

"DA'YENU" -
shiur for Pesach & for Yom Atzmaut

How could an observant Jew say, let alone sing, that 'it would have been enough'- even had God not given us the Torah?

And how could a Zionist say, let alone sing, that 'it would have been enough'- even if God had not given us the Land of Israel?

Nevertheless, every year at the Seder, we all sing the popular song of "dayenu", which seems to convey precisely that message!

In the following shiur, we attempt to answer this question.

INTRODUCTION

"Dayenu" is a very simple, yet beautiful poem - containing fifteen stanzas describing acts of God's kindness - each stanza stating that it would have been 'enough' had God only helped us in one way.

For example, we begin by saying it would have been enough had He only taken us out of Egypt, and not punished the Egyptians. The poem continues stage by stage through the process of redemption from Egypt (until we arrive in the Land of Israel and build the Temple), saying how each stage would have been 'enough', even had God not helped us with the next stage.

However, some of those statements appear very strange, for they include that it 'would have been enough had we not received the Torah', which simply doesn't make sense!

To understand what we are 'really saying' in "dayenu", we must consider its context, as well as its content.

A PREP FOR HALLEL

In the Haggadah, "dayenu" does not 'stand alone'. Rather, we recite (or sing) "dayenu" towards the conclusion of Maggid; after we tell the story of the Exodus, but before we sing the Hallel.

Following the guidelines of the Mishna (in the tenth chapter of Mesechet Pesachim), in Maggid - we tell the story of the Exodus by quoting (and then elaborating upon) the psukim of "arami oved avi" (see Devarim 26:5-8). But that very same Mishna also instructs us to begin the story with a derogatory comment, and conclude it with praise ["matchilin b'gnut - u'msaaymim v'shevach"/ see Pesachim 10:4].

Taking this Mishna into consideration, we find that "dayenu" is recited in Maggid - precisely when we finish telling the story of the Exodus (with the discussion of the Plagues) - and right at the spot where we are supposed to begin our "shevach" [praise].

Therefore, "dayenu" should be understood as a poem that was written as a form of praise, to conform with the guidelines set by the Mishna. This consideration will allow us to explain its full meaning - in a very simple manner:

Within this context, the refrain of "dayenu" has an implicit suffix. In other words, - "dayenu" should not be translated simply as 'it would have been enough'; rather, "dayenu" means **it would have been enough - to PRAISE God**, i.e. to say Hallel - even if God had only taken us out of Egypt, or only if He had split the Sea, etc.

In this manner, the poem poetically summarizes each significant stage of redemption, from the time of the Exodus until Am Yisrael's conquest of the Land - stating that each single act of God's kindness in that process obligates us to praise Him: e.g.

- Had He only taken us out of Egypt and not punished the Egyptians, **it would have been reason enough** to say Hallel
- Had He split the sea, but not given us the 'manna', that alone **would have been reason enough** to say Hallel...

... And so on.

With this background, the next paragraph of that poem makes perfect sense:

"al achat kama vekhama," - How much more so is it proper to thank God for performing ALL these acts of kindness, as He took us out of Egypt, and punished them, and split the sea, and gave us the manna etc.

"Dayenu" relates a total of fifteen acts of divine kindness, each act alone worthy of praise - even more so we must praise God, for He had performed all of them!

From this perspective, "dayenu" serves a double purpose. First and foremost, it concludes the story with "shevach" [praise], and qualifies the Hallel that we are about to sing. However, it could also be understood as a continuation of the story of the Exodus. Let's explain why and how:

SIPPUR & SHEVACH

Recall that the last "drasha" [elaboration] on the psukim of "arami oved avi" led into a lengthy discussion of the Ten Plagues. To fulfill our obligation at the Seder 'to tell the story', we could (and do) finish right here. But the poem of "dayenu" actually continues that story, picking up from the Ten Plagues ["asa bahem shfatim" refers to the Plagues], and continuing through all the significant events in the desert until our arrival in the Land of Israel. This is also congruent with the last pasuk of "arami oved avi", that includes arriving in Israel (see Devarim 26:9! - "va'yvi'einu el ha'Makom ha'zeh, va'yiten lanu et ha'aretz ha'zot"), which we don't elaborate upon in our version of Maggid, even though according to the Mishna it appears that we really should!

In this manner, "dayenu" is both "shevach" [praise] and "sippur" [story] - at the same time!

The 'HASHKAFa' of DAYENU

According to our explanation thus far, "dayenu" sets the stage for Hallel, as we will now praise God [by singing Hallel] not only in gratitude for taking us out of Egypt, but also in appreciation for each significant stage of the redemptive process. We thank God not only for the Exodus, but also for the 'manna', for shabbat, for coming close to Har Sinai, for the Torah, for the Land of Israel..., and finally for the building of the Bet HaMikdash.

From a certain perspective, this poem may allude to a very profound 'hashkafa' [outlook on life], and a message that is very applicable to our own generation.

Today, there are those who focus at the Seder only on the first stanza of "dayenu," viewing 'freedom from slavery' as the final goal, and hence the ultimate goal of redemption. For them, this first stanza of "dayenu" is 'enough' - and to them, that is the entire meaning of Passover - a holiday of Freedom.

Others focus only upon the last stanza, that without the entire land of Israel in our possession, and without the re-building of the bet-ha'Mikdash, the entire redemptive process is meaningless. In their eyes, Hallel should only be sung when the entire redemption process is complete, and Am Yisrael reaches its final goal.

The beautiful poem of "dayenu" seems to disagree with both approaches. Instead, each significant stage in the process of redemption deserves our recognition and for requires that we praise God for it, even though it is 'not enough'!

It is this hashkafic message, i.e., the understanding and appreciation of each step of the redemptive process, which "dayenu" can teach us. "Ge'ulat Yisra'el" - the redemption of Israel - even in our time, is a process which is comprised of many stages. Every significant step in this process, be it simply sovereignty, or partial borders, or victory in battle; or freedom to study Torah, even without complete redemption, requires our gratitude and praise to Hashem.

For each stage in that process, it is incumbent upon Am Yisrael to recognize that stage and thank Hashem accordingly, while at the same time recognizing that many more stages remain yet unfulfilled - and reminding ourselves of how we need act - to be deserving of that next stage.

"Dayenu" challenges us to find the proper balance.

b'tikva l'geula krova,
menachem