

This week's *Parashah* opens with the *Mitzvah* of "*Machatzit Ha'shekel*," which includes giving half a *Shekel* annually to support the operations of the *Bet Hamikdash* (see *Rashi z"l* to 30:15). The Torah commands that this donation be given by "*Kol ha'over al ha'pekudim*"--literally, "everyone who passes through the census."

R' Yitzchak Ze'ev Yadler z"l (1843-1917; Yerushalayim) notes that the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Shekalim* 1:3) interprets "*Kol ha'over al ha'pekudim*" as: "All who pass over the sea." [See there for the *Halachic* significance of this interpretation.] Why is a Jew referred to as "*Over al ha'pekudim*"? R' Yadler explains: The word "*Pakid*"--from the same root as "*Pekudim*"--refers to someone who is appointed to a position. Every part of Creation was made for a purpose; it was "appointed" to perform a specific role within nature. But the Jewish People have the power to "pass over" the *Pekudim*; to overrule the laws of nature, as when the Sage Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair ordered the Jordan River to split for him (*Chullin* 7a). Likewise, the entire *Yam Suf* was required to split for *Bnei Yisrael*, allowing them to "pass over the sea."

R' Yadler continues: Every man is commanded to give half a *Shekel* as "an atonement for his soul" (30:12) in order that he merit to have the laws of nature bend to his needs. The *Midrash* says that Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand the *Machatzit Ha'shekel*. R' Yadler suggests that it was this aspect that Moshe could not understand: How can such a small coin have so much power? In response, *Hashem* showed him a *Machatzit Ha'shekel* of fire, as if to say that its power is very great. (*Tiferet Zion*)

Thirty Days Before Pesach . . .

The *Gemara* (*Pesachim* 109a) describes how the Sages would encourage their children to ask questions on *Pesach* night, and the major *Halachic* authorities (*Rambam z"l* and the *Shulchan Aruch*) rule that the *Seder* should be conducted using a question and answer format. Hence, *Maggid* is book-ended by questions and answers: "*Mah Nishtanah?*" on one side and "*Pesach/Matzah/Maror - Al Shum Mah?*" on the other. Even if there are no children at the *Seder*, and even if the *Seder* participants are all Torah scholars, *Halachah* encourages them to ask each other questions.

R' Yisrael Ze'ev Halevi Horowitz z"l (1778-1861; rabbi of Sátoraljaújhely ("Uhel"), Hungary; later settled in Teveryah, *Eretz Yisrael*) writes: Clearly, the question and answer format is based on the verses (*Devarim* 6:20-21), "When your child asks you tomorrow, saying, 'What are the testimonies and the decrees and the ordinances that *Hashem*, our *Elokim*, commanded you?' You shall say to your child, 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and *Hashem* took us out of Egypt with a strong hand.'" Our Sages understand "When your child asks" as a *Mitzvah* to ask. But why does the Torah insist on this format?

He explains: Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pekudah z"l (Spain; early 11th century) writes in *Chovot Ha'levavot* that a person should not rely on received tradition alone when it comes to his *Emunah* / faith; rather, each person should also inquire into this subject to the extent of his capability, as it is written (*Divrei Ha'yamim I* 28:9), "Know the G-d of your father," but also, "Serve Him with a perfect heart," i.e., your intellect. R' Horowitz elaborates: This may be understood through a parable. If a person does not know that he is sick, he is less likely to follow a doctor's orders and take medicine. Even if someone puts the medicine in his mouth, he may spit it out. But, if a person investigates and understands his condition, he is more likely to comply with the doctor's orders. Similarly, R' Horowitz writes, a person who attempts to understand matters of *Emunah* is more likely to accept the received tradition in the long run than a person who accepts it blindly. This is one reason why questions are encouraged at the *Seder*.

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“Why should Egypt say the following, ‘With *Ra’ah* / evil intent did He take them out, to kill them in the mountains and to annihilate them from the face of the earth?’” (32:12)

When Moshe negotiated with Pharaoh before the Exodus, Pharaoh said (*Shmot* 10:10), “See that *Ra’ah* is opposite your face!” *Rashi* explains: There is a certain star whose name is “*Ra’ah*.” Pharaoh said to Moshe, “Using astrology, I see that star rising towards you in the wilderness. It is an emblem of blood,” *i.e.*, you are destined to be killed in the desert. When *Bnei Yisrael* sinned by worshipping the Golden Calf and *Hashem* intended to slay them, Moshe prayed that *Hashem* not give Egypt the chance to say they were correct. At once (*Shmot* 32:14), “*Hashem* reconsidered regarding the *Ra’ah* that He had declared He would do to His people,” and He changed the blood which that star represented to the blood of circumcision. This is the meaning of the verse (*Yehoshua* 5:9), “Today [by circumcising the Jewish People who had not been circumcised during the 40 years in the wilderness], have I removed from you the reproach of the Egyptians,” *i.e.*, that which they said, “We see blood hovering over you in the wilderness.” [Until here from *Rashi*]

R’ Chaim Friedlander *z”l* (1923-1986; *Mashgiach Ruchani* of the Ponovezh Yeshiva) writes: Pharaoh did not see incorrectly; there was, in fact, a decree of destruction hovering over *Bnei Yisrael* after they made the Golden Calf. What Pharaoh failed to see, however, is that repentance and prayer have the power to change an evil decree. Indeed, this is one of the key messages of the Purim story.

