

Past, Present and Future: - Some musings on the mitzva of re-telling the Exodus.

The story of Yetziat Mitzrayim - the Exodus - is one that we tell again and again, year by year. In fact, when we “tell” this story, we are encouraged not simply to superficially relate the bare details of the Exodus, but rather to immerse ourselves in the details, the emotions, the associated symbols and Halakhot of the event that we know as Yetziat Mitzrayim. “Kol Hamarbeh lesapper, harei zeh meshubach,” states the Haggada; we simply cannot get enough of this story! And the question is, quite obviously, why? Or maybe, better put, to what purpose? - What do we expect to achieve by telling - once again - this familiar epic tale? What is it meant to do for us? for me?

Now clearly, this is just the sort of question that would be worthwhile to raise at your Seder. The Seder is quite a fantastic ceremony. It draws upon the power of story-telling, the togetherness of family, the sense of surprise (afikoman) and playfulness, role-play (leaning), culinary symbols (wine, Matza, Marror), the art of intellectual curiosity (Questions and answers), the familiar songs, and let us not forget the innocence and appeal of children (who is saying Ma Nishtana this year?) Yes - we do not miss a trick in passing over this national narrative to those who experience this eclectic ritual. But again - what is it for?

So we can suggest some answers. See what your friends and relatives come up with when you discuss this at your Seder.

But one phrase always comes to mind when discussing this particular point. It comes from the Mishna in Pesachim 10:4 (1):

“IN EACH AND EVERY GENERATION, EVERY PERSON MUST VIEW HIMSELF AS IF HE PERSONALLY CAME OUT OF EGYPT.”

What is indicated by this phrase? That somehow, the focus of the Seder is not intellectual, but rather experiential. A person must view himself as if he came out of Egypt. On this night, we are being asked to connect in a most personal, most primal way with the events of the Exodus and the energy which animated that momentous happening. What does this imply for us?

It would seem that there are two very clear models which one could adopt:

1. From the present into the past: To re-live the past, to give the Seder participant the feeling that he has actually

been in Egypt, experienced the harsh slavery and emerged triumphant in freedom. Here, the aim would be to somehow simulate the past and to give each and every Jew, a taste of the Exodus itself, to be sent back in time.

2. But there is another option: to bring the Exodus up-to-date. The question here would be not as to whether I can re-experience the Exodus. The question is whether “I came out of Egypt.” Have I learned the lessons of the Exodus, have I internalised its power, its vision? Here the Exodus is going to be applied to the contemporary reality, so that we can ask the questions of the Exodus about our world today, here and now. In this model, we do not travel back in time. The past travels forward to partake in our age with its timely challenges and problems.

Let us appreciate that the difference here is not simply cosmetic. These two views should radically alter the type of discussions that we will be having at our Seder! Are we to talk about the uniqueness of the Israelite community back then, in Egypt (“*melamed shehayu metzuyanim sham*” - from the Haggada) or are we to talk about contemporary Jewish rates of assimilation? Are we to talk about the notion of Jewish peoplehood and responsibility then, or now? Are we to discuss slavery in terms of bricks, mortar and pyramids, or are we to focus on that which binds us and frees us in today’s FREE-speech, FREE-market world, fast-moving, internet world? Should we be talking about the contemporary problems of poverty, crime and inner-city decay, or should we be studying ancient Egypt, miracles, plagues and Pascal Lambs? Is the question whether the Israelites were headed for Sinai, or whether we are orientated towards Sinai?

Are we to read the present in the light of the past, or to read the past in the light of the present? What does it mean to “view ourselves as if we came out of Egypt” and how does this impact upon our experience of Mitzvat Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim?

“VEHI SHE’AMDA - And it is this which stood for our forefathers AND FOR US”

“ASHER GA”ALANU - Who redeemed US and our forefathers ... KEIN HASHEM ELOKEINU YAGIEINU LEMOADIM UL’RGALIM ACHERIM ...S’MECHIM BEVINAYAN IRECHA VESSASIM BE’AVODATECHA ... may God bring us forth to a different type of festival in which we take part in the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in a state of peace, rejoicing in the rebuilding of God’s city, happy in His service, bringing our festive sacrifices and the Korban Pesach...singing a new song of our redemption...”

Who comes first? Our forefathers or us? The redemption of the present or that of the past?

