

The Path To Follow

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The Sanctity and Greatness of the Festivals

In *Parsha Emor* it is written, “Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: Hashem’s appointed festivals that you are to designate as holy convocations – these are My appointed festivals: For six days work may be done, but the seventh day is a day of complete rest, a holy convocation; you shall not do any work. It is a Sabbath for Hashem in all your dwelling places” (*Vayikra* 23:2-3).

The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* says that we need to understand the reason for the apparently redundant expression “these are My appointed festivals.” We also need to understand why Hashem again commanded us to keep Shabbat here, and why the Torah repeats after the *mitzvah* of Shabbat: “Hashem’s appointed festivals.”

We may answer these questions in the spirit of *Mussar*. The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to teach Israel the sanctity of the festivals. A person should not think, “The sanctity of Shabbat is so great that we’re punished for desecrating it. I’ll pay attention to it and warn my family to do the same, but the festivals are not as holy as Shabbat, since even the Sages allowed us to perform work on the festivals that is forbidden on Shabbat. It may therefore not be necessary to pay as much attention to them.” Hence the Torah warns us about Shabbat at the same time as the festivals, in order to tell us that their holiness is equal to one another and that we cannot be more lenient in regards to the festivals and more strict in regards to Shabbat.

A person must always safeguard the sanctity of the festivals, and our Sages have spoken at length about the punishment of one who neglects it. They say, “One who profanes sacred things, who degrades the festivals, who publicly humiliates his fellowman, who abrogates the covenant of our father Avraham, and who interprets the Torah in a manner contradictory to its true intent – even though he may possess Torah and good deeds, he has no share in the World to Come” (*Pirkei Avot* 3:11). The Sages also say that one who scorns the festivals is like an idolater.

The Extra Soul of the Festival

Although according to Halachah we do not say a blessing on aromatic herbs at the conclusion of a festival – *Tosaphot* having stated (*Pesachim* 102b) that it is because an extra soul is not given during the festivals – some of the Sages still said the blessing on herbs at the conclusion of a festival (*Ohr Zarua* 2:92, citing *Rabbeinu Gershom*). From this custom we learn that there is an extra soul in man during the festivals as well. In fact among some of the *Rishonim*, we clearly find the concept of an extra soul during the festivals (*Tosaphot Pesachim* *ibid.* citing the *Rashbam*; also in a response of the *Rashba* that is cited by the *Abudraham* regarding the conclusion of Shabbat).

Let us try to understand this. We learn of the existence of an extra soul from what is said regarding Shabbat: “On the seventh day He rested *vayinafash* [and was refreshed]” (*Shemot* 31:17). Here the Sages have explained, “Once it [Shabbat] has ended, woe that the [additional] soul is lost” (*Beitzah* 16a). However *vayinafash* is not said in regards to the festivals, only in regards to Shabbat. Therefore how do we know that man also possesses an additional soul during the festivals?

We may explain this according to a statement of the Sages: “The Sabbaths and festivals were given only for the sake of Torah study” (*Yerushalmi, Shabbat* 15:3). When a man studies Torah during the festivals, not wasting his time in useless conversations, he immediately merits to rejoice in the light of the Torah, and an additional soul enters him. In fact the Torah is called light, as it written: “For a

mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light” (*Mishlei* 6:23), and the soul of man is also called a lamp, as it is written: “A man’s soul is the lamp of Hashem” (*ibid.* 20:27).

When someone studies Torah and cleaves to its words, he becomes worthy for a new soul to enter him. This is the special soul created by the merit of learning during the festivals, a soul that contains some of the sanctity of the festivals. It comes into a person who studies Torah while people are outside chatting and scorning the festivals by their negligence of Torah. Learning Torah at this time demonstrates that one’s learning truly stems from a love of Heaven, and one merits an additional soul because of the Torah that he learns during that time. This is because the Holy One, blessed be He, draws closer to man during a festival than during a regular week day.

Let us say that the additional soul of Shabbat differs from the additional soul of the festivals. The additional soul of Shabbat enters a person even if he does not deserve it. However the additional soul of the festivals does not enter a person if he has not studied Torah. Hence the Sages did not institute a blessing over aromatic herbs at the conclusion of a festival. Not everyone has an additional soul on the festivals, and only certain merit it because they study for the love of Torah. I say that this is why the exodus from Egypt is juxtaposed to the festivals in the Torah. It teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt only so they could take the Torah and *mitzvot* upon themselves. When they observe the festivals – which are the festivals of Hashem, not their own festivals – they certainly merit the *Shechinah* resting upon them. Yet when they waste their time and fail to study Torah, these are no longer “holy convocations,” but rather “profane convocations.” They are no longer the festivals of Hashem, but festivals that He holds in abhorrence, G-d forbid.

