

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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דב"ט

## Reflections on Passover

### 1. Uniqueness of the Exodus

The Torah's account of G-d's redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage is part of a much larger story, intrinsically connected with the covenant that G-d established with the patriarchs and His long-term agenda for human society. The Israelite's liberation should not be thought of as a successful "national liberation movement," comparable to those events in history when people fought for and succeeded in gaining their freedom. True, the Passover narrative has often inspired the oppressed and downtrodden, as well it should, encouraging them to hope and strive for deliverance from tyranny. The humbling of a mighty, wicked and stubborn ruler; his helplessness in the face of divine visitations of plagues; and his ultimately being rendered pathetic in defeat are surely among the most pleasing images imaginable to a subjugated populace. The same may be said of reading about an oppressed and suffering people marching to their freedom and destiny, carrying off some of the riches of their erstwhile masters, as beautifully depicted in the Torah.

But the Exodus from Egypt was neither a grassroots revolution nor one fomented by dynamic leaders. This is made crystalclear in the narrative and is an important feature of the essential message. The narrative cannot be severed from the unique context in which it is deeply embedded without losing the essence of the biblical message.

Moses, Israel's emerging leader, was extraordinarily sensitive to the plight of his brethren from his earliest days, keenly interested in justice for them as well as for all other people. He was courageous and energetic. He was willing to personally intervene (perhaps somewhat impulsively) at the risk of his own welfare and even his life; he was willing to jeopardize his princely position in the palace in order to rescue a single victim of the harsh slavery. He also tried to correct what he perceived to be wrongful behavior among his brethren. But the Torah demonstrates that

he could not get very far on his own. It is also evident that this gifted individual, the humblest of men, possessed neither the driving personal ambition nor confidence in his ability to play the organizer's role – traits that are typical of national liberation heroes. After barely escaping from Egypt with his life he resigned himself to a lengthy absence from his people. Hashem had to prod and press him and help him overcome his feelings of inadequacy in order to get him to accept the mission to return to Egypt to work toward his nation's liberation as Hashem's representative.

The established leaders of the Israelites had resigned themselves to their fate as slaves. After Moses' first audience with Pharaoh, when the slavery was intensified, those leaders bitterly criticized him for his activities and exhibited no interest in fighting for their rights. At that point Moses complained to Hashem: "Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people" (Exod. 5:22-23). When he presented an inspiring message from Hashem to the Israelites, they paid no heed to it because of their circumstances. Even after their departure from Egypt, when they were being pursued by their former masters, they would not mobilize to protect their newly gained independence. Rather, they complained to Moses, "Is this not what we told you in Egypt, saying, leave us alone and we will serve the Egyptians, for we prefer to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert?" (Exod. 14:12). On their own, the Israelites were unwilling to risk a possible deterioration of their situation to advance what appeared to be the far-fetched prospect of liberty.

G-d redeemed the Israelites in order to take the children of the meritorious patriarchs as His people, enter into a covenant with them and create a nation that ultimately will bring blessing to the world. He expressed His purpose at the time of His selection of Abraham: "And I will make you a great nation...and all the families of the earth will be blessed through

you” (Gen. 12:2-3); He elaborated on His reason in a declaration He made concerning Abraham: “And all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him, for I know him that he will instruct his children and household after him to observe the way of Hashem to do righteousness and justice in the world” (Gen. 18:17-19). The “way of Hashem” is expanded upon in related assertions, such as “Only in this shall one pride himself, that he perceives and understands Me, that I, Hashem, act with kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these do I desire” (Jer. 9:23). At a point when the Israelites cried out in their suffering under the yoke of oppression (Exod. 3:7) He deemed the time right to fulfill His commitment made to the patriarchs and began the process of their redemption (6:5-7).

Without G-d’s direct involvement each step of the way there would have been no progress toward freedom either by the Israelites or their leaders. Hashem is the true “hero” of the story and His faithfulness and concern for Israel and human society are evident throughout.

Israel’s slavery and attendant affliction are described in the Torah as preordained, at least to some degree. G-d revealed these details to Abraham before he had children, at the time that He contracted with him the *berit ben habetarim* (“the covenant of the parts” [Gen. 15:13-16]). It was necessary for Abraham to know what he was getting his progeny into. We may assume that having the experience of painful oppression etched into the national consciousness of Israel helped nurture in it the extraordinary degree of sensitivity to the plight of the exploited and underprivileged that Torah law requires. The lawgiving explicitly refers to remembering the slavery in Egypt as a motivational factor toward fulfillment of a number of laws that prescribe treating the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the slave – in general the poor and underprivileged – with fairness and decency. This sense of compassion and concern for others, together with the recognition that national redemption had been brought about through G-d’s intervention for His purpose of establishing such a nation, were concepts that served as fundamental underlying motifs of the monumental venture.

