



PASSOVER DAY 2

Pesach:

This Is A Story About Stories

April 21, 2019

SECURE MATZO VS. INSECURE MATZO

ABSTRACT

Let me tell you a story... about stories.

Storytelling is a Mitzvah. “And you shall tell your child” is a Torah commandment obligating us to tell the our story. In addition to “educating” our children in the Jewish way, we also have to “tell” our children the story of being a Jew.

This indeed is the centerpiece of the Seder. The Haggadah, the “telling,” is anchored around Maggid, the relating of the story, our story.

However, unlike the Mitzvah of Torah study and Jewish education, the Mitzvah of telling the story has no blessing. Every morning we recite the Birchat Hatorah, *Baruch Ata...asher kidishanu b'mitzvotot v'tzivanu al divrei Torah, the blessing on the study of Torah.*

And yet, unlike every other Mitzvah of the Seder night, we do not make a *bracha*, a blessing, on the storytelling.

We make a bracha when we light candles, make kiddush, eat the vegetable dipped in salt water, washing our hands for Hamotzi, on the Matzo, on the Maror, on the food of the meal, on bentching, on Hallel... on everything but Maggid.

Why don't we bless the Mitzvah of telling the story?

We can answer this question with, you guessed it, a story.

1. Joke: Bless You!

Gut Yom Tov! Chag Sameach! How does it feel to be free, to be liberated, to be leaving your constraints (mitzrayim) and journeying toward Sinai and the Promised Land?

Freedom, chairut, is a true blessing, a true bracha. Which reminds me of an episode that took place at the Goldberg Yom Tov table a few years ago.

The Goldberg family was celebrating the second Seder at their grandparents house – Bubbie and Zeidy Gold-

berg. Seated around the table little Moishie Goldberg dug into the food immediately.

“Moishe!” his mother exclaimed. “You have to wait until we make the bracha, the blessing.”

“No I don’t,” little Moishelch replied.

“Of course you do,” his mother insisted, “we always say a bracha before eating at our house.”

“That’s at our house,” Moishe explained, “but this is Bubbie’s house and she knows how to cook.”

2. Everything Is A Blessing

Truth be told, we Jews don’t recite a blessing to protect us from bad cooking. We recites blessings to express gratitude and make us aware and mindful of the Mitzvot we perform. The Hebrew word *bracha*, is rooted in the same word as “bowing” or “drawing,” for a blessing draws the light of higher divine consciousness into our physical actions. Thus did the sages institute the blessings for Mitzvot.

As we can see from the lead up and the Seder night itself; virtually every Mitzvah is accompanied by a blessing.

We recite *al biur chametz* on burning the chametz... *lehadlik ner shel yom tov* on candle lighting... *bagafen* on kiddush... *borei m’orei ha’eish* on the fire... *hamavdil* to separate Shabbat and Yom Tov... *shebechianu* on the festival... *ha’adama* on the vegetable dipped in salt water... *goal yisroel* on redemption... *al netilat yadyaim* on hand washing... *hamotzi* and *motzi matzo* on the matzo... *achilat maror* on the bitter herb... *birchat hamazon* for grace after meals...

And yet, one Mitzvha, perhaps the most central Mitzvah of the Seder, the Mitzvah after which the entire Haggadah is named after, is conspicuously missing a blessing.

3. A Telling Mitzvah

The Torah states

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, “Because of this, the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt.”¹

¹ Exodus 13:8.

Sefer Hachinuch, the great codifier of commandments, lists this a Positive Mitzvah #21. The Rambam² clearly states

It is a positive commandment of the Torah to relate the miracles and wonders wrought for our ancestors in Egypt on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan... The Torah teaches: “And you shall tell your son on that day, saying: ‘It is because of this... when matzah and maror are placed before you.’”

It applies even if one does not have a son. Even great Sages are obligated to tell about the Exodus from Egypt. Whoever elaborates concerning the events which occurred and took place is worthy of praise.

