

Shach's Dayenu Pilpul

Summarized and adapted by R. Gil Student

Rav Shabsi Kohen, author of the brilliant *Sifsei Kohen* on parts of *Shulchan Aruch* and commonly known as “the *Shach*,” lived in Vilna and Czech in the 17th century. Among the works he wrote during his short life (he died at the age of 41) is a pilpulistic commentary on the Haggadah passage commonly known as Dayenu. It was written in 1661 and first published from manuscript in 1840. In attempting to locate most of his sources, it became clear from his little errors that this was written mostly from memory, an incredible feat. What follows is my attempt to summarize his complex analysis. This was a great hit at my Yom Tov table last year so I am sharing it with friends (only one or two Dayenus per meal, lest you risk brain overload).

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The Gemara (*Bava Kamma 27b*) records a disagreement whether a person can institute judgment for himself (*avid inish dina le-nafsheih*), e.g. take back an object that you know is yours from someone who stole it, without going to court. Both agree that if you will otherwise lose money, you can enact judgment on your own. The Jewish people in Egypt were close to the final level of impurity, after which they would have permanently assimilated into the Egyptian people. Therefore, seeing that if He did not act immediately He would suffer a loss, G-d enacted judgment on his own and redeemed us from Egypt. This was justified even though the 400 years of exile had not passed because the hardship of the servitude made the 210 years as difficult as 400 years.

But that leads to another question. The commentators ask why G-d punished the Egyptians when He told Avraham that the Jews would be enslaved (Gen. 15:14). The Shach quotes the answer of “the commentators” (see Ramban, ad loc.) that the Egyptians went too far in subjugating the Jews. However, asks the Shach, that justifies G-d's redemption of the people quicker. The hardship is used to make 210 years equal to 400 years. If so, the hardship can't also justify punishing the Egyptians. Then why did G-d punish the Egyptians?

This is the meaning of: ***If He had taken us out of Egypt and not punished them; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).***

The commentators ask why the Ten Commandments begin with a reference to the Exodus and not the Creation (see Ibn Ezra, Ex. 20:2). The Shach quotes an answer that the Exodus showed G-d's existence and might through intervention in the world, more than Creation does (see *Kuzari* 1:25).

The Shach quotes Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah* 6:5) who, contrary to Ramban, says that the Egyptians deserved punishment because no individual was forced to enslave the

Jews. Therefore, any individual who did so deserved punishment. However, the Shach adds, this punishment could have been accomplished privately. G-d made public plagues to demonstrate His existence.

But if plagues proved G-d's existence and total power, why did they have to target Egyptian deities specifically?

This is the meaning of: ***If He had punished them and had not made (punished) their G-ds; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).***

We could say that G-d targeted the Egyptian deities to prove His power because the Egyptians were the most ardent idolators in the world. The midrash asks why G-d attacked the Egyptians forty years before the Canaanites, since both nations were steeped in idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed. According to one opinion (*Sifra* 6:9:6), the Egyptians were the worst nation in the world, the most steeped in these cardinal sins. According to another opinion (ad loc., 7) the Canaanites were worst and according to a third opinion (ad loc., 8), the Egyptians and Canaanites were equally bad (and the Canaanites were punished later than the Egyptians because the Canaanites had merit from having honored Avraham). According to the first opinion, that the Egyptians were the worst idolators (among other sins), we understand why G-d attacked their deities. But this raises another problem.

Many explanations are given for the reason that G-d killed the Egyptian firstborns. One is that doing so proved that despite the rampant Egyptian immorality, no Jewish women had succumbed to their captors. If they had, then Jewish boys who were firstborn to an Egyptian man would have perished in the plague. Since none did, this demonstrated the Jewish family purity.

The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 68b) asks how we know that the son of a Jewish woman and a gentile man is Jewish. The Gemara suggests learning it from Deut. 7:4 but that verse specifically refers to the Seven Nations of Canaan (including the Canaanites). If the Canaanites were the most steeped in idolatry, then certainly the rule applies to all other nations, that the son of any gentile man and a Jewish woman is Jewish. But if the Egyptians were more steeped in idolatry than the Canaanites, then maybe this rule does not apply to Egyptians. If the Egyptians were the most ardent idolators, then the son of an Egyptian man and a Jewish woman is not Jewish.

