



PASSOVER DAY 8

Pesach:

Do You Ever Finish Last? Why Last Is Not The Least

April 27, 2019

DO YOU EVER FINISH LAST? WHY LAST IS NOT THE LEAST

ABSTRACT

Do You Ever Finish Last? Why Last Is Not The Least

Acharon Shel Pesach: Reaching the Finish Line of History

Do you ever feel like you're the last at something? The last to achieve a certain goal or hear a piece of news? The last to finish a race or complete a project? The last one to show up at a party, or the last to leave?

Well, Passover — and Judaism — has some news for you: not only is last not the least, last might actually be the most!

Is it better to finish first or last?

It depends on the situation: A marathon is best finished first. Life, however, is one race you most definitely want to finish last.

The last day of Passover is called Acharon Shel Pesach., “the last of Passover.” *Acharon acharon chaviv*, “the last is the most cherished,” is a famed Jewish expression found in the Midrash.

Why is the last the most cherished? Is not the beginning of something the most joyous, and the end the most painful? Look at a human being: birth, the beginning of life, is the greatest celebration, and death, the end of life, is the saddest. Why then does the Torah say *acharon acharon chaviv*?

The answer may be found in the difference between three different types of races: the sprint, the marathon, and the relay.

1. The Finish Line

Gut Shabbos and Gut Yom Tov! Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!

Welcome to Acharon Shel Pesach, the last and final day of Passover. If Pesach were a race, today would be the finish line.

If life were a race, one could say that the ultimate goal, the desired destination, the ultimate finish line would be Moshiach. Today, as we read in the Haftorah¹ and celebrate with the Moshiach Seudah, is all about the Messianic Age, when the long marathon of history will reach its destination: a world filled with divine knowledge as the

¹ Isaiah 10:32-12:16.

waters cover the sea.²

The last day of Pesach is all about reaching our goal and crossing the finish line.

Of course, this finish line is really also a start line — the finish line in the race, the rat race of *galut* and the starting line of the *geulah*. Today exile ends and Moshiach begins.

The word *acharon* of Acharon Shel Pesach means “last,” or “final.” Today is the finale of Pesach. As in any grand finale, on Acharon Shel Pesach we reach the zenith and attain the crescendo of the entire holiday. And indeed, of all of history with the coming of Moshiach.

2. Humor: Is This A Race?

Finish lines bring to mind races. Which brings to mind a story of two hunters.

Two hunters are walking through a forest looking for deer. When all of a sudden, a giant bear jumps out and scares the living daylights out of them. They drop their guns and run like the wind. One of the hunters stopped, opened up his backpack and laced up a pair of Nike running shoes. His buddy looked at him and said, “What are you doing? Are you crazy? Running shoes? No way you can outrun the bear!”

To this the fellow hunter said, “I know, all I have to do is outrun you!”

Life is too often positioned as a competitive, “dog eats dog” race between you and I, two hunters running for our lives and my single objective is to outrun you. Otherwise known as survival of the fittest. Winning is often associated with making sure you don’t finish in second place.

We live in a very fast-paced, competitive world. Everyone wants to be the first, and is afraid of coming in last. We want to be number one -- the first investor in a company, the first to do something, the first to invent a product. No one wants to be last to the party.

Which brings to mind the famous anecdote featuring Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev. The Berditchiver once saw a Jew running, hurrying at an accelerated clip. The Berditchiver asked him, “Reb yid, where I you running so fast?”

The Jew replied that he was running to earn a living. To which Reb Levi Yitzchak responded: “How do you know you’re running **towards** your living, maybe you’re running **away** from it?”

This question is very pertinent today: We are all running to make a living, to accomplish, to be the first. But is rushing to be the first really our objective? Perhaps the true value lies less in winning first and more in fin-

² Ibid 11:9.

ishing last.

Acharon Shel Pesach, the **last** day of Passover, teaches some very relevant and personal lessons about finishing last.