This is why the Torah repeats, “...these are My appointed festivals.” In other words: When am I sanctified among the Children of Israel? When the festivals are My festivals, not your festivals. This means that if you consider a festival only as a family celebration, a family gathering in order to eat, drink and amuse yourselves at that time, it then becomes a personal pleasure, a vague remembrance of what the holy festival represents, a festival that actually belongs to Hashem. This is why the exodus from Egypt is juxtaposed to the festivals, alluding to the fact that just as the *Shechinah* rested upon the Children of Israel during the exodus from Egypt – when they agreed to accept the Torah and the observance of Pesach for all the generations – likewise the *Shechinah* rests on them when they accept all the other festivals of Hashem.

I believe that the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted the Children of Israel to observe the festivals and call them “the festivals of Hashem” because the nations of the world made festivals for their idols. Hence we read that Pharaoh celebrated his own birthday, and they certainly associated their idols to his birthday. Hashem therefore wanted the Children of Israel to observe festivals that recalled things in their favor, festivals that would awaken Hashem’s kindness from Heaven, for they are called “Hashem’s appointed festivals.”

If they were called “festivals of man,” in memory of what happened to them, these festivals would be filled with useless things. Yet since they are called “Hashem’s appointed festivals,” people would certainly not despise them, for they are holy convocations.

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An Actual Vision, Not a Dream

Rabbi Haim Pinto *HaGadol* demonstrated extraordinary hospitality, never once saying: "There's not enough room for someone to sleep in my home." One day a *shaliach* by the name of Rabbi Yitzchak Shapira arrived from Eretz Israel. The man had an excellent reputation, and Rabbi Haim went to meet him and warmly welcomed him, as befitted such a man.

It was the eve of Pesach, and Rabbi Yitzchak was staying in the home of Rabbi Haim Pinto for the holidays. On the night of the Seder, Rabbi Yitzchak sat at the table with Rabbi Haim, when suddenly he began to weep. Rabbi Haim tried to calm him, but he continued to weep with great tears.

"Tell me what the problem is, and I'll try to help you," Rabbi Haim told him. "Your pain is my pain, for we cannot sit at the Seder table in joy when someone in my home is weeping." Rabbi Yitzchak heard these words, but continued to weep.

Rabbi Haim again tried to console him: "I take it upon myself to provide you with everything you need. If you are suffering because you are lacking something, I will provide you with it, so why cry?"

At that point Rabbi Yitzchak began to recount his story: "I left Eretz Israel by myself. Every year during Pesach I would be with my family at the Seder table in joy. Yet now that I see the *matzot*, the wine and the Haggadah, I'm reminded of my family, and I don't know what's become of them! Are they happy? Are they sad that I'm not with them? Is everything alright with them in Eretz Israel?"

Rabbi Haim understood his feelings and said, "Don't worry, the salvation of Hashem comes in the blink of an eye. Come with me into my study. I want to show you something."

The man followed Rabbi Haim into his study, at which point he told him: "Look!" The man looked through the darkness, and he could clearly make out the image of his family seated at the Seder table, joyfully celebrating the holiday. Once he got past his initial astonishment at being able to see his family – who where thousands of miles away at the time – his joy returned. He then went back to the table with Rabbi Haim for the Seder.

Rabbi Haim said to him, "Don't think that what you saw was just a figment of your imagination. When

you return home, ask your family how they felt on the night of the Seder, as well as what happened to them. Afterwards, please write to me and tell me what they said."

After the holidays, the man took leave of Rabbi Haim Pinto and thanked him for all the time he had spent in his home, just like a member of his own family. He left Morocco and returned safely to his home in Eretz Israel. After the first meeting with his family, Rabbi Yitzchak asked them how things were while he was gone, and how they felt during the night of the Seder.

They told him that although they were very sad after he left and they were all alone, come the night of the Seder, they suddenly felt greatly uplifted and celebrated the holiday with tremendous joy. Rabbi Yitzchak Shapira listened to all this with great emotion, and he hastened to write to Rabbi Haim Pinto in Morocco, as he had promised. He stated that everything he had seen in the vision in Rabbi Haim's study had in fact taken place. It had not been a dream, but was real.

– *Shenot Chaim*

Guard Your Tongue!

Commensurate With the Effort is the Reward

From the fact that we must suffer financial loss in order not to speak *Lashon Harah*, how much more are we to not speak *Lashon Harah* for the simple sake of personal honor! For example, if we find ourselves in the company of people who are speaking words that are forbidden by the *din*, and if we cannot leave or remain silent without being considered a fool, then obviously it is still forbidden to participate in their conversation. In regards to such situations, the Sages have said: "Better that I should be called a fool for my entire life than to be considered wicked for even a moment in G-d's eyes" (*Eduyot* 5:6). When the time comes, a person must exert all his strength and stand firm, and as a result Hashem will give him an infinite reward. As the Sages have said, "Commensurate with the effort is the reward" (*Pirkei Avoth* 5:21).

– *Chafetz Chaim*

Reward or Restitution for a Theft?

Who would have thought that an ancient and famous discussion between Geviha ben Pessisa and some Egyptians, which took place in the presence of Alexander of Macedonia, would resurface more than 1,600 years later in an Egyptian newspaper? In the year 5747, an article in an Egyptian newspaper claimed that Israel owed Egypt an enormous debt, about \$50 billion! This debt was explained as being equal to the value of gold that the Children of Israel left Egypt with during the time of the Pharaohs, when they borrowed vessels of gold and silver from their Egyptian neighbors, and with which they made the golden calf on the slopes of Mount Sinai. The article before us was published within the last decade, and it appeared in our newspapers as well. A specialized historian of that period, Mr. Ahmed Bahjet, was charged by the Egyptian press with the task of calculating this debt. This Egyptian historian is known for having written *Moses and Pharaoh*, a book that recounts the story of the exodus from Egypt. The historian took on this task with great seriousness, devoting long days to consulting the documents of the Egyptian royal treasurer at the time of the Exodus, Nephotep. According to these calculations, the Children of Israel amassed huge quantities of pure gold, which the Egyptian authorities at the time were unable to retrieve because the Children of Israel dashed out of Egypt amid miracles and wonders. The absence of such huge quantities of gold, which was the pillar of the ancient world, shook Egypt's economy and eventually led to the downfall of Pharaoh's kingdom.

The semi-official Egyptian newspaper *Al-Gomhouriyah* supported Mr. Bahjet's hypotheses. In the introduction to his conclusions, which the newspaper published, Mr. Bahjet saluted the Jewish people in honor of the festival of liberty, believing that it should be consecrated as a festival for all humanity because the Pharaoh during the Exodus was in fact a cruel ruler, a tyrant and oppressor. However, continued Mr. Bahjet, there's just one problem: The Children of Israel took with them the spoils of Egypt and made the golden calf with it. In his opinion, this constituted a debt which they still owed to Egypt. In fact Israel should reimburse the Egyptian treasury today, without interest (since interest is forbidden in Islam), and Israel should not forget the verse: The sins of the fathers upon the children.

The Arab-language version of *Kol Israel* (Israeli national radio), which broadcasts Israel's official policies to Arab countries on local airwaves, quickly responded to the Egyptian demand. The person in charge of these explanations, Mr. Shaul Menashe, said that since Egypt raised the issue, Israel was ready to make a very simple and precise calculation with Mr. Bahjet: "The Children of Israel performed forced labor for Pharaoh for 280 years without any pay whatsoever. For this work, Pharaoh used not only the men, but also the women, meaning that about 300,000 workers were used. Therefore, Mr. Bahjet, calculate the salary that Egypt owes to Israel for this work, and don't forget to add the debt for having delayed payment for 3,000 years. When you finish this calculation, intervene with your government so they pay us the difference."

Equivalent Pay

For their part, the Egyptians did not sit back quietly. The Egyptian press once again called upon Mr. Bahjet, the "specialist," and this

time he promised to come up with an exact figure. He once again descended into the caves of the national museum of Cairo, and enclosed himself with papyrus from the priest Nephotep.

Mr. Bahjet then issued his response: "Nephotep's calculations are not in doubt. Egyptologists in Israel also certainly know that he was a very skilled treasurer. Yet even before going into detail about the numbers, I would like to correct my dear brother Shaul Menashe. The Children of Israel did not stay in Egypt for 3,000 years, but only for 300 years. They were simply Pharaoh's slaves, meaning that they worked without pay. Nevertheless, we have discovered that each of the Children of Israel received every year an ancient Egyptian *mil* as pocket money, the value of which today, according to researchers, is a half a dollar. We are prepared to do the annual calculation per person based on one and a half *mil*, according to papyrus which recount that the slaves who were not from among the Children of Israel received one and a half *mil*."

