

מכון חדר

MECHON HADAR

Mah Nishtanah: **The Freedom of Multiple Meanings**

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer – kaunfer@hadar.org

Pesah 5777

Every year on Pesah we recite the “four questions” at the Seder. But what is the significance of the questions? More specifically, what is the meaning of the opening line of the questions: מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות?

I want to suggest that the language used to open the questions—*mah nishtanah*—is in fact purposely ambiguous. By playing with this ambiguity, the author invites us into a world in which meanings can be multiple. And this, in large part, is the main point of the Haggadah: stories and symbols have multiple meanings. The very idea of words having multiple meanings has a spiritual dimension as well, which cuts to the core of this holiday: Freedom is the ability to explore more than one meaning. In a slave’s world, there is no room for multiple possibilities; reality is flat. But free people can spend time exploring and are not satisfied with only one explanation. All this, I believe, is wrapped up in the words *mah nishtanah*.

Let’s explore the multiple dimensions of this phrase. The first challenge comes in translating the line (left untranslated above on purpose). Is this phrase a question or, in fact, a statement (and this should be referred to as “the four statements” or “the four exclamations”)? Specifically, should the line be translated “How is this night different from all other nights?” or “How different this night is from all other nights!” We often know “*mah*” as a question word, meaning “what.” But we also know it, certainly from the Bible, as an exclamation, such as: *mah tov ohalekha Ya’akov*, usually translated as “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob!” (Num 24:5); and “*mah norah ha-makom ha-zel*”, “How awesome is this place!” (Gen 28:17).

The Mishnah where these words first appear may help shed some light on the translation. In the best

manuscripts of Mishnah Pesahim 10:4 we read:¹

Kaufman and Parma manuscripts of Mishnah Pesahim 10:4 They pour him a second cup. Here the son asks [his father] And if there is [no] knowledge in the son, his father teaches him: How different this night is from all other nights! [Or: How is this night different from all other nights?] On all other nights we do not dip [even] once; tonight we dip twice. On all other nights we eat <i>hametz</i> and <i>matzah</i>; tonight we eat only <i>matzah</i>. On all other nights we eat meat that is roasted, boiled and cooked; tonight entirely roasted.	משנה פסחים פרק י:ד (כ"י קאופמן ופרמה) מזגו לו כוס שני וכאן הבן שואל אביו ואם [אין] דעת בבן אביו מלמדו מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות שבכל הלילות אנו מטבילין [אפילו] פעם אחת הלילה הזה שתי פעמים שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה הלילה הזה כולו מצה שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בשר צלי שלוק ומבושל הלילה הזה כולו צלי
--	--

There is much to notice about this Mishnah, not least that the original listing of unique facts about Seder night number three, not four.²

But concerning our ambiguous line of “*mah nishtanah*,” note that this statement is not something the child asks the father, but rather only if the child does not ask an unscripted question does the father recite the *mah nishtanah*. Indeed, for hundreds of years, the tradition was for the father to recite these words (perhaps to the relief of young children!).³

This leads some, like contemporary scholar Josh Kulp, to conclude that this must not be a set of questions. In Kulp’s words: “Only if the son is unable to ask a question does the father prompt his question by reciting the Mah Nishtanah text. They should therefore be translated not: ‘Why is this

¹ The “best” manuscript is one which displays minimum changes to the text based on later practice or later texts, e.g. the Bavli. Because of how important Pesah has been to Jews throughout time, and how authoritative is the Mishnah, this chapter’s description of the Seder was particularly susceptible to changes of this type.

² They also map nicely onto the three subject areas Rabban Gamliel says we have to mention at the Seder—in the following Mishnah, and in the Haggadah itself.

³ See, for example, Rambam *Hilkhhot Hametz U-Matzah*, 8:2.

night different from all other nights?’ but rather ‘How different this night is from all other nights!’⁴

But I think the context of the Mishnah actually doesn’t fully resolve the question of what the sentence means. After all, the father could be making an exclamation in order to prompt the child’s curiosity, or he could be asking a question to elicit a response (perhaps the rest of the litany is the child’s response to the question posed by the father?). The point is this question actually doesn’t need to be resolved in one way or another. For the point is, I suggest, that the very line itself is meant to signal multiple understandings.

This is made all the more clear when we look at the phrase “*mah nishtanah*” as it is used in other rabbinic contexts. I want to look at three examples where the phrase has three different valences.