3. Ever Lasting

Do you ever feel like you're the last at something? The last to achieve a certain goal or hear a piece of news? The last to finish a race or complete a project? The last one to show up at a party, or the last to leave?

Well, Passover — and Judaism — has some news for you: not only is last not the least, last might actually be the most!

Is it better to finish first or last?

It depends on the situation: A marathon is best finished first. Life, however, is one race you most definitely want to finish last. You'll never hear someone bragging: I finished life before you did!

There is a famous Jewish expression, *Acharon acharon chaviv*, “the last of the last is the most cherished.” This expression is rooted in the Midrash,³ and Rashi quotes it in his commentary to this verse:

ישם את השפחות ואת ילדיהן ראשונה ואת לאה וילדיה אחרונים ואת רחל ואת יוסף אחרונים

*And he placed the maidervants and their children first and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and her Joseph last.*⁴

Rashi states that, when positioning his camp, Jacob placed Rachel and her children last in the back because *acharon acharon chaviv*, “The further back the more beloved.”

Should not the more beloved be in front, not at the back?

Why is the last the most cherished? Is not the beginning of something the most joyous, and the end the most painful? Look at a human being: birth, the beginning of life, is the greatest celebration, and death, the end of life, is the saddest. Why then does the Torah say *acharon acharon chaviv*?

Rashi himself seems to say something very different later in the Torah, at the beginning of Nitzavim:

אתם נצבים היום כולכם לפני ה' אלקיכם ראשיכם שבטים וקנינים ושטריכם כל איש ישראל

You are all standing this day before the Lord, your God the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every

³ Genesis Rabba 78:11.

⁴ Exodus 33:2.

*man of Israel.*⁵

Here Rashi states: *bachashuv chashuv kodem...* “The more distinguished ones were mentioned first, and after this: “every man of Israel.”

How do we reconcile this with the earlier Rashi that the last is most precious? The simple answer is that the verse regarding Jacob and Rachel speaks about Jacob setting up his war camp for the battle with his twin brother, Esau. In war, the most beloved, the most precious, the most cherished are placed last -- all the way in the back to protect them. When mentioning the leaders of Israel, however, in Nitzavim, the most prestigious are prominently mentioned first, as there is no reason to protect them, as there was with Rachel.

From the Midrashic expression *acharon acharon chavin*, however, it seems as if there is an inherent quality to being last, to being all the way in the back behind everyone else. What possible quality could there be in being last and what lesson does this teach us in our everyday lives?

4. Principle Of Halacha

Halacha, literally meaning the “path” or “way”, is the collective body of Torah religious laws derived from the Written and Oral Torah. Halacha guides and directs our lives and behavior, aligning it with G-d’s plan. Everything we do, from what we eat to how we dress to what we read, the foos permitted or prohibited on Passover -- are all codified in Halacha.

Determining halacha -- a legal Torah ruling -- is a complex process. Essentially it consists of Rabbinic authorities reviewing an issue or question at hand, mulling over all the arguments and opinions and counter-opinions on the matter, as well as precedents, and then, based on the rules of Torah interpretation, determining and rendering a final ruling. The ruling of halacha is always grounded and founded on a verse in the Written Torah as it has been explained in the Oral Torah. The body of halacha today is a product of thousands of years of accumulated Jewish scholarship.

Obviously, different authorities may disagree on the interpretation and the legal conclusion. This is perfectly fine as long as each opinion is based on the guiding principles of Torah interpretation. The final decision is determined by consensus.

One of the important rules governing Halacha is the concept of *Halacha k’Batrei*,⁶ the Halacha goes according to the latter authorities. Generally speaking, if there is a disagreement between an earlier and a later authority, the Halacha follows the latter opinion.

At first flush, this may seem counter-intuitive: should not the opinion of a great teacher take precedence over

⁵ Deuteronomy 29:9.

