

The Memory of Pesach: A Tale of Two Stories

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Our rabbis teach that all Jews must see themselves as if they had come out of Egypt. The Exodus from Egypt is not a story of a distant past but a living memory which must shape our present lives and identities as Jews.

Memory is a tricky thing in which we are not merely passive recipients of past events, but active participants in shaping the memory and determining its features. The critical question we have to ask ourselves is what story we choose to tell. What do we remember from Egypt and most importantly what do we take away from that memory as a foundation block for contemporary Jewish life?

The Exodus story, as retold by our tradition, has many facets, each weaving its own narrative and moral lesson. The most dominant and common one portrays our liberation from Egypt as a story of Jewish election. It tells of our suffering in Egypt, of a God who remembers God's covenant with our forefathers, and who reaches down with a mighty hand and outstretched arm and with great miracles to free us and to make us God's inheritance and chosen people.

In telling the story we remember the liberation, so we can bask in the light of God's love and care and feel the pride and dignity of being God's chosen people. We count, relish, magnify, and multiply each miracle as evidence both of God's unique love for us and as a foundation for the promise of things yet to come.

This story has served us well, especially in the darkest moments of exile as we awaited our next liberation story. It served to create a pride of membership even when our precarious political status seemed to suggest that we were the abandoned child. As our freedom and power increased with the rebirth of Israel and our newfound acceptance in the Western world the pride taken from the story served and serves as an ongoing catalyst for our people to strive for excellence and to define ourselves by our achievements. It is a story which embeds us with a sense of dignity and self-worth in which to be a Jew and to be mediocre is viewed as a contradiction in terms unworthy of the people who were freed by God from Egypt.

This story, however, can and at times has a darker side. Pride can be the mother of arrogance, and chosenness, instead of serving as a catalyst for achievement, can be the foundation for entitlement. The story of God's love can give birth to a sense of superiority and a denigration of those who were not the recipients of that love.

In truth this darker side can be found throughout our tradition, as the Exodus story was sometimes used to discriminate between Jew and non-Jew. It even finds its way into the ending of the traditional Passover Haggadah with the calling for God to pour out God's wrath upon the nations that do not know God.

As we tell the story it is important that we own this part as well, for to ignore it will allow it to fester and to influence our soul. It is only when a symptom of an illness is recognized that appropriate acts can be instituted to activate healing.

As a part of this healing there is a dimension of the Exodus which rarely enters into the telling of the story or the traditional Haggadah, but which had significant impact on the Jewish moral code. It is the part of the story that precedes the liberation and which speaks of our humble and suffering past. It obligates us to use this memory as a catalyst for responsibility toward all who are in a similar circumstance.

If the first story unites us with fellow Jews, the second places us forever in the midst of the community of sufferers. It tempers our pride with a measure of humility to ensure that arrogance and entitlement never become our inheritance. It channels our drive to achieve into areas which do not merely service our own interests but the needs of all, especially the downtrodden and forgotten.

If the prayer, "Pour out Your Wrath," is the personification of our darker side, then the beginning of the Haggadah, "This is the bread of affliction, which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. All who are hungry, let them come and eat. All who are needy, let them join us at our table," is meant to serve as its antidote.

Both, however, are present in our story. It behooves our people, whose liberation story serves as a catalyst for excellence, that we recognize that it is our responsibility to determine which side of the story we tell and which side we allow to define our future as a people. It is true that we were once slaves; now, however, we are free. As a free people the power is now in our hands to be a force for good or for evil. It is in our hands to show that Jewish pride and a sense of God's love for us need not lead to arrogance and blindness to the needs and rights of others. It is in our hands to determine which story will define us as a people. Here too mediocrity and being Jewish must be a contradiction in terms.