

suggesting: that all reference to the rebuilding of the *Bais HaMikdash* be removed from our prayer books; and that *Tisha B'Av*, our national day of mourning and yearning for the return of the Temple, be amended. Tradition, ritual, history, remembrance are terms which the *ben rasha* wants extirpated from the Jewish lexicon. I think, if he would have his way, he would do away with the term "Jewish." It is too exclusive.

The father is confronted with a problem. On the one hand, he is happy that his entire family managed to come to the *Seder*. On the other hand, his errant son, who has allowed the outside influences to permeate his mind, is spewing forth his diatribe against religion, a diatribe which is really an expression of his own self-loathing but, nonetheless, disturbing and exerting a negative influence on the rest of the family.

We must also take in consideration that this is a *father* responding to his *son*. As disappointed as the father is with his son's derisiveness, he is still his son whom he loves. A parent may never lose sight of the painful truth. It is not easy for the father to tolerate his son's insolence, but at least he came to the *Seder*. Thus, to lash out and give his son the tongue dressing that he deserves would only serve to alienate the son even more. To ignore his criticism would be worse. It would give the appearance of capitulation, of acquiescence.

Therefore, we blunt his teeth by diminishing the potential harm his words can have. In response to the son's shameful denunciation of our tradition, his belittling of the *Passover Seder* commemorating the slavery and eventual liberation from Egypt, the father focuses -- not on replying to his critique-- but rather, on showing him what he really is. He explains that this is not work, but ritual: not simply a commemoration, but a celebration of how far we have come from those days of bondage: a time to pay gratitude to Hashem, Who has been with us through thick and thin. His father tells him that, by his attitude and actions, he has removed himself from the ranks of those who should celebrate: "It is not the ritual and tradition that is flawed; it is you my son, who has distanced himself from Hashem and His People." In order to celebrate freedom one must experience the bondage and persecution -- or, at least, empathize with those who did. To deride those who maintain their conviction is to reveal one's true, inner flawed self.

The father sees his son in his unembellished debasement. Covering up will be to no avail. His son talks like an assimilated Jew who has turned his back on the religion for which his ancestors had died. A father, however, is a father. To let his son's diatribe go unchecked might negatively influence the rest of the family. To come down hard on his son might push him over the edge, so that the father will lose him completely. At least he showed up at the *Seder*. Next year, he might not come altogether.

The only option is *hakheh es shinav*, "Blunt his teeth"; "hit back," but not hard; stun him, take out some of his sting; humble him -- but do not destroy him. "Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed." Redemption is a process. First, one must be a slave, feel the pain, and maintain his

conviction to be deserving of redemption. The one who denies the bondage has no business celebrating the redemption. He wanted no part of the travail; why should he enjoy the salvation?

*Hakheh es shinav*, "Blunt his teeth." What do his teeth have to do with it? When a person smiles, his teeth are revealed. When a person is happy, satisfied, his teeth show. Teeth represent attitude. The wicked son cannot leave the table feeling that he bested his father: that smug feeling must be wiped off his face -- otherwise, there is no chance of his return; plus, he will leave a harmful impression on the rest of the family. His father had to blunt his teeth --get rid of his smile, explain to him that he has not only removed himself from *Yiddishkeit*, he has also destroyed his future generations. They will not ever come to a Seder! If he wants to express his self-loathing in public, he may not be allowed to leave with a smile, indicating that he had succeeded. Perhaps if he leaves with his teeth blunted, i.e. without a smile, he will confront the truth: he is his own biggest enemy.

### Va'ani Tefillah

השיבנו אבינו לתורתך

Hashiveinu Avinu I'Sorasecha

The word *hashiveinu*, return us, implies that we are returning to a place or to a concept to which we had once connected. When were we connected to the Torah to which we ask to be returned? *Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl*, explains that, prior to birth, the fetus studies the entire Torah with a Heavenly Angel. When the infant emerges from the womb, the angel strikes him over his mouth, and everything that he has learned is immediately forgotten. Thus, we return to the Torah, which we actually had once mastered. Alternatively, every *neshamah*, soul, stood at *Har Sinai* and heard the entire Torah. We ask Hashem to return us to the state of Torah knowledge we experienced at Sinai.