⁶ See RIF Eruvin 35a and Yuma 3b. ROSH Eruvin 2:4.

that of his student? Yet the reasoning for the rule is simple:⁷ the later authorities have the benefit of being privy to all the previous information and knowing the earlier arguments. they are therefore in a better position to clarify and decide between all the opinions.

Since Halacha is based on precedent in previous scholarship and is an intergenerational tradition, one generation building on the next, the further you go down the chain, the more information you have, the more precedent you can study, and the more due-diligence you can perform. Therefore, the Halacha goes according to the latest deciser. (There are of course exceptions to this rule).

The 12th century sage, R Yeshaya De Troni, uses a powerful example to explain how he could disagree with earlier scholars:

Should Joshua the son of Nun endorse a mistaken position, I would reject it out of hand... I was never arrogant claiming “My Wisdom served me well”. Instead I applied to myself the parable of the philosophers... The wisest of the philosophers was asked: “We admit that our predecessors were wiser than we. At the same time we criticize their comments, often rejecting them and claiming that the truth rests with us. How is this possible?” The wise philosopher responded: “Who sees further a dwarf or a giant? Surely a giant for his eyes are situated at a higher level than those of the dwarf. But if the dwarf is placed on the shoulders of the giant who sees further? ... So too we are dwarfs astride the shoulders of giants. We master their wisdom and move beyond it. Due to their wisdom we grow wise and are able to say all that we say, but not because we are greater than they.”⁸

That’s why Halacha follows the latter opinion.⁹

5. All Sevens Are Cherished

This humbling point is brought home in the first discourse (maamar) the Rebbe delivered on Yud Shevat 5711, when he assumed leadership as the seventh Rebbe of Chabad (in an unbroken chain from the Alter Rebbe). This discourse, which begins with the verse Basi L’Gani (Come to my Garden), was the last published discourse by the Previous Rebbe (the sixth Rebbe of Chabad), with additions and explanations by the Rebbe.

At the opening of the discourse he cites the Midrash¹⁰ that states how Moses, the seventh generation from Abraham, drew the divine presence back to earth (in the temple). And he adds that *kol hashvivin chavivin*, “all

⁷ See Piskeu HaROSH Sanhedrin 4:6. Tosafot Kidushin 45b “Havei Uvda;” et al.

⁸ Tshuvos Hari”d 62. Shiblei Haleket in the Introduction. See also Chavas Yair in the Introduction.

⁹ This rule applies, of course, as mentioned in the above ROSH, only if the latest opinion is based on everything prior; if not, the Halacha most certainly does not go according to the latter opinion.

¹⁰ Vayikra Rabba 29:9.

those who are seventh are cherished.” The expression used here is similar to the one discussed earlier -- *acharon acharon chaviv*, the last is cherished.

The Rebbe explains the nuance: It states *kol hashvivin chavivin* and not *kol bachavivin shvivin*, “all those who are seventh are cherished” and not “all cherished are seventh.” This means that the reason they are cherished is because they are the seventh, not the other way around that because they’re already cherished, therefore they’re last and seventh.

The seventh is cherished because the seventh is not a value in of itself, but rather a *tuldah*, a result and outcome of the six that preceded it. The fact that it is the seventh in an unbroken chain and direct line from the first, means it is the culmination of everything prior.

It is not something we choose, or even something we may want or have earned; it simply is the realization of everything that preceded it.

This is why *acharon acharon chaviv*. The last and end of something is cherished because it is the completion of the chain and the final realization of the higher vision.

6. Take Away Lesson: Life More Relay, Less Race

Usain Bolt, the Olympic gold medal sprinter and world’s fastest human being, was on his way to a country club with some friends. At the door, the bouncer turned to him, looked at his jeans, and said: “Sorry, man, you can’t come in here dressed like that. We have a ‘no denim’ policy.”

The aptly named Bolt was quite annoyed at this and retorted: “Don’t you know who I am? I’m Usain Bolt, the fastest man alive!”

