part of our commemoration of those events. Indeed, the Tosefta (Pesachim 10:8) establishes at the end of its presentation of the laws regarding the *seder*, "A person is obligated to involve himself in the laws of Pesach the entire night." It then proceeds to tell of Rabban Gamliel and the "elders" who participated in a *seder* in Lod and "were involved in the laws of Pesach the entire night, until the rooster crowed."

Another source commonly marshaled in support of this theory is the response the *Haggada* encourages a father to give to the wise son, who displays curiosity and interest in the halakhic requirements of Pesach: "You shall thus tell him the laws of Pesach: 'One may not eat a dessert after the paschal offering.'" The Vilna Gaon understood this to mean that one should teach his son the Pesach laws from beginning to end, until the final Mishna of Masekhet Pesachim, which instructs, "One may not eat a dessert after the paschal offering." The *Haggada's* discussion of the "four sons" is presented as part of its

introduction to the actual text of *maggid*, with the intent of advising parents to discuss the Exodus with each child in accordance with his personal disposition and capabilities. As Maimonides instructs in *Hilkhos Chametz U-matza* (7:2), "The father teaches according to the son's intellect..." Thus, if in this context the *Haggada* encourages parents to elaborate on the halakhic minutiae of Pesach in response to the wise son's inquiry, then we should seemingly conclude that this study is included under the *mitzva* to tell of the Exodus.

The notion of halakhic study as a fulfillment of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* may perhaps find some support in the Torah itself, in the verse with which the Torah introduces the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus. As Maimonides comments in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*asei* 157), the source of this obligation appears towards the end of Parashat Bo (Shemot 13:8): "You shall tell your son on that day, as follows: It is on account of this that God acted on my behalf when I left Egypt." While the meaning of this verse is not entirely clear, Rashi explains it to mean, "...in order that I fulfill His commands, such as this paschal offering, *matza* and bitter herbs." According to this interpretation, the father tells his son that God performed the miracles of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* "on account of" – or for the purpose of – the *mitzvot* that we have observed ever since. The *Haggada* also appears to have followed this explanation, as it infers the words "*ba'avur zeh*" ("on account of this") that *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* takes place only at the time when one sits down to partake of the *matza* and *marror* ("*lo amarti ela be'sha'a she-yesh matza u-marror munachim lefanekha*"). Thus, the *Haggada*, too, understands the father's comments to mean that God "acted" at the time of the Exodus for the sake of *Am Yisrael's* future acceptance and fulfillment of His commands.

It emerges that when the Torah introduces the obligation of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, it does by urging parents to explain their children the ultimate purpose and objective of this event, namely, the fulfillment of *mitzvot*. This might shed some light on the aforementioned theory concerning the role of halakhic study within the rubric of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*. By exploring the laws of Pesach, we reinforce the notion that the importance of the Exodus is not limited to its historical significance, but rather extends to daily life in the form of *mitzva* observance. The Exodus transformed *Am Yisrael* from the servants of Pharaoh to the servants of the Almighty, and thus the celebration of this event includes studying and recommitting ourselves to the laws God conveyed to us at the time of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim*.

### ***Sippur and Zekhira***

Still, one might wonder whether the rabbis' discussion of the daily obligation of *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* indeed qualifies as study of the laws of Pesach. After all, the daily requirement of *zekhira* – to briefly recall the Exodus each day – applies throughout the year, and differs in both form and substance from the special *mitzva* of *sippur* – to discuss the Exodus on the night of Pesach. Even once we assume that the *sippur* obligation, as the Tosefta establishes, includes the study of the laws of Pesach, why would the laws of *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* fall under this category?

The answer to this question might relate to an issue that many scholars have discussed concerning the classification of the *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* obligation. Maimonides explicitly codifies the requirement to mention the Exodus each day and

night (Hilkhot Keri'at Shema 1:3), yet in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* he does not list this obligation as one of the Biblical commands. Numerous scholars have addressed this anomaly and suggested numerous theories. (For a more comprehensive discussion of this subject, see <http://www.maimonidesheritage.org/ContentFolder4/Reei.pdf>.) One approach, which appears in the *Keren Ora* commentary to the Talmud, contends that Maimonides classified the daily requirement of *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* under the same category as the annual obligation of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*. In other words, he understood that the Torah establishes a general obligation to recall the Exodus, and ensure that these events never leave our individual or collective memories. In practice, this obligation manifests itself in two ways: in the brief, daily mention of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, and in the more elaborate discussion at the *seder*. These are not two separate obligations, but rather two requirements that flow from the single *mitzva* of remembering the Exodus. Maimonides therefore did not assign a separate entry in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* for the daily obligation of *zekhira*, because it belongs together with the annual obligation of *sippur*.

If we acknowledge a close association between the two obligations of *zekhira* and *sippur*, we can more easily understand why the halakhic details of *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* might have arisen during the discussions at the *seder* in Bnei-Brak. Since the *sippur* obligation on Pesach night includes the study of the *halakhot* relevant to this night, it perhaps extends as well to the *halakhot* of *zekhira*. As we have seen, while in practice *zekhira* is performed each day of the year, fundamentally, it belongs to the same halakhic rubric as *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, and, as such, it bears relevance on the night of Pesach.

