

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

The Four Cups on Seder Night

וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעֲבֹדָתָם וְנָאֲלַתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּרֹעַ נְטוּיָה
וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים. וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם

I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt, I shall save you from their servitude, I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgements. I shall take you to Me as a people (7:6-7)

It is well known that the four expressions of redemption enumerated in these pesukim express themselves in every Jewish home on an annual basis, for they form the background to the mitzvah of the four cups of wine on Seder night.¹ What is the connection between these four terms and the four cups?

It is also significant to note that the four cups of Seder night come at very specific points in the Seder, namely: at Kiddush, at the end of Maggid, at Birkas Hamazon and at Hallel. It is most interesting to consider how the four terms mentioned in our pesukim correspond to these four stages of the Seder.

FOUR REDEMPTIONS

In order to understand the approach of the Meshech Chochmah to this issue, it is important first to realize that referring to these terms as “the four expressions of redemption” may itself be inaccurate. This implies that these are four different ways of referring to the same process, whereas in truth, they represent *four distinct aspects* of the redemption from Egypt:

1. “וְהוֹצֵאתִי – *I will take you out*”: This refers to removing the Jewish People from the impure influences of Egypt which surrounded and influenced them. Commenting on the words later in the Torah² “לָקַחְתָּ לָּךְ גּוֹי מִקֶּרֶב גּוֹי – *to take for Himself one nation from within another,*” the Midrash³ explains that this was analogous to removing a fetus from the womb. When the fetus is in the womb it partakes of the properties of its surroundings. So, too, the Jewish people adopted

1 *Yerushalmi Pesachim 10:1.*

2 *Devarim 4:34.*

3 *Yalkut Shimoni sec. 828.*

negative practices from their Egyptian neighbors, including idol-worship and corrupt attitudes. This first term refers to their removal from that environment and the attitudes it contained.

2. “והצילתי – *I will save you*”: This refers to saving the Jewish people from the threat to their very survival, as expressed in its most extreme form by Pharaoh’s decree to throw the Jewish newborn males into the Nile.
3. “וגאלתי – *I will redeem you*”: This refers to redeeming them from their state of slavery to one of freedom.
4. “ולקחתי – *I will take you to Me as a nation*”: This refers to them achieving the status of a nation with their own unique national order and with Hashem as their King.

MERITING REDEMPTION

Before proceeding to discuss how these four aspects of redemption translate into the four cups on Seder night, the Meshech Chochmah first establishes that these four elements were the product of *a prior set of four*! The Mechilta⁴ discusses the background to the redemption from Egypt and explains that it was due to four areas in which the Jewish people distinguished themselves:

- They were careful and circumspect in matters of physical immorality.
- They did not speak *lashon hara* one about the other.
- They did not change the names they gave their children from Hebrew ones to Egyptian ones.
- They did not change the language they spoke among themselves from Hebrew to Egyptian.

Each of these four meritorious qualities reflected an aspect of the Jewish People which allowed them to merit a corresponding aspect of redemption – and which subsequently expresses itself in the form a specific cup at the Seder.

THE FIRST CUP – SANCTITY

The first cup is that of Kiddush. The bracha of Kiddush concludes with the words “מקדש ישראל והזמנים – (You) sanctify Yisrael and the seasons.” The full meaning of these words, as expressed by the Gemara,⁵ is that Hashem sanctifies Yisrael and through that sanctity, *Yisrael sanctify the seasons!* The *kedushah* of Yom tov is the product of the *kedushah* of Yisrael.

From where did we merit this *kedushah*? Chazal state⁶ that the hallmark of *kedushah* is being circumspect in matters of physical immorality. As we have seen, this was one of the areas in which Bnei Yisrael distinguished themselves. This preservation of *kedushah* was what allowed for the first aspect of redemption – “והוצאתי – *I will take you out,*” which, as we have noted, refers to removing Yisrael from the negative influences of their Egyptian surroundings. Had Yisrael been lax in this area and consorted with the Egyptians, they would have become indistinguishable from them and it would have been impossible to remove one from the other! Hence, the element of “והוצאתי,” which was the product of their *kedushah*, finds expression in the cup which expresses that *kedushah*.

