

# Pesach Appeal: Compassion

- Nisson Shulman.

Jews are Rahmanim, bayshanim gomlei hasadim, two of the three are descriptions of our compassion. Pesach, at the birth of our people, it is appropriate to care for fellow Jews and fellow men. That is why Maos Hitim starts the holiday. And that is expressed in the Midrash about the Yam Suf, where the angels were silenced because "My creatures are drowning and you are singing?"

Pesach, beginning with Maos Hitim, is frequently a time for appeals for help through our tzedaka funds and for many other causes. This is an appeal for help for fellow Jews. The specific cause was omitted at the end, for each rabbi will apply it to the needs of his community. It was originally delivered on the seventh day of Pesach but would apply to other days as well.

## COMPASSION

Gemara Megila 10b

“Amar rav Yohanan mipney ma lo neemar ki tov behodaah zu?” (“Hodu laadoshem ki leolam hasdo” (Divrey Hayamim ii:20): Because the Lord does not take joy in the destruction of His creatures, even if they are wicked; As Rav Yohanan interpreted: What is the meaning of the verse “They did not approach each other the whole night through? The angels of heaven wanted to recite the song (they normally sang, “Vekara ze el ze, kadosh kadosh etc.”), whereupon the Almighty stilled them, ‘My creatures are drowning in the sea and you will sing to My glory?’”

That is why we sing a half Hallel, a muted Hallel, during the last six days of Passover. For the final destruction of Egypt by drowning in the sea was unnecessary. It came because of Pharaoh's excessive stubbornness. Even though that was the moment we became assured that we were truly free and would nevermore return as slaves to Egypt, nevertheless, our deliverance had come earlier, and if Pharaoh had not chased after us we would have been just as free without all this loss of life. So those who were actually delivered, we, may sing. The angels may not. And even we mute our song during this last six days of the holiday.

The same idea is to be found in a Midrash explaining why we only call one person to the aliya of the tochecha, the curses with which we are warned in Behukotai and later in the portion of Reeh.

Midrash Rabbah, Reeh, IV

“Thus have our sages expounded. One does not interrupt the curses with an aliya and beracha, but one reader reads them all. Why do we not interrupt the curses? Said Rabbi Joshua in the name of Resh Lakish, because the Lord said ‘It is not fitting that my children should be cursed while I should be blessed’.”

Such thoughts and words left an indelible mark upon the Jewish personality. We have learned to share the sorrow and the tragedy of our fellow human beings in a way that no other nation has learned to do. These words are embedded in the conscience and consciousness of our people, giving us no rest as long as we see tears of sorrow, need, hurt, sickness, oppression, injustice.

Whenever we hear the sounds of sadness, we hear the bat kol, the heavenly voice within us, saying, “Maasey yaday tovim bayam, veatem omrim shira?” “My creatures are drowning and you sing?”

This sensitivity to the suffering of others which is characteristic of the Jew caused our sages to describe the Jewish character as “Rahmanim, bayshanim, gomley hasadim”. Notice that two out of three descriptive phrases deal with acts of loving-kindness, that we are compassionate, modest, and doers of acts of loving-kindness.

Since our compassion has been extended to all people on earth, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi described our people as the beating heart of humanity, “Lev haenushiyut”.

There is a beautiful Midrash about Jewish leadership, which declares that leadership is awarded from on high, only after the individual to be elevated has been tested in small things; The Midrash proceeds to give two examples. The first is Moses who was tested as shepherd of Jethro’s flocks. The Midrash tells the story of the little lamb which broke away from the flock, and Moses chased it through the desert and finally caught up with it at a stream, drinking thirstily. “O, little lamb”, said Moses, “if I had known that you were thirsty I would have carried you to the water”. “Such a person”, said the Lord, “is worthy to become the shepherd of My people”. According to the Midrash the very same test was given King David before he was chosen to be the King of Israel as well as the symbol of kingdom, the house from which the Meshiach would come. He too was a shepherd, and defended his flock with his life, first from the lion and then the bear. He too was worthy to be a shepherd of Israel.

Pesach is a national holiday. None of our holidays is more concerned with the birth and life of our nation than this. Yet, even on this holiday, or perhaps especially on this holiday, we are concerned with the needs of others: especially on this national holiday, because that is the Jewish national characteristic. That is why an appeal for our fellow Jews should rightly come on Pesach. And that is why our people are considered worthy as we do worthily: as we reach out to help our fellow Jews and our fellow human beings.

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)