

BAR MITZVAH ADDRESS FOR TEDDY GROSS
SHABBAT HAGADOL, 1967

April 22

Dear Parents, Relatives, and Friends:

Because this is the eve of Shabbat Hagadol, I would like to devote my "Devar Torah" to the forthcoming festival of Passover.

The commandment to read the Hagadah is Biblically ordained; it is a mitzvah min ha-Torah that we tell the story of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt.

Now if this recitation of the Hagadah is, indeed, a Biblical mitzvah, then we should be required to recite a blessing before the performance of this commandment, as we do over all commandments. Why, indeed, do we not recite a berakhah prior to the performance of this commandment? Why should the recitation of the Hagadah be different from, for instance, the recitation of Hallel or the Megillah, over which we recite a benediction before we begin?

One answer that has been suggested is the principle laid down by the Rashba. The Rashba points out that we ordinarily recite a blessing before those mitzvot שבין אדם למקום, the commandments guiding man's relationship to God; but we do not recite a berakhah over those commandments שבין אדם לחבירו, which relate to the conduct of man towards his fellow man. But are not the ethical and social commandments of the Torah equally as important as the purely religious ones? The answer, says the Rashba, is yes. However, whenever I make a blessing I recite the name of God, and I must therefore be particularly careful that the blessing is a

necessary one, that it not be wasted; for then I will have recited the name of the Lord in vain.

Now, those commandments which tell me how to act towards God depend only upon myself, and once I have decided to perform the mitzvah then I may recite a blessing because there is no one to stop me from doing the commandment. However, when it comes to those commandments that are בין אדם לחבירו, my successful performance of the mitzvah depends not only upon myself but upon another intelligent human being, my friend. I therefore cannot make the blessing because I am never sure that the other person will want to cooperate with me in the performance of the mitzvah. For instance, I do not make a berakhah over the giving of charity because I am never completely sure that the poor man will accept my contribution. I do not make a blessing over honoring my parents, because my parents may be willing to forego their honor, as they are permitted to do according to Jewish law.

According to this principle, we may understand why there is no blessing recited before the reading of the Hagadah. For the Hagadah is not just an ordinary recitation, as is the Hallel or the Megillah, but it is cast in the form of a conversation, of question and answer. The child asks, the father answers. It is not a monologue but a dialogue; more than one person is involved. And according to the rule of the Rashba any commandment which involves more than one person does not require a blessing before it. Perhaps the

child will not ask the question, perhaps the father will not answer properly, and perhaps the child will not listen to the answer his father gives him. Because of this element of doubt where more than one person is involved, no berakhah should be pronounced.

However, this solution is not satisfactory. For while it is true that the Hagadah is cast in the form of a dialogue, this is just the form but not the content. The essential mitzvah is to relate the story; the particular form happens to be that of a conversation or dialogue. However, Jewish law teaches that if one has no company and a person must conduct the Seder by himself, then he fulfills the commandment of Hagadah even though there is no one to ask him the questions. In that case, the mitzvah of Hagadah is essentially a one-person commandment, and once again we should be required to recite the blessing before beginning the commandment.

Our question may be answered, however, by reference to another distinction made between two classes of commandments. Rabbi Saadia Gaon has taught that there are two kinds of commandments: the מצוה שכלית, the rational commandment, and the מצוה שמעית, the traditional commandment. The rational commandment is one which people would observe even without the Torah; for instance, people honor their parents and refrain from murdering even if they do not know of the Torah. The traditional commandment is one which one would never think of without the explicit teaching of the Torah; for

instance, no one would ever put on the Tallit or lay the Tefillin unless there were a special commandment to that effect.

With this distinction, other of our Rabbis explain the principle which guides blessings. They tell us that the blessing over a mitzvah is always cast in the form of ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך, "Blessed art Thou O Lord, our God, King of the world, Who has sanctified us with His commandments," וצונו, "and commanded us" to do such-and-such.

We therefore see from the structure of the blessing itself that it should be recited only in such a case where וצונו, where God commanded us, and where our performance is in direct response to God's command. Only when our action is directed solely by the Divine command can we speak of אשר קדשנו במצוה, God endowing us with sanctity by virtue of His mitzvot; only then is there present קדושת ישראל, the special holiness of the people of Israel. But this quality is present only in the מצוה שמעיה, the traditional commandment. When it comes to the מצוה שכליה, the rational commandment, however, there we perform the act because it is ethical or reasonable, and not exclusively because the Torah commanded it. Hence, while the act is very important, it does not possess the special קדושת ישראל, the special holiness of Israel, and therefore we do not recite the blessing which includes the words אשר קדשנו במצוה.

In that case, we must now determine whether the mitzvah of Hagadah falls in the class of מצוה שכליה, and therefore does not

require a blessing, or it is a מצוה שמעיה , in which case it does take a berakhah.

For this we must turn to the Talmud, פסחים דף ט"ז עמוד ב' , which tells us: עבדא דמפיק ליה מריה מעבדות לחקוה, ויהיב ליה כספא ודהבא, בעי לאודוויי ולשבוחי

This means, a slave whose master emancipated him, and in addition, gave him a gift of gold and silver, such a liberated slave certainly ought to thank and praise his former master. Now, since the Hagadah is the story of our emancipation by God from the slavery of Egypt, our praise and gratitude to the Almighty is a rational act. It is reasonable to expect of a former slave voluntarily liberated by his master, that he offer such praise and thanks. The Hagadah, then, is a מצוה שכלית , a perfectly rational and reasonable act by former slaves expressing gratitude to their Liberator. In that case, we can understand why we do not recite a berakhah over the mitzvah of Hagadah.

My dear parents and friends, I do not consider the present occasion just an ordinary סעודה מצוה celebrating my entrance into a life of mitzvot. I would like to regard it as well as a kind of Hagadah, in which I relate praise and thanksgiving to my beloved parents for having raised me with such devotion and love so that I might arrive at this great day. I would like it to be my Hagadah of gratitude to Almighty God who has given me the privilege of growing up in such a wonderful and warm home, and Who has given

me the parents and the relatives and the friends to inspire me to a life of Jewishness and loyalty to Torah and to Israel. That is why, although my father is required to make the blessing of ברוך שפטרני of release from responsibility for me, the Bar Mitzvah himself makes no blessing. That is for the reason I have mentioned before, that it is reasonable and rational that a Bar Mitzvah boy such as myself thank parents such as he has for all that they have done for him.

But if I do not recite a formal berakhah over this Hagadah of gratitude to my family, I nevertheless hope that I myself will become for them a source of berakhah. I hope that the Almighty will give them and me, my sister, and all our relatives and dear ones, the health and the years so that we may enjoy each other's blessed company and be proud of each other's achievements for many, many years to come.

Thank you.