RELIVING THE EXODUS

by Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

It is well known that the primary objective of the Pesach seder is to verbally recount the Jews' bitter, oppressive experience as slaves in Egypt, as well as their miraculous deliverance from that country.

And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, "This is done because of that which the Lord did to me when I came forth out of Egypt." (Exodus 13:8)

In contrast to the daily mitzvah of remembering the Exodus (see Deuteronomy 15:15), this mitzvah of retelling requires active, detailed participation and discussion. So central is the need for active dialogue that even a person who is alone, or lacks another individual who is able to ask the four questions to him, as well as scholars who are well versed in all matters related to the exodus, must ask the four questions of the Mah Nishtana to themselves.

Our Rabbis taught: If his son is intelligent, he asks (his father), while if he is not intelligent his wife asks him. But if (she is also) not (able to ask), he asks himself. Even two scholars who know the laws of Pesach ask one another. (Talmud, Pesachim 116a)

A person is obligated to relate the story of the exodus for the entire evening...even (if it means) relating (the information) to himself. (Tosefta, Pesachim 10:8)

And even if we were all wise, all men of understanding, all elders, all knowledgeable of the Torah, it would be incumbent upon us to speak of the exodus from Egypt. (Haggadah)

The obvious question is why is this necessary? Why is the mitzvah such that even if a person is alone he must ask himself questions at the seder? Why are scholars with ostensibly nothing left to learn still required to actively participate in the seder?

Furthermore, our sages instruct us that this mitzvah of retelling is not bound by any limit. "He who increases in his recounting of the exodus is praiseworthy" (Haggadah). Typically, there are quantifiable limitations (number, volume, time, etc.) associated with mitzvos. Why is this particular mitzvah different? After all, once you have told the entire story, what is there to add?

In order to address these questions, let us first focus our attention on another fundamental aspect of the seder, namely our obligation to relive the experience of the exodus. "A person is obligated to see himself as if he were leaving Egypt." (Pesachim 116b)

A number of questions arise from this mitzvah as well. First, what exactly is the nature of this obligation? In which specific respects are we to attempt to "relive" the exodus from Egypt?

In addition, even if we were to clearly define the exact obligation, is the expectation realistic? Can we really view ourselves, living as we do in a free country, with great liberty and freedom, far removed from the abject suffering of slavery, as if we are leaving Egypt? How then do we go about achieving a meaningful connection?

(Compare this to Ramban's view of the mitzvah of loving one's neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18), which he terms an "exaggeration", stating that one cannot possibly love another as much as they love themselves.") Lastly, why do we need to go to this degree? Why can we not relate the events without having to become active, personal participants in the story?

The simple approach to understanding this mitzvah is that we are expected to view ourselves as if we had actually left Egypt so as to better internalize our ancestors' struggles as well as their deliverance. In so doing, we come to truly appreciate G-d's miraculous intervention on behalf of His people, an intervention which we still benefit from today.

If G-d had not taken us out of Egypt, then we and our children and our children's children would still be slaves to Pharaoh. (Haggadah)

Rambam (Laws of Chametz and Matzah 7:6) states that a person's obligation in this area is of such significance that it is not sufficient for a person to simply view himself as one who has personally left Egypt. Rather, he must act as a slave who is currently experiencing the exodus, by engaging in the type of behaviors that symbolize both slavery and freedom. These include the various mitzvos of the seder, such as eating marror and reclining while eating matzah and drinking wine. In addition, we possess numerous customs which are designed to reinforce this concept, including carrying sacks over one's shoulders, so as to reenact the exodus.

This thought answers the earlier questions which we asked. In order to properly fulfill one's obligation at the seder, it is not sufficient to merely know that which occurred. Rather, we are required to relate the story by relating to the story. Speaking, asking, answering, declaring, etc. all create a certain sense of awareness that is essential to re- enacting the experience, even if it means asking oneself the questions and retelling information that one already knows.

