

Rabbanit Dr. Tamar Meir



HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

A few years ago, we were looking for a special idea that would cause our children to ask *Ma Nishtana*. Not just to recite the text they'd learned by heart in advance, but to truly ask an authentic, curious question. To reach the place toward which *Ma Nishtana* is actually directed: the curious gaze, the eyes open to the world. It's the look of a baby who sees rain for the first time, or the toddler who sees a lit *chanukiah*. The gaze which the Mishnah describes when it states: "they pour the second cup, and here, the child asks."

That year, which has since become our standard *minhag*, we brought a decorated chocolate cake to the table and sang "happy birthday." We responded to the children's question of "but who's birthday is it?" with a mysterious smile. Wait, we told them.

We reached the answer at the climax of *Maggid*: in the *derashot* of the verses of *Arami oved avi*, which the Haggadah expounds upon at length. "And he became there a nation, great and powerful," says the verse. The Haggadah explains:

"Great and powerful" – As it is stated (Shemot 1:7), "And the Children of Israel multiplied and swarmed and grew numerous (וַיִּרְבוּ) and strong, most exceedingly and the land became full of them."

"And numerous (רַב)" – as it is stated (Yechezkel 16:7), "I have given you to be numerous (רַבְרָבָה) as the vegetation of the field, and you increased and grew... your breasts were set and your hair grew, but you were naked and barren. When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: 'Live in spite of your blood.'"

The Haggadah does not connect the word "numerous" to the verse in Sefer Shemot which was used to explain the words "great and powerful," even though the root רב in its initial understanding appears there, but rather chooses to connect between the word רב and the word רַבְרָבָה, and from there to drift to the verses in Yechezkel 16. This isn't an associative word game, but an intrinsic chapter to this special night. This chapter describes the birth of the Jewish nation – happy birthday.

"As for your birth, when you were born your navel cord was not cut, and you were not bathed in water to smooth you; you were not rubbed with salt, nor were you swaddled. No one pitied you enough to do any one of these things for you out of compassion for you; on the day you were born, you were left lying, rejected, in the open field. When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: 'Live in spite of your blood'.. When I passed by you [again] and saw that your time for love had arrived. So I spread My robe over you and covered your nakedness, and I entered into a covenant with you by oath – declares the L-rd G-d; thus you became Mine."

This chapter describes *Am Yisrael* as a baby abandoned at birth – she's not washed, she's not diapered (an exciting window into childcare of ancient times). She is covered in the blood of her birth. This is the blood that G-d sees, and promises her: "through your blood you shall live." She grows up wild, but healthy and strong, until G-d returns and sees already that her "time for love had arrived." He nurtures her as a bride, and makes a covenant with her. This magnificent metaphorical description of the relationship between *Am Yisrael* and G-d comes at the heart of Seder Night. The finale of the Exodus is the covenant between *Am Yisrael*

and G-d. The covenant of Mt Sinai, which is described in different places as a *chuppah* and a wedding between *Am Yisrael* and G-d. But Seder Night is not a wedding day. We don't see the beautiful, adorned bride. Seder Night is *Am Yisrael's* birthday, a night she is covered in blood – the blood of the *korban* Pesach is the blood of her birth. In the darkest times, she is seemingly an abandoned baby, who no one cares about, with no one to care for her. But exactly at this moment, the Haggadah reminds us that G-d passes over and sees her. Right now, it's as if nothing has changed – she is still an abandoned infant covered in blood. But really, on this night – everything has changed, *hakol hishtana*.

Happy birthday!

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