The Torah relates that an additional purpose of the Exodus events was to bring to the world’s awareness the existence of the one supreme, all-powerful G-d. He was making His omnipotent presence known

through Israel, demonstrating that all natural forces are at His disposal. The mighty Egyptian nation, possessing one of the foremost cultures of the ancient world that had already been and would continue to be a great influence on civilizations, equipped with a prodigious military feared throughout the region, is forced to experience overpowering divine intervention on behalf of Israel. The plagues, in their overall design and purpose, as well as the splitting of the sea, pointed to the one G-d who is the Author of creation, who is patient, preferring the reformation of sinners and who is concerned about humanity’s appreciation of His reality. The wonders were intended to teach about His incomparability and the vanity of belief in other divine beings. G-d articulated His purpose to Pharaoh after the sixth plague: “For this time I will send all My plagues to your heart, and at your servants and your people, in order that you shall know that there is none like Me in all the earth...For the following reason I have let you stand, to show you My power, and in order that My name will be related throughout the earth” (Exod. 9:14-16). An opportunity was presented to the Egyptians and to all who heard of the extraordinary events to begin the process of subduing their idolatrous beliefs and practices.

## 2. Basic Principles

The redemption-covenant linkage had far-reaching consequences. Israel’s existence as a nation is dependent on Hashem’s special and continual intervention on its behalf. This reality is symbolized in its formative stage in Abraham and the barren Sarah having Isaac after her childbearing years had unquestionably passed and as made clear in events throughout the book of Genesis. In the natural order, Israel could not exist. Hence, it is summoned to order its society, as well as each individual member his personal life, in accordance with its founding identity of being Hashem’s people and commanded to follow His law. In order to emphasize this point the Exodus leads directly and immediately to the lawgiving in the wilderness even before entering the promised land. Indeed, Hashem had informed Moses at the very initiation of his mission at the burning bush that the Exodus will straightaway lead to Mount Sinai: “When you have taken the people out of Egypt you (plural) will worship G-d on this mountain” (Exod. 3:12).

The promised land is an extremely important element in the divine plan; it is where the nation may blossom,

applying the values and particulars of the Torah unencumbered by foreign pressures and distractions. It is the arena, located at the crossroads of great empires, where the divinely ordained system of holy living and social justice was expected to create a showcase that other nations may choose to emulate: “And many peoples shall go and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mount of the Lord, to the House of the G-d of Jacob, that He may teach us of His ways and that we may walk in His paths’” (Isa. 2:3). However, the land does not essentially define the nation. The covenantal relationship, with the Decalogue and the Mount Sinai experience at its core, was established in the wilderness and is the fundamental theme that runs through the Bible and underlies the nation’s early history and destiny.

The implications of the wondrous events of the Exodus concerning the future are clear. The celebration of Passover calls upon the nation not to merely commemorate events of the past but to also reflect upon and appreciate what can be done at any time and in any situation. It summons the nation to be inspired by G-d’s past intervention and work toward deserving His redeeming involvement in resolving whatever trouble may obtain.

Regarding the national exile in the days of Jeremiah, the prophet quotes Hashem concerning the future. The coming redemption will be so extraordinary that in that time “It shall no longer be said ‘As Hashem lives who brought up the Israelites from the land of Egypt,’ but rather, ‘as Hashem lives who brought up the Israelites from the land of the north, and from all the lands to which He had cast them.’ And I will bring them back to their land, which I gave to their fathers.” (Jer. 16:14-15; also in 23:7 with slight variations). Just as during the Egyptian bondage, when the time was right in His sight, G-d overrode all obstacles to redeem His people and bring them to the promised land, at which time they would exercise their free will to properly accept His governance, He would once again reconfigure the cosmos to provide salvation and rejuvenation to His people and reestablish them in the promised land. That is the nature of a covenant with G-d – anything is possible and everything depends on the commitment to fulfill His will.

As the Exodus comprises the founding event of the Israelites’ national existence, its basic lessons were meant to apply throughout the generations to the

nation as well as to each individual. Psalm 107 addresses the situation. It begins with citing the requirement for those redeemed in an ingathering of the exiles to give thanks and praise to G-d. It then turns to four successive cases of individuals who experienced various mortal dangers in their lives and who cried out to G-d, and whom He redeemed from their plight. The psalm elaborates on their requirement to give thankful praise to Him for the event they experienced as well as for other wonders He performed. As this psalm appears to carry forward an aspect of the lesson of the redemption from Egypt, it is fitting that the tradition prescribes it for daily recital during the days of Passover.