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by

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## Parashas Bo

תשע"ז

פרשת בא

החודש הזה לכם ראש חדשים

This month shall be for you the beginning of the months. (12:2)

Time is our most precious Divine gift. Time is life. When we give someone our time, we are giving him a part of our life. The time we give up is a part of our life, which we can no longer retrieve. Thus, it is best that we take great care in how we spend that time. The quantity and quality of time we spend with our children manifests how much we value our relationship with them. If our relationship is all about talk, but does not involve our input of time, it is a sad commentary on that relationship.

As *Yidden*, we must view time not, merely from an objective perspective, but rather, a subjective perspective, as well. We fill time with meaning; otherwise, it goes by and is wasted. We have the opportunity to elevate time when we use it appropriately. We can sanctify time by using it for *devarim she'b'kedushah*, holy observances. Therefore, the first *mitzvah* with which we were commanded as we prepared to leave Egypt was the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush HaChodesh*, Sanctifying the New Moon. This is the process in which we declare a certain day to be *Rosh Chodesh*. At the beginning of the month, the calendar year was determined by the *bais din*, Jewish court. The decision rendered by the *bais din* determined when the various *Yamim Tovim*, Festivals, occur. This is unlike *Shabbos*, which occurs every seven days, regardless of the calendar date. *Shabbos* is determined by Hashem; the Festivals, by man.

*Sforno* observes the distinct connection between *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Egyptian exodus, with the ensuing freedom from slavery, and the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush HaChodesh*, sanctifying time *vis-à-vis* the new moon. Slaves have no clear perception of time, since it does not belong to them. They work for a master. Thus, their time is his. Only a free man who has limited control over his time can spend his time properly. He may, therefore, sanctify it. The concepts of freedom and the sanctity of time go hand in hand, for they define the quality of one's life.

Of all of the "things" that Hashem created, only *Shabbos* represents the sanctity of time that was blessed by Hashem. *Shabbos* thereby became an experience in time permeated by Heavenly sanctity. The following discussion between two *Chassidic* Masters underscores this idea. The *Kotzker Rebbe* and the *Vorker Rebbe* were debating the holiness of certain *mitzvos*. The *Vorker* maintained that the *mitzvah* of *Succah* has greater sanctity than the Four Species. We are busy preparing for their use, purchasing the finest, most pleasant, perfect and beautiful species; once they are used, however, the holiness departs from

them. When a Jew sits within the confines of the *Succah*, he is ensconced in *kedushah*, holiness; he is surrounded by the *mitzvah*. Thus, *Succah* should be considered the greatest *mitzvah*. The *Kotzker* countered with the *mitzvah* of *Shabbos*. A Jew can leave the *Succah*, and the holiness no longer encompasses him. A Jew, however, cannot walk out of *Shabbos*. The sanctity of time is the ultimate sanctity, since it embraces him wherever he goes. Life is measured in time; therefore, time is life. A life whose "time" is holy is a holy life. A life whose "time" has been wasted is essentially without meaning and is of limited value. Hashem grants life; who are we to waste it?

והיה כי יאמרו אליכם בניכם מה העבודה הזאת לכם?

And it shall be that when your children say to you, "What is this service to You?" (12:26)

The *Mechilta* considers this to be the question presented by the *ben rasha*, wicked son. He has removed Hashem from the service, refusing to recognize that what the rest of the family is doing is Divinely ordained. The wicked son has essentially removed himself from the community. This is a common excuse: "I do not have to do this, because I am not Orthodox." Being Orthodox is not a choice. Reneging Orthodoxy is also not a choice. One either follows the law, or he does not. Excuses to justify one's errant behavior, to assuage one's guilt, are meaningless. On the other hand, the fact that the wicked son attends the *Seder* and interacts with his family -- regardless of the nature and tenor of his comments - is in and of itself a major step in the right direction.