### **A Closer Look at *Sippur Yetzi'at Mitzrayim***

In light of other comments of Maimonides, however, we might question the assumption that he included halakhic study under the *mitzva* of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*. He makes no clear indication to this effect in his discussions of this *mitzva* in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* or *Mishneh Torah*, focusing instead on only the actual story of the Egyptian bondage and subsequent redemption:

#### *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*:

The 157<sup>th</sup> commandment is that which He commanded us to tell of the Exodus on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan... And whoever adds to this recitation, and elaborates in exalting that which God did for us, and that which the Egyptians did to us – the injustice and crimes – and how God took revenge on our behalf, and thanks Him, may He be exalted, for all the goodness that He did for us – this is preferable.

#### *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhot Chametz U-matza 7:1-2):

There is an affirmative command of the Torah to tell of the miracles and wonders that were performed for our forefathers in Egypt, on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan... And whoever elaborates on the events that happened and took place – he is praiseworthy... The father teaches according to the son's intellect. How? If he was young or ignorant, he says to him, "My son, we were all slaves, like so-and-so the maidservant or like so-and-so the slave, in Egypt, and on this night the Almighty redeemed us and took us to freedom." And if the son was accomplished

and wise, he teaches him of what happened to us in Egypt and the miracles that were performed for us by our teacher Moshe...

Maimonides consistently defines the obligation of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* in terms of the actual events of the Exodus, and in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* he adds as well the element of praise and thanksgiving. (In the subsequent passage in Hilkhot Chametz U-matza, Maimonides also mentions that it is laudable to elaborate on the interpretation of the verses in Devarim 26:5-8 which briefly recount the bondage and redemption.)

Particularly striking is Maimonides' instruction to the father of a gifted child. While these comments are seemingly drawn from the "four sons" section of the *Haggada*, Maimonides clearly deviates from the *Haggada's* directive to teach the son the laws of Pesach. Instead, Maimonides instructs the father to elaborate on "what happened to us in Egypt and the miracles that were performed for us by our teacher Moshe."

Accordingly, Rabbi Simcha Mordechai Ziskind Broyde (of the Chevron Yeshiva), in his *Sam Derekh* commentary to the *Haggada* (pp. 63-4), contends that Maimonides did not extend the *sippur* obligation to include halakhic study. In his view, the comments cited above demonstrate the Maimonides defined this obligation purely in terms of relating the story of the Exodus, as the straightforward understanding of the phrase "*sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*" would indeed suggest. Despite the fact that the Tosefta, as cited above, explicitly establishes an obligation to spend the night engrossed in the study of the laws of Pesach, Rav Broyde asserts that divergent traditions exist in this regard. Recall that the Tosefta documented an account of a *seder* held by Rabban Gamliel, in which the laws of Pesach were studied and discussed throughout the night. This description contrasts sharply with the account recorded in the *Haggada* of the *seder* in Bnei-Brak, during which the rabbis "were telling about the Exodus from Egypt throughout that night." It is thus likely that these two *sedarim* reflect two different traditions as to whether the obligation of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* includes studying the laws of Pesach. The *Haggada's* incorporation of the account of the *seder* in Bnei-Brak demonstrates that it represents the accepted view, namely, that the obligation relates specifically to telling about the Exodus, and not the study of the Pesach laws.

Of course, once we exclude the study of *hilkhot Pesach* (the Pesach laws) from the "curriculum" of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, we must address the *Haggada's* admonition to respond to the wise son by teaching him the laws of Pesach. Why does the *Haggada* urge parents to teach their gifted children the intricate *halakhot* of Pesach when the Torah requires elaborating on the events surrounding the Exodus?

The answer, perhaps, relates to a later passage in the *Haggada*, where we read Rabban Gamliel's ruling requiring that we explain at the *seder* the reasons underlying the *mitzvot* of the paschal offering, *matza* and *marror*. The *mitzva* of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* obligates us to not only tell about the Exodus, but also to appreciate the symbolic significance of the *seder* rituals as vehicles through which we perpetuate the memory of these events. Even if the actual study of *hilkhot Pesach* does not fall under the obligation of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, this *mitzva* clearly does include explicating the themes underlying the *mitzvot* performed on Pesach. In response to the inquiries of the clever son, the parents are instructed to explain the *seder* rituals down to the very last detail, showing how they all come together to form an elaborate, integrated celebration to mark the event of the Exodus.

We might add that the specific reference to "*ein maftirin achar ha-pesach afikoman*" – the prohibition against eating after partaking of the paschal offering – might bear particular significance in this context. As numerous commentaries explain, this prohibition serves to ensure that the flavor of the sacrificial meat remains in one's mouth throughout the night, thereby emphasizing the centrality of the event commemorated through this offering. The *Haggada* here might be indicating that the in-depth study of the Exodus on this night serves a similar purpose – to ensure that the "flavor" of this event remains with us. Just as *Halakha* requires retaining the taste of the sacrifice throughout the night of Pesach, similarly, the *Haggada* urges parents to fill their intelligent, inquisitive children with knowledge so that the "taste" of this event leaves an indelible impression upon their minds.

