

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



First of all Firsts - Head of all Heads

Nissan

Hi! Welcome to Nissan, our first month. Everyone agrees that the date Nissan 1 is very significant. It appears to be the birthday for the Jewish nation, because we were given our very first Mitzva as a nation on that day, KIDDUSH HaCHODESH, to sanctify our calendar. Actually, Jewish tradition counts ten important events which occurred on this date:

The Mishkan was erected (perhaps dedicated, Sh'mot 40:17). It was taught: That day took ten crowns. It was the first day of Creation, the first day of the offerings brought by the tribal princes, the first day of the kehuna, the first day of service in the Mikdash, the first time for the descent of fire onto the altar, the first time that consecrated foods were eaten, the first day of the resting of the Divine Presence upon the Jewish people, the first day that the Jewish people were blessed by the kohanim, and the first day of the prohibition to bring offerings on improvised altars (Shabbat 87b).

But what does all that mean to me in

my personal life? Well, it could mean that my wife starts reminding me to be careful where I consume Chametz around the house. It could describe the Pesach shopping outings, but according to the Haggada, it could be the time to start relating the stories and events of the Exodus. You know the material we discuss at the Seder. But the Haggada famously asks: Couldn't it be from Rosh Chodesh that one would have to discuss the Exodus (YACHOL MEI-ROSH CHODESH)?

Eventually, the Haggada rejects this premise: However we learn otherwise, since it is stated, "on that day". If it is written "on that day", it could be from while it is still day [before the night of the fifteenth of Nissan. However] we learn otherwise, since it is stated, "for the sake of this (ZEH)." I didn't say 'for the sake of this' except that it be observed when Matza and Maror are displayed in front of you, which only occurs on the night of the fifteenth.

How are we to understand this question and its ultimate rejection? Rav Baruch HaLevi Epstein conjectures that the obligation to relate the story (V'HIGADTA L'VINCHA, 'and you will relate it to your child' - Sh'mot 13:8) should start with the beginning of the month of Nissan because the many events of that day were the beginning of the GEULA (redemption). Wouldn't it be cool to start giving news updates every day of Nissan until the Seder

recounting what happened each day of that momentous month? But that great rabbi concludes: that attitudes are best reflected in concrete actions... Pesach becomes more real not simply because we recall but because we do so with concrete symbols that represent the day. 'When the Matza and Maror are before him on the table.'

The Ma'asei Nissim (Rav Yaakov Lorberbaum) makes the reasonable assumption that this question logically is connected to the previous passage discussing the Child Who Doesn't Know to Ask. The question of when to discuss Pesach with your child 'who doesn't know how to ask' arises because with the other three children we might assume that we answer them when they ask their question. But this silent child must be approached by us. So, the Haggada is really asking when does it make the most sense to deliver the redemption message to our beloved silent offspring?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik really builds on that idea of the Haggada being a logical sequence of teachable moments, and stated: The sections of AVADIM HAYINU, the Rabbis in B'nei Brak, R. Elazar's ben Azarya's ruling, the Four Children and YACHOL MEIROSH CHODESH concentrate on the laws of SIPUR Y'TZI'AT MITZ-RAYIM. They discuss who is obligated in this Mitzva, when it applies, how to fulfill it, etc. Without discussion of the

laws, the Haggada cannot begin.

In other words the authors of our standard Haggada (the work of canonizing our Haggada was begun by the Men of the Great Assembly, c. 500_{BCE} to c. 300_{BCE}), composed a 'How To' manual for fulfilling the Mitzva of relating the story to the next generations. What does this obligation entail? Rav SD Luzatto says that we must 'Explain the reason' behind all these annual practices. Rav SR Hirsch writes that V'HIGADTA is accomplished by 'demonstrating through actions'; the actions of the evening blend with the discussions. The Rav offers: The word Haggada connotes more than the act of 'telling' or 'narrating'. It suggests an elaborate form of study.

So, even though most Seders have a responsible leader in charge, nevertheless every adult is obligated to perform the Mitzva of V'HIGADTA L'VINCHA. The person who assumes the role of 'leader' (been there, done that) I guess must develop a sort of curriculum or lesson plan for the evening, but the rest of us should be ready, willing and able to chime in with an incisive thought or D'VAR TORAH during the proceedings. I like canvassing the crowd for ideas during the meal.

Therefore, I'm going to suggest very strongly that everyone use that date,

Rosh Chodesh Nissan, to begin to think, prepare and compose a presentation about the GEULA, redemption from Egypt, for that night when the Mitzva of retelling the story is in force, namely the night of the Seder. For many years I bought a new Haggada every year for this very purpose of working on new material for that distinguished evening. I always found that it was worth the effort and minor expense.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointed out that it is not enough to share clever thoughts. We must also live by and exemplify these ideas and principles. The Seder is about learning fundamental truths through both text and activities. As the Rav said, 'Tell the story while doing the deed.' It's a wonderful opportunity to pass on our most cherished principles in both word and action.

And finally, what is the central role of ROSH CHODESH NISSAN to this endeavor? The Ohr HaChayim noted something about the language in the verse we began with, and he wrote: Why did the Torah repeat ROSH CHADASHIM ('head of months') and RISHON HU ('It is the first')? I believe the meaning of ROSH is that the month of Nissan will be particularly important, the choicest of the months... Our sages pointed out in tractate Rosh HaShana (11a) that Israel

was redeemed from Egypt in Nissan and that the future redemption would again occur in that month. This is so because this month is a harbinger of good tidings for Israel.

This date is and has been a wonderful time for our people. Use it wisely to develop your thoughts on these significant ideas about Jewish history and destiny, which you can then share with your friends and loved ones. Let's work hard to recognize the historic significance of this time, and, please, God, it will bring about a great redemption again this year. 