To which the bouncer, in great Talmudic tradition, retorted: “Then it shouldn’t take you too long to run home and change, should it?”

There are a number of different types of races, sprints, marathons, and relays. Sprints test your speed, how fast you can cover in 100 or 200 meters. Marathons test your endurance, measuring your ability to pace yourself and wisely plan a long distance run. Then there are relays, a test of how a group of individuals team-up together to reach the finish line, each link in the chain passing the baton to the next.

The sprint and marathon are individual efforts. The relay is a team effort. A synergy. But a team effort that is completely dependant on each individual doing his best.

Here is the most fascinating thing about a relay race: the bulk of the race is run by the earlier runners, and yet, it is up to the last person, and the last person alone, to cross the finish line.

No matter how fast, speedy, record-breaking a lap the first runner, or second, or third runs, he or she can never cross the finish line. Only the last, the *acharon acharon*, could complete the race.

But, according to the relay rules, he must take the baton passed on to him by the previous runner -- and so much each runner receive the baton from the previous one in an unbroken chain -- and he must hold on to the baton in his hand to finish the race. Otherwise he is disqualified.

The same can be said about the marathon of history: It is a relay race, with each generation carrying the baton in its time, fulfilling its respective role in its stage of history to transform this world into a divine home, and then passing on the baton of tradition to the next generation, who carries it and fulfills their respective role. And so, generation after generation.

Until our last, seventh generation, who receives the baton from all the baton carriers through the generations, up till the previous, sixth generation. And the role and mission of our seventh generation (as the Rebbe explains) is to carry the baton to the finish line -- to conclude the work that was done until now, to out on the finishing touches and finally draw down the divine presence into this material world, transforming it into a divine home and garden (*Basi L'Gani*), filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.

We could not do it without the baton carrying “runners” before us; but *kol hashvivin chavivin, acharon acharon chaviv* -- the seventh and last is cherished -- because, standing on the shoulders of the giants before us, and all their collective and cumulative work, we merit to cross the finish line, with the coming of Moshiach.

Each and everyone of us does not have to be Moses. We don't have to be Rabbi Akiva. We don't have to be the Mechaber. We simply have to do the work given to us, each on his or her level, and carry the baton across the finish line.

7. Acharon Shel Pesach

This is why the last day of Pesach is called not the Eighth Day of Pesach, but **Acharon** Shel Pesach, the **Last** Day of Pesach -- signifying the finale of a process:

In the first days of Pesach we commemorate and celebrate the first redemption from Egypt. On this Last Day of Pesach we celebrate and honor the final redemption -- reaching the finish line with the coming of Moshiach, as we read in today's Haftorah and we will later eat the final meal of the final day of Pesach, called Moshiach's Seudah at the end of today.

The last day of Pesach is not possible without first celebrating the earlier days of Pesach. It also does not have all the potency of the Seder table and the subsequent days, all the way to the seventh day of the holiday, when we commemorate the parting of the sea. But once we have those days in place, it is only and exclusively Acharon Shel Pesach that reaches the finish line, celebrating the final redemption.

So too with us: We cannot compare to the power and potency of earlier generation. But standing on their shoulders, we are the ones that finish the job.

Think about it: All the generations past, including Moses himself, cannot do what we must do: carry the baton that they passed on to us to the finish line!

Only you and I can do that.

And this finish line is really the start line. For when *galut* finishes, *geulah* begins.

Acharon Shel Pesach, celebrating Moshiach, is us carrying the baton handed down from Abraham to Moses to Rabbi Akiva to the Baal Shem Tov to the Rebbe. We, and we alone can carry it across the finish line.

And I am confident that we certainly will.

And while life is not a race measured in speed, may it be speedily in our days, even before we begin Musaf! Amen!

Chag Kosher Vesameach — A Happy and Kosher Passover! May this redemption bring the final redemption today!

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