

[Sources pasted here in Hebrew; translations are in source sheet available as separate file]

I.

How do we tell a Jewish story?

One week from last night, settling in around our Seder tables, we commemorate a night that is not just about peoplehood, family, eating, singing, or even telling the particular story of our Exodus from Egypt. It is a night about *how* we tell the greatest national story we know as Jews. It is a night about *how* we frame our past and project it into the present and future, to ourselves, to one another, and to the next generation -- our collective children.

How we take an event that has been portrayed in our culture in ways ranging from Charlton Heston to animated Prince of Egypt, and fit it into a narrative framework that reflects our values and our theology.

And as such, it in some way serves as a model for how we tell all our stories. How we frame our narratives as individuals, as families, as communities, and as a nation.

And it is an educational moment. The Ohr Letziyon, R Benzion Abba Shaul, a yeshivamate of the late epic sage R Ovadyah Yosef, articulates what we know intuitively that I am trying to get at here:

SOURCE 1

ויש לדעת, שעיקר מצות סיפור יציאת מצרים היא לבנים, ויסוד החינוך שמצינו בתורה נאמר בפסוקי והגדת לבנך, ועיקר החינוך מן התורה הוא בליל פסח, והוא שורש החינוך לחינוכם של הבנים בדרך התורה והמצוות כל ימי חייהם.

Storytelling is education. It is intergenerational. It aims to impart values and bring us into the world of Torah. And how it is told makes all the difference to achieving those goals.

So tonight we ask: What makes a good story? What makes a Jewish story?

The answer to this question, in the minds of the Rabbis, is 4 words long, and while those 4 words themselves do not appear in the Haggadah, nearly every page of the Haggadah bears their imprint and echoes their charge.

Those 4 words come from the Mishnah in the 10th Chapter of Pesachim, the one which provides us the scaffolding upon which the Seder night experience is to be built.

Those 4 words are a mission statement, a theological charge, and a life challenge:

SOURCE 2

ולפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח

ודורש מארמי אובד אבי עד שיגמור כל הפרשה כולה:

Let's unpack these 4 words, מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח:

מתחיל בגנות: We begin with genut. This is a hard word to translate, and part of our task tonight will be to flesh out its meaning. But for now let's just say that genut is something negative. It might be something disgraceful or shameful that is in some way also our fault, or it might be the result of something beyond our control. But either way it is something about which we are not proud, something from which we should want to emerge.

The word genut comes from a shresh related to covering, like מגן, shield, and even ג, a fenced-in protected area. We want to cover this reality up. To conceal it from view – the view of the world, and even our own view. But, says the Seder, says the Mishnah: the Jewish story starts there. We can't conceal this from ourselves.

To get anywhere, we have to acknowledge that uncomfortable, not-ideal, place in our lives. *Jewish tradition always does this - the Bible doesn't whitewash its stories. It portrays even our heroes with their human shortcomings, leaving right out in the open the things we might have imagined they would want to hide.*

So, too, the story of the Seder night starts with those things we might want to hide or forget. And we will have a lot more to say about how and why.

ומסיים בשבח: We culminate with praise. With celebrating, exalting, telling-the-good of the story. Does shevah mean a happy ending? I don't think that's necessarily the case. Because the story of the Jewish people hasn't ended yet -- it is still evolving. Shevah, which means praise and not happiness, is as much a task as it is the goal.

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So tonight I'd like to do three things together.

First, I'd like to see together how this framework of מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח is a recurring theme in the Maggid service.

Second, I'd like to sharpen our understanding of מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח by comparing it to two other Torah paradigms for how we tell the stories of our past.

Third, I'd like to examine together why this model – both the need to begin with genut and the need to end with shevah – why this model is and should be so central to our broader lives.

Let's dive in.

II.

We begin first by discovering that מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח repeats time and again throughout the whole Maggid section.

To do so, let's first return to the question of the meaning of genut. I mentioned earlier that it's a hard word to translate. We can see this already in the Talmud's discussion of the mishnah. As soon as the Talmud cites the Mishnah's programmatic statement -- begin with genut and end with shevah -- a

question immediately follows: What do we mean by genut? What is genut referring to? Let's take a look at the Babylonian Talmud in Pesahim 116b, where a debate is recorded:

### SOURCE 3

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח

מאי בגנות?

רב אמר: מתחלה עובדי עבודת גלולים היו אבותינו.

[ושמואל] אמר: עבדים היינו.

Rav, a 1<sup>st</sup> generation Babylonian amora, Talmudic figure, suggests the genut, the disgrace is our idolatrous origins. We began as idol worshipers. Even Avraham himself began in an idol worshipping context before he embarked on the journey of listening and discovery that led him to the ethical monotheism whose standard he bore across time and space.

But the Babylonian Talmud records a second opinion, cited in our printed versions as that of Shmuel, Rav's counterpart, although many versions of the Talmud attribute this to other figures who lived over a century later, most especially Rava.

That opinion is that the genut, the disgrace is "Avadim Hayinu" – the fact of our being slaves in Egypt. It is our physical servitude that is our central disgrace.

