

Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach 5777

P'SHAT (from the Pesach Haggadah)

In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he left Egypt, as it is stated (Exodus 13:8):

"For the sake of this, did the Eternal do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt."

Not only our ancestors did the Holy One, blessed be He, redeem, but rather also us [together] with them did God redeem, as it is stated (Deuteronomy 6:23): "And God took us out from there, in order to bring us in, to give us the land which God swore unto our ancestors."

בְּכָל-דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת-עַצְמוֹ
כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם, שְׁנֹאמֵר: וְהִגַּדְתָּ
'לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בְּעֵבֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה'
לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם. לֹא אֶת-אַבוֹתַינִי בִלְבַד
גָּאֵל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, אֲלֵא אַף אוֹתֵנוּ גָּאֵל
עַמָּהּ, שְׁנֹאמֵר: וְאוֹתֵנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם, לְמַעַן
הִבִּיא אוֹתֵנוּ, לְתֵת לָנוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתֵּינוּ.

KEY KOSHI: Why must we each look at ourselves *as if* we have left Egypt? And how do we do it?

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתַי וְצִוֵּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

REMEZ

House of Study (Nathaniel Deutsch, Jewish Studies Professor, UCSC): In Exodus 12, God invents the holiday of Passover when he commands Moses and Aaron to tell “the whole community of Israel”: “seven days you shall eat unleavened bread...You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time” (Exodus 12:15). In the following chapter, Moses relays God’s command, declaring: “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the Lord” (Exodus 13:6).

But there is a crucial difference.

Where God uses the plural form of “you” in the Hebrew original, Moses substitutes the singular form; where God directs his command to the entire nation, Moses redirects it to the individual Israelite, adding “And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8). The “whole community of Israel” has now become “your son,” and “your ranks” have become “me.”

In many places, the Torah teaches us that Jews were chosen as a people. But were we also chosen as individuals? Perhaps in order that the collective should not eclipse or even erase our individual selves, the Haggadah reminds us that every “person is obligated to view himself as if he were the one who went out from Egypt.” In this way, we continue to fulfill Moses’ exhortation to tell our children about what the “Lord did for me when I left Egypt”—for me and not for you or, even, for us. But do we still need to be reminded that we are individuals? Or is the real challenge to imagine that we belong to something bigger than ourselves?

Playground (Lemony Snicket, Novelist): The story of Passover may seem very remote to you, as it happened thousands of years ago, when the oldest people at your seder table were very, very young, and so many of the details of the story seem somewhat old-fashioned, such as the smearing of lamb’s blood over the doorway of one’s home, which has largely been replaced by signs warning away solicitors. But in fact, the story of liberation is one that is still going on, as people all over the world are still in bondage, and we wait and wait, as the Jews in Egypt waited and waited, for the day when freedom will be spread all over the world like frosting on a well-made cake, rather than dabbed on here and there as if the baker were selfishly eating most of the frosting directly from the bowl. The story of Passover is a journey, and like most journeys, it is taking much longer than it ought to take, no matter how many times we stop and ask for directions. We must look upon ourselves as though we, too, were among those fleeing a life of bondage in Egypt and wandering the desert for years and years, which is why we are often so tired in the evenings and cannot always explain how we got to be exactly where we are.

DRASH

Nation (Jeffrey Goldberg, Journalist): Who can say we've actually left? "Wherever you live, it is probably Egypt," Michael Walzer wrote. Do you live in a place where some people work two and three jobs to feed their children, and others don't even have a single, poorly paid job? Do you live in a community in which the rich are fabulously rich, and the poor humiliated and desperate? Do you live among people who worship the golden calves of obsessive acquisitiveness, among people whose children are blessed by material abundance and cursed by spiritual impoverishment? Do you live in a place in which some people are more equal than others?

...America is a golden land, absolutely, and for Jews, it has been an ark of refuge. But it has not yet fulfilled its promise. The same is true for that other Promised Land. Jewish citizens of Israel have median household incomes almost double that of Arab citizens and an infant mortality rate less than half that of Arabs. Israel represents the greatest miracle in Jewish life in two thousand years—and its achievements are stupendous (and not merely in comparison to its dysfunctional neighbors)—and yet its promise is also unfulfilled. The seder marks the flight from the humiliation of slavery to the grandeur of freedom, but not everyone has come on this journey. It is impossible to love the stranger as much as we love our own kin, but aren't we still commanded to bring everyone out of Egypt?

Library (Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Philosopher): Haggadah means narration, and tonight's celebration insists on the moral seriousness of the stories that we tell about ourselves. Stories are easily dismissible as distractions, the make-believe we craved as children, losing ourselves in the sweet enchantment of "as if." "As if" belongs to the imagination, that wild terrain governed by no obvious rules. But tonight we are asked to take this faculty of the mind, so beloved by children and novelists, extremely seriously. All the adults who have outgrown story time are to be tutored tonight, with the physical props meant to quicken our pretending, and the ways of the child to guide us. It is not enough to merely tell the story, but we must live inside of it, blur the boundaries of our personal narrative so that we spill outward and include as part of our formative experiences having lived through events that took place millennia before we were born.

It is the imagination alone that can extend the sense of the self, broaden our sense of who we really are. We are Jews, insists the tradition, and the identity of an individual Jew is never strictly individual but also collective. By extending our personal narratives to include the formative tale of Jewish identity we appropriate that collective self as part of our own.

[RNG continued] But the tradition also insists on possessing tonight's story in more general moral terms, the Torah reminding us never to oppress the stranger, "since you know the soul of the stranger, having been strangers in the land of Egypt." This story that we relive tonight is meant to grant us knowledge of "the soul of the stranger," and there is nothing more universal than that soul and our knowledge of it and it is only the tutored imagination that can lead us to it and to the compassion it yields.

Tonight is the night that we sanctify storytelling.

SOD – Alan Morinis in *With Heart in Mind* (Ch. 33): Love of Uprightness

When the soul comes into the world, its circle of interest and engagement is very small. Much effort in child rearing goes into guiding the child to be less selfish, more inclusive of others in thoughts and action. As parents put their own needs for sleep, food, and pleasure second to the needs of their child, they are engaged in growing beyond self-interest. From a soul perspective, life is meant to be a journey of expanding boundaries of the self to include family, friends, spouse, community, and more, depending on the nature and potential of that soul.

The more a person identifies with a personal "I," the smaller the world he or she inhabits, and the less motivation there is to be upright in dealing with others. The more expansive the sense of who is included in the definition of the "I," the more obvious and natural it is to treat everyone within that expanded boundary with righteousness.

This is a teaching of Rabbi Shimon Shwab, in his book *The Gates of Uprightness*:

The entire "I" of a coarse and lowly person is restricted only to his substance and body. Above him is someone who feels that his "I" is a synthesis of body and soul. And above him is someone who can include in his "I" all of his household and family. Someone who walks according to the way of Torah, his "I" includes the whole Jewish people, since in truth every Jewish person is only like a limb of the body of the nation of Israel. And there are more levels.

When approached in this way, uprightiness and responsibility are not a matter of diminishing the individual ego or suppressing self-interest. Rather, we are being shown that we have the potential to expand the boundaries within which we live beyond the self. Expanding in this way is a step toward actualizing the soul's potential, or, as we might say, acquiring Torah.