### 3. The Calendar

The first law promulgated as a consequence of the redemption from Egypt is *הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֹדְשֵׁים* (“This month shall be for you the beginning of months” [Exod. 12:2]), that is, to henceforth count the month of the Exodus as the first month of the year in the national calendar. In this way the calendar gives prominence to the great event and reflects the fact that G-d’s redemption is at the foundation of the nation. Moses made a specific point of emphasizing the timing, “This day you are leaving is in the month of *abib*” (13:4), the month of spring (*אֲבִיב*: ripening barley). This, in turn, coordinates the Passover message of national rejuvenation and hope with the great reawakening that all of nature undergoes with the coming of spring. G-d regulated His intervention such that the Exodus coincided with spring.

The Deuteronomy passage that mandates commemoration of Passover begins with *שְׁמֹר אֶת חֹדֶשׁ הַפֶּסַח* (“Guard the spring month and perform the *Pesah*” [Deut. 16:1]). This clearly prescribes (or reinforces) the requirement to focus on the Passover linkage with the spring month. The sages expounded this as a cornerstone requirement of the calendar: Passover must always fall during the spring month (the month within which the spring equinox occurs). Months (actual months, reflecting an astronomical phenomena) are lunar and Passover’s dates (the sacrifice on the fourteenth of the first month and the festival that begins on the fifteenth) are lunar dates. It is thus necessary to establish a mechanism within the calendar to ensure that year after year the lunar date recurs in the same season despite the fact that seasons are determined by the solar cycle. This requires an

intercalation between the years of the sun and the months of the moon. We will take this opportunity to provide some details about the Jewish calendar.

Months are functions of the moon's orbit and all Torah festivals are dated by it. (Since in the solar calendar months do not correspond to any astronomical phenomena but are merely conventional contrivances, they play no role in the Torah scheme of things.) Seasons, on the other hand, result from the sun's orbit. As lunar months are twenty-nine days, twelve hours, forty-four minutes and several seconds each, twelve lunar months comprise 354.37 days. A solar year is slightly longer than 365.24 days. In just a few "years" of twelve lunar months each (in a manner of speaking, as a true year is only a solar phenomenon), Passover would have drifted backwards relative to the seasons and occur in the winter and continually move backwards through the seasons. To ensure its falling in the spring, the solar and lunar calendars are merged such that an extra month is periodically added (intercalated) to the lunar "year" to compensate for the difference between cycles.

Originally, intercalation was based on astronomical calculation together with direct observation of the signs of spring. Early talmudic sages checked the state of the crops toward the end of winter and relied on the weather to determine if an adjustment (adding an extra month) had to be made in a particular year. As the primary purpose of adding a "leap" month is to ensure that Passover remain in the spring month (Nissan), it is added just before Passover's month, that is, to the twelfth month (Adar), and is called the Second Adar. By later talmudic times until the present day, however, intercalation has been determined strictly by calculation.

The calendar is now structured such that the twenty-nine and a half days of each lunar cycle are resolved into months of either twenty-nine or thirty days each, with no exceptions. In a "regular" year, six months have thirty days and six months have twenty-nine days. These "full" and "short" months rotate; Nissan is always thirty days, the second month (Iyar) is always twenty-nine, the third month (Sivan) always thirty, etc. For a technical reason, whenever a month has thirty days, two days are celebrated as the head (*rosh hodesh*) of the following month, the thirtieth of the outgoing month and the first of the new month. In

months of twenty-nine days, only the first day of the new month is so celebrated.

When the set calendar was established in the third century, intercalation was achieved by adding an extra thirty-day month to the year seven times every nineteen years, given that the number of days in nineteen solar years is extremely close to the number of days in 235 lunar months ( $12 \times 19 + 7$ ), both comprising about 6939.6 days. Rounding out slightly, the relevant equations are:

$$\begin{aligned} 365.2422 \text{ days per year} \times 19 \text{ years} &= 6939.60 \text{ days} \\ 29.5305 \text{ days per month} \times 235 \text{ months} &= 6939.67 \text{ days} \end{aligned}$$

Additional calendrical considerations have necessitated "short years," comprising one day less than the "regular" year, and "complete" years, comprising one day more than the "regular" year. In "short" years, the eighth and ninth months (Heshvan and Kislev) will each have twenty-nine days while in long years each will have thirty days.

#### 4. The Tenth Plague

The proclamation concerning the first month is taught between the announcement of the upcoming tenth plague – the smiting of the Egyptian firstborn – and its fulfillment. Unlike the first nine plagues, the Israelites had to make preparations for the pivotal tenth plague and it was necessary to refer to specific dates of the month.

