

The Meaning of “Chad Gadya”

Category: Holidays, Pesach

We all know the famous song from the Seder. But what in the world does it mean?

The Bizarre Song

Everyone has heard of the song, “Chad Gadya,” the song about the goat that father bought for two Zuzim.

It contains a whole series of events. The cat came along and ate the goat. (Okay, it’s a little strange that a cat is able to eat a goat, so maybe it’s referring to a big cat, or at least not a domesticated house cat, like a mountain lion. Or maybe it means a baby goat. But whatever.) The dog then came along and bit the cat, the stick came along and hit the dog, the fire came and burnt the stick, the water came and put out the fire, the ox came and drank the water, and the butcher came and slaughtered the ox.

But then comes an interesting surprise: the Angel of Death comes along and kills the butcher, and the song ends with, “And G-d came and slaughtered the Angel of Death”— in the end, everyone ultimately gets what they deserve.

(In the Chabad Haggados, “Chad Gadya” actually does not appear. However, the Rebbe says in a Sicha that “even though we don’t verbally recite this composition, its concept remains meaningful...” (Hisvaduyos 5747, Vol. II pg. 689).)

Now, Jews have been singing this composition on Passover Night for at least 600 years and perhaps more. So it’s clear that “Chad Gadya” is not just a happy little children’s rhyme in which the kids learn about a father who bought a goat for two coins. And if that be the case, then the real question is, what is this song supposed to really tell us?

At first glance, the lesson of “Chad Gadya” is that there is a Master to this House and that nothing happens by chance. But if that were the real lesson here, then we have many verses from Tanach, sayings of the Sages, and Chasidic stories to teach us that same lesson!

Clearly, there is something deeper in this song. And indeed, some explain that this song is there to tell us the story of the Egyptian Exile from beginning to end by means of allegory. So here's what "Chad Gadya" would really mean, then:

The "goat" that father bought for two Zuzim—who would that be? When we look into the saga of the Jewish Nation's descent to Egypt, we find that the "goat" symbolizes Yosef. When his brothers sold him as a slave in Egypt, we are told that they took Yosef's cloak, slaughtered a goat and dipped the cloak in its blood and sent it to their father Yaakov. So the goat evokes Yosef.

The "father" is Yaakov, who gave his son Yosef a cloak of the value of "two coins."

The cat is an animal that has a predatory side, and the way a cat hunts (or the way at least some species of cat hunt) is that it lays a trap for its prey. And so the "cat" in "Chad Gadya" symbolizes the brothers of Yosef, who "killed" him when he was "caught" by them and sold as a slave. They "swallowed" him. As Rashi (Bereishis 43:30) explains, Binyomin named one of his sons Bela because his brother Yosef was "nivla"—swallowed up—"among the nations." So right there, you have the cat "swallowing" the goat.

Next comes the "dog," which symbolizes Egypt. How do we know that Egypt is compared to a dog? Because at the Exodus from Egypt, the Torah tells us, "And to all the Children of Israel, no dog shall whet its tongue." We might also say that G-d informed Moshe that not only would the dogs not whet their tongues against the Jewish Nation, but the big miracle would be that neither did the two-legged dogs whet their tongues against the Jewish Nation—not bothering them when they left Egypt. And thus, with regards to the Egyptian Exile, the "dog" bit the "cat," the descendants of those who sold Yosef.

The "stick" is the Staff of G-d with which Moshe hit the dog—meaning, hitting the Egyptians with the Ten Plagues.

The "fire" symbolizes the Giving of the Torah, as the Torah (Shmos 19:18) tells us, "And the entire Mount Sinai smoked because the L-rd had descended upon it in fire," and again (Devarim 5:4), "Face to face, the L-rd spoke with you at the mountain out of the midst of the fire."

So this fire of the Giving of the Torah burned the "stick"—meaning, the event of

the Giving of the Torah was so colossal that all the plagues and miracles that had occurred before it were dwarfed by it. It was specifically the Giving of the Torah that was the event that lent legitimacy and authority to the leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu; it was specifically because of the Giving of the Torah that the Jewish Nation now knew for a fact that Moshe was indeed speaking in the name of G-d. As Maimonides writes about Moshe Rabbeinu: “One who believes [in the legitimacy of Moshe Rabbeinu only] because of signs has doubt in his heart” (Maimonides, Yesodei HaTorah 8:1).

Next comes “water,” and water symbolizes the Torah itself, as the Prophet Yeshayahu (55:1) says, “Ho! All who thirst, go to water!” And as the Tanya (Chap. 4) explains, “And why is the Torah symbolized by water? Just as water descends from a high place to a low place, so too did the Torah descend from her place of honor... etc.”

So the Torah, the “water,” put out the fire. That means that while the Giving of the Torah was a special event, it was still just a one-time event. As we know, there will never be another Giving of the Torah. But as for the Torah itself, the Torah is eternal, with Jews studying the Torah every day in every place in the world—and it is specifically that fact that gives Jews the strength to live their daily lives. In other words, we Jews do not draw energy from nostalgia over the fact that there once was a Giving of the Torah—instead, the study of the Torah each day is a new Giving of the Torah each day, with the “waters” of the Torah being that which gives us energy.

Then we come to the ox. And in the Exodus from Egypt story, what does the ox remind us? So in the Book of Tehilim (106:20), we read: “They exchanged their glory for the likeness of an ox eating grass.” But it’s interesting to note that when King David relates the Exodus saga in a long chapter of Tehilim, he first says (verse 19), “They made a calf in Horeb and prostrated themselves to a molten image” and only then explains that it was in “the likeness of an ox.”

So what does that mean? It means that the “ox”—the Sin of the Golden Calf—“drank the water.” In other words, because of that sin, Moshe Rabbeinu broke the Tablets on which were engraved the Ten Commandments of the Torah—and if not for the fact that G-d had mercy on the Jewish Nation and gave them a second set of Tablets, the “ox” would have “drunk” the “water,” meaning that the Torah would have been lost to Jewish Nation forever, G-d forbid.

After the ox in “Chad Gadya” comes the shochet, the kosher butcher. So in “Chad Gadya,” the shochet is Moshe Rabbeinu, who came down from Mt. Sinai (after he broke the Luchos) and incinerated the Calf and ground it to dust—he “slaughtered” the “ox” and left nothing of it, thus rescuing the goat, which is the Jewish Nation.

The end of Chad Gadya brings us the unfortunate end of the shochet too. Along comes the Malach HaMaves, the Angel of Death, and slaughters the slaughterer; Moshe Rabbeinu didn’t merit entering the Land of Israel despite his mighty desire and many entreaties. Despite that, he died in the desert—for which the Angel of Death (by G-d’s command, of course) was responsible.

But at the very end of “Chad Gadya,” we recite how G-d Himself comes along and kills the Angel of Death. And thus, on the night of Passover, after we prepare the Cup of Elijah, the Herald of the Redemption, and open the door for him, we pray and hope that G-d come along and lay death itself to rest by “slaughtering” the Angel of Death—with the fulfillment of the promise, “He has concealed death forever” (Yeshayahu 25:8), with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!

Happy holiday!