(*Siftei Chaim: Mo’adim* II p.177-178)

“And now, if I have indeed found favor in Your eyes, make Your way known to me . . .” (33:13)

The *Gemara* (*Berachot* 7a) teaches that Moshe was asking, “Let me understand Your ways: Why are there righteous people whose lives are filled with suffering and wicked people whose lives are filled with goodness?” But *Hashem* did not reveal this secret to Moshe at that time. Instead, He said only (verse 19), “I shall show favor when I choose to show favor, and I shall show mercy when I choose to show mercy.” [Until here from the *Gemara*]

R’ David Kimchi *z”l* (*Radak*; 1160-1235; Narbonne, France) notes that, later in the Torah, Moshe Rabbeinu himself reveals the answer, saying (*Devarim* 7:10), “He repays His enemy in his lifetime to make him perish.” Even an evil person does some good in his lifetime for which he deserves some reward. *Hashem* gives him that reward in this world so that he will have no share with the righteous in the World-to-Come. Conversely, even a righteous person makes some mistakes for which he deserves punishment. *Hashem* punishes him in this world so that his share in the World-to-Come will not be diminished. This, writes *Radak*, is what King David is describing in the verses (*Tehilim* 92:6-8--recited multiple times on *Shabbat*), “How great are Your deeds *Hashem*; exceedingly profound are Your thoughts. A boor cannot know this, nor can a fool understand this: When the wicked bloom like grass and all the doers of iniquity blossom. It is to destroy them till eternity.”

(Commentary to *Tehilim* 92:7)

“You must observe My Sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am *Hashem* . . .” (31:13)

Rashi *z”l* writes: This is a mark of *Gedulah* / distinction for you--the fact that I have chosen you and let you inherit the day on which I, *Hashem*, “rested” as your day of rest. [Until here from *Rashi*]

R’ Yechezkel Sarna *z”l* (1890-1969; *Rosh Yeshiva* of the Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim) writes: In *Mussaf* recited on *Shabbat*, we identify several different levels among those who observe the Sabbath: “Those who delight in it will inherit eternal honor, those who taste it will merit life, and also those who love its words have chosen *Gedulah*.” Even a person who is not on the level to experience *Shabbat* in its most perfect form (referred to as “delight”) will merit “*Gedulah*,” the sign of distinction referred to by *Rashi*, if he merely loves *Shabbat*. (*Dalot Yechezkel* II p.283)

“‘Between Me and *Bnei Yisrael* it is a sign forever--that in six-days *Hashem* made heaven and earth, and, on the seventh day, He rested and was refreshed.’ When He finished speaking to him on *Har Sinai*, He gave Moshe the two *Luchot Ha’edut* / Tablets of Testimony . . .” (31:17-18)

R’ Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter *z”l* (1847-1905; second *Gerrer Rebbe*) writes: These verses were placed consecutively to teach that *Shabbat* should be set aside for studying Torah. (*Sefat Emet* to *Tehilim* 92:1)

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A second reason for the question and answer format, R’ Horowitz continues, is that it increases the number of words of Torah that are uttered, a concept found in *Yeshayah* (42:21): “To make Torah bigger and to glorify it.” In this vein, the *Gemara* (*Bava Metzia* 84a) relates that when Rabbi Yochanan’s student and study partner, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish (“Reish Lakish”), passed away, Rabbi Yochanan was despondent. Seeing this, Rabbi Yochanan’s colleagues assigned the sage Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat to study with him. However, this arrangement only upset Rabbi Yochanan more. He said, “Reish Lakish would challenge everything I said from 24 different sources, which would lead to a ‘broadening’ of the Torah, while Rabbi Elazar cites support for everything I say from 24 different sources.” R’ Horowitz explains: Rabbi Yochanan knew that his teachings were correct, and he did not need Rabbi Elazar’s supporting sources. But he appreciated when Reish Lakish challenged his teachings, because that led to clarifying the parameters of the *Halachah* and increasing the number of words of Torah exchanged. The entire *Talmud Bavli* and its commentaries are based on this principle, R’ Horowitz adds.

(*Haggadah Shel Pesach Ga’al Yisrael*)