

## The Secret of Fifteen and Seder Night:

The Seder night is an incredible experiment in the power of ritual and order. The word 'seder' means 'order', clueing us in to the fact there will be a script for the evening. This is emphasized by the very first page of every haggadah--the list of the simanim or stages of the seder. We might think that the Biblical command of 'and you shall tell it to your children' (Exodus 13:8) is fulfilled by the telling of the story, and there might be some flexibility in how to tell it, but we see that this is only partially true. At the very beginning of the seder we have a list of the 15 stages of the evening directing us towards an experience of 15 distinct stages in the journey from slavery to freedom to be experienced every year anew.

In the opening of Rabbi Sacks' Haggada, he points out that Seder night is the perfect balance between structure and spontaneity: the same text year after year, but each one of the participants brings their own additions, insights and personal growth. The structure is rigid and unchanging for the past hundreds of years, but it is the content that can--and perhaps should--be entirely new every year! This tension between a highly-structured ritual which is supposed to be made personal can lead to a fruitful and insightful seder!

I want to explore this idea of 15 and some of these 15 stages of the process, and perhaps together, we will discover a few moments that we can insert new ideas or questions into the defined order of the evening.

It is implied that there is indeed a process from the name, 'seder' or 'order'. Of course it would feel funny, but would it make sense to eat the afikomen before reciting 'ha lachma onya'? Or to eat the karpas after finishing the meal? Or making the opening kiddush on the fourth cup of wine instead of the first? Could we conceive of a seder night that merely *included* these 15 elements but not necessarily in the prescribed order? The obvious answer is no (although some of us might prefer to eat the meal a little earlier...). So what is so important about this order, this progressive building, stage after stage, step after step, towards the redemption both of our ancestors from Egypt, and for each and every one of us from our own limitations and enslavements each year?

(Here we will explore a number of the stages (but not all), and if you are more interested in a few other "15"s in Jewish, skip ahead!)

1. "Kadesh" is the first stage of the seder. A common question here is why is it not called 'kiddush' like every shabbat and holiday? What is the secret of this strange name? The grammar of 'kadesh' is in the imperative command form: an urgent instruction. Perhaps since this is the very beginning of the process--when we are essentially still slaves--we need the encouragement of a command to urge us to take the first step. Slave mentality would find an excuse or a way to procrastinate. We start with a jarring command to give us that push into beginning our path towards freedom! This night represents Gd's love for the Jewish People and taking them out of Egypt from the depths of their slavery. Gd's compassion also enables us at this

stage to dive right in, especially when we might not think that we are ready or confident enough to begin.

2. Second is Urchatz. Interestingly, this is also in the command form. This is a washing that is not common (as opposed to washing before eating bread), and therefore the extra impact of the command is simpler to understand. Conceptually, however, it can be seen as a washing away of the everyday world as we commit ourselves to this process on the path towards freedom. It is powerful that this is after kadesh, and not before. We might have thought that in order to bring ourselves to begin the holy work of this process, the first stage might be to do a ritual cleansing-- a way of leaving our past behind and beginning something anew. But no. We dive right in and go straight to making things holy with Kadesh and only now do urchatz. It is compelling that if we have 'skipped' this stage by starting with kadesh, why do we do it now? I want to suggest that it is reminder that at every stage of our growth, we have the ability to be washing away what has limited us until now as we go on to the next stage. In other words, at every stage of our growth, there is still a little 'schmutz' from before that we continue to wash off as we grow.
3. Third is Karpas. This is a vegetable that signifies new life. It also serves as an 'appetizer', building our yearning for what is to come both physiologically and also spiritually. This is an important third stage, reminding us early that after each step of growth, we should not become complacent and satisfied, rather we should be yearning for more growth and keeping focused on the path ahead of us.
4. Yachatz--breaking the middle matzah is next. Even with all of the sanctifying, cleansing and yearning that we have, sometimes things don't work according to plan. At yachatz, we show that we will have setbacks and that things that we do will be broken (but don't worry, we'll reunite them later at tzafun!) We have begun to make significant progress, but we hide half away for later, tangibly reminding us that it is difficult to see the growth and progress. Don't lose hope if you can't see!
5. We have arrived at Maggid, the fifth stage and the central part of the celebration this evening. We have come one third of the way, and maggid will take up the majority of the seder night. We have summoned our strength, washed ourselves, built anticipation and prepared ourselves for setbacks. Now we step into the telling of the story, the main event. Here is where we really shine and bring our own voices, questions, struggles and insights. It is a collective shared process with each other as this stage looks to the other participants that we are journeying with to add their own voices.