Following this logic, if the Canaanites were the most steeped in idolatry, any firstborn of an Egyptian man and a Jewish woman would be Jewish. The lack of deaths among Jewish boys would prove the family purity of the Jews. But if the Egyptians were the most steeped in idolatry, then the child of an Egyptian man and a Jewish woman is not Jewish, and the plague does not prove that Jewish women did not succumb to immorality with Egyptians. However, we explained that the reason for plague of the firstborn was to show that Jewish women did not succumb to the Egyptians.

G-d attacked the Egyptian deities because the Egyptians were the most steeped in idolatry. But the plague of the firstborn only makes sense if the Canaanites were the most steeped in idolatry. Therefore, we have to ask, why did G-d kill the firstborn?

This is the meaning of: ***If He had made (punished) their G-ds and had not killed their firstborn; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).***

Rather, we have to say that G-d punished the Egyptian firstborns because the Egyptians enslaved G-d's firstborn, the Jewish people (Ex. 4:22). It was a divine punishment of measure for measure. But that raises a further difficulty.

Some midrashim describe the Jewish people in Egypt as very sinful. The Gemara (*Bava Metzi'a* 73b) says that Rav Se'oram used to force sinners to carry Rava's chair because the Torah says "Of them you may take as slaves forever and over your brothers" (Lev. 25:46). Meaning, sinful Jews deserve to be enslaved.

If the Jews deserved to be enslaved, and therefore not paid for their work, why did G-d give them Egyptian money?

This is the meaning of: ***If He had killed their firstborn and had not given us their money; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).***

There are two reasons offered for why the Jews received Egyptian money at the Exodus. One is that they deserved it for their work as slaves (*Sanhedrin* 91a). As we saw above, this is problematic. Another explanation is that this was the money that Yosef collected in Egypt.

Regarding Yosef, the Gemara (*Shabbos* 49b) has a disagreement whether when Yosef went to Potiphar's house "to do his work" (Gen. 39:11) he literally went to do his work or he went to sleep with Potiphar's wife, and only fled when he saw an image of his father.

The Shach asks why the second view would read the text negatively about Yosef. What textually or theologically could prompt such a reading? He suggests that if Yosef was Potiphar's bookkeeper, as one midrash suggests, then he was not an actual slave but a forced worker (see *Shach, Yoreh De'ah* 267:41). Anything an actual slave acquires belongs to his owner (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 267:22). If Yosef was an actual slave, then any money he collected in Egypt belonged to Potiphar (the Shach assumes neither Potiphar nor Pharaoh freed Yosef from slavery). If he was Potiphar's bookkeeper, then he was not an actual slave and the fortune he later amassed belonged to him.

Therefore, the Shach suggests, since the only viable explanation to the Jews taking Egyptian money with them is that this was Yosef's money, and if Yosef was an actual slave then his money never belonged to him, in order to protect the Jewish people from accusations of theft the midrash had to suggest that Yosef was not a house slave and therefore must have gone to the house to sleep with Potiphar's wife.

But that raises another question. The midrash (*Shemos Rabbah* 21:7) says that the sea split in the merit of Avraham chopping wood with which to bring Yitzchak as a sacrifice. Elsewhere, the midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 87:8) says that the sea split in the merit of Yosef running away from Potiphar's wife. But if Yosef went to the house in order to sin and only fled because he saw his father's image, what merit did he have for fleeing? Why did G-d split the sea?

This is the meaning of: ***If He had given us their money and had not split the Sea for us; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).***

The midrash (*Shemos Rabbah* 21:7) says that the sea split in the merit of Avraham chopping wood with which to bring Yitzchak as a sacrifice. If so, why did the Jews cross the split sea on dry land rather than wet, muddy ground?

*Yalkut Shimoni (Beshalach* 234) says that the angels argued with G-d, saying that since both the Egyptians and the Jews were idolators, why should the Jews cross the sea in dry land? G-d responded that the Jews merited this treatment because they would accept the Torah at Sinai. Why did the angels ask why the Jews crossed on dry land rather than the bigger question, why did the Jews leave bondage in Egypt if they were idolators? Presumably because the answer to that question is basic — the Jews were redeemed from Egypt because of the merit of the forefathers. Similarly above, the Jews merited the splitting of the sea because of Avraham's splitting the wood. But the merit of forefathers should also apply to crossing on dry land. A different midrash says that just like G-d provided dry land for a single person, Adam (Gen. 1:9), even more so (*kal va-chomer*) He provided dry land for the entire nation of Israel. But this argument only works when the nation of Israel is holy, like Adam was (before the sin). The angels seem to have been arguing that the Jews committed idolatry in Egypt, therefore this argument fails and they lacked the merit for crossing on dry land.

