Remembering and Recounting the Exodus:

Opposite Perspectives on a Common Theme

By Rav Yair Kahn

Translated by David Silverberg

The Almighty designated two mitzvot for recalling the Exodus: "zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim" - REMEMBERING the Exodus, and "sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim" - TELLING about the Exodus. This article will explore the relationship between these two mitzvot.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO MITZVOT

"Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya said: I am like a seventy-year-old man, yet I have not had the privilege of mentioning the Exodus at night, until the exposition of Ben Zoma, that it says, 'In order that you remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life' - 'the days of your life' refers to the days; 'ALL the days of your life' refers to the nights. But the Sages say, 'the days of your life' refers to this world; 'ALL' comes to add the messianic era." (Mishna, Berakhot 12b)

According to Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya, the mitzva to remember the Exodus - "zekhira" - applies each and every night throughout the year, a ruling codified by the Rambam as authoritative halakha (Hilkhot Keri'at Shema 1:3). If so, "How is this night different from all other nights?" What need is there for a specific mitzva to retell - "sippur" - the story of the Exodus on the seder night?

The Minchat Chinukh (mitzva 21) suggests a number of ways in which one can fulfill the obligation of "zekhira" without performing the unique mitzva of "sippur." He cites a distinction raised by the Pri Megadim relating to the possibility of fulfilling the given obligation through non-verbal contemplation ("hirhur"): one may, perhaps, fulfill the requirement of "zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim" through a silent mental process, while that of "sippur" demands verbal recounting. The Minchat Chinukh cites another possibility suggested by the Sha'agat Aryeh: the mitzva of "sippur" might require the reminiscence of the specific miracles and wonders that occurred on this night, while on other nights a mere general recollection suffices.

Along similar lines, Rav Chayim Brisker ("Chidushei Ha-Grach al Ha-shas," 40) adds several technical requirements mandated by the mitzva of "sippur." As opposed to "zekhira," the "sippur" must take the form of storytelling, or, more specifically, the process of question-and-answer. Furthermore, the process of "sippur" most follow a specific format, that of "beginning with shame and ending with praise" (meaning, we must begin the story with our inauspicious, idolatrous origins, and conclude with our emergence as God's nation). Another obligation unique to "sippur" is the need to explain the reasons behind the mitzvot of the seder. This requirement is expressed in the Haggada, by Rabban Gamliel:

"Whoever does not mention these things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation; they are: [korban] pesach, matza and maror." (Pesachim 116a)

SUGGESTION #1: ZEKHIRA AND SIPPUR ARE TWO ASPECTS OF THE SAME MITZVA

All these distinctions share a common denominator: the annual "sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim" at the seder demands more than does its nightly counterpart, "zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim." The aforementioned differences do not, however, express a fundamental difference between the two mitzvot. One may thus argue that, essentially, the two mitzvot are one and the same. However, since the Torah could not demand such an intense level of detail twice each day, it designated the special night of Pesach for the recitation of the entire story, from beginning to end, while a brief mention suffices all year round.

This understanding of the relationship between sippur and zekhira helps us solve another mystery.

The Rambam explicitly rules in accordance with Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya's view, requiring "zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim" both by day and by night. Yet he does not include this mitzva in his list of the 613 commandments, neither in his Sefer Ha-mitzvot nor in the Yad Ha-chazaka. He mentions it only as an aside in his discussion of the laws relevant to Keri'at Shema, as a basis for including the parasha of tzitzit in Shema even at night, when the obligation of tzitzit does not apply.

"What does one read [to fulfill the mitzva of Shema]? Three sections, and they are: 'Shema,' 'Ve-haya im shamoa,' and 'Vayomer' … [One reads] the parasha of tzitzit, since it too contains the command to remember all the mitzvot.

Although the mitzva of tzitzit does not apply at nighttime, we read it at night insofar as it makes mention of yetzi'at Mitzrayim, and there is a mitzva to mention yetzi'at Mitzrayim both by day and by night, as it says, 'In order that you remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life.' Reading these three parshiyot in their proper sequence is what is called 'Keri'at Shema.'" (Hilkhot Keri'at Shema 1:2-3)

However, based upon the above, we can suggest that zekhira is included within the context of the mitzva of sippur. The Rambam writes:

