

Acharon Shel Pesach - The Fatherly Voice

When a Rabbi pushed off the end of Passover by a day, his entire community listened without question. Why?

One Act of Kindness

Over two hundred years ago, on the last day of Pesach in the central synagogue of Prague, the rabbi got on the podium and made an announcement. "This year, we made a mistake in the calculations, and we began Pesach a day early. Therefore, tomorrow will still be the holiday, and we must abstain from Chametz."

The community was shocked by the bizarre announcement, but they knew better than to question their esteemed rabbi. His name was Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, the author of the Nodah Biyehudah and one of the leading rabbinic figures of his generation. That night, instead of taking out the chametz pots and pans and buying bread, they welcomed the final day of Pesach, once again.

What was behind his announcement?

To understand the story, we need to go back thirty years, to a cold and windy night in Prague when the rabbi was on his way home from the synagogue. Despite the cold weather, he noticed a child, a gentile, crying in the street.

“Why do you cry?” asked the rabbi.

“My mother died,” the child explained, “and my father remarried to a cruel woman. Each day, she sends me to sell the bread my father bakes, and if I don’t sell the full stock, she beats me and deprives me of food and sleep.

“Today,” continued the boy, “a terrible thing happened. I sold off all the bread, but then the money was stolen from me, and I am afraid to return home.”

The compassionate rabbi was moved. He brought the boy home, fed him, and gave him the full amount that was stolen from him.

Thirty years later, on one of the nights of Chol Hamoed Pesach, a non-Jew knocked on the rabbi’s door and asked to speak with him urgently. He said that he had an urgent message for the rabbi that could not be delayed.

Rabbi Landau ushered him into his private study, and the man turned to him and said, “Rabbi, do you recognize me?”

Rabbi Landau was confused. He didn’t remember him at all.

“I was the boy to whom you showed kindness on that rainy night thirty years ago.”

He had an urgent message for the rabbi. One of the chief pastors of the city, a virulent anti-Semite, had called the bakers of the city for a meeting. In two days, he told them, Passover would be over. It would be the only time a year that Jews purchased bread from non-Jewish vendors. He instructed all the

bakers to poison the bread; they would thereby, in one shot, rid themselves of Prague's "Jewish problem."

"When I heard about his terrible plan," the non-Jew explained, "I remembered how thirty years ago, when I sat in the rain afraid to return home, you took pity on me and even gave me the money I had lost. I feel obligated to return the favor by informing you of the plan. But please don't tell anyone that you know that the bread is poisoned. They will easily point their finger at me."

Rabbi Landau thanked him, and the man quickly left the house.

On the night Passover ended, the bakers couldn't understand why the Jews weren't coming to purchase their bread. Instead, the police raided the bakeries, and fed some of the bread to a dog. Immediately, the dog went into convulsions and soon died. The police confiscated all the bread and imprisoned the bakers who had participated in the scheme.

Rabbinic Authority

This is an amazing story, with an amazing lesson. A single act of kindness to a young child resulted in the salvation of the entire community.

But there is something bizarre. The rabbi announced that they had miscalculated Passover, and everybody listened!

True, in the 1700s, people didn't necessarily have pocket calendars, but still, it was an entire community of laymen and scholars, and they had all just celebrated eight days of Passover. Yet they all accepted his judgement without question!

How does a rabbi have such strong authority?

On Pesach, as on other holidays, we recite the Hallel. This prayer is one of the seven rabbinic mitzvot. There are seven unique commandments which the rabbis enacted over the generations; for example, the mitzvah to light chanukah candles. It is not a commandment of the Torah, because the story of Chanukah took place after the Torah was written. The same is true of the holiday of Purim, Shabbat candles, and so on.

Before we do any of these Mitzvos, we say a blessing: “Blessed are You...Who commanded us to light the Shabbat candles,” or, “the chanukah candles,” and so on.

The Talmud asks a basic question regarding the Chanukah blessing (Shabbat 23a), “Where did He command us?”

We declare that G-d commanded us to do those Mitzvos, but the Torah contains no such commandment?

The Talmud answers by citing a verse from the Torah portion of Haazinu (32:7): “Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will tell it over to you.” This verse teaches us to obey our parents, as well as the prophets and elders of every generation.

Moses’ Instruction

The importance of listening to our leaders and parents can also be learned from two incidents that took place during the Exodus from Egypt.

When Moses first came to Pharaoh and said, “Let my people go,” he asked for just three days in the desert; he didn’t ask for permission to leave for good. When they finally left Egypt after all the plagues, Pharaoh held onto the idea that it would be only for three days, and he sent officers along to ensure that the people returned in time.

When the officers realized that the Jews had no intentions of returning, they raced back to Egypt to inform Pharaoh that the people had escaped. Pharaoh immediately recruited his people to chase after the Jews and return them to Egypt by force.

At that moment, G-d spoke to Moses and said, “Speak to people of Israel and have them return towards Egypt.” As Rashi explains, G-d wanted Pharaoh to think that the Jews had lost their way, which would encourage him to chase after them.

Let’s think about what happened here. The People of Israel had finally left Egypt, the place of their enslavement and persecution. And suddenly, Moses is telling them to return to Egypt! The natural reaction should have been to object! Yet we don’t find anything of that sort. Moses commands them to retrace their steps, and nobody protests! Imagine Jews attempting to escape Russia or Hitler, and someone tells them, “Let’s turn back.”

Yet, despite the danger, the People of Israel followed Moses’ instructions and went back towards Egypt. And in the end, they experienced the Splitting of the Sea, where their belief in G-d and in Moses was reinforced.

When they withstood that test, they understood that everything

Moses commanded was actually the will of G-d. That was the beginning of the Jewish tradition to follow the instructions of the sages, prophets and rabbis, down to our generation.

His Father's Voice

Something else took place during the Exodus story as well.

A year before the Exodus, on the date of Passover, G-d revealed Himself to Moses at the Burning Bush. (Seder Olam Rabbah). The Midrash says, "Rabbi Yehoshua Hakohen bar Nechemia said: When G-d revealed Himself to Moses, Moses was a prophetic novice. G-d said, 'If I reveal Myself to him in a strong voice I will frighten him, with a low voice I will sour him on prophecy.' What did He do? He revealed Himself to him with the voice of his father. Moses said, 'Here I am! What does father ask?' G-d said, 'I am not your father, rather I am the G-d of your father.'" (Shemos Rabba 3:1).

This Midrash tells us something amazing. G-d didn't want to reveal Himself with a voice that was too loud or too quiet, so He chose the voice of Amram, Moses' father. There is a profound message here. The voice of G-d comes to us through our father and our mother. They are the ones who pass on to us the traditions of Judaism. As the Torah tells us at the end of Devarim, "Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will tell it over to you." Listen to the voice of your parents and your elders; they will bring G-d's voice to you.

The Jewish nation is known as the People of the Book. This is, actually, a compliment that we received from other religions. The people of Israel are actually more proud of the fact that we

are the People of Tradition, who have remained proudly Jewish in merit of our traditions.

We are now about to recite Yizkor. Our parents are the ones who passed down our traditions to us. Even if it seems that we are more traditional than them, that itself is in their merit. They gave us a love for Judaism and a desire to grow in our observance. Now is the time to thank them for their gift of Jewish tradition.