This assumes that when the Jews committed idolatry in Egypt, they were sinning. However, the Jews certainly worshipped G-d in Egypt because they recognized Him at the sea when they said, "This is my G-d" (Ex. 15:2). If they committed idolatry, it was by worshipping G-d and idols. This is called "*shituf*," which according to *Shach* is permissible for gentiles and forbidden for Jews (see *Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh De'ah* 147:2). Great authorities debate whether the nation of Israel had the status of Jews even before the giving of the Torah or they had the status of gentiles. If the nation of Israel had the status of gentiles before the giving of the Torah, then they did not sin with their idolatry in Egypt. If they had the status of Jews, they sinned with their idolatry.

If they had the status of gentiles, then they did not sin with their idolatry and the *kal va-chomer* argument from Adam works. Then we understand why the Jews crosses on dry land. If they had the status of Jews, then the *kal va-chomer* does not work.

However, if they had the status of gentiles, we find another problem. Avraham had designated Yitzchak as a sacrifice and then replaced him with a ram. Replacing a sacrifice is called *temurah*. The Gemara (*Zevachim* 45a) says that only Jews can do *temurah* and not gentiles. If the nation of

Israel had the status of gentiles before the giving of the Torah then Avraham could not do *temurah*. His sacrifice of the ram instead of Yitzchak was not a mitzvah but a sin. We said above that the sea was split because Avraham split the wood for the sacrifice. If he then did *temurah*, this was not a mitzvah for which there was merit to split the sea.

If the nation of Israel had the status of Jews before the giving of the Torah, they committed sinful idolatry in Egypt so why did they merit crossing on dry land? If they had the status of gentiles, Avraham's behavior with the sacrifice was sinful so how could they merit the splitting of the sea?

They must have had the status of Jews and merited the splitting of the sea. But then why did they cross on dry land?

This is the meaning of: **If He had split the sea for us, and not brought us through it dry; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

It must be that the Jews crossed on dry land because they would accept the Torah. But we can ask, what is the great merit of accepting the Torah when G-d held a mountain over the Jews and threatened to kill them if they did not accept the Torah?

The Gemara (*Sotah* 11a) says that the Egyptians decided to drown newborn Jewish boys because they knew that G-d punishes people based on their deeds. And G-d us promised not to bring another flood to the world. Therefore, the entire Egyptian nation would be safe from divine punishment by water. The Gemara adds that they did not realize that G-d only will not destroy the entire world with a flood but He will destroy an entire nation. However, this point seems to be a matter of debate. *Bereishis Rabbah* (49:9) says that Avraham challenged G-d regarding Sedom that G-d had promised not to bring a flood to the world. From this text, it seems that the promise applies also to the destruction of an entire nation.

If we accept that G-d would not destroy an entire nation, then we understand why the Jews received merit for accepting the Torah. G-d's threat to destroy them with the mountain was not real coercion because He would not have destroyed them. Therefore, their acceptance of the Torah was willful and they merited crossing on dry land.

But if G-d would not destroy an entire nation, how could he cause all the Egyptians to die in the sea?

This is the meaning of: **If He had brought us through the sea dry, and not drowned our foes in it; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (43) says that G-d killed all the Egyptians in the sea except for Pharaoh, so Pharaoh would tell others what had happened and they would repent. Since Pharaoh was the king, he was sufficiently important that his escape meant that the nation was not destroyed.

However, as we discussed elsewhere, Rav Menachem Azariah of Fano believes that gentiles do not have the ability to erase their sins through repentance. If so, why was Pharaoh kept alive?

In multiple places, the Gemara debates whether the land of Israel belonged to the Jews from the time of Avraham or from the time of Yehoshua's conquest. Ramban and others prove from the following the verse that it was from the time of Yehoshua: "And the fourth generation shall return here because the sin of the Amorite is not yet full" (Gen. 15:26). If the land belonged to the Jews then the Amorites were merely watching it and the Jewish owners could return any time they wished regardless of whether the Amorites had sinned. And that is why G-d kept the Jews in the desert for forty years — because the Amorites' sin was not yet full.

But if the Amorites owned the land, and Pharaoh was saved so he would tell other people the story and they would repent, why wasn't the Amorites' repentance sufficient for them to retain the land? It must be that the land belonged to the Jews from the time of Avraham. Therefore, even if the Amorites repented, they still could not retain the land. But if that is the case, why did the Jews wander through the desert for forty years? It was their land so they should have just done straight into.