The four sons and their questions are a highlight of the *Seder* experience and offer much material for homiletic exposition. One of the more insightful interpretations, attributed to the *Lubavitcher Rebbe*, *Horav Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, zl*, has profound meaning today. The *Rebbe* suggested that the four sons, in fact, represent the four generations of the American experience. The wise son represents our European roots, the generation of the grandparents who came to this country, their European garb and their way of life and burning idealism still intact. They were pious, displayed a love of learning, and possessed a profound knowledge of tradition, but were a bit too naive. They did not realize the spiritual vacuum which existed here.

The members of the first generation which was raised in America's "melting pot" soon rejected their parents' customs, way of life and adherence to tradition. Their son considered himself a new person in a new country, forging for himself a

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new tradition. This son, whom we will call the *ben rasha*, resented his parents, considering them odd for not adopting the American way of life, which was clearly more “satisfying” both culturally and economically. Indeed, many of these first generation sons amassed great fortunes, which they used to build their personal empires devoid of Torah, *mitzvos* and respect for tradition. Their goal was to distance themselves as far as possible from the *shtetl* by assimilating totally into American culture.

Their son was confused. At family gatherings, and also when he went to the nursing home where they “kept” his grandparents, he saw individuals who looked and acted diametrically different from his parents. On Shabbos, when *Zaidy* was there, his parents put on a show. Sadly, only *Zaidy* could make *Kiddush*. Dad could hardly read, and “son” could not even decipher the letters. So, this son just simply asks, *Ma zos?* “What is this?” He is unable to figure out why his father and grandfather are at such odds with one another. It certainly is having a harmful effect on him and his relationship with Judaism.

It is, thus, no wonder that his son, the fourth generation, is the child who does not even know what to ask. He never had the advantage of seeing his great-grandparents. They were gone and buried by the time he appeared on the scene. Their pictures were even gone! He knows only his self-loathing, assimilated grandfather, who cringes at the mention of tradition. His religiously-confused father is pathetic. So, what is he to do? He is unable to ask. This is America of today, where children wonder whose birthday it is when they see their great-grandmother light *Shabbos* candles. How sad that this is so true.

The story gets worse: There is a fifth child who does not even know that it is “Passover,” or what this festival represents; or yet worse: He does not even know what Judaism is. The wicked son may have serious religion issues, but at least he has shown up at the *Seder*. The fifth son is the one whom we must seek out before it is too late.

Why is the wicked son at the *Seder*? Is it guilt? Perhaps it is his conscience speaking to him. The other day, I had occasion to speak with a man who, for all intents and purposes, fits the description of the *ben rasha*. Despite his bitterness, we happen to be friendly. I asked him, “Fred, why do you attend the *Seder* every year at your brother’s home? After all, you are far from observant. You are constantly putting down ritual and tradition. Whenever you find a degrading article or hear of a disgraceful incident concerning an Orthodox Jew, you get on your, ‘I told you so,’ stand. Why do you attend the *Seder*?”

His response shocked me. “I come because I want them to know that they are to blame for what I have become.” He then rambled on with his usual litany, with his laundry list of complaints against the observant Jews. Obviously, it is a way of justifying his behavior, but it is a perspective which we should not ignore.

*Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl*, spoke every *Shabbos* at the Zichron Moshe *shul*. One *Shabbos*, he banged on the *shtender* as he cried out, “Jews of Zichron Moshe! One day when we come before the Heavenly Tribunal, we will be called to task for *chilul Shabbos* and shaving with a razor!” The assembled crowd was shocked. The Jews of Zichron Moshe were devout and observant. The mere mention of such sins in connection with these people was ludicrous. Then an explanation followed. *Rav Sholom* and his close friend, *Horav Ezra Barzal, zl*, heard

concerning a certain barber in the area that he used a razor when shaving his customers. They could not prevent the customers from doing so, but they could speak with the offender. The man was impossible. An immigrant from Eastern Europe who grew up with little religion, he was not prepared to risk his livelihood for some “archaic” laws. The *rabbanim* were relentless, visiting him weekly until he acquiesced to their requests. A number of months went by and, suddenly, word reached them that the barber was back to being open on *Shabbos* and using a razor for shaving. They returned to the barber shop and asked for an explanation.