"It is a positive commandment of the Torah to tell of the miracles and wonders that were performed for our fathers in Egypt on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan, as it says, 'Remember this day that you left Egypt,' just as it says, 'Remember the Sabbath day.' And how do we know that it is the fifteenth? The Rabbis teach: 'And you shall tell your son (Ve-higadeta le-vinkha) on that days as follows, On account of THIS [God did for me...]' - namely, at the time when there is matza and maror is placed before you." (Hilkhot Chametz U-matza 7:1)

One can interpret the phrase "the night of the fifteenth of Nissan" as singling out the night when the mitzva of sippur applies. If so, this halakha refers exclusively to the mitzva of sippur. Alternatively, this phrase may be qualifying which miracles one must relate, namely, the miracles that occurred on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan. If so, there is no limitation to when the mitzva applies. Therefore, one may claim that this halakha begins with zekhira (derived from "Remember this day that you left Egypt"), and only later focuses upon sippur, which is specific to the seder night (and learned from "And you shall tell your son").

Accordingly, zekhira is not counted separately because it is not an independent mitzva, but rather merges with the mitzva of sippur.

SUGGESTION #2: ZEKHIRA IS PART OF THE MITZVA OF ACCEPTING THE YOKE OF HEAVEN

Rav Chaim Brisker offered a different solution to this problem. His grandson Rav Joseph Soloveitchik writes:

"My grandfather also said that the entire mitzva of 'zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim' does not constitute an independent fulfillment of an obligation. Rather, its basic essence is a fulfillment of the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingship of Heaven. This constitutes a specific law regarding the acceptance of the yoke of His Kingship, which must take place also through the recollection of yetzi'at Mitzrayim." (ShiurimLe-zekher Abba Mari, vol. 1, p.1)

For good reason, then, the Rambam addresses "zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim" only as an aside in his presentation of the laws of Shema. This obligation comprises not an independent mitzva, but rather one detail within the framework of the mitzva of reading Shema. Its purpose is not the recollection of yetzi'at Mitzrayim per se, but rather the acceptance of God's supreme authority that results therefrom.

This understanding of zekhira led Rav Chaim to posit another distinction between zekhira and sippur. Rav Soloveitchik writes:

"I learned from my father, my teacher, in the name of our great rabbi zt"l [Rav Chaim], that four halakhot separate and distinguish the mitzva of 'zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim' from the mitzva of 'sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim"…

4) The mitzva of 'zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim' does not constitute an independent mitzva, but rather emanates from the mitzva of reciting the Shema and the fulfillment of accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. The mitzva of 'sippur,' by contrast, is a mitzva of its own among the list of 613 [commandments]." (Shiurim Le-zekher Abba Mari z"l, vol. 1, p.2, note 4)

It would seem to me that we should add a fifth distinction: the obligation of 'zekhira' does not cast upon the individual a requirement to recite praise and thanksgiving. The mitzva of 'sippur,' by contrast, requires one not only to tell of the wonders and miracles that He performed for us, but also to praise and thank - [as we say at the end of the Maggid section of the Haggada,] 'Therefore we are obliged to thank and praise…' Herein lies the basis of the obligation of reciting Hallel on Pesach eve."

SIPPUR - SENSING REDEMPTION IN THE PRESENT

The obligation to recite Hallel on the seder night relates to the personal experience of redemption unique to this evening. Indeed, the mishna teaches:

"In every generation, a person must see himself as if he had left Egypt, as it says, 'You shall tell your child on that day, saying, It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt.' We are therefore obliged to thank, praise, extol, glorify, elevate, exalt, bless, honor and magnify the One who performed all these miracles for our forefathers and us." (Pesachim 116b)

This mishna supports the position of Rav Hai Gaon, who distinguished between the recitation of Hallel at the seder and the Hallel service in general, by omitting the blessing over Hallel at the seder. The Ran quotes his position as follows:

"Rabbeinu Hai Gaon z"l wrote in a responsum that we do not recite the blessing, 'ligmor et ha-Hallel', over the Hallel of Pesach night, since we do not read it as a formal recitation, but rather as a song of praise… Therefore, if one wishes to recite a blessing - he is silenced." (Pesachim 26b in the Rif)

In other words, the personal experience of redemption, which each individual is required to sense "as if he had left Egypt," gives rise to the special requirement of "shira" - song of praise - at the seder.

This goal, of transplanting the redemption of the past into the living present, from the pages of history books into our national consciousness, forms the central pillar of the mitzva of "sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim." We must therefore conduct ourselves in a manner resembling royalty (the four cups, reclining, etc.), since verbal expression does not suffice.