This debate highlights the complexity of the word genut. What does it mean? Anytime we use evaluative words -- especially words with a negative connotation -- we need to ask if some kind of blame or judgment is involved. Is genut something we ought to be ashamed of because we are in part responsible? Or is genut a bad or painful state of affairs, even one which is not at all our fault?

We might think that the genut of having been idolaters suggests a meaning of genut as something we ought to be ashamed of. We ought to have served the one true God. We ought to have known better. Genut, then, is a kind of disgrace for which we are responsible. *But then again* -- perhaps we were not responsible for the fact that we were idolaters – everyone else in the surrounding culture was too! God had not called out to Terah, or to Avraham yet. Perhaps we were like a "Tinok She-nishba" -- a captive child.

On the other hand – we might think that the genut of having been slaves in Egypt is a tragic state of affairs, one that was not anyone's fault. Indeed, how could we blame a slave for being enslaved? Genut, here, might involve no judgment of us, but just reflect our less illustrious beginnings as a people - a time of pain and suffering. *But then again* – perhaps, as some sources suggest, we are responsible for our enslavement, which was the result of a cascade of events beginning with the sale of Joseph or Avram's behavior with Sarai when they went down to Egypt.

The point is: even with these two examples, it's hard to parse out the normative implications of a word like genut.

But, I want to suggest, we should not get bogged down in this question. Either way, these are not states we want to be in. Genut encompasses both. *And the statement that we must begin with genut and conclude with shevah implies that whether or not we are at fault, if we are in a situation of genut, we*

*must find a path toward something beyond that genut - whether it be disgrace, disempowerment, or whether it be suffering and tragic pain -- whether Rav's spiritual enslavement or Shmuel's physical servitude -- toward some form of shevah. And I will suggest, tonight, a meaning of shevah that highlights our own role in creating shevah - in improving ourselves and bringing good into the world.*

So which opinion of these two do we choose for the Haggadah? As we well know, and dating back to right after the Talmud, it is already well established that we follow both of these opinions.

And both are right – there are, indeed, many moments of genut, and many journeys to shevah, and many timeframes for this story, and many ways to tell this story.

But even these two interpretations are only one way to understand this Mishnah.

Before we see another possible interpretation, we must first ask one more question and draw out one more point. Where is the shevah in these cases? Where does Rav mesayem, and where does Shmuel mesayem?

Some suggest they each end at the end of the Maggid section, but others have a very different approach. They say the shevah need not be mentioned in the Talmud because it is obvious - it is simply the second half of each sentence describing genut! Shmuel's sentence that begins with: we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt ends with: and then God took us out of Egypt – shevah! Rav's sentence that begins with: In the beginning we were idolaters, ends with: and now God has brought us near to God's service – shevah! As such, these are little units in succession beginning with genut and ending with shevah. Genut, shevah. Genut, shevah.

In this understanding, מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח is not a single journey spanning the whole Haggadah -- or at least not only that -- but also an act that we constantly repeat throughout the Seder night -- beginning many times over with genut, and ending each time with shevah.

This type of approach -- seeing the Haggadah as repeated units of beginning with genut and ending with shevah, can again be seen if we turn to another interpretation of the Mishnah, different from Rav and Shmuel in the Talmud.

Let's return to the Mishnaic source for a moment.

## SOURCE 2

ולפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח

ודורש מארמי אובד אבי עד שיגמור כל הפרשה כולה:

After the child asks the questions, the parent answers by way of teaching in an educationally appropriate way specific to the child. Then we are told מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, and then the parent expounds on the verses from Devarim 26, ארמי אבד אבי. Up until now, we, following the Talmud and the medieval commentaries in general, have assumed that מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח is its own portion of the Seder project, separate from the immediately following instruction of ודורש מארמי אבד אבי. Based on that assumption, the Talmud needed to suggest a separate text, or, since there was a debate, two separate texts, that might fulfill the mandate of where to begin the story -- which historical moment of genut.

But R' David Tzvi Hoffmann, a 19-20<sup>th</sup> c German posek and academician, suggests that the original intent of the Mishnah was not that at all. He explains:

#### SOURCE 4

שו"ת מלמד להועיל חלק ג (אבן העזר וחושן משפט) סימן סה

באמת קשה על הגמ' למה לא פירשה המשנה דחדא קתני מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח דהיינו ודורש מארמי אובד אבי וכו'...

The question is an especially good one because all the other sections of Mishnah Pesachim 10 include the specific Seder texts they are talking about or an explicit reference to them, like the Four Questions, the liturgy of the Secnd Cup, the Hallel, and more. Yet this one gives an instruction with no specific base text – why should this case be different?

באמת קשה על הגמ' למה לא פירשה המשנה דחדא קתני מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח דהיינו ודורש מארמי אובד אבי וכו'...  
ונראה לתרץ הכל בס"ד דהנה מתני' דסדר של פסח נשנה בזמן שבית המקדש קיים כדתנן הלילה הזה כולי /כולו/ צלי ובזמן  
הבית באמת היה די בפ' ארמי אובד אבי כדי להתחיל בגנות ולסיים בשבח, אמנם עיקר השבח היה מספר בפסוק ויביאנו אל  
המקום הזה וכמו שפי' הספרי שזה בית המקדש, וזה עיקר השבח שהשי"ת משרה שכינתו בתוכנו בבית המקדש...

