



SEDER AT THE REBBE'S TABLE

HARAV Y. REUVEN RUBIN SHLITA

Have you heard of this new medical condition yet? 'Lockdown Brain' is when you are feeling more forgetful, unable to concentrate, and are stumbling over the right words. Studies going on now show that our recent situation can bring us too feeling some or all of these symptoms. Truth be said even before this pandemic, we often could find ourselves just walking through life with something of a fog running through our minds. We do try to be focused, but often as not, there are just too many voices jangling for attention. Events come and go at a dizzying rate, and we end up just trying to keep our focus on what's at hand. This is what passes for everyday survival and this is all before Covid.

However, then there are those magic moments that stay within you forever. They are there to remind you who you can be and what you should aspire to.

Torah Yidden have lofty expectations. We work on polishing and perfecting our path to Hashem and try our best to be worthy of our name. Unfortunately, in the real world, especially in Golus Covid, we can't always remember how holy we are. At such times we should search through our own bank of memories of special times and through them regenerate our soul.

As a youngster, I had the merit to be several times at the Seder of the Bobover Rebbe, Rav Shlomo zt"l. Being so young, well, it was important, and yes, it gave me great spiritual uplift, but I was immature and therefore didn't really understand how much I was witnessing. This is the nature of man; in our youth we are meant to soak up experiences and only later can we truly weigh them for what they are.

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To say that the Bobover Seder table was regal would be an understatement. Royalty in Torah terms goes beyond mere luster. Yes, the Rov's table shone, with its white tablecloths and sparkling silver. There was even one huge cup that was used for the Kos Eliyahu that purportedly once sat on the table of the Emperor Franz Joseph. Nevertheless, there were jewels far beyond the worth of the silver and white cloths that made up that table.

First and foremost was the Rov himself, whose bearing carried the majesty of holy generations of Torah scholars. Then there were his children, the next chain of leaders who from birth were taught by example what it means to give oneself over to one's brethren. There were the hundreds of students, in my time mostly children of Holocaust survivors, who had become proud carriers of Torah traditions as taught by their Rebbe. They were the first ones to bring these lessons to new vistas - the streets of America, England and Israel, to places that had not seen these living lessons and were not always accepting of their unique message.

But, like all gatherings, it was not just one facet that made it what it was. Rather, it was the combination of all its parts that created an atmosphere so unique that it was truly otherworldly.

Before the Seder, the Rov would be ensconced in his office, preparing those matzos he would use for the evening. All these matzos had been baked during the hours before Yom Tov, under his strict, yet joyous, supervision. They were placed in a high cabinet in small piles, and it was from there that the Rov chose which ones would be used on this holy night. He would hum an ancient niggun as he went through the piles. Nobody was in the room except the few students who were charged with carrying the matzos to the table. I was fortunate to have had this opportunity, and as the Rov hummed his special melody, we sensed we were hearing something so spiritual that we felt inadequate and somewhat intruding.

He would then set out toward the Beis Medrash where the Seder was held, shtriemel on his head and wearing two kittels, one his own, and the other which had been worn by his holy grandfather. As he entered the hall, a silence overtook the many guests. He walked (or rather strode, since the Rov always walked quickly) to the head of the table, took off the Shtriemel, covered his head with his tallis and soon we were all transported to a place where Kedusha, joy and higher aspirations linked hands.

I will never be able to describe how we felt at that Seder; its taste is impossible to articulate, its vocabulary beyond the realms of Olam Hazeh. The atmosphere was not merely perceived by one or two of our senses. It overcame the entirety of each and every participant, caressing us at every level, totally enveloping us.

I remember one special moment that has never really left me, although it happened some sixty years ago. Like all fathers, the Rov invited each of his children to ask the Four Questions that begin the Hagadah recital. I remember his asking his smallest daughter to come forward to give her rendition. The child was very young, a toddler.

The Rov placed her on his lap, and with his holy finger pointed at each word in the Hagadah, saying the questions with his child. So far, so seemingly straightforward, except that from the

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Rov's holy lips the questions took on a different meaning. He was asking why this Golus, this long, difficult night, was different from all other nights. Why was the Golus we were living in so much darker, longer and bitterer? In all other times our galus was limited to a certain time. Here it seems to go on forever.

Tears were now rolling down the Rov's silver beard, and he wept with the memories of all that he had seen and witnessed. Yet - his child was in his arms-and this was the answer to everything.

The Rov was flanked by his eldest son HaRav Naftulcha Ztl who was destined to accept the leadership of this reborn chasidous many years later. This great neshomah was clothed in a slight body. His kedusha sprang out from his sweet eyes and gentle demeanour. He had grown up through the hell of the Churban yet his fire was never diminished.

I was young, yes, but looking at this tableau of kedusha could never leave my heart. These special souls, generations of holy yieden melding together, opened the heart to the hope for vibrant future.

Later, as we would sing Dayeinu, it felt as if all the shackles of the Golus were thrown off. The Rov flung his arms apart with joy, "And if we came to Mount Sinai and did not receive the Torah.... Dayeinu, it would be enough to thank You!" Verse followed verse, we were going out of the Egyptian bondage that we each carried, we were striding through the Red Sea, Dayeinu, again and again. Rav Naftali Ztl had a unique way of singing, when he was ensconced in a nigun he would rub his hands together as if to try to contain the fire in his soul. It didn't work though, his body was swayed with the rhythm, and the bren actually left others breathless. Shomayim opened as we all sang, The Rov, Rav Naftulcha, the young children, the talmidim, Reb Naftulah's hands rubbing together, The Rov's arms out stretched, we were no longer at that table in Brooklyn, we were all so far from the mundane as we sang Dayeinu, again and again, catching a glimpse of how Hashem showers us with so much love.

Yes, many are suffering from 'Lockdown Brain' in one way or another. The experts tell us that one way to help alleviate these symptoms is to dedicate your mind on higher and newer concepts. Holy Yieden have always shared stories about great Tzadikim and how they opened up the hearts of Klall Yisroel no matter where in Golus they were placed. Dear readers, I am no great Sage, just a mere teller of stories of yesteryear however stories are always being written, and we are all the scribes of those that will be told tomorrow. Let them be stories of wonder, of joyous faith. Let Dayeinu be the stepping-stone for our acceptance, and let the galus finally end with our glorious song.

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