Now, I will have to admit, that my distinct impression

from the Seder is that we do spend our time primarily dwelling upon the past, indicating to me that our focus is on understanding the past more than the present or the future, but, let us examine this "Time" theme and delve a little deeper.

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

"RABBAN Gamliel stated: Whoever does not recite the following three statements has not fulfilled the Mitzva of telling the story of the Exodus:

PESACH ... for the Lord passed over our forefathers' houses

MATZA ... because the redemption came so fast, there was no time for the bread to rise

MARROR ... because the Egyptians made our forefathers' lives bitter ..."

Let us discuss the relationship between Pesach, Matza and Maror from the vantage point of our discussion regarding "time".

Marror represents the slavery. The past. Matza clearly represents the redemption. What does Pesach symbolise? At first glance, Pesach belongs with the Matza - it reminds us of God's salvation. But then, why do we need two symbols of redemption? Except that possibly, Pesach is there to represent that freeze-frame moment, that split second of redemption.

Marror is the past,
Matza is the future,
but Pesach is the eternal "Present".

Pesach is the moment on which God leaped over our homes, the moment in which our fate, and the fate of every inhabitant of Egypt, was determined. Pesach will always symbolise that charged moment in which the clock struck midnight and God expressed his power over Egypt changing the fate of Jewish history, from slavery to freedom, from exile to redemption.

THE FUTURE

Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaria said: I am as seventy years old and I never found a proof that one should remember the Exodus at night, until the proof of Ben Zomma: "That you shall remember the Exodus from Egypt ALL the days of your life.: (Deut 16:3)

"The days of the your life" implies mentioning Yetziat Mitzrayim by day

"ALL the days of your life" includes nighttime too!

But the Chachamim said:

"The days of the your life" implies mentioning Yetziat Mitzrayim in "this world"

"ALL the days of your life" includes the era of the Messiah!

(Mishna Berachot ch.1)

What are Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaria and the Chachamim arguing about? Of course, it is possible that the dispute discussed in the Mishna is simply a technical

disagreement as to how to read pesukim. However, another possibility can be suggested.

R. Elazar b. Azaria wants to prove that the Exodus be mentioned at night. The Exodus represents God's redemption. The need to mention God's redemption at night might represent a need to express faith in God's salvation even in dark times, in times of persecution and exile. But the Chachamim have a different way of seeing the Exodus. They claim that the Exodus must be mentioned even in the era of redemption! Even after the Beit Hamikdash has been re-established and the Messianic age heralded, there is still room to recall the Exodus.

In other words, does the Exodus have relevance only in the past and present (Galut), or does it also have a message for the "future", the age of redemption? Or, in other words, is the Exodus a story of all-time, or a pre-redemption story. Maybe this further develops our theme of past, present and future.

TIME CONSCIOUSNESS

"There are some people who live in **quantitative**, dead time. They measure time by the clock and by the calendar. For them, there is no merger of the past and the future. The present itself is a lost moment. A year is endless. ...These people are deprived of an historical consciousness; for history is the living experience of time.

The man, however, who lives in **qualitative time** has a different criterion of the experience of time than the quantitative experience. He measures time not by the length-extension but by pure quality, creativity, and accomplishment. While for the man with a quantitative apprehension, all fractions of time are equal ...for the man of a qualitative apprehension, there is no equality among temporal fractions of time. Moments are heterogeneous. One may live an entire lifespan quantitatively, not having lived even a moment qualitatively experienced. And, contrawise, one may have lived a moment quantitatively and have lived through an eternity qualitatively. The alternative is up to man himself.

....The slave has no time consciousness of his own, for he has no time of his own. His awareness of "z'man gerama," the full intuition of the qualitative moment, is alien to him. Absolved by homogeneous, changeable time, he lacks affinity for a duty whose execution depends solely on time, on a "now and "not later"; upon a "today" and "not tomorrow"...

The basic criterion which distinguishes freeman from slave is the kind of relationship each has with time and its experience. Bondage is identical with passive intuition and reception of an empty, formal time stream.

When the Jews were delivered from the Egyptian oppression ... metamorphosing a tribe of slaves into a "nation of priests", he was told by God that the path leading from the holiday of Pesach to Shavuot, from the initial liberation to consummate freedom (Revelation), leads through the medium of time. The commandment of s'fira (counting the Omer) was entrusted the Jew; the wondrous test of counting forty-nine successive days was put to him. These forty-nine days must be whole. If one day is missed, the act of numeration is invalidated.