וכל זה בזמן שבית המקדש קיים, אך לאחר החורבן בודאי לא אמרו ויביאנו אל המקום הזה, ... ומעתה היה חסר עיקר  
השבח בפ' ארמי אובד, ואף שמשנה לא זזה ממקומה ונשנית כמו שנשנית בזמן הבית מ"מ היו צריכין לפרש דמתחיל בגנות  
ומסיים בשבח היינו שיאמרו פסוקים אחרים של גנות ושל שבח דבפ' ארמי אובד יש כאן גנות אבל עיקר השבח נאבד...

R' Hoffmann is suggesting that the original מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח of the Seder night in the Mishnah's instruction was the actual expounding upon אבי אבד ארמי! Now its shevah -- the conclusion of the story with the Jewish people in Israel with God's presence dwelling among them at the Temple -- is incomplete, so we need other ways to express בשבח ומסיים בגנות מתחיל, *but it, also, then, fundamentally, follows this structure of discrete Haggadic units of genut and shevah.*

So the Maggid has בשבח ומסיים בגנות מתחיל in the interpretations of Rav and Shmuel. It has it in the Arami Oved Avi which follows. But it also has it already at the very beginning of Maggid. Ha Lahma Anya -- This is the Bread of Affliction -- which introduces and frames the Seder, follows this simple trajectory:

#### SOURCE 5

השתא הכא, לשנה הבאה בארעא דישראל.

השתא עבדי, לשנה הבאה בני חורין.

This is certainly a movement from גנות to שבח, *and it adds another component to our understanding of genut.*

Until now, we've understood genut as a moment, or many different moments, from our past -- moments of disgrace that we have overcome. But Ha Lachma Anya shows us that genut is not only in our past, and our present is not only shevah. It's not all better now that we're not idolaters or slaves in Egypt. Ha Lachma Anya refers to a present -- to a now -- now we are in Exile, next year in Israel. Now we are not free, next year, let us be free.

*This affirms that the task of beginning with *genut* and ending with *shevah* is not just about how we tell a story from the past, but it is also a task -- a normative charge -- for how we are supposed to turn our present life into a better future. Storytelling is also about the future.*

And so we can understand that the charge of the Mishnah was not just isolated to one particular moment in the Haggadah, but was rather the basis around which every version of the story of the Exodus and of the Seder night itself was framed. The very fact that we accept the multiple versions of Rav and Shmuel and Arami Oved Avi seems to support the notion that we want lots of expressions of *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח* – that it may even be the defining characteristic of the Seder liturgy.

One final perspective on the pervasiveness and importance of *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח* in the Maggid: we know that the way to show something's importance is to find it a Scriptural source. So much Talmudic ink is devoted to that question – “X min haTorah, minayin?” (Where do we find a basis for X in the Torah). And *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח* is so central and fundamental that the Ohr Hahayyim actually argues that it is found in the Torah, embedded in the very verse that serves as the mandate for the Seder night, from Exodus 13:8, *וְהַגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה יְקֹוֹק לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם*,

## SOURCE 6

אור החיים שמות פרק יג

(ח) והגדת לבנך וגו'. צריך לדעת למה לא אמר ואמרת כי תיבת הגדה מצינו לרבותינו ז"ל שאמרו (שבת פ"ז א) שיתכוין בה דברים קשים כגידיים... עוד צריך לדעת אומרו לאמר והוא כבר אמר והגדת:

ונראה כי יכוין על דרך אומרם ז"ל (פסחים קט"ז ב) מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, יאמר גנות אבותיהם של האבות כי לא היה דבר משובח, והוא אומרו והגדת דברים קשים שלב האדם נעקש מהם, ואחר כך מסיים בשבח, והוא אומרו לאמר אמירות משובחות משמחים את הלב ומסעדים אותו,

Wow! In other words, the Torah verse that charges us to transmit the Passover story is itself a mini-*מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח*, beginning with the harsher verb of *להגיד* and ending with the more celebratory *לאמר*.

So we have seen in this first section that *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח* is both a recurring theme and central value in the Seder, and that it is both the arc of the whole story and the framework of each individual mini-unit of the story.

*But is it coincidental? Does מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח just happen to be the way all the Exodus texts are organized, and therefore the organizing principle for the tellings of the Seder night, or is מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח more fundamental, and somehow the way we are supposed to tell all our stories?*

I believe it is the latter, and so now we begin our second exploration, our understanding of *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח* by comparing it to two other Torah paradigms for how we tell the stories of our past.

## III.

The first alternative storytelling model we must consider comes from the other major storytelling ritual that fills our calendar year – *keriat haTorah betzibbur* – Torah reading! Perhaps this is so second-nature to us that it doesn't occur to us to ask, but let me ask: *Why do we read the Torah? Why not just have it*

*in the ark and in our printed texts and study it each at our own pace and on our own time? Why is it even a part of liturgy and synagogue life?*

Of course, Torah reading, and its history as a ritual, is the main mode of transmitting Torah to the community. Communities had *meturgemanim*, translators who translated and explained the text as it was being read, and the whole institution is designed to allow the text of the Torah to be taught to the community on a regular basis.