1. *Mah nishtanah* as rhetorical question

Sometimes *mah nishtanah* can be used to point out a similarity rather than a difference. Below is an example where R. Yohanan ben Nuri objects to the claim of the author of the Mishnah. The details are less important than the use of the phrase rhetorically:

Mishnah Kelim 17:14	משנה כלים יז:יד
And all things created on the first day [of Creation] are susceptible to uncleanness.	ויש במה שנברא ביום הראשון טומאה
[All things created] on the second day are not susceptible to uncleanness.	בשני אין בו טומאה בשלישי יש בו טומאה
[All things created] on the third day are susceptible to uncleanness.	ברביעי ובחמישי אין בהם טומאה
[All things created] on the fourth day and on the fifth day are not susceptible to uncleanness, except for [what is made] from the wing of the black eagle/vulture and the glazed [shell of an] ostrich egg.	חוץ מכנף העוז וביצת נעמית המצופה
R. Yohanan ben Nuri said: What is the difference between the wing of a black eagle/vulture and all other wings?!	א"ר יוחנן בן נורי מה נשתנה כנף העוז מכל הכנפים
And all things created on the sixth day are susceptible to uncleanness.	וכל שנברא ביום הששי טמא:

⁴ *The Schechter Haggadah* (Jerusalem: Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies), p. 196.

R. Yohanan ben Nuri uses the phrase *mah nishtanah* to make a claim that, in fact, there is *no difference* between the wings of a black eagle or vulture and any other winged animal, and thus it should not be singled out for distinction. In this usage, *mah nishtanah* is a rhetorical device used to challenge an assumption of difference.⁵

2. *Mah nishtanah* as a true question

The phrase *mah nishtanah* can also be used to offer a question in which the speaker doesn't know the answer. Here it is not a prompt but an invitation to be taught.

Babylonian Talmud Bekhorot 5b R. Hanina said: I asked R. Eliezer in the house of Motva Rabba: What is the difference between the firstborn donkeys from firstborn horses and camels? He said to me: It is from scripture. And also they helped Israel at the time of their redemption; for every Israelite had with him ninety donkeys that carried the silver and gold of Egypt. And I also asked him: What is the word “ <i>Refidim</i> ”? He said to me: “ <i>Refidim</i> ” is [just] its name... And I also asked him: What is the word “ <i>Shittim</i> ”? He said to me: “ <i>Shittim</i> ” is [just] its name...	תלמוד בבלי בכורות דף ה עמוד ב אמר ר' חנינא, שאלתי את ר' אליעזר בבית מותבא רבא: מה נשתנו פטרי חמורים מפטרי סוסים וגמלים? א"ל: גזירת הכתוב היא, ועוד, שסייעו ישראל בשעת יציאתם ממצרים שאין לך כל אחד ואחד מישראל שלא היו עמו תשעים חמורים לובים טעונים מכספה וזהבה של מצרים. ועוד שאלתיו: מאי לשון רפידים? ואמר לי: רפידים שמה... ועוד שאלתיו: מאי לשון שטים? ואמר לי: שטים שמה...
---	--

In this selection, R. Hanina asks his teacher R. Eliezer a series of questions. The second two questions are simply definition questions (what does this word mean?), but the first question is one of distinction: What is the difference between the firstborn of a donkey vs. the firstborn of a camel or a horse? Again, the details matter less than the use of language: R. Hanina does not know something, and approaches his teacher with a statement of wonder: what is the difference? *Mah*

⁵ See also Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 19a.

nishtanab? In this read, the rest of the Haggadah litany could be an answer to the question posed by the author.

3. *Mah nishtanab* as an opportunity to expound

Finally, the phrase *mah nishtanab* can be a rhetorical device that is meant to expound upon an actual difference. This is one in which the author knows the distinctions, and uses a question (or a statement of wonder) to entice the reader to understand how different things, in fact, are.