For this same reason, we must begin by recalling the troubled times, allowing us to relive the ultimate salvation. On a different occasion, I wrote that herein lies the connection between the mitzva of sippur and the other requirements of this night: pesach, matza and maror (http://www.vbm-torah.org/pesach/pes-yk.htm). Speaking is not enough; we must engage in concrete actions that symbolize and bring to life the events of yetzi'at Mitzrayim. We eat bitter herbs in order to actually taste the suffering of bondage, so that we too cry and pray to the Almighty. Following all our longings for even a respite from the bondage, the complete redemption comes suddenly and instantaneously; even our dough had no chance to rise, which is illustrated by the matza. The paschal lamb points out that this redemption came about not through the intervention of an angel or agent, but rather at the hands of the Almighty Himself, who passed over, as it were, our houses and those of all Benei Yisrael in Egypt, saving His people.

Thus, the uniqueness of "sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim" at the seder lies in the attempt to reconstruct, revive and actually relive the religious-national experience of the Exodus itself. Granted, when the Temple stood and the entire nation would ascend there and offer their pesach sacrifices, the closeness of the Shekhina could be sensed far more easily. Nevertheless, this obligation remains in force even today.

At the seder we must thus rejoice and celebrate as we reconstruct the miraculous emergence of the chosen people and sense the national and religious redemption. We sing and give praise over the wonders of the Creator who personally took us out of the Egyptian bondage, and we feel ever so close to the Redeemer of Israel, who, in a single night, erased, as it were, the infinite distance separating between God and Yisrael. There is a popular custom to conclude the seder with the recitation of Shir Ha-shirim. This night is "a night of watching" marked by intense love, when the Lover leaves His hiding place and brings His beloved out of bondage to freedom.

ZEKHIRA - ACCEPTING GOD'S KINGSHIP AS A RESULT OF THE REDEMPTION FROM EGYPT

Such is not the case regarding the "zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim" required of us twice daily. Not only is it impractical to demand reliving yetzi'at Mitzrayim anew each day, but we have no interest in doing so. According to Rav Chaim, as cited earlier, this obligation constitutes part of the mitzva of Shema, serving the purpose of "kabbalat ol Malkhut Shamayim" - accepting the yoke of the Kingship of Heaven.

Acceptance of divine authority results directly from the Exodus, as stated in the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God who took you from the land of Egypt, from bondage."(Shemot 20:2). When we consider and assess the events of yetzi'at Mitzrayim, we cannot but conclude that the Exodus not only freed Am Yisrael from their suffering in Egypt, but also subjugated them to the Almighty.

When we awaken from the inebriation of the senses which we experience at the seder, the infinite distance between Benei Yisrael and their Redeemer once again emerges clearly. As our redemption mandates, we accept upon ourselves the yoke of God's Kingship together with the yoke of mitzvot. We reflect this awareness in our twice-daily recitation at the conclusion of the Shema:

"I am the Lord your God, who has taken you from the land of Egypt to be for you a God; I am the Lord your God."

In light of this discussion, then, "zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim" differs fundamentally from "sippur." It involves not the reliving of the past and its transplantation into the present, but rather leaving it in the past and remembering it therefrom. The purpose of "zekhirat yetzi'at Mitzrayim" is to extract the lessons of that historic event, rather than reconstructing it.

SUMMARY

As we have seen, "zekhira" and "sippur" constitute two entirely different mitzvot, lending opposite perspectives on yetzi'at Mitzrayim. "Sippur" is meant to revive the past and infuse it into the present, whereas "zekhira" serves to recall the past and to leave it there, while reaching the conclusions relevant to the present.

Nevertheless, these two mitzvot complement one another. One may not just tell the story and revive the powerful spiritual experience of yetzi'at Mitzrayim, only to ignore the required conclusions and fail to accept upon himself the yoke of God's Kingship. An entire community cannot maintain a profound sense of spirituality unless it is grounded in the acceptance of the divine imperative; it cannot sustain a religious experience which is divorced from the halakhic norm. Conversely, an acceptance of God's authority that is not firmly rooted in the majestic spiritual experience of the Shekhina's revelation suffers from spiritual aridity and quickly becomes emotionless rote. Only a blend of "sippur" and "zekhira" allows one to reach an acceptance of God's Kingship and His mitzvot which is accompanied with a profound and living spiritual experience. Only thereby can one properly combine genuine love and fear of the Almighty.