This is the meaning of: **If He had drowned our foes in it, and not helped us forty years in the desert; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

Rather, G-d kept us in the desert for forty years for a different reason. *Mechilta (Beshalach, Vayehi 1)* says that if the Jews had entered the land of Israel immediately, everyone would have had to work their fields, vineyards, etc. G-d kept the Jews in the desert for forty years so they would learn Torah.

However, that raises a different question. *Mechilta (Beshalach, Vayisa 5)* explains that the *man* (manna) was intended as a sign throughout the generations. People will ask how they can study Torah when they need to work to support their families. The *man* teaches us that we should study Torah and G-d will provide for us.

But if that is the case, why did G-d keep the Jews in the desert for forty years? Even when they enter the land of Israel, they should study Torah and wait for G-d to provide. The Gemara (*Berachos 35b*) has a debate between R. Yishmael and R. Shimon Bar Yochai whether people should work (R. Yishmael) or study Torah (R. Shimon Bar Yochai). The midrash about the *man* seems to follow R. Shimon Bar Yochai. However, the midrash about staying in the desert shows that we follow R. Yishmael.

This is the meaning of: **If He had helped us forty years in the desert, and not fed us the *man*; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

It must be that we received the *man* for a different reason. The *man* fell six days a week, with a double portion on Friday. It proved that Saturday is the day of rest, Shabbos.

Commentaries ask why G-d commanded the mitzvah of Shabbos (particularly at Marah, before the giving of the Torah). The midrash says that the Jews observed Shabbos in Egypt. If so, why were they later commanded in something they already observed? The commentaries explain that in Egypt, they rested for one day but not necessarily on Saturday/Shabbos. Some rested on Friday and others on Sunday. The commandment was to specify Saturday/Shabbos as the day of rest.

But if we say that the *man* identified Saturday as the day of rest, why was there a need for a separate command?

This is the meaning of: **If He had fed us the *man*, and not given us the Shabbos; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

There must be a different reason for the commandment of Shabbos. The Torah (Ex. 31:17) says about Shabbos, “It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever.” Shabbos distinguishes Jews from gentiles. We rest on Shabbos and they do not. In this vein, among the five divine distinctions we list in Havdalah at the conclusion of Shabbos is the difference between Jews and gentiles. This difference can be seen through Shabbos.

However, at Mt. Sinai, G-d made a special covenant with the Jews that He would not switch them with another people. For this reason, the Gemara (*Shabbos* 89a) says that the mountain is named Sinai because it caused hatred among the gentiles for Jews. The chosenness of Jews angers many gentiles. But if Shabbos creates the distinction between Jews and gentiles, of what purpose was Mt. Sinai?

This is the meaning of: **If He had given us the Shabbos, and not brought us to Mt. Sinai; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

The Zohar (*Parashas Bereishis*) says that Adam’s sin was not fully rectified until the revelation at Mt. Sinai. However, Adam repented from his sin. Shouldn’t the repentance serve to rectify his sin? There is a debate between the Zohar and Midrash Rabbah whether repentance works for the sin of idolatry. This passage must follow the view that repentance does not work for idolatry and therefore Adam’s rebellion against G-d was not rectified until the revelation at Mt. Sinai.

However, the Gemara (*Shabbos* 87a) asks what justified Moshe’s destruction of the first tablets. The Gemara explains that Moshe used the *kal va-chomer* logic. If an apostate Jew cannot partake in the Pesach sacrifice, which is only one mitzvah, then certainly (*kal va-chomer*) the Jews who were apostates for worshipping the Golden Calf could not receive the entire Torah. Tosafos (ad loc., s.v. *u-mah Pesach*) points out that the *kal va-chomer* does not fully justify the breaking of the tablets. Moshe could have delayed the giving of the tablets and taught them Torah to bring the nation to repentance.

If repentance works for idolatry, then the Jews could have received the Torah. But then there is no need for the revelation at Mt. Sinai to rectify Adam's sin for which he repented. On the other hand, if repentance does not work for idolatry, then the revelation at Mt. Sinai was necessary to rectify Adam's sin. But then why did the Jews receive the Torah?

This is the meaning of: **If He had brought us to Mt. Sinai, and had not given us the Torah; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

*Pa'anei'ach Raza* (I could not find this) answers Tosafos' question that the tribe of Levi did not worship the Golden Calf. Therefore, the Jewish people at the time of the revelation at Mt. Sinai were like a group of circumcised and uncircumcised Jews (*mulim ve-areilim*). Rav Chisda holds that if part of the group is uncircumcised then the Pesach sacrifice is invalid. Rav Ashi holds that a Pesach sacrifice for a mixed group of circumcised and uncircumcised is valid (*Pesachim* 61b). According to Rav Ashi, Moshe should have given the Torah to Israel because the tribe of Levi did not commit idolatry and therefore it was a mixed group of idolators and non-idolators.