Telling the story is a profound Mitzvah, around which the entire Seder is structured. As the Rambam continues:

It is a mitzvah to inform one’s sons even though they do not ask, as it states: “You shall tell your son.”

A father should teach his son according to the son’s knowledge: How is this applied? If the son is young or foolish, he should tell him: “My son, in Egypt, we were all slaves like this maidservant or this slave. On this night, the Holy One, Blessed be He, redeemed us and took us out to freedom.”

If the son is older and wise, he should inform him what happened to us in Egypt and the miracles wrought for us by Moses, our teacher; everything according to the son’s knowledge.³

The Rambam even writes how the story should be told in an exciting and resonant manner:

He should make changes on this night so that the children will see and will [be motivated to] ask: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” until he replies to them: “This and this occurred; this and this took place.”

What changes should be made? He should give them roasted seeds and nuts; the table should be taken away before they eat; matzot should be snatched from each other and the like.

When a person does not have a son, his wife should ask him. If he does not have a wife, [he and a colleague] should ask each other: “Why is this night different?” This applies even if they are all wise. A person who is alone should ask himself: “Why is this night different?”⁴

It would seem that such a monumental and essential Mitzvah should warrant a blessing. Torah Education, the other essential ingredient to raising healthy children and the bright present and future of our people, has a blessing that we recite every morning, without which cannot begin studying Torah.

2 Mishne Torah, Chametz U’Matzah 7:1.

3 Ibid 2.

4 Ibid 3.

And yet Maggid begins with *hei lachma anya* and the Ma Nishtana. Why no bracha?

4. A Lesson From Apple (Not The Charoset Ingredient)

Apple is an essential ingredient to *charoset*, the Seder plate staple. Perhaps the answer to why we do not make a blessing on the Mitzvah of Maggid, on storytelling, may be found in the apple.

Not the apple fruit, but Apple Inc., one of the world's most valuable companies and the first to cross the trillion dollar (twelve zeroes!) valuation.

To use Apple to understand the inherent life and awesome power of a story, I first want to read some words to you and I want to see if you can guess the source of these words:

Life often makes no sense. There's something about stories that gives a sense of order and purpose to the world and allows us to live other lives than the life we are living.

There's truth pumping through your veins and into the story that you're telling.

There is no greater moment than that when you feel that you are really cruising and you're one organism telling one story and you're all telling it with each other's contributions. Nobody's telling it alone.

Nothing works if the themes don't connect with the audience.

Sharing stories with one another makes us feel less alone.

Everyone deserves to have their story be told.

That's what makes us special.

It's the tapestry of who we are as human beings.

To become involved in someone else's life, that's the idea of what a story should be.

Where do you think these words come from? Who said them? Was it Moses? The Talmud? The Rambam? The Baal Shem Tov?

Just a few weeks ago, on March 25, Apple hosted its annual Apple Event. This year, its big announcement Apple TV+, in its own words: "a new streaming service with original stories from the most creative minds in TV and film."

The presentation was highlighted by a 5-minute short film entitled "The Storytellers,"⁵ telling and showing the storytelling ethos through the prism of some of Hollywood's greatest storytellers. It opens with Steven

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=37&v=RrdbT4hpwBk

Spielberg.

The above words are transcribed from that short film.

Life often makes no sense. There's something about stories that gives a sense of order and purpose to the world and allows us to live other lives than the life we are living.

This life too often really doesn't make sense. That's why we Jews tell the story. The Seder literally means "order," a story "gives a sense of order and purpose to the world and allows us to live other lives than the life we are living."

There's truth pumping through your veins and into the story that you're telling.

Maggid is our truth, it's our story pumping through our veins for 3331 years.

There is no greater moment than that when you feel that you are really cruising and you're one organism telling one story and you're all telling it with each other's contributions. Nobody's telling it alone.

All are welcome and invited to the Seder. As we declare at the opening of the Seder: Whoever is hungry, let him come and eat; whoever is in need, let him come and conduct the Seder of Passover.