The next five steps come very quick, after stretching out in maggid, also giving us deep insight into how some steps of spiritual process happen in a flash, and others can seem to take forever. Rachtza--Motzi--Matzah--Maror--Korech have to happen in this order, and although they are very short, they encompass the next third of our progress this evening.

6. The second washing, here called Rachtza, is more familiar to many of us as the traditional washing before eating bread. Here, on seder night, it comes after we have

passed through one third of our journey. Ahhh, the sweetness of something familiar. But do I wash at this point like I always do, falling back into a routine? Or do I seize the opportunity to infuse the familiar with the growth that I have experienced in the first third of the seder?

7. Motzi--Matzah. This is the familiar blessing on bread and the unique blessing for seder night on Matzah (for the rest of Passover, and for the entire year, there is not special blessing on Matzah, only tonight). These are the middle two stages of the seder. One is familiar and universal for all bread, and the other is specific and particular to this bread on this night. We dance between these two foci and grow from tension that pulls us both the general and the particular.

Shulchan Orech, Tzafun, Barech, Hallel and Nirtzah are the last five stages, progressing through the meal, the afikoman, the blessing after the meal (with the third cup of wine), singing praises of Hallel, and the final sublime stage of Nirtzah.

I love that Nirtzah is very short, and is both a statement of what we have done, and a prayer that we will do it again. We understand that by the time next year comes around, we will be different people and will be able to go through the cycle as a new person. More subtle in the poetry of this section is that we refer to ourselves as 'shoots' (*nitay kana*)--a beautiful image of baby trees that have already sent down their roots and are just beginning to really grow. This is a very powerful and humble way of viewing oneself having completed a significant spiritual process: we have come very far, and we acknowledge that there is still so much potential ahead of us!

There is one other "15" that stands out on seder night, and it comes at the end of the maggid section: Dayenu. There are 15 statements in this section, each one clearly building on the other, teaching us about appreciation, and challenging us to stop and recognize the abundance of blessings that we have. In our world today of striving and achieving and always looking for 'more', Dayenu pushes us to acknowledge what we have, and not to focus on what we do not yet have.

A challenging and even chilling aspect of Dayenu is if we were to take the words seriously. It is one thing to say that each of the stages would have been sufficient, and the next stage is unnecessary when each of those stages did really happen. What would the hypothetical world where all of these things might not have happened look like? If we came to the Red Sea and it was not split? If we came to Mt. Sinai and didn't receive the Torah? If we came through the Desert but not into the Land of Israel? By deeply going into these moments, we are challenged to appreciate, but we also feel that that nothing is obvious. We sing with joy and gusto (we still haven't eaten yet!), but the song touches a deep feeling of uncertainty. Deep appreciation comes when we successfully recreate the feeling of lacking that is then filled.

15 is also a number of fullness. The lunar calendar starts each month with the new moon, and on the 15th day is when the moon is fullest and brightest. This is when we celebrate two of the three festivals: Pesach, Sukkot (and also Tu B'shvat and Tu B'av are the on the 15th).

This is when the cycle of the moon is at its brightest. Day-by-day, stage-by-stage we pass through 15 steps to reach this moment of fullness. Astronomically, the moon is full because it is entirely reflecting the light of the Sun--it has maximized its potential. So too for each of us, this 15th level can inspire us to reflect back the light that we experience from our surroundings.

There were also 15 generations between Abraham and King Solomon. 15 stages from an initial sublime awareness of Gd in Abraham's first encounter with the Gd whom the rest of the world did not yet know, to the epitome of physical manifestation of Gd's presence in the Temple in Jerusalem, roadcasting to the entire world that Gd is present! Within the Temple itself, there were 15 stairs leading from the women's gallery up to the Israelite Courtyard, essentially the process of entering into the Temple and coming closer to an experience of the Divine.

Similarly in the traditional morning prayers, the 'birkot hashachar' or morning/waking blessings, pass through 15 blessings/stages for the transition from sleeping to moving about in the world through blessings. Each stage brings us more fully into the world, preparing us for our day of growth and maximizing potential.

In the book of Psalms, there are 15 chapters that open with 'shir hama'alot' (a song of ascents) which is often understood to correspond to those steps in Temple--always leading us through stages upward and inward on a path of growth and self-actualization.

When asked about what are the major symbolic numbers in Judaism, 15 does not come to mind right away, but when we look a little closely, we see many places where 15 indicates a process that is leading to actualization, fulfillment or freedom!

May we be blessed on this seder night and in our lives to be travellers on the journey towards growth and self-actualization, both in our own personal lives and communal lives. May we draw strength and inspiration from each other and from the structure that Judaism offers us. Chag Sameach!