So how are the stories of our Torah read and told to the community? There is one framing guideline mentioned in the Talmud Yerushalmi, and then followed through on by the Rema in the Shulhan Arukh. In discussing the fact that we do not make aliyah breaks within the קללות, the two admonition portions in the Torah, the Talmud Yerushalmi explains,

SOURCE 7

תלמוד ירושלמי (וילנא) מסכת מגילה פרק ג הלכה ז

א"ר יוסה בי ר' בון לא מטעם הזה אלא זה שהוא עומד לקרות בתורה צריך שיהא פותח בדבר טוב וחותם בדבר טוב

The Rema codifies this point in the Shulhan Arukh:

SOURCE 8

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות קריאת ספר תורה סימן קלח סעיף א

הקורא בתורה לא ישייר בפרשה פחות מג' פסוקים, מפני היוצאים אז מבהכ"נ שיאמרו: העולה אחריו לא יקרא אלא שני פסוקים הנשארים; .... הגה: ... **ויכוין שיתחיל תמיד לקרוא בדבר טוב, ויסיים בדבר טוב** (א"ז ומיימוני פרק י"ג מה"ת) וע"ל סימן תכ"ח.

Besides the initial guidelines about how many psukim to leave at the beginning and end of an Aliyah, the only guidelines given for the structure of aliyot, the units of the way the Torah is taught and told in public, is the instruction to always start with something tov -- good, and end with something tov -- good. In fact, this is one of only a handful of places that the Shulhan Arukh includes any instruction of how to מתחיל and how to מסיים, and this time it is on a high note in each case.

This preference is so dominant that it leads to all kinds of Aliyah breaks in strange and unexpected places just in order to avoid ending on a sad note or starting on one. *You can ask me after for some fun examples!*

To get a better sense of this phenomenon, we need think no further than the multiple Megillot and other texts that end on low notes and so we repeat the penultimate verse in order not to end on that low note. I did that this morning with the Haftorah – repeated the second to last verse of Sefer Malakhi so as not to end on its darker final verse.

What this approach has in common with מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח is the second half – we like to end on a high note! But they part company when it comes to how to start. With aliyot all year round, we start on a high note. On the Seder night, we start with acknowledging and publicizing the hard things – not burying them in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> verse.

Why in Torah reading around the year do we focus on the positive and bury the negative, while on the Seder night we are willing – even mandated, to begin the story right in the midst of the hard stuff?

Keriat Hatorah betzibbur is just that -- betzibbur. It is public. Anyone can walk in at any time. We have no control over our environment. And so we need to be more cautious, and keep things positive and upbeat. Start happy and end happy, even if there is some hardship in the middle. There is a need to frame things in undifferentiated community with an overall positive spin.

But the Seder is a family conversation. It is לפי דעת הבן אביו מלמדו – a chance for us to have the frank and intimate conversations in which the truth can come out. In that setting, we can admit the גנות – the uncomfortable things – and put them right out there at the beginning.

So while public Torah reading needs to contain a fully positive frame, the Seder night – the more candid conversation, the more honest telling of our story, begins with facing the hard parts of our past.

And there is another, related explanation, based on the distinction between the word tov, from the Torah reading guideline, and the word shevah, from our Seder night. The kind of storytelling we do on the Seder night is much more open-ended than the story-telling of the Torah-reading. In the Torah reading, we're reading from a fixed text, from a divine text. There is a kind of objectivity to the good and bad in the Torah -- it is or it isn't. Something is either tov or ra -- good or bad. A pasuk in the Torah either says something good or bad. And that's what the text says, at least in the context of a public reading where there is no mandated discussion.

But the Seder night, although it also very much includes a text that we read, is really about conversation, asking questions, and going far beyond the text too. It is not only about telling a story, but also about living a story. So we use shevah. *Because shevah, I want to suggest, is not just an objective fact -- it's just as much about how we spin things. We are in control, to some degree, of how the story is understood. Shevah is a task, as we've been saying, as much as it is a fact. We are tasked with turning the genut into shevah.*

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So the Seder night mandates that we must acknowledge a painful past -- without simply burying it between good things. But it is precisely the premise that we should acknowledge a painful past that is also problematized by one more text in our tradition – in fact, a Mishnah.

SOURCE 9

משנה מסכת בבא מציעא פרק ד משנה י

כשם שאונאה במקח וממכר כך אונאה בדברים לא יאמר לו בכמה חפץ זה והוא אינו רוצה ליקח אם היה בעל תשובה לא יאמר לו זכור מעשיך הראשונים אם הוא בן גרים לא יאמר לו זכור מעשה אבותיך שנאמר (שמות כב) וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו:

The Mishnah in Bava Metzia 4:10 clarifies that in the same way as there is אונאה, a form of oppression or abuse and advantage-taking, in business, so is there in speech. Oppressing the stranger, verbally, is exemplified by the prohibition not to say to the convert, "Remember your predecessors' deeds." In other words, we don't highlight the past behaviors which no longer accord with the convert – the community member's – current value system and Jewish way of life. It would be embarrassing, disgraceful. And it is a Torah prohibition.

How striking, then, that this is in essence exactly what Rav tells us to do on the Seder night!

The Mishnah says, don't say "remember the [idolatrous] deeds of your ancestors."