Tosafos (*Kiddushin* 37b s.v. *ho'il*) ask why the Jews did not bring the Pesach sacrifice throughout most of their years in the desert. The key seems to be that the Torah says that this applies "when you come to the land" (Ex. 12:25). Tosafos offers one answer that assumes this means that bringing the Pesach sacrifice leads to the reward of entering the land of Israel. Then why didn't the Jews observe it in the desert? Because most of the Jews were uncircumcised and therefore they could not bring the Pesach sacrifice. Another answer is that the Pesach sacrifice is only required after conquering the land of Israel. The first answer seems to follow Rav Chisda, that if part of the group is uncircumcised then the Pesach sacrifice is invalid.

If we follow Rav Chisda, the Jews merited entering the land of Israel from the Pesach sacrifice brought in the final year in the desert. But according to Rav Chisda, if some Jews committed idolatry and some did not, they could not receive the Torah.

If we follow Rav Ashi, and the Jews received the Torah because some (Levi) did not worship idolatry, then we follow the view that the Pesach sacrifice is not obligatory until the Jews conquered the land of Israel. Otherwise they should have brought it in the desert. If so, why did they merit entering the land?

This is the meaning of: **If He had given us the Torah, and had not brought us to the land of Israel; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

According to the view that the Pesach sacrifice could only be brought after settling the land, why did the Jews bring the Pesach sacrifice in the time of Yehoshua (Josh. 5:10)? Tosafos say that it was based on a prophetic exception to the law (*al pi ha-dibur*).

If that is the case, we can ask why G-d built the Holy Temple (*beis ha-bechirah*). *Bamidbar Rabbah* (14:3) quotes an opinion that G-d built the Holy Temple and it emerged fully built. Why



would G-d have to build it for us? The Talmud Yerushalmi says that David was frustrated that he could not find the place to build the Holy Temple until Gad the prophet showed him. The Mishnah (*Avodah Zarah* 45a) says that every mountain in Israel has idolatry on it somewhere. Tosafos (ad loc., s.v. *kol makom*) quotes the Yerushalmi as asking how we could build the Holy Temple on a mountain if it had idolatry on it. The Yerushalmi answers that this was a prophetic exception.

Tosafos (*Sanhedrin* 89b s.v. *Eliyahu*) ask whether we listen to a prophet to violate a biblical law. One opinion is that we do if it is a temporary violation. The other opinion is that we don't, and Eliyahu justified his actions with a deduction from a verse.

If we do not listen to a prophet to violate a law, then we understand why G-d had to build the Holy Temple. David could not follow Gad's guidance to build the Temple on a mountain that contained idolatry. But if so, how could the Jews have brought the Pesach sacrifice in the time of Yehoshua and merited entering the land?

If we listen to a prophet to violate a law, then we understand how the Jews brought the Pesach sacrifice and merited entering the land of Israel. But then why did G-d have to build the Holy Temple?

This is the meaning of: **If He had brought us to the land of Israel, and had not built for us the Holy Temple; Dayenu (it would have been enough for us).**

Tosafos (*Kiddushin* 31b s.v. *istaya*) say that G-d placed much of the punishment that the Jews deserved on the Temple instead. This can be explained with the concept of collateral (*mashkon*). The Temple was placed as collateral for our obligations and when we failed to fulfill those obligations, the collateral was taken away. That is why the Tabernacle is called a *mishkan*, similar to *mashkon*. And the Temple is also called a *mishkan* (*Shevu'os* 16b).

The general rule is that a lender cannot take collateral after the time of the loan. Meaning, if he lends money and then as the loan progresses, he gets nervous and wants collateral. He must go to a court and have the court take the collateral (*Bava Metzi'a* 113a). An exception to this rule is if the collateral belongs to the lender. Then he can take it on his own from the borrower.

Since the Temple is collateral for the Jewish people's obligations. If G-d builds it and owns it, He can take it at any time, thereby punishing the Temple instead of us. For this reason, G-d built the Temple Himself, to take the Temple instead of punishing the Jews even more.

This is the meaning of: **And built for us the Temple, to atone for all our sins.**

May we say *Dayenu* together next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem!