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The Pesach Seder: Karpas and the Coat of Many Colors (TTP-386)

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One of the most mysterious rituals on the Seder night is the eating of the *karpas* (1) dipped in salt water at the very beginning of the evening. One reason for this ritual, we are told, is to encourage everyone, particularly the children, to ask many questions. After reciting the *Kiddush* we would no doubt expect a proper meal, as is customary on Friday night or on other festivals. Instead, we receive a small piece of vegetable dipped in salty water and are left hungry for a good part of the evening. This should certainly raise some eyebrows.

Without denying the importance of the above, we need to understand why our Sages decided to facilitate the asking of questions through this particular ritual and not another. What is there in the ritual of *karpas* that would otherwise be lost on us, and why is it this one that will prompt our children to ask questions?

Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, (2) in his commentary on the Haggada *Yeriot Shlomo*, (3) gives us a very unusual clue. The word *karpas*, he says, is etymologically difficult to place. It has two meanings. One is “greens” and “vegetable.” This is in line with the meaning in the Haggada, as we are told to partake of celery, parsley, potatoes, scallion, or other such vegetables. The other definition is “fine wool or linen.”

The latter reminds us of Rashi’s comment on the story concerning the hatred of the brothers toward Yosef. (4) As we know, this animosity was caused by Yaakov’s giving a *ketonet passim* (multicolored garment) to his son Yosef. Rashi there states that the word *passim* means material made of fine wool or linen. This statement reveals to us a secret behind the ritual of *karpas* and its dipping into a liquid.

After Yosef had received this garment from his father, the brothers sold him to the Egyptians. This was the precursor of the exile and slavery in Egypt. Whatever the deeper meaning of this hatred, it was unjustified and led to much pain. Had Yaakov not given the garment to Yosef, the exile and servitude in Egypt would in all likelihood not have come about.

So this garment, made from *karpas*, was seemingly the primary cause of the Egyptian enslavement.

When the Sages fashioned the blueprint for the Haggada text, they looked for a way to draw attention to the fact that brotherly hate was what caused the Jews to end up in Egypt. Upon realizing that this infamous garment was made of *karpas* (wool or linen, according to one definition brought by Rabbi Kluger), they decided to institute a ritual that would involve using a vegetable (Rabbi Kluger’s other definition for *karpas*). On a deeper level we realize that what identifies this ritual even more with the hatred of the brothers is the act of dipping the *karpas* in salt water. After all, the brothers took this “*karpas* garment” and dipped it into animal blood before they approached their father with the terrible news that Yosef had been killed.

Still, one may wonder why the Haggada only alludes to this in the form of a mysterious ritual. Apparently, the authors wanted to hide this information while simultaneously hoping that the readers would get the point. But, if the multicolored garment was indeed the principal cause of the entire Egyptian exile, why not actually bring a multicolored garment to the Seder table and mention it candidly, in order to ensure that no one will miss this crucial information? What is the purpose of making the Seder participants aware of this on a subconscious level instead of bringing it to the surface?

I believe that this touches on the very core of Judaism’s interpretation of the Exodus. Its main point is to emphasize Divine providence; God’s miraculous interference in the lives of millions of Jews who were

stranded and enslaved in Egypt. This story had to become the locus classicus of all Jewish history, and in fact of world history. Whatever happens is ultimately in God's hands. This is the categorical lesson of the Pesach story. It is not the story of the human role in history, or to what extent man had a hand in the shaping of all that happened. Of course, Jewish tradition constantly emphasizes that man has to take responsibility for the consequences of his deeds, but the Pesach story operates on a different level. It is the triumph of God as the Lord of History that is celebrated.

In fact, the interplay between Divine intervention and human action is one of the great philosophical problems, which all religious thinkers have grappled with. To what extent is man responsible, and to what extent is God responsible? This question remains basically unanswered and is part of the mystery of all human history.

This also touches on another and in no way more solvable problem. How can we ever know what is the cause that brings about a specific effect? More than that, when *is* something a cause and not the effect of an earlier incident? Speaking in terms of the Egyptian enslavement, are we indeed able to say for sure that it was just the hatred of the brothers for Yosef that brought about the Jews' servitude, and if the brothers had not sold Yosef to Egypt, the Israelites would not have landed in Egypt? Wasn't it promised to Avraham that his children would be enslaved in a land that was not theirs? (5) The Egyptian experience is seen in its own right as a *sine qua non* to prepare the Jews for receiving the Torah and shaping them into a spiritual people that will be a "light unto the nations." So to what extent were the brothers really responsible for this exile, and how much free will did they actually exercise when they decided to sell their brother?

It is for this reason that the authors of the Haggada were not prepared to openly point their finger at the brothers. They could do nothing else but allude to this fact, telling us that somewhere along the road to Egypt the "*karpas* garment" dipped in blood played a role. We may never know to what extent, but it is most telling that the *karpas* is eaten at the very beginning of the Haggada reading. It makes us immediately aware that the inside story of what really caused the exile in Egypt will remain forever a mystery. That is the all-encompassing, underlying message that this ritual wants to convey at the very beginning, before we continue to read the story. It will indeed provoke many questions but, however brilliant the answers, we will be left with the knowledge that on a higher plain, and beyond human understanding, it is the hand of God that holds the answers.

On a moral level, however, the story should be clear. It was hatred between brothers that sent us into exile. How revealing that what brought about the redemption was the love between two brothers, Moshe and Aaron, living in total harmony.

(1) Hebrew word for "greens" or "vegetable"

(2) Rabbi Shlomo Kluger (1785-1869) was chief *dayan* of Brody, Galicia, and one of the leading halachic authorities of the 19th century. His reputation endures to this day. He authored 375 books – the numerical equivalent of his name Shlomo.

(3) Found in Rabbi Yaakov Emden's *Siddur Beit Yaakov*

(4) Bereishit 37:3

(5) Bereishit 15:13