Rav says, on the Seder night, say, "our ancestors were idol worshippers"!

Are we engaging in הגרא on the Seder night against ourselves?

At one level, the difference may simply be that there is no ending b'shevah, no positive spin on the statement to the convert. But it seems to me that even if we added that, and said, "Remember the [idolatrous] deeds of your ancestors, but look at how far you've come", the genut with which we opened would still violate a Torah prohibition.

But there is a more important difference: *whose story it is*. Listen to the difference between the two descriptions. הגרא, the prohibited approach, is saying, "Remember the deeds of *your* ancestors"; Rav's Seder night charge is to say, "*Our* ancestors were idol worshippers."

When it comes to opening up parts of our story about which we are not proud, or which are hard, or which contain embarrassment, only we can do that for ourselves. We cannot do that for someone else, nor should we allow anyone outside of ourselves to do it for us, certainly not without our permission. I cannot מתחיל בגנות שלך (mathil bignut shelakh – begin with your genut) – only בגנות שלי (with my genut), or בגנות שלנו (with our genut). Only from a place of intentional self-revelation or communally chosen vulnerability can we talk about the hard parts of our past. It is not our place, of course, to declare it about others.

What about the distinction between individual and communal? Maybe the only way we can begin with genut is because it is a national story, so any individual genut is nullified in the greater whole. It is not about any one of us. Can we tell our own stories that begin with genut, or would that be more like an ona'ah against ourselves?

I think we can, and Yaakov our patriarch provides one proof.

SOURCE 10

בראשית פרק לב

(יא) [קִטְנִיתִי מִכֹּל הַחֲסִדִים וּמִכֹּל-הָאֱמֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֵת-עַבְדְּךָ] כִּי בְמִקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הֵיטִי לְשֹׁנֵי מַחֲזָוֹת:

In the darkest night, with his brother and men bearing down on him, and without the certainty that this nascent dream of the Jewish people would even survive to see the dawn, Yaakov turns to God and tells his story. He recounts, as an individual, beginning with his lowly and pitiful state, crossing the Jordan with nothing but his walking stick, perhaps even feeling responsible for some of what caused him to flee, and now growing to this beautiful and robust family. He doesn't shy away from the hard parts of his past.

We can – and should, if we wish – tell the hard parts of our past. It can be an individual activity, not only a communal activity.

From these two counterpoints to the broad dictum of מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, I believe we can now refine מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח further as a broad charge.

Torah reading, as a public teaching of a fixed and more morally objective text, has to begin with good, not genut.

And if we're telling someone else's story, not claiming it as our own, then genut can be an act of ona'ah or lashon hara.

But when we tell our national story in intentional, more intimate settings, and also when we tell our individual stories in such settings, it is important to do something which we otherwise have an instinct not to do – to open the door to the parts we might otherwise conceal, the parts we feel less comfortable with or less proud of. To start with genut. And to get to shevah.

And if, as we argued in SOURCE 1, the Seder night is the fundamental night for the mitzvah of education, then מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח is a core principle in how we teach and transmit our message to each other and into the future.

Why? Why is the genut important, and why is the shevah important? And more broadly: why frame stories in any particular way? Why not just “tell it like it is” - unconsciously, unintentionally, just narrate events as they happened?

We are now ready to enter the third stage of our learning. To unearth the value in מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, and see what it offers us in our own lives.

For this we must turn to the Maharal.

IV.

The Maharal grounds the principle of מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח in something we know from our life experience, but that is actually so fundamental that it also explains the way we tell the story of the creation of the world. In his *Gevurot Hashem*, his analysis of Pesah, commenting on מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, he offers this comment. This is a little bit of philosophy, so let's make our way through it together.

SOURCE 11

וכאשר תבין עוד תדע עוד, כי השבח שקודם לו גנות יותר שבח כמו שתראה כי היום קודם לו הלילה וזה מפני כי השלימות אינו נמצא בהתתלתו בעולם הזה... באשר היא מדריגה עליונה א-להית, שאין המקבל ראוי אל מעלה הגדולה הא-להית שיהיה כך מהתחלתו... ולא היה כדאי העולם הזה לקבל המעלה הזאת שיהיה האור בתתלתו, כי האור הוא מעלת המציאות לכך יקדם לו לילה.

The Maharal here makes two key points.

The first is that the genut is in some way in service of, and enhances, the shevah.

We cannot appreciate the goodness of our lot until we see it in contrast to the way things were, or the way they could have been.

This is a fact of the human psyche. Maybe it should be and maybe it shouldn't be, but it is real. I think this is so basic and so true that we take it for granted, but at some level it is the entire message of the Seder, and the entire message I want to transmit tonight.

We cannot appreciate the goodness of our lot until we see it in contrast to the way things were, or the way they could have been.

This is the story of the Jewish people. But how do we tell it?

Listen to these two versions of our story.

We are a nation, monotheistic and free.

- or -

We were small, a family, and now we are a nation. We were idolaters, and now we are monotheistic. We were slaves, and now we are free.

Which makes us feel more grateful and more aware of our all the blessing we have in our lives?

השני – of course, it is the second.