The four children, and the fifth who doesn't even know there's a Seder, tell the story as one organism, nobody alone, everyone come and eat of the story, our story.

Nothing works if the themes don't connect with the audience.

As the Rambam prescribes, we must motivate our children, our audience, to connect with the story. We must create mystery provoking them to ask.

Sharing stories with one another makes us feel less alone.

Everyone deserves to have their story be told.

That's what makes us special.

It's the tapestry of who we are as human beings.

To become involved in someone else's life, that's the idea of what a story should be.

Slavery is fragmentation. Freedom is unity, you are part of my story, and I am part of yours.

The film concludes:

A story should make you forget your surroundings, should make you forget your agenda, your day, and hopefully makes you forget yourself.

I would replace one word. I would replace the word “forget” with the word “remember”:

A story should make you **remember** your surroundings, should make you **remember** your agenda, your day, and hopefully makes you **remember** yourself.

5. A Story *Is* A Blessing

Our sages discuss the technical reasons for why we make no blessing on Maggid⁶. It may be because we bless the telling of the Exodus in the Kiddush (RIF), or because a Mitzvah that has no time restraint (like honoring parents and Tzedakah) also has no blessing (Rashba), or because, unlike the Megillah, it is an unscripted praise and you can and should use your own words, or because storytelling is a Mitzvah that’s dependant on another as you cannot tell it to yourself, or because at the outset of Maggid we are like converts who have not yet immersed in the Mikvah, so thus must bless only after the story.

The Chasam Sofer quotes from the Ramban and the Shalah various points that I believe answer our question by defining the essence of a story.

The essence of a story has three elements: 1) It *is* a blessing; 2) it is perpetual, 3) it is inherently resonant and engaging.

First off: there is a principle that we do not make a blessing on a blessing. Maggid concludes with the blessing of Redemption, *go’al yisroel*. The story itself is the greatest blessing, the blessing of Redemption, and one need not make a blessing on a blessing.

Secondly: as the Rambam writes, *Whoever elaborates concerning the events which occurred and took place is worthy of praise*. And as we see from the stories in the Haggadah itself, the Rabbis told the story perpetually, all night, and only stopped because they had to recite the morning Shema. Like accepting the yoke of heaven and faith in G-d, storytelling is perpetual, it never ends. And it is perpetual because we are actually *living* the story. That’s why it’s unscripted; we are scripting it. And any Mitzvah that is perpetually happening does not require a blessing.

Thirdly: Brachot were instituted by the Sages to generate mindfulness, awareness and consciousness when performing the Mitzvah. The entire essence, the whole heart and soul of a story, of a telling, is consciousness, awareness, and resonance

As even manmade, fictional storytellers will tell you:

Life often makes no sense. There’s something about stories that gives a sense of order and purpose to the world and allows us to live other lives than the life we are living.

⁶ Abudraham Seder Haggadah. The Chasam Sofer, in his commentary to the Haggadah, brings many explanations, including from the RIF, Rashba, and ROSH.

A blessing reminds us of the story within every Mitzvah. When we tell the story, we don't need the blessing to remind us.

There's truth pumping through your veins and into the story that you're telling

A blessing reminds us of the truth within every Mitzvah. When we tell the story, we don't need the blessing to remind us.

Nothing works if the themes don't connect with the audience.

A blessing reminds us, the audience, to connect with the Mitzvah. And a story does the same exact thing.

6. Conclusion: Tell Your Story Only Like You Can

After *hei lachma anya*, Maggid officially begins with the Mah Nishtana, the freedom to ask questions, the liberty to be curious, the right and ability to inquire.

Is there no greater blessing than the freedom to ask who, why, what, where, when, how?

Indeed, some might say that Maggid does begin with a blessing, with a bracha, the greatest blessing of all

The blessing to be free to ask.

And when we begin our story with the blessing of questions, we ultimately conclude with the blessing of Redemption.

And by conclude I mean, "To be continued..." as this story never ends.

And that is the true nature of a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Kosher Vesameach — Good Shabbos and a Happy and Kosher Passover!

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