“It was one year after my father had died, and I wanted to say *Kaddish*. I obtained a *kippah* and went to the Zichron Moshe *shul* where there is never a shortage of *minyanim*. I entered the *shul* to see a sign emblazoned with the words: It is prohibited to speak during prayer and reading of the Torah. Right in front of the sign a money exchange is going on; people are discussing the going rate of exchange for various currencies – and this is all taking place while *davening* is going on in the various rooms! You *rabbanim* are coming to rebuke me – what about them? (Obviously, those who were praying were not speaking, but a person sees what he wants to see. Likewise, the wicked son who attends the *Seder* and wants to blame everybody but himself for his spiritual downfall has a jaundiced eye on religion; he seeks any way to justify his errant behavior.)

*Rav Sholom* continued, “Now, you know why we will have to give an accounting for *chilul Shabbos* and shaving with a razor!” We must be acutely aware that he who wants an excuse for turning his back on *Yiddishkeit* will find it. We, however, should not make it easy for him to find it.

**הגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ד' לי בצאתי ממצרים**

**And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, “It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt.” (13:8)**

As presented in the *Haggadah*, this *pasuk* is both the response to the *ben rasha*, wicked son, and to the lack of questioning by the *she'eino yodea lishol*, child who does not realize or know that there is much to question concerning the *Pesach* observance. The parents of such a child must endeavor to pique his curiosity. They have an obligation to guide and teach him that he is not like everyone else. He has a destiny, a historic mission, to carry on the legacy of the Exodus and its seminal standing as the critical commencement of our becoming a nation. Our children must know that they are part of a historical continuance, a nation whose mission in life supersedes that of all others.

Interestingly, the response -- or lesson in Jewish history which we convey to the *she'eino yodea lishol* -- is similar to the one which we give to the *rasha*, wicked son. We tell him that had he been in Egypt and scoffed at the commandments, he would have had no part in the Exodus. Why do the son who knows nothing and the one who cares about nothing receive the same response? Simply, the *Baal Haggadah* is intimating to us that, if we have a child who is uninitiated in Torah, who is unschooled and unsophisticated in the Jewish religion, we must open up to him and teach him. Otherwise, he will end up on a downward spiral and end up being a *rasha*. One either rejects, or one never learns. In any event, his lack of knowledge can be

spiritually devastating.

In the sequence presented by the *Baal Haggadah*, the wicked son, due to his spiritual alienation, should have been the last son, following after the son who knows not what to ask; surprisingly, instead, he follows immediately after the wise son. Why are they together? Why grant the wicked son such a prominent position?

Apparently, the *chacham*, wise son, belongs next to his errant brother who now carries the title of wicked son. A wise man is one who cares about others. He who hoards his wisdom and refuses to share it with those who are not as fortunate is no different than a wealthy miser who benefits from his wealth.

The *Tzadik, Horav Mendel, zl, m'Vorka* teaches, “When does one know that he is close to Hashem? When you see that, you are close to people! Go out to the street and see if you feel close to every person you see. If you care about them all, then you are close to Hashem. If, however, when you walk the streets, you cast a jaundiced eye on every person, or you have something negative to say about every other fellow, then you are not secure in your relationship with Hashem.”

When Bisyah, Pharaoh’s daughter, saw an infant in a basket within the reeds, she remarked to his cries, *Mi'yaldei ha'Ivrim zeh*, “He is from the Jewish infants.” Why did the Torah not simply write: “This is a Jewish child”? Why did the Torah include all the Jewish infants in the phrase? Possibly, it is because when one Jew cries, they all cry. We care for one another. Caring about our fellow Jew is (or should be) an inherently Jewish character trait.

A distraught father came to *Horav Yitzchak m'Vorka* and cried, “*Rebbe*, I cannot take it any longer. My son is gravely ill. For all I know, by now he could be on his death bed. Please *Rebbe*, pray that he recuperates and lives.”