It's not to say that *genut* is justified because it enhances the *shevah*. Nor is it to say that there's a happy ending, or that things are perfect now. We all know that even though these things are true for the Jewish people, much work remains to be done. There is still much *genut*. But -- it's only from reflecting on our past, and on the ways that we have already moved from *genut* to *shevah*, that we can appreciate our journey, our current state in the present, and, most importantly: the task that still remains.

This is so fundamental, suggests the Maharal in his second point, that the Jewish narrative of the creation of the world expresses and proves it. Our Torah's very first verses, our story of all existence, is מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח. ויהי ערב ויהי בקר. There was darkness, and then there was light. There was night, and then there was day.

So the Haggadah, our story of national creation, actually bases itself on the precedent of the story, of our story, of universal creation.

In some sense, every story flows from, or begins with, that story. By making the story of creation a story of *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח*, we are really saying that every story should be told that way. *Embedded in the fabric of the world from its very start is the notion that things progress from incomplete to complete, from darkness to light. As such, when we tell a story, we tell it in that framework, as about progress, development and growth.*

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Allow me to furnish one such example of how *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח* serves to deepen our appreciation of the world, and bring us to *shevah* – in fact, to Hallel.

I grew up in a world in which I took the State of Israel for granted. And in that world, one can ask the question why we say Hallel on Yom Ha'atzmaut. What is so miraculous about the State? It's "always" – in my frame of existence – been there.

And then one speaks to those who lived before the State. Or reads the prayers and essays of the Zionists and the Sages and all those who thirsted and longed and yearned for a homeland. And then one watches the footage of Ben Gurion proclaiming the State. And the dancing in the street.

And when one sees the process as one from exile to redemption, from the genut of homelessness to the shevah of being able to be the master of our destiny, with all the glory and responsibility and spiritual power and challenge that that entails, suddenly the State, the very same one I always know, is a miracle. And demands Hallel.

And so when I fly on a plane across the Mediterranean and prepare to land in Tel Aviv, I have a kind of a minhag, a custom: I look at the earth below me and try to ask myself: what was here 100 years ago? What an enormous journey has been undertaken! מה נשתנה המקום הזה - how profoundly redeemed and changed this place is. And I feel the miraculousness of it all.

And this doesn't mean that the state can't and mustn't be better than it even is now. It doesn't mean that we're fully done with genut and only in shevah. But that's not what this is about. The movement from genut to shevah is our eternal, permanent task in telling and living our story.

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This idea of the Maharal, that the shevah is only true shevah because it comes from genut, is deepened by Rav Kook, who argues in his Haggadah that it's not only that genut changes our perspective and enhances our appreciation of the good in the world, making us more inclined and able to do shevah, but he goes a step further, saying that genut actually changes us as people, that it shapes our character, and makes us people who are more shevah-oriented.

SOURCE 12

הרב קוק (עולת ראייה ח"ב, הגדה של פסח)

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח - להורות שהגנות היא צורך השבח. מתחיל בגנות של 'עבדים היינו'. אמנם העבדות ודאי גרמה כמה דברים רעים, כמה תכונות נשחתות, ואצ"ל רעות וצרות בהוה שלה לאותם הסובלים אותה אז, אבל גם תכונות ההכנעה, וההשתעבדות למי שראוי להשתעבד, להיות עבד ד' באמת, להיות יכולים לבטל הרצון העצמי והנטיה העצמית בשביל קבלת עול מלכות שמים, שישראל מצטיינים בה, ושהביאו בזה ועתידיים להביא טובה רבה להם ולעולם...

What Rav Kook is arguing here is not, of course, a defense of genut as an absolute value, but of the fact that out of suffering we do often gain so much that makes us better people. It's not worth the price, but a journey which begins with genut does often – not always, but often – produce people who are better equipped to truly praise.

In the Israel example, it is to suggest, perhaps, that the years of exile, diaspora and separation from our homeland actually forged in us a certain kind of independence, flexibility and resourcefulness, for example, that serve us in such good stead now that we have returned home to our land and sovereignty.

In a very different way, and at a deeply personal level, I think I have experienced this over these nearly 7 months since our baby girls died. Nothing will ever soften the genut of that loss. In the sense that genut means to cover up, there is a part of me that wants to cover it up, to forget the pain and the hardship. That is hard to share with the world, and that I even want to hide from myself. Sometimes I long for the more carefree person I was before this genut befell our family. Sometimes I wish that such pain was not part of my life story.

And here מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח teaches me two things.

First, I have to uncover that which is painful. I have to, as Shira did so powerfully in this space just a week ago, tell the story, expose the pain and the vulnerability - to myself first, and to others. I have to מתחיל בגנות.

Second, what Rav Kook illuminates is the belief that doing that will produce some capacity לסיים בשבח. What is that shevah? I have no praise, God forbid, for the fact that our girls are not here in this world. I only have unanswered, unanswerable, questions, and sadness. But I have grown to treasure life even more, to appreciate the miracle of every baby that is born alive, and to be able to praise with more understanding when life is affirmed. And as Shira mentioned last week, we have even come to see the shevah in the brief existence of our babies -- and to be thankful for the fact that we had them in the way that we did, rather than them never having existed at all -- even if that fact is what also causes so much pain.

