**"What is This Service to You?"**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l***

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At the end of *parashat Bo*, the Torah tells us about the obligation to bring the Pesach sacrifice, and adds: "You shall tell your son, on that day, saying: Because of this God acted for me, when I came out of Egypt" (*Shemot* 13:8). The Torah makes no mention of the question that prompts this response, nor can we know what the questioner was trying to get at. However, we do learn that part of the commandment of the Pesach sacrifice is to convey the commandment onward and to tell the accompanying story to one's children and future generations. The reason for this is clear: the Torah must continue to be passed down beyond the generation of those who left Egypt, and hence the story must be retold. It is for this reason that the Torah omits to mention any particular situation in which this response is elicited; rather, it is "on that day" – any regular, normal day that may be in the future.

Earlier, however, the Torah presents a different scenario, where the telling is prompted by a specific question: "It shall be, when your children say to you, 'What is this service to you?' You shall say, 'It is a Pesach offering to God...'" (*Shemot* 12:26-27). The Torah does not describe this question as arising out of nowhere, without any context; rather, it arises at a specific time: "It shall be, when you come to the land that the Lord will give you as He promised…" (12:25). From this perspective, the situation that the Torah is describing is familiar to us – not only from the time of *Bnei* *Yisrael's* first entry into the land, but also from the beginnings of modern Jewish settlement in Eretz Yisrael. The question that is posed here is as follows: in exile, the commandments were necessary for the purposes of creating a national identity and uniqueness that would protect us from assimilation, but why must they still be observed now that we are in Eretz Yisrael? The question is in essence a demand to abandon the mitzvot, because – as the questioners see it – these are necessary only for an external reason, to create a nation that is consolidated around something. Therefore, now that we have returned to our homeland, the *mitzvot* are no longer necessary. This approach is expressed in the famous saying of Achad Ha'am: "More than the Jews have kept the Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews."

However, the question may also be interpreted not as a casting off and abandonment, but rather in a less extreme – and hence, perhaps, more dangerous – sense. The question here does not mean to annul Divine service, but rather to question its particular form: "What is *this* service to you?" This demand is not for uprooting and rejecting, but rather for change and adaptation to reality. In this sense, we must understand exactly how the Torah responds to such a demand and how we are to contend with it.

On the surface, the Torah's reply seems unintelligible, unrelated to the question: "You shall say: It is a Pesach offering to God, Who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He struck the Egyptians and saved our children, and the nation kneeled and prostrated themselves." Upon closer examination, though, we find here a fundamental lesson.

The parents' answer relates to the commandment of "*Pesach dorot*," the Pesach sacrifice brought in future generations. The original Pesach sacrifice that the Jews brought in Egypt was quite different: they took a bunch of hyssop, spread the blood on their doorposts, took the sheep on the tenth day of the month, etc. All of these obligations are absent from the celebration of Pesach in later generations.

Thus, in this statement we are effectively telling our children that there is room for innovation and change where necessary, in accordance with a changing reality; the commandment of the Pesach sacrifice in fact symbolizes this change. However, we must also bear in mind the final words of the verse: "And the people kneeled and prostrated themselves." Change is essential, and the great Torah sages throughout history have applied Halakha to the situation of each generation. But all of this can take place only on condition that it is undertaken with complete commitment to Halakha and its obligations, rather than out of a desire to cast away or to submit oneself to fashionable philosophies.

There is a tendency among parents, when questioned by their children, to dismiss the question and to remain frozen and inflexible in their position. Yet sometimes there is an opposite tendency to submit altogether to the spirit of the times and to youthful impatience, leading to a shift in the very fundamentals for the sake of making life easier. The Torah, in its answer here to the children, attempts to indicate a middle path that we should observe in every generation. On the one hand, we must preserve the Torah from any attempt at uprooting commandments or fundamental principles; on the other hand, we must be open to change in certain points if it is truly necessary. The basis for any such decision must be the understanding that the Torah was given to us in order for us to observe it, not for our convenience, and any change must come from an appreciation and internalization of the greatness and depth of the Torah, as well as an absolute commitment to Torah and its values: "And the people kneeled and they prostrated themselves."

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