2 Chronicles 20:21-22 ²¹After taking counsel with the people, he [Yehoshaphat] stationed singers to the Lord extolling the One majestic in holiness as they went forth ahead of the vanguard, saying, “Praise the Lord, for His steadfast love is eternal.” ²²As they began their joyous shouts and hymns, the Lord set ambushes for the men of Amon, Moab, and the hill country of Seir, who were marching against Judah, and they were routed. Tanhuma (Warsaw) Beshalah 10 “You, raise your staff” (Exodus 14:16). Ten miracles were done for them by the sea... And so it is written concerning Yehoshaphat: “After taking counsel with the people, he stationed singers to the Lord extolling the One majestic in holiness as they went forth ahead of the vanguard, saying, ‘Praise the Lord, for His steadfast love is eternal’: (2 Chronicles 20:21). What is the difference between this thanks (<i>hodaya</i>) and all the other ones in the Torah, that in all the other ones it says “who is good”—<i>ki tov</i>, but here it does not say “who is good”?	דברי הימים ב כ:כא-כב ²¹וַיִּזְעַץ אֶל-הָעָם וַיַּעֲמֵד מְשֻׁבְּרִים לִיקְנֹק וּמְהַלְלִים לְהַדְרַת-קֹדֶשׁ בְּצֵאת לִפְנֵי הַחֲלוּץ וְאֹמְרִים הוֹדוּ לִיקְנֹק כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסִדוֹ: ²²וַיִּבְעַת הַחֲלוּ בְרָנָה וַתִּהְיֶה נִתֵּן יְקִנְקוּ מְאָרְבִּים עַל-בְּנֵי עֲמֹון מוֹאָב וְהַרְשִׁיעִיר הַבָּאִים לִיהוּדָה וַיִּגְנְפוּ: מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשת בשלח י ואתה הרם את מטך, עשרה נסים נעשה להם על הים... וכן כתיב ביהושפט (דברי הימים ב כ:כא) ויועץ אל העם ויעמד משוררים לה' ומהללים להדרת קדש בצאת לפני החלוץ ואומרים הודו לה' כי לעולם חסדו, מה נשתנה הודיה זו מכל ההודיות שבתורה שנאמר בכלן כי טוב וכאן לא נאמר בה כי טוב,
--	---

It is as if there is no joy in the heavens when the wicked die.	כביכול לא היתה שמחה לפניו במרום על אבודן של רשעים
---	--

Here the author of the midrash asks a question (or makes an exclamation!) noting how different this praise is from other praises! But he knows the answer to this question: the reason it is different is because God doesn't celebrate death, and therefore cannot be called "good" in this moment. The full praise line is muted in war. This is related to the more well-known midrash that God told the angels not to sing when the Egyptians were drowning:

Babylonian Talmud Megillah 10b Does the Holy Blessed One rejoice in the downfall of wicked ones? But it says: After taking counsel with the people, he stationed singers to the Lord extolling the One majestic in holiness as they went forth ahead of the vanguard, saying, "Praise the Lord, for His steadfast love is eternal." R. Yohanan says: Why didn't it say "who is good" in this thanks? Because the Holy Blessed One does not rejoice in the downfall of the wicked. And R. Yohanan said: What is the meaning of the verse: "And they did not draw near to each other all night long"? The angels wanted to sing a song, but the Holy Blessed One said: The works of my hand are drowning in the sea, and you want to sing a song?	תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף י עמוד ב ומי חדי הקדוש ברוך הוא במפלתן של רשעים? והא כתיב בצאת לפני החלוצ ואמרים הודו לה' כי לעולם חסדו, ואמר רבי יוחנן: מפני מה לא נאמר כי טוב בהודאה זו - לפי שאין הקדוש ברוך הוא שמח במפלתן של רשעים. ואמר רבי יוחנן: מאי דכתיב ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה - בקשו מלאכי השרת לומר שירה, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מעשה ידי טובעין בים ואתם אומרים שירה?
---	---

R. Yohanan has a read of the phrase "they did not draw near to each other"—*ve-lo karav zeh el zeh*—which hearkens to a similar sounding verse in Isaiah 6: The angels called to each other (*kara zeh el zeh*) and recited Holy, Holy, Holy. R. Yohanan creatively reads this phrase as a moment when the angels did *not* call to each other. Why? Because the Egyptians were drowning. All this is based on the prompt "*mah nishtanab*"—what is the difference between the usual praise of God and the

unusual praise of God missing “*ki tov*.”

So we see *mah nishtanah* is used in Rabbinic texts in three main ways:

- 1) As a device to deny distinction
- 2) As a true question in which the questioner does not know the answer
- 3) As an invitation to notice difference, which then gets expounded upon.

There are two points to this phrase I want to close with. First, by using the phrase *mah nishtanah*, the author is inviting the reader into a dialogue, and a rabbinic dialogue at that. That is, in the Haggadah, we all enter the classic rabbinic study hall, and are able to participate as full members. We can ask questions, make declarations, and react to other people’s opinions. Elsewhere, the Haggadah imagines “if we were all sages”—in this moment, we all enter into the language of the sages and become participants in the discussion.

Second, understanding something as having multiple meanings is one of the deepest expressions of freedom. After all, the Haggadah tells us that whoever expands on the telling of the story of leaving Egypt is praiseworthy. And what better way to expand on the telling then by offering multiple interpretations, multiple questions and multiple reads of a single line. The ability to see variety and diversity in words is a luxury of freedom. I pray we all merit to enjoy that luxury at the Seder this year when reciting *mah nishtanah*.