

OUT OF EGYPT

by Rabbi Yonason Goldson

In every generation, every person is obligated to envision himself as if he personally had gone out from Egypt.

Are we meant to take these words from the Pesach Haggadah literally? If so, it seems an impossible task. With only moderate effort we might recall ancient miracles, reflect upon the essence of Jewish identity, or even uncap new wellsprings of spiritual inspiration. But how can we imagine ourselves capable of truly reliving our ancestors' flight from Egypt, of fully experiencing from the comfort of our own seder tables the grandeur of their exodus, of feeling what they felt as generations of pain and oppression finally and dramatically came to an end?

When our sages penned the Haggadah, however, they did not demand from us the impossible. Rather, in their precise and careful language, they differentiated between two ways of referring to the land of our enslavement. And so we find that they did not speak only of "the land of Egypt", which refers merely to a physical place, but also of "Egypt", which refers to a culture, a system of values, a pattern of thinking.

The oppression of our ancestors was more profound than mere physical servitude. So consuming was their labor that they did not have even a moment to pray. So intense was their suffering that they had no strength to cry. So pervasive were the idolatrous practices surrounding them that they had begun to believe in the sorcery and black magic practiced by their captors. This was Egypt, where the Jews were not free to think their own thoughts or feel their own feelings, where they absorbed by osmosis the attitudes and ideas of the society in which they were immersed.

This, too, is the "Egypt" from which the Haggadah commands us to shake ourselves free. For in whatever society we may live, the morals and values of that culture insinuate themselves into our subconscious, shaping our thoughts and molding our attitudes until we find ourselves invested in a value system that we have never critically or objectively examined.

Indeed, the music we listen to, the movies we go see, the clothes we wear, and the friends we choose for ourselves often reflect social positioning and status seeking, with no thought for how these choices might compromise our psychological and spiritual well-being. Whenever we forsake character for personal advantage we sell ourselves into slavery. Whenever we choose personal gain over personal commitment we slip back into bondage. Whenever our actions are the product of habit rather than reason we have returned to Egypt.

The more committed we become to the ideologies around us, the more difficulty we have divesting ourselves of that commitment, and the more likely we are to find ourselves espousing and defending points of view that may never have truly been our own. The freedom that we celebrate on Pesach is the freedom to think Jewish thoughts and choose Jewish values, the freedom to evaluate the attitudes of our society and not blindly embrace them for the sake of social acceptance.

It should go without saying that intelligent decision making depends upon knowledge. Free choice does not exist without an adequate understanding of the options available, and choosing blindly is not choosing at all: it is gambling, and gambling with no knowledge of the odds. To choose without information is to be a slave to ignorance.

We may not be able to relive the physical exodus from the land of Egypt, but what we can do -- what the Haggadah requires us to do -- is to challenge the bonds that restrict our freedom of thought, to understand the choices we make, to never become smug or complacent in our opinions or our values. Pesach reminds us of the obligation placed on every one of us to root out cultural and personal bias and to uncover the universal truth that is the foundation of Jewish identity.