

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Pesach 2020, Day 1: “Praiseworthy Criticism”

Chag sameach. First, I’d like to remind everyone that we’ve prepared information to help you with your at-home davening on Pesach – what to say and when, with page numbers from the Artscroll siddur. You can find a link to this information on our shul website: on the Pesach page, as well as on the Rabbi’s Desk page. We also sent the link in a special email, and it’s in this week’s Pesach Newsletter.

Pesach is supposed to be a time spent with family and friends, sitting together at the seder and enjoying the holiday with others. Instead, we’re forced to stay where we are, sometimes alone. We’re feeling anxious and wondering, what is going on? What could our Pesach celebration mean this year? Do we feel like people who are free? Or are we back in slavery?

Under the circumstances, perhaps under any circumstances, it can be tempting to go through our seder by rote. But all the elements of the seder are all there for a reason – they are not just random rituals. One that’s very prominent is the mandate about the way we tell the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim -- we must start with criticism, *genut*, and then move on to praise or *shevach*.

It would seem that *shevach* indicates that we’re praising God, which implies that our criticism is directed at God as well. So why not use more generic terms like *good and evil*, *sadness and happiness*, or *positive and negative*. Why use the specific terms, *genut/criticism* and *shevach/praise*?

I think it is possible to say that we are explicitly criticizing God by declaring that He acknowledges giving us hardships. In fact, the Gemarah says in Mesechet Kiddushin 30b and Mesechet Sukkah 52b, that God intentionally sends evil our way **every day**. The Maharal miPrague even asks in Gevurot Hashem, why do we praise God and extol the Exodus at all on Pesach? What is the point? After all, God is the One who put us in Egypt and caused our suffering in the first place! The Maharal answers that if not for the negative part, we wouldn’t have the positive. We’d be disengaged from life. We’d be stuck in the same place forever. In other words, if we had never been slaves, we could never become free. That’s why the Gemara, in Mesechet Megilla 13b, says that God sends us the cure before the sickness, or put another way, He embeds the solution in the problem. So why does He bring us so many difficulties in the first place? To give us the opportunity to discover the solutions only found within those difficulties, and thereby develop ourselves and fulfill our potential.

I think this is the message we can take from this year’s Pesach in particular. We begin the seder with criticism, to teach us that we must acknowledge the gravity of our situation and not

sugar-coat it. But for whatever reason, we need this negative experience to bring out the goodness we desire. Of course, when you're in the midst of a painful challenge, as we all are right now, it is very difficult to look at life that way. But this year, more than ever, we must try to absorb the message of the Haggadah, that God sends these hardships to help us grow, and that we should look for the good, the positive, the solution to the challenge, in order to appreciate and see that goodness. And if we can keep that positive perspective in the face of all our anxiety and uncertainty, we will have the strength to endure this dark and difficult time, and somehow come out better for it on the other side.

May God fulfill His promise he made to us immediately following the Exodus: "Kol hamachala asher samti b'mitzrayim lo asim alecha, ki ani adonai rofecha" *I will not place the entirety of the illness upon you, because I am God your healer.* May Hashem heal us all in every way from this terrible malady very soon. Chag sameach.