Mr. Bahjet added, "Now the calculation is simple: Based on the fact that there were only 1,000 Jews in Egypt – not the hundreds of thousands that they claim – Egypt owes Israel \$150,000. If we deduct from this amount the value of the gold that they took out, Israel now owes us \$39 billion. We have carefully checked everything, and we have even agreed not to consider financially-related papyrus that were not sealed with Pharaoh's scarab."

This concluded the semi-hypothetical discussion, without undisputable proof from the Israelis – who curiously enough had forgotten to check "proofs" in source documents. What follows is a story related in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 91a):

On another occasion the Egyptians came in a lawsuit against the Jews before Alexander of Macedonia. They pleaded as follows: 'Is it not written, 'Hashem gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, and they lent them'? Now return to us the gold and silver which you took!'

At that point Geviha ben Pessisa said to the Sages, "Give me permission to go and plead against them before Alexander of Macedonia: Should they defeat me, then say, 'You have merely defeated an ignorant man among us.' However if I defeat them, then say: 'The Law of Moshe has defeated you.'"

So they gave him permission, and he went and pleaded against them.

"From where do you derive your proof?" he asked.

"From the Torah," they replied.

"Then I too," he said, "will bring you proof only from the Torah, for it is written, 'Now the sojourning of the Children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was 430 years.' Pay us for the work of 600,000 men, whom you enslaved for 430 years."

King Alexander then said to them, "Answer him!"

"Give us three days' time," they begged.

He therefore gave them a respite. They looked, but could find no answer. They immediately fled, leaving behind their sown fields and planted vineyards. And that year was a shmita year.

The descendants of those who had made spurious Egyptian claims thus maintained their position before the descendants of Geviha ben Pessisa. It seems that this legal decision, which took place before the court of Alexander of Macedonia, had escaped them. Perhaps now the Egyptians would prefer not to raise this subject again on the request for Israeli compensation for 600,000 workers for 430 years of work, for no doubt it would ruin Egypt's economy.

The Reading of Shir HaShirim on Pesach

It is customary to read *Shir HaShirim* during Pesach. This was already practiced as far back as Talmudic times, as we read: "We read *Shir HaShirim* on the nights of the second holidays in the Diaspora, half on the first night and half on the second" (*Sofrim* 14:18). Abudaram mentions that we normally read *Shir HaShirim* during the festival of *matzot*, explaining this by the fact that it speaks of the deliverance from Egypt. In his notes on the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 490:9), the Rema points out that we usually recite *Shir HaShirim* during Shabbat of *Chol HaMoed*, and if the last day of a festival takes place on Shabbat, we recite it on that day. This custom has been accepted by all Ashkenazi communities that observe the Rema's decrees.

Furthermore, our Sages have instituted the custom of reciting *Shir HaShirim* after the Haggadah on the night of Pesach, a custom that has been adopted by all Jewish communities, both east and west, north and south. The Chida *Zatzal* praises this custom in his book *Moreh B'Etzba*: "After the Haggadah, we joyfully recite all of *Shir HaShirim*, for all the supernal worlds are illuminated by it." A good reason for this is that *Shir HaShirim* begins with subjects that touch upon the exodus from Egypt, which it explicitly mentions. Likewise deliverance will come quickly in our days. Let us not forget that it is written, "In Nissan they were delivered, and in Nissan they will be delivered in time to come" (*Rosh Hashanah* 11b).

According to *Mincha Shai*, we read *Shir HaShirim* during Pesach because Pesach is the first of the festivals, and *Shir HaShirim* is first among all songs. In other words, it precedes them all, which is why we read it on Pesach.

Another reason why *Shir HaShirim* is read on Pesach, writes Rabbi Chaim Friedlander *Zatzal* in his book *Siftei Chaim*, is because a slave who is set free feels unbounded love for his liberator. This was how the Children of Israel reacted to Hashem, answering Him with love and *chesed*, as it is written: "I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, when you followed Me into the desert, into an unsown land" (Jeremiah 2:2). From then until today, Pesach is a fitting time to awaken love between Hashem and the Jewish people. Hence we normally recite *Shir HaShirim* during Shabbat *Chol HaMoed* of Pesach, which is a symbol of the love between Hashem and the Jewish people. It is for this reason that it is stated that Pesach is a time for doing *teshuvah* out of love, whereas Rosh Hashanah is a time for doing *teshuvah* out of fear.