So there is another piece of the lesson: That following the mandate to begin with genut and end with shevah requires us to not only acknowledge the hard things from our pasts - but also to, in some ways, embrace that this is our life and this is our life story. It's not to suggest a silver lining for things that are painful, certainly not for things that are tragic. *But it is to say that once those things have happened to us, we must include them as part of our life story.*

We can't pretend to be the person or the nation we were before. We must let the fact that the genut was there change us, and in changing us, help us reach toward the shevah, toward the task of somehow working on making ourselves and the world better. We can't take away the past. Nor can we hide it between two good things. That's appropriate for Torah-reading but not for lived life or for the Seder night.

This notion is highlighted in a striking interpretation of מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, by the Maharsha:

SOURCE 13

מהרש"א חידושי אגדות מסכת פסחים דף קטז עמוד א

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים כו'. ענינו שביום שמחת לבו של אדם יזכור תחלת שפלותו וגנותו שלא תזוח דעתו עליו ומה"ט דורש נמי מארמי אובד אבי וע"כ בעי לאודווי ולשבוחי טפי וק"ל:

In many ways, what we have said until now is that, detached from a given story, when we return to tell it, we should use the framework of מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח. The Maharsha pushes us further, saying that specifically at moments of shevah, at moments of peak joy, we must return to the genut and incorporate it into the experience, just as we break the glass under the huppah.

Even in a time of unmitigated shevah, a time when the genut of the past seems a distant memory, we must also recall the genut. We can't genuinely conclude with shevah if we aren't also honest about the way that they genut has formed us and made us who we are.

It's the image of Anshel Rothschild, the founding father of international finance, who grew up living with his 30 family members in an attic above their shop with the front wall 11 feet wide. When he grew to prominence and fame, he kept the clothes of his impoverished youth in a drawer, and looked at them from time to time – to remember. And to appreciate.

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We must recognize that the march of Jewish history is not a simple upwards climb. It is not just an ascent to higher and higher, better and better. Obviously the calamities across our history, and the unspeakable horrors of the Shoah, and the many wars of Israel and terror which plagues her and us all, and the simple facts of human suffering, all eliminate that possibility from our consideration. So how can we claim that our story is a story of genut to shevah, when sometimes we go backwards from shevah to genut?

Indeed, we touched on this earlier, with the suggestion that the entire Haggadah is actually recurring units of moving from genut to shevah. That every section of the haggadah, in some sense, repeats this move. We might suggest, then, that the Haggadah is modeling the fact that the move from genut to shevah is a recurring and recycling one in lived life and in Jewish history too.

But the question is even deeper than that. Sometimes moments that were once the moment of shevah in our story -- those moments go away entirely. Sometimes the shevah of the past is destroyed and becomes reversed into a moment of genut.

In fact, remember all the way back when we pointed out R David Tzvi Hoffmann's interpretation that the Mishnah's מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח was the actual portion of ארמי אבד אבי which began with our ancestors wandering and ended with our people settling down in Israel, with the building of the Temple? But then, said Rav Hoffman, that very thing that was the shevah -- the return to the land and the building of the Temple, was destroyed, and it could no longer be a shevah. In fact, it became one of the greatest moments of genut in Jewish history! Exile, destruction of the Temple. Rav Hoffman stated that, in light of this cataclysmic change, we needed to find a new shevah in order to fulfill the mandate.

What this position acknowledges is that we are constantly moving between genut and shevah, and that even those categories themselves can be in flux. Because this is lived life, not just a fixed and closed text. Even the paradigmatic shevah, coming into the land and building the temple, has been up-ended, and required two new versions. So why do we offer this framework for storytelling when even the paradigm in the Mishnah is not a full movement from genut to shevah?

Is every story a story of genut to shevah? Aren't there some chapters that end with no good, with nothing to praise God for? Or where what we feel thankful for is far outweighed by what pains us? And sometimes, it even feels like a betrayal to the pain of the past, to find a way toward shevah. Some experiences are just so bad, that they can only be re-told as stories that end with genut.

So why is מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח the Jewish framework for storytelling?

This is simply not a fully answerable question.

Not every story, not every chapter, not every period of time can fit this framework.

Some stories must be told outside this frame.

But there are two points we must incorporate in response to the question.

The first is to remember the frame for מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח in the Mishnah: לפי דעת ה'בן אביו מלמדו – according to the capacity of the child, the parent instructs. In other words, our capacity to wrestle with the chapters that feel like all genut and move them towards shevah is profoundly personal and

subjective. One person's approach and capacity will necessarily differ from the next's. we all have different da'at.

Second, we must remember what shevah is.

*The overarching challenge, the overarching goal, of the Seder night, is to encourage us to construct stories that are not afraid to begin with genut, and that can end in praise - and remember, praise does not mean everything is perfect; nor does it mean that we erase the pain of the genut or that the pain isn't always also there to some degree. But praise, as I've emphasized over and over again, is not mainly a state of affairs -- it's not saying: and things are great now. Rather, it is a task, it is a mindset, it is a goal. A goal of personal and communal, individual and collective, self-improvement and world-improvement. It is a goal of continuing to strive to bring light into the world, even as we are struggling to emerge from darkness.*

Hallel itself – the ultimate shevah – includes the lines of מן המצר קראתי י-ה, of crying out to God from a narrow place, and of אנא ה' הושיעה נא, of pleading with God for salvation – in the midst of praise. Praise includes a seeking a better life, and thanking God - even while not letting God off the hook for the parts of the genut which are beyond our control - thanking God for endowing us with the capacity to survive and adapt even in the face of genut.