The final plague was of a totally different order than the first nine, each of which appears to have had parallels, albeit of vastly lesser intensity, in natural phenomena that periodically occur in Egypt. The unprecedented tenth plague – if it had precedence it is only in the sense of parents' sacrificing a child, particularly the firstborn, to their idolatries in times of extraordinary distress – alludes to the profound concept of Hashem exacting judgment against the polytheistic beliefs of Egypt. In the ancient world, the firstborn were often dedicated to the service of the society's gods, surrogates of the priests and signifiers of the deities. Thus, when Hashem informed Moses and Aaron that He will pass through Egypt on the night of Passover He linked the two, stating He will "strike down every firstborn...and mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord" (Exod. 12:12). In Numbers 33:4, when describing

Israel's leaving Egypt, the Torah states: "The Egyptians were burying those among them whom Hashem struck down, the firstborn, whereby Hashem executed judgment on their gods."

Before the tenth plague occurred the Israelites had to disconnect themselves from their attachment to those idolatrous Egyptian beliefs and express their dedication to Hashem. Thus, the second subject legislated between the ninth and tenth plagues is the *Pesah* sacrifice.

Each family had to take a lamb or goat on the tenth of the month, protect it from blemish until the fourteenth, at which time it was to be slaughtered to Hashem. The fourteen days between the first of the month when the instructions were given and the sacrifice, especially the interval between the tenth and fourteenth, served as a period of significant spiritual growth for the Israelites and a critical form of preparation for the Exodus. The Egyptians considered these animals sacred, representative of their gods. When Pharaoh had previously agreed to allow Israel to sacrifice but not depart the metropolitan area, Moses told him: "If we sacrifice the abomination of Egypt before their eyes, will they not stone us!" (Exod. 8:22). The Israelites must have felt tremendous trepidation during those days but surely experienced an enormous change in outlook toward idolatry. The incipient nation had to publicly defy the prevalent idolatrous beliefs of their mighty human masters and of the society they lived in – beliefs to which many of them were deeply attached (see Josh. 24:14; Ezek. 20:8) – as a necessary condition to the final step in their redemption.

## 5. Educating the Children

The covenant that Israel contracted with G-d is of a permanent nature. Israel was conceived to be a corporate entity that would extend through the generations and the inclusion of children was a most critical component. Consequently, parents had a major responsibility to educate their children in covenant essentials, particularly the details associated with the Exodus and the lawgiving.

Regarding the latter, Moses stated: "And you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children, the day you stood before Hashem your G-d at Horeb, when Hashem said to me,

'Assemble the people to Me that I may have them hear My words so that they learn to revere Me...and their children they shall teach'" (Deut. 4:9-10). Shortly after reviewing the Decalogue, referring to its principles, Moses stated: וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ ("continually repeat them to your children" [6:7]) and וְלַמְּדַתְּם אֹתָם אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם ("teach them to your children [such] that they shall speak in them" [11:19]). Children were a key part of the septennial *haqhel* reaffirmation of the covenant (31:13).

Parents were also required to transmit the fundamental details of the Exodus to their children. A highlight of the annual Passover festival celebration – indeed, a detail established as central to the *seder* – is, וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעֵבֹר זֶה וָגו' ("And you shall relate to your son on that day, saying, 'for this purpose Hashem did for me what He did in my departing Egypt'" [Exod. 13:8]).\* Parents are instructed to recount to their children not merely the events that occurred but also G-d's purpose of the redemption. This connects with the story of the covenant and the lawgiving.

In three different contexts (Exod. 12:26; 13:14; Deut. 6:20) the Torah speaks of a son who asks a question to his father concerning an aspect of the Passover commemoration. In a fourth context, the father is bidden to teach his son about the Passover details without the mention of a question (Exod. 13:8). The formulators of the Passover Haggadah (based on the *Mekhilta* [*Parashat Bo* 18]) composed a homily utilizing these passages to alert parents to a critically important concept concerning educating their children. "The Torah speaks in accordance with four [types of] sons: One is wise, one is wicked, one is simple and one doesn't know how to ask." Each of the three who asks a question is presumed to ask a different question and the approach to each son is different. What may succeed with one may not succeed with another. תַּנְהֵךְ לְיָצֵר עַל פִּי דְרָכָו ("Educate the youth according to his tendencies") גַּם כִּי יִזְקֵין □ א יָסוּר ("even when he grows old he will not swerve from it" [Prov. 22:6]).

## Endnote

\* For a fuller discussion on this topic see our study *On Exodus Chapter 13*.