

Rabbi Ephraim Sprecher

The Bnei Brak Seder - Where are the Ladies?

"It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar Ben-Azarya, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining in Bnei Brak. They were discussing the Exodus from Egypt all that night, until their students came and told them: 'Our Rabbis! The time has come for reciting the morning Shema!'" (Pesach Hagada).

This story is read by all Jews on Pesach at the Seder. At first sight, it is a simple tale of five Rabbis who get carried away retelling the story of the Exodus until their students need to interrupt them.

Yet, upon closer examination, we see that this tale is anything but simple and is actually riddled with questions and problems. The first problem is the absence of the families of these Rabbis. If the main Mitzva of recounting the Exodus from Egypt is to tell the next generation, where are the wives and children of these great Rabbis?

If one wants to make the argument that this was a special elite Seder, not only would this violate Halacha, but the further question is raised – where are the students of these great Rabbis?

These exalted Rabbis would hardly

have given over any Torah without their students there to listen. If a Rabbi gives over Torah and there is no one to hear it, it is like a tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it. Why do the students have to come from the outside to tell the Rabbis that the time of K'ri'at Sh'ma has arrived? Why not just look out the window and see the daybreak themselves?

Yet another problem is that Rabbi Akiva was the junior member of this distinguished group and a student of some of these Rabbis, so how can he recline? The Halacha states that one is not allowed to recline in front of his Rebbe! Finally, what is so special about these great Rabbis spending the whole night discussing the Exodus on Seder night? Isn't that what one is supposed to do?

This unusual story does not appear anywhere in the Talmud or Midrash, yet it appears in the Hagada. Some scholars offer the explanation that this story isn't describing a Seder on Pesach night, rather this meeting took place on a different night during the Bar Kochba rebellion (132-135CE). The story was preserved by memory until it was finally included in the Hagada.

The Bar Kochba rebellion was an attempt by Shimon Bar Kochba to end the Roman persecution and occupation of Israel and re-establish Jewish sovereignty over the land. In the

beginning he was successful, and the great sage, Rabbi Akiva, declared Bar Kochba to be the Moshiach.

This explanation would offer an answer to all of the questions we asked above. Rabbi Akiva may have been the junior member of the group but he was the spiritual head of the Bar Kochba rebellion. This explains why they were meeting in Bnei Brak. This city was Rabbi Akiva's home town, and as spiritual head of the rebellion and as Mara D'Atra of Bnei Brak, he would have the right to recline even in front of his Rebbeim.

This theory also explains why the wives and children were not present, as this event did NOT occur on Pesach night. As for the students, they stood guard outside and had to inform the Rabbis who were meeting perhaps in an attic or a basement, hiding from the Romans, that the time for Keriya Shema had arrived. There were no windows in their place of hiding.

These Rabbis met to discuss the Exodus from Egypt, because it was the archetype of all future Redemptions. They hoped that discussing the Exodus, even though it wasn't Pesach, would hasten the Final Redemption and help them in their present dire situation. Perhaps more importantly, it would inspire them and give them courage during this dark time of Roman persecution and oppression.

The Bar Kochba rebellion ultimately failed, and its consequences were disastrous for the Jewish People. If so, how did this story of hope survive, and why is it recounted every year along with the Exodus from Egypt?

Jewish History is not a spectator sport. Pesach is an invitation to take an active role in the unfolding Jewish story. The Red Sea would not have split unless Nachshon ben Aminadav and Shevet Binyamin plunged in beforehand. Therefore, these Rabbis met to take an active part in Jewish History, and that is why their story is connected to the story of the Pesach Exodus.

The Zohar states that the Complete Redemption will parallel and follow the Roadmap of the Redemption from Egypt. The Exodus from Egypt began the long and winding road which will eventually lead us to the Messianic Era. -**ESP**