This what I think of as *realistic, aspirational optimism* – the way we tell our story on the Seder night, and how we strive to tell our stories always.

*Even in the very last few weeks in our Bayit, we have tried to model this – thinking of Bernie, Tally, Ann and Shira, sharing stories of abuse, of loss, of genut, and doing so in a way which places themselves and each other and all of us on the path to shevah as a result.*

When we achieve this frame of realistic, aspirational optimism, we can experience the truest liberation of the Seder, that brings us back to the very beginning of our learning. It's the emotional description of the Ohr Letziyon of what the Seder night should feel like. He explains in

SOURCE 14:

שו"ת אור לציון חלק ג - הערות פרק טו - דיני ליל הסדר  
ויספר ביציאת מצרים ויערוך כל הסדר בשמחה גדולה, ...

והוא בכלל מה שאמרו בפסחים קט"ז ע"א מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח. (וראה בדברי הרמב"ם בפרק ז' מהלכות חמץ ומצה הלכה ד'). הרי שהעיקר ההתגבשות לעם היתה ביציאת מצרים, ומתוך כך קיבלנו לאחר מכן את התורה. ואין בכל הימים יום שמחה גדול כיום זה.

וירחיק מאוד כל עצבות או רוגז לעומת השמחה הגדולה שיש לשמוח ביום זה. ואף אם זה לעומת זה יבואו לו נסיונות של כעס וכדומה, יקטינים בעיניו כשיתבונן בגדלות יום זה. וכיון ששורש היותנו לאומה שבחר ה' הוא בלילה זה, הרי שעיקר החינוך לבנים הוא בלילה זה, שיחנכם לבנים לעם ה', ויזכו מתוך כך לתורה ומצוות.

Sometimes we can, reflecting on that charge, and achieving it, reach a certain joy on Pesah night. Of course, distancing all negative emotion is a very high, and maybe unrealistic bar, and so the Or Letziyon circles back to just suggest putting those emotions in perspective – moderating them – in light of the great things we have achieved until this point.

So what Pesah, what מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח stands for, is the capacity to take stock of our history – nationally and personally.

Not to be afraid to uncover parts of our past about which we are less proud, whether we feel responsible for them or not. And not to be afraid to uncover and hold onto the tragic parts of our past that hurt so much that we sometimes wish we could be that person, or that nation, who don't have that past.

To recognize that not every chapter has a happy ending, and that mesayem bi-shevah doesn't imply that it does. To decide whether we want to choose a narrative frame that allows us to not only see growth, progress and development in our lives but also to actively strive to create that growth and progress, even when it is so hard to do.

To take the opportunity to see God's role in that – and to celebrate our role in it. And to experience from that the feelings of shevah – of praise and Hallel that come from deep inside.

And praising God doesn't mean that we don't also ask God why, or hold God accountable. But it means recognizing that Hashem natan vi-Hashem lakach -- God gives and God takes -- and yehi shem hashem mevorakh -- without God's gifts, we would have nothing.

And then, when trials and tribulations, sadness, confusion, and even anger, arise within us, we can try to put them in perspective in the context of our grander narrative. We can remember creation. Vayhi erev, vayhi boker.

V.

Allow me to offer one more reading of these simple 4 words (back to SOURCE 2) as we conclude:

At their plainest, and as we have mostly discussed them until now, they are an instruction about how we tell our story.

But they might actually be a charge about how to live our lives, and a prediction, and aspiration, for the consequence which that kind of life leads to.

דעתי על דעת ה' – לפי דעת ה' – according to the child's capacity to internalize and live out this model for behavior, the parent inculcates in them the following value and call to action:

מתחיל בגנות – which I want to read here as: בגנות? מתחיל! – even when you find yourself in genut, in despair, stuck, whether nationally or individually, *mathil* (or, *hathil*) – get started. Don't allow yourself to stagnate. Respond, sometimes overcome, grow, begin the process of making the things you can control, better.

And we don't do this alone – we do it in community. When we see each other in genut, and we're brought into the story – we must *mathil* – we must also start the process of supporting, of helping. Of reaching out to visit, to call, to offer resources, to listen to the story. That's the community our Bayit is.

When there is genut, still *mathil*. Whatever you do, don't get stuck. Create an opening.

The outcome, the Rabbis offer to us, will be מסיים בשבח. Cultivating that type of personality will allow us, with the help of each other, to find some comfort, some strength and the pathway to a life of gratitude and praise. The end will be thankfulness and Hallel.

I look around this room at my own teachers and guides and role models in this. We have all experienced *genut* – and we rise, and raise each other. And all of you have helped me, in moments of *genut*, to begin – *lehtahil*.

So as we prepare to sit around our Seder tables in a week from now, and tell our ultimate story, we are also practicing how we tell so many of our stories, and how we live our lives. Honestly, and in a framework of optimism. And supporting one another.

מתחיל בגנות, ומסיים בשבח.

Hag kasher vesameah.