Still, some of our earlier problems remain. We can empathize with our ancestors and attempt to re-experience the entire process of the exodus. Yet, the exact nature of the obligation still seems somewhat elusive. How are we to truly imagine ourselves as experiencing the exodus in our comfortable lifestyles, millennia removed from the entire story?

Further complicating matters is the position of Maharal (Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague), who states (Gevuros Hashem, 61) that every man is obligated to view his generation as if it was the one that was leaving Egypt, to the exclusion of all others. Is it really possible for us to in effect replace the actual generation of the exodus with our own?

I would like to answer these questions homiletically, by suggesting an alternative explanation for the

words of our sages. Instead of understanding our obligation at the seder as being simply one of reliving the experience of the exodus from Egypt (Hebrew: Mitzrayim), let us substitute the word meitzarim, meaning straits or confinement. In our new version, the commandment reads: "In each and every generation a man is obligated to see himself as if he has left behind his personal confinements."

Our Egyptian experience was about more than physical servitude. There was a spiritual enslavement as well. Our sages relate that the Jewish people had sunk to the lowest levels of impurity. Had they fallen any further, they would have faced permanent spiritual extinction.

As the Haggadah states, had G-d not taken us out of Egypt at that time we would still be slaves to Pharaoh today. I do not believe that this idea is to be understood literally. Certainly, we are aware of the fact that the Egyptian dynasty represented by Pharaoh has long disappeared into the annals of history, making the idea of Jews as perpetual Egyptian slaves a historical impossibility. What, then, is the Haggadah telling us with this idea?

I submit that the focus of this statement is not directed towards our physical status as slaves, but rather our spiritual servitude. Had we continued along the same path for much longer, as spiritual slaves to the Egyptian culture which surrounded us, we would have completely lost our unique spiritual identity, and would have blended permanently into Egyptian society. Pesach is therefore called z'man cheirusainu, the time of our freedom, not only because of the physical freedom that it wrought, but, even more importantly, for the spiritual freedom that it achieved as well.

It would be a mistake, however, for us to assume that this spiritual freedom was achieved only one time in history, on 15 Nissan, 2448, at the time of the Exodus. Again, in the words of Maharal:

From G-d's perspective as the orchestrater of redemption, He took us all out as one people. The meaning of this is that the Holy One, blessed be He, redeemed Israel in its totality, since when He redeemed Israel, the redemption was so that they no longer be under the jurisdiction of Egypt. In this sense, the redemption was as much for the children as it was for the parents.

Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler (Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. 2, p. 18) points out that Jewish festivals are not merely anniversaries of important historical events, designed to remind us of these occurrences. Rather, they are annual spiritual opportunities. We do not simply commemorate events, we relive them. We do so by tapping into the unique spiritual energy that is unleashed during each respective time period.

On Yom Kippur, for example, we are granted a unique opportunity to seek atonement for our sins, just as our ancestors were following the sin of the golden calf. On Succos, we experience a singular prospect for joy, similar to the feelings of elation and gratitude for the constant protection and heavenly sustenance that we received in the desert. On Shavuos, we are able to reaffirm our commitment to the Torah and its dictates, as if we ourselves were standing at Mount Sinai.

Similarly, the freedom of Pesach is an ongoing, never ending process. Our obligation is to try to achieve our own personal freedom by identifying the servitude of today, and finding ways to overcome it. "In each and every generation, a man is obligated to feel as if he himself has left (his personal) Egypt."

We all have our own "Egypt". That may take many forms, such as a personal inclination towards sin or the influence of the general culture. Each year, at this time, we are granted special divine providence to confront and overcome these particular challenges.

Physical freedom is not sufficient for one to be considered free. By viewing ourselves as those who also need to escape from the alien thoughts and values that surround us, we will have the opportunity to make this Pesach a true z'man cheirusainu.

Chag kasher v'sameach.

Rabbi Naphtali Hoff, M.Ed., is an instructor of Jewish History at the Hebrew Theological College (Skokie, Illinois) and serves as associate principal at Yeshiva Shearis Yisroel in Chicago. More information about Rabbi Hoff can be found on his website,www.rabbihoff.com.