The Ashkenazi custom is to read *Shir HaShirim* during Shabbat *Chol HaMoed* of Pesach. The Rema states that we do not recite a blessing on the reading of the scroll, nor on the reading of the *Ketuvim*, which is what most Ashkenazi communities practice, even when they read *Shir HaShirim* from a kosher scroll (written on parchment), except for communities that have adopted the customs of the Vilna Gaon and recite the blessing on the reading of the scroll and reciting *Shecheyanu*. It is an ancient decree to recite *Shir HaShirim* every Friday night, for no other time during the week is as holy as the one in which a person removes his weekday garments, washes himself, and dons his Shabbat garments. At that point an extra degree of Shabbat's sanctified light illuminates the body of man, and at such a time it is fitting to recite *Shir HaShirim*, an exceedingly holy text (*Petach HaDevir*). The commentators also say that we recite *Shir HaShirim* on Friday night because Shabbat is a bride and queen, and in *Shir HaShirim* there are many verses that celebrate the betrothed.

He Could No Longer Contain Himself

King Solomon's song, *Shir HaShirim*, was conceived when he brought the Ark into the Holy of Holies. At that point he had supernal visions and saw the glory of Hashem filling the Temple. Hashem appeared to him through *Ruach Hakodesh*, lavished the splendor of the *Shechinah* upon him, and he composed *Shir HaShirim* for the King to Whom peace belongs. Rabbi Akiva said, "The whole world is not as worthy as the day on which *Shir HaShirim* was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but *Shir HaShirim* is holy of holies" (*Yadayim* 3:5).

The holy Zohar states that when King Solomon built the Temple, the lower world was completed like the upper world, and all the Children of Israel were *tzaddikim* who reached lofty spiritual levels. The Throne of Glory was elevated by several degrees and in joy. At that point, King Solomon composed *Shir HaShirim*, destined for higher and lower beings, the union of all the worlds by the King to Whom peace belongs.

The great Rabbi Eliezer fell ill on a Friday, and all his students came to see him. Rabbi Akiva began to weep and said, "Rabbi, teach me the Torah." Rabbi Eliezer opened his mouth and began to teach him about the Divine Chariot. A fire descended and encircled Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva. The other students saw this and left. Rabbi Eliezer continued to teach Rabbi Akiva 216 explanations on *Shir HaShirim*, and the eyes of Rabbi Akiva streamed with tears. When they arrived at the verse, "Sustain me with dainties" (*Shir HaShirim* 2:5), Rabbi Akiva could no longer contain himself. He therefore cried out in tears, but did not speak because he was afraid of the *Shechinah*, which was present. Rabbi Eliezer taught him all the secrets contained in *Shir HaShirim*, warning him not to teach them to others, not even a single verse. As such the Holy One, blessed be He, would not destroy the world, for He does not want His creatures to use the power of supernal holiness (*Midrash HaNe'elam*).

The Song of the Privileged

- Whoever sees *Shir HaShirim* in a dream may hope for piety (*Berachot* 57b).
- By reciting *Shir HaShirim*, a person rids himself of the impurity of the serpent, and he merits the knowledge of Torah and attainment of wisdom (*Tzafnat Paneach*).
- Whoever recites *Shir HaShirim* every Friday night by singing it with a pleasant voice, all the sins that he committed during the week will be forgiven (*Shoshanei Leket*).
- Whoever reads *Shir HaShirim* attentively on Friday night will be saved from Gehinnom, for there are 117 hours in the week, corresponding to the 117 verses in *Shir HaShirim* (*Avodah U'Moreh Derech*). [Translator's note: Of the 168 hours in the week, the wicked are said to rest from suffering in Gehinnom for 51 hours, leaving 117 hours, which correspond to the 117 verses.]
- We have heard from the elders of Jerusalem that reading *Shir HaShirim* is a *segula* in asking for the sick to be healed (*Me'am Loez*).
- All remedies are included in *Shir HaShirim*, and it is better to say them before the light of day for someone who is sick (*Likutei Moharan*).
- One who attentively reads it on Shabbat will be saved from Gehinnom (*Ma'asei Rokeach*).
- Attentively reading *Shir Hashirim* for 40 consecutive days is a *segula* for finding a spouse (*Shirat Shlomo*).
- In the city of Baghdad, we read *Shir HaShirim* for a woman who is having difficulty giving birth, for this awakens Divine mercy for her (*Shirat Shlomo*, citing Rabbi Eliyahu Madar *Shlita*).