4 Parshas Bo sec. 5.

5 Berachos 49a.

6 See Rashi to Vayikra 20:2 s.v. *kedoshim*.

THE SECOND CUP - HISTORY

The second cup accompanies the *Maggid* section of the Seder, which concludes with the first two paragraphs of *Hallel*. These paragraphs focus on the beginnings of the Jewish people and thus represent a nation which recognizes and celebrates its past. One of the characteristics of slavery is that the slave has no sense of worth, to the extent that he is content to live under someone else's authority and might not even wish to be set free even if he were offered the chance!

By maintaining their Hebrew names in Egypt, the Jewish People were recognizing that they had a history and that they were of distinguished lineage. By continuing to call their children after their forbears they were identifying with their illustrious ancestors and all that they represented. Through this, they succeeded in preserving a sense of nobility and were able to maintain the vision that slavery as a state was fundamentally incompatible with their essential identity. As we have seen, the term “וגאלתי – *I will redeem you*,” refers to delivering the Jewish People from a state of slavery to one of freedom. This was made possible through them connecting with their past and hence finds expression at the point in the Seder when we, too, connect with and celebrate our past through the opening section of *Hallel*.

THE THIRD CUP – HARMONY

The third cup accompanies *Birkas Hamazon* after the meal. *Birkas Hamazon* expresses our appreciation of Hashem providing for our physical sustenance. How does this relate to the redemption from Egypt?

The term “והצלתני – *I will save you*” refers to Hashem saving the Jewish People from Pharaoh who sought their demise. Hashem is fully prepared to save His People from those who are pursuing them, but only if they are not pursuing *each other*! This is the significance of the fact that they did not speak *lashon hara* about one another. It refers to them not slandering others to the Egyptian authorities for personal gain, rather, looking out for each other's wellbeing.

Where does this sense of unity and lack of contention come from? Strife among people begins when they perceive one another as a threat, compelling them to neutralize this threat by repressing the other person. When people realize that their needs are being taken care of from Above, they will find it easier to find contentment and can be more accepting of – and caring towards – each other. This realization and appreciation constitutes the central message of *Birkas Hamazon*, where we recognize Hashem as the source of our Sustenance. This recognition, which allowed us to avoid pursuing each other, led to Hashem delivering us from our enemies who pursued us, and hence the cup representing “והצלתני” comes at *Birkas Hamazon*.

THE FOURTH CUP – DESTINY

The final cup comes after the completion of *Hallel* and corresponds to the term “ולקחתי – *I will take you (to Me as a people)*.” The Midrash informed us that the Jewish People took care to preserve their language. In this, they followed the example of Yosef who, with all the prominence that he attained in Egypt, continued to speak *Lashon Hakodesh*.⁷ Maintaining their language reflects the fact that the Jewish People preserved a sense of

7 *Bereishis Rabbah* sec. 93, quoted in *Rashi to Bereishis 45:12 s.v. v'einei*.

national identity and aspirations towards a national destiny. Indeed, it was, appropriately, Yosef who transmitted this message to them with his final words, “וְאֱלֹקִים פָּקֵד יִפְקֹד – *God will indeed take account of you and bring you up out of this land to the land that He swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov.*”⁸ In the merit of maintaining this awareness, Hashem took them to be His People and bestowed upon them the unique destiny and mission of Am Yisrael. The fourth cup thus accompanies the second half of *Hallel* which expresses our hopes for the full realization of our mission as Hashem’s People in the world.

Each of the four cups thus ultimately reflects an aspect of distinctness that was maintained by the Jewish people and in whose merit they were redeemed. Indeed, the Meshech Chochmah adds, it is for this reason the four elements of redemption are marked by four cups of wine. Wine symbolizes the way the Jewish People remain distinct among the nations, taking care whose wine they drink and remaining conscious of the type of relationship they do and do not wish to have with their gentile neighbors.

The Meshech Chochmah concludes this discussion by bringing the above ideas from the past to the present – and the future. If, by maintaining our sense of distinction we merited redemption from our original exile in Egypt, then by continuing to do so in our present exile we likewise allow for the final redemption, may it come soon!

This, then, is the Meshech Chochmah’s explanation of the four cups. Not only is it breathtaking in its scope, making “seder” as it does between the different groups of four, it is also very beautiful in that it demonstrates how, in spite of their various imperfections, it was ultimately the merits of the Jewish People that stood behind their redemption from Egypt.