According to this reading, the response to the wise son does not indicate any requirement to study the laws of Pesach as part of the fulfillment of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*.

In any event, we are left with the question of why, according to Maimonides' text of the *Haggada*, the rabbis in Bnei-Brak included the laws of *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* in their discussions at the *seder*. If the obligation of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* relates solely to the events of the Exodus, what place is there for an intricate halakhic exchange within this framework?

### **The *Beit Ha-levi***

An ingenuous explanation for the relevance of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya's comments to the *seder* in Bnei-Brak appears in the *Beit Ha-levi* Torah commentary (Parashat Bo), written by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik of Brisk (1820-1892). The *Beit Ha-levi* suggested that Rabbi Elazar's remarks relate to his debate with Rabbi Akiva concerning the time-frame within which one must partake of the paschal offering on Pesach eve. As the Talmud records in Masekhet Berakhot (9a), Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya held that one may eat the sacrificial meat only until midnight, whereas Rabbi Akiva allows partaking of the meat throughout the night, until daybreak. The Gemara explains that this debate hinges on whether we view midnight or morning as the critical moment of *Benei Yisrael's* transition to freedom. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya pointed to midnight – the moment when God struck the Egyptian firstborns, in response to which Pharaoh proclaimed the Hebrew slaves free – as the moment the *korban pesach* is intended to commemorate. Rabbi Akiva, by contrast, afforded primary significance to the morning, when *Benei Yisrael* frantically left Egypt.

The *Beit Ha-levi* claimed that Rabbi Elazar's view regarding the consumption of the paschal offering likely affected his approach towards the daily obligation of *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim*. As the critical moment of the Exodus occurred at midnight, and not during the morning, it should be obvious that the Torah's command to recall the Exodus each day ("all the days of your life") includes both daytime and nighttime. If the Torah required making mention of the Exodus by day, then all the more so, Rabbi Elazar would argue, it obligates one to do so by night, when this event took place.

Accordingly, Rabbi Elazar acknowledged an obligation to mention the Exodus both by day and by night irrespective of how one interprets the word *kol*, as discussed above. The central event of the Exodus story occurred at nighttime, and it is therefore, in

Rabbi Elazar's view, readily obvious that the remembrance of this story should take place at nighttime.

It appears that at the *seder* in Bnei-Brak, the sages decided in favor of Rabbi Akiva's view, allowing one to partake of the *korban pesach* throughout the night. As we mentioned earlier, the *Haggada* explicitly restricts the obligation of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* to the time when the other *mitzvot* of the *seder* – the paschal offering, *matza* and *marror* – apply. We might therefore deduce that if the sages remained awake throughout the night to engage in *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, they accepted the position which allows partaking of the paschal offering until morning.

The *Beit Ha-levi* thus suggests that Rabbi Elazar's remarks recorded in the Mishna was his response to the sages' embracing Rabbi Akiva's position, that *Benei Yisrael's* morning departure marked the essential moment of the Exodus. He exclaimed, "Behold I am like seventy years old, and yet I was not privileged that the Exodus should be mentioned at nighttime, until Ben Zoma expounded..." Meaning, despite his prominent stature among the rabbis of his time, they rejected his perspective on the Exodus as having essentially occurred at nighttime. Hence, it was only due to Ben Zoma's extrapolation from the term *kol* that other rabbis agreed to Rabbi Elazar's ruling that one must make mention of the Exodus even during the night. Since they adopted Rabbi Akiva's position, that the critical moment of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* occurred in the morning, it was not evident that the daily obligation of *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim* applies at nighttime. Rabbi Elazar thus noted that despite his prominent stature, it was only Ben Zoma's inference that persuaded his colleagues to acknowledge an obligation to mention the Exodus even at night.

### **Appreciating the Importance of *Yetzi'at Mitzrayim***

In conclusion, we might suggest a much simpler explanation for why Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya made these comments during the *seder* in Bnei-Brak. After engaging in intensive study of the subject of the Exodus throughout the night, Rabbi Elazar acquired a newfound appreciation for the significance of this event. He recognized – perhaps more powerfully than he had previously – just how central *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* is to Jewish belief and the importance of recalling it on a regular basis throughout one's life. He thus bemoaned the fact that he was denied the privilege of mentioning the Exodus during the nighttime prayer service until he became aware of Ben Zoma's ruling. The sages in Bnei-Brak did not spend the night debating the parameters of the *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, but rather devoted the time to, as Maimonides writes, discussing the great wonders and miracles of the Exodus. This experience may have led Rabbi Elazar to regret having missed for many years the nighttime *zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, losing the opportunity to entrench this event within the innermost recesses of his memory to the very best of his ability.

The inclusion of Rabbi Elazar's remarks in the *Haggada* is thus perhaps intended to underscore the meaningfulness of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, and demonstrate how this experience must lead a person to a greater understanding and appreciation of the significance of the Exodus, as a fundamental pillar and cornerstone of Jewish practice and belief.