A slave who is capable of appreciating each day, of grasping its meaning and worth, of weaving every thread of time into a glorious fabric, quantitatively forming the warp and woof of centuries of change, is eligible for Torah. He has achieved freedom.

We may say then that qualitative-time consciousness is comprised of two elements: First, the appreciation of the enormous implications inherent in the fleeting moments of the present. ...eternity may depend upon the brief moment. Secondly, the vicarious experience, while in the present, of the past and future. No distance, however removed, should separate one's time consciousness from the dawn of one's group or from the eschatological destiny and infinite realisation of one's cherished ideals." (Rav Joseph B Soloveitchik. Sacred and Profane. Published in Shiurei HaRav pgs 15-18.)

Here Rav Soloveitchik focuses upon the ephemeral notion of time itself in an attempt to describe the difference between slavery and freedom. It is not so much that Seder night forces us to meditate upon the transition between past and present, and the way in which past is remembered, or the present rediscovered; it is "time" itself which lies at the epicentre of the experience of freedom.

KIDDUSH HACHODESH

Maybe this explains why the commands of the night of liberation in Egypt (Shemot ch.12) open with the strange instruction of Kiddush Hachodesh, the command to establish a Jewish calendar (see Shemot 12:1-2.) Why does this mitzva precede the command to take the Paschal Lamb? One might suggest that it is precisely the calendar which determines sacred times, in essence, the rhythm and pulse of a culture marches upon the pace which it is given in the form of the calendar. "Hachodesh Hazeh Lachem Rosh Chodashim" means that, as Jews, we have a different beginning than the Egyptians. Moreover, it is ourselves who determine the months; Kiddush Hachodesh is a Mitzva that determines the advent of a new months on the basis of a proclamation by the central Beit Din. The determination of the months, and hence the dates of the festivals is entrusted to Am Yisrael in the form of the Beit Din Hagadol - the official national Halakic forum.

It is this Mitzva which is the quintessential expression of Time consciousness. And it is this mitzva which God designates as a pre-requisite to the Paschal Lamb in Egypt. Hence, the very concept of time awareness is central to the very freedom of the Jewish people, and by the same token, central to the drama of Seder Night.

KIDDUSH ON SEDER NIGHT.

Furthermore, we might suggest a further connection related to the Seder. A question which is frequently raised, relates to the place of Kiddush within the Seder of Pesach. Why does Kiddush feature within this ceremony dedicated to Yetziat Mitzrayim? After all, Kiddush is the first of the 4 cups, and an integral part of the "seder" (KADESH, urchatz etc.). But why does Kiddush belong in the Seder? After all we make Kiddush every week! How does it fit in? Some have responded, that Kiddush itself is "zecher li'Yetziat Mitzrayim" hence it carries the theme of the Exodus itself.

But I think there is something deeper. The "Bracha" of Kiddush on Yom Tov is "Mekadesh Yisrael Vehazmanim." What is the significance of the insertion of "Yisrael" in this formula? After all, on Shabbat we say "Mekadesh Hashabbat" and not "Mekadesh Yisrael veHashabbat"! What is the meaning of the phrase "Mekadesh YISRAEL vehazmanim?" The Gemara answers for us:

"Shabbat which is fixed (by God) ... we say Mekadesh Hashabbat. But Yom Tov which is fixed by Am Yisrael who fix the months and years, we say Mekadesh Yisrael veHazmanim."

Shabbat is set in place by God ever since creation. But Am Yisrael are active in creating Kedushat Haz'man – in creating the very sanctity that is Yom Tov. Am Yisrael is intimately connected to Kedushat Yom Tov. And in the same way that the laws of Pesach in Sefer Shemot commence with the independence of "Jewish Time", similarly, our celebration of our independence – the Seder – commences with Kiddush, that ceremony which celebrates the joining of God and man in generating the sanctity of time. It is this notion of time that is so central a feature of our freedom, and our Seder night.

Chag Kasher veSameach! Make the most of every second!

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Footnotes

(1) This is how it is printed in the standard editions of the Mishna. I checked the classic manuscripts of the Mishna however, and this phrase does not appear there! Maybe it somehow got inserted via the Haggada - I haven't had time to check it through properly! But the Rambam does quote this phrase (albeit with an important difference) see Hil. Chametz Umatza 7:6.