

The Cruel Joke

Pashas Bo by Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

The Mitzvah of relating the story of the Exodus in detail on the Pesach Seder night is based on the passage "that you may relate in the ears of your son, and your son's son, what (how) I have mocked the Egyptians... and you will know that I am Hashem." (Shemos 10:2) (Rashi and Ramban both render "hisalalti": I mocked). While Hagadah could be fulfilled by reciting a few terse statements, the Mitzvah of SIPUR, to relate as in a story form, requires conveying the event with all nuances. It is intriguing that this Mitzvah is given in connection with the "mockery" wrought upon the Egyptians.

To gain insight into the above it should be pondered: what constitutes the mockery that the Egyptians suffered. Also, since the Al-mighty metes out punishment MIDAHA K'NEGED MIDAHA, measure for measure (Sanhedrin 90a), wherein lies the mockery in Pharaoh's atrocities, which evoked the "like" retributions? On the surface it would seem that what constitutes mockery is not so much the plagues themselves, as the order in which they were inflicted, from bad to worse, and after being relieved of the plague of hail, any food left being destroyed by the locusts which followed. This is similar to the agony wreaked upon the Israelites also in stages, going from bad to worse. Yet, this alone hardly warrants the designation "mockery," which usually refers to mental pain.

One commentary of the rabbis (Mishnas Reb Eliezer, quoted in Midrash "Hagadol on Shemos 10:11) speaks of Pharaoh's suggestion that only the male adults should go and worship the Al-mighty, and to leave their families behind. The mental agony this would have caused is hardly describable. It means allowing the Israelites to taste the truth of Torah, but denying them the privilege of sharing it with their children; to make the religious encounter a temporary experience rather than an everlasting tenacious faith transmitted from parent to child, to grandchild. It meant tearing the family asunder, part for Judaism and part remaining Pharaoh's slaves. It is reminiscent of the cruel joke the Nazis played on Jewish families, dividing them part for Auschwitz and part to struggle on. Pharaoh here seemingly intended to ridicule the Israelites, to play on their nerves, to scoff and deride them, using their urge to serve the G-d of their ancestors as a means to crush them mentally.

It is in the context of this cruel mockery that the Torah commands the Mitzvah of SIPUR, though the latter is mentioned first, as Pharaoh's stubbornness is foretold.

It was in retribution for this cruelty, it may be expounded, that the Egyptians were made to suffer not merely ten plagues, but shame and derision, becoming the laughing stock of the generations. For the story of the Exodus was ordained to become that foundation of Torah that is to be conveyed in all detail to the children and grandchildren, those young generations whom Pharaoh sought to withhold from access to the service of the Al-mighty, measure for measure. And SIPUR has become the central observance of the Pesach Seder night, when the child and the grandchild are the focus of our attention.

As a consequence of their eagerness for children's survival as Hashem's chosen people, parents, too, will become more proficient in Torah knowledge, "And you, (too) will know that I am Hashem". Indicative here is the future good tidings when Eliyahu will restore the heart of fathers to children (and the heart of children to their fathers) (Malachi 3:24).