The *Vorkar* (as he was reverently called) closed his eyes and began to sway back and forth. A few minutes went by; the *Rebbe* opened up his eyes, looked at the father and said, “I regret that I was unsuccessful in my entreaty. I tried, but the Heavenly gates are sealed. My prayers were unable to penetrate the Heavens. Quickly, return home. You are needed there.” The father bowed his head and began to weep profusely, but what more could he do? He had prayed; he had gone to the holy *Vorkar Rebbe*, who had also prayed. Heaven had more or less given its response. He returned to his coach and left for home. A half hour went by, and he heard the sound of a wagon quickly approaching. He turned around to see the holy *Vorkar* coming up behind him. He stopped his coach, allowing the *Rebbe* to catch up. The *Rebbe* alighted from his wagon and said, “Wait here; I have something to say to you.”

The *Rebbe* motioned the man to sit down with him on the side of the road. The *Rebbe* looked at the man and said, “When you left, I was engulfed with sadness. It broke my heart that I was unable to help you, to in some way ease your plight. I then realized that while I could not affect a cure for your son’s illness, I could at least cry together with you! This is why I came.” The *Rebbe* proceeded to weep incessantly.

The scene was heart rending: the holy *Rebbe* sitting on the ground next to the distraught father, sitting together crying mournfully. Ironically, the father realized that the *Rebbe* was crying with greater intensity than even he was crying. This motivated the father to cry even harder. A short while went by, and the *Rebbe* motioned to the father to stop crying. “Go home. Your son has been cured. The illness has turned around. Your

son will live.”

“What happened?” asked the father. “The Heavens opened up to our tears.”

**הגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ד' לי בצאתי ממצרים**

**And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, “It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt.” (13:8)**

In the *Haggadah*, this is the father’s response to his errant son, the *ben rasha*, wicked son. He makes a derisive statement, and his father responds with a litany underscoring his historical connection with *yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Egyptian exodus. Does the response really clarify anything in the wicked son’s mind? For that matter, is the wicked son really seeking an answer? When someone reaches the point of derision, nothing anyone says really matters to him. He is interested only in “hit and run,” ridiculing and skewering the subject of his derision and leaving, supposedly satisfied that he has shot his bullets. I think that we misunderstand the *ben rasha*, wicked son. First of all, the mere fact that he attends the *Seder* with the rest of the family is in and of itself an indication of his troubled life. His animus might be expressed toward the religion from which he alienated himself and against his family, but his true loathing is for himself. He has great difficulty reconciling himself with his errant behavior, so he lashes out at those who had the courage to maintain their commitment to the way of life and conviction that had always been a part of their lives.

What aspect of his question defines him as a *rasha*? How does the father’s response change anything? His son continues to loath. The wicked son tells his father: “You are wrong. Why spend an entire evening focusing on the past? Memories are wonderful if one has nothing else. What about the present? Think of today, not days gone by. Times have changed. We are no longer slaves in Egypt; we are free men. Archaic ideas are out of touch with today’s progressive society.” Little does he know that it is those “archaic” ideas that enhance the present. They set the foundation for a sustainable future. Regrettably, one cannot argue with the *ben rasha* on this level. The only way he will ultimately understand his father’s position is if he sees personally the fallacy of his beliefs, and, in contrast, the verity of his father’s way of life.

One thing is clear: the *ben rasha* wants nothing to do with tradition. Torah and ritual are out of touch with “today.” He is concerned with how the outside world of today views him. If his appearance stands out, if his way of life is different than the prevailing culture adopted by society in order to satisfy their desires, then he wants no part of it. In short, he is an insecure person and being different exacerbates his insecurity. He seems clueless concerning ritual and tradition, referring to them as hard work. To him, *mitzvah* observance is work, and he conceives what Hashem demands of us as subjugation, no different from the slave labor to which we were subjected in Egypt.

What a veritable characterization of the Jew who has alienated himself from all forms of tradition. The secular-oriented Jew who has divorced himself from tradition views ritual as demanding work, impeding his freedom. I recently came across an article by an outspoken critic of Orthodoxy,