

FEELING JEWISH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The glorious holiday of Pesach is upon us once more. With all of its rituals and wonder, Pesach marks the uniqueness of the Jewish people - a people delivered from centuries of bondage through miraculous Heavenly intervention. So, one of the main functions of Pesach is to connect us to an event that occurred millennia ago in a distant land.

The natural inclination of people is to feel disconnected to that event. This is implicit in the questions raised in the section of the Hagadah devoted to the four sons. Their basic question is: "What is the relevance of this long-ago event to me?" And this has remained the basic question in all of Jewish life throughout the ages.

The enormous number of Jews who are completely disconnected from their faith and their people, from their homeland of Israel and from the values and observances of Torah, testifies to the intensity of doubt and difficulty posed by this question. If the Exodus from Egypt does not speak to me, then the rest of Judaism is pretty immaterial to me as well.

And that is basically the statement and question of the evil son in the Hagadah. In effect he is saying that the whole rite of Pesach as well as all of the other rituals of Judaism are meaningless because he has no connection to the Exodus from Egypt or to Jewish history generally. It is this disconnect that creates rampant assimilation and a constantly diminishing connection to the past and destiny of the Jewish people.

The answer of the Hagadah to the seemingly irrelevance of the Exodus from Egypt to our current world, three thousand, three-hundred, twenty-six years later, is difficult for us to understand. We tell that evil son that had he lived at the time of the Exodus from Egypt he would not have been redeemed and would have died in Egyptian captivity.

Midrash teaches us that a majority of the Jews in Egypt did not survive, spiritually or physically, to participate in the Exodus. The clear message here is that Exodus denial means spiritual annihilation as far as the individual Jew is concerned. In order to be able to achieve freedom - inner and lasting freedom - as a Jew, one must first feel connected to the Jewish people and to its past and committed to its future.

Ritual is one of the proven methods to achieve such a connection. Every bite of matzo brings me closer to my people and to its eternal mission in world civilization. One of my grandsons when he was a little boy said to me at the Seder: "Zaidy, tell everyone to be quiet I want to hear what the

matzo is saying to me." In his wise, childlike way he encompassed the message of Pesach to all of us.

We have to listen to what the matzo is saying to us. By so doing, we connect ourselves to the Exodus from Egypt and thereby to all of Jewish history and Judaism itself. Without listening to the matzo, we will be disconnected from our past and all of Judaism will appear to be irrelevant to us.

Pesach teaches us many basic lessons about life generally and Jewish life particularly. It teaches us that we are a unique people and therefore have to behave in a unique fashion. It teaches us that the past has to always live in our present and that memory is the key to wisdom and survival. It teaches us never to despair and to always hope and trust for better times and salvation. It teaches us of the power of an individual - even one individual alone, such as our teacher Moshe - to affect and alter all of human history.

It points out to us the inherent danger of Jews not feeling Jewish and distancing themselves from their people and their own individual destiny. It proclaims for us God's rule over nations and the omnipresence of His Divine hand, so to speak, in human affairs. Many times this guidance is an unseen force but there are times in history, such as the Exodus from Egypt and perhaps even in our time in the miraculous resilience of the Jewish people after the terrible events of the past century, when God's direction of events is more visible to us.

Pesach and its matzo have a great deal to say to us if we are prepared to listen and understand the message. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov was reputed to have said: "Every step that I take brings me closer to Jerusalem." We can also say that every bite of matzo that we take brings us closer to the experience of the Exodus from Egypt and to the great redemption of Israel that yet awaits us.

Shabbat shalom A happy and kosher Pesach to you and yours

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com