

JEWISH SURVIVAL AND EXODUS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The story of the Jewish people's suffering under Egyptian bondage reaches its climax in this week's Torah reading and in the beginning part of next week's Torah reading as well. The Torah does not really dwell on the history and political significance of this momentous event. It tells us of the plagues visited upon the Egyptians, of the stubbornness of Pharaoh and of the eventual capitulation of the Egyptians to the demands of Moshe.

However, it does not in any way inform us of the geopolitical consequences of the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt. Rather, the balance of the Torah readings of the year will concern itself almost exclusively with God's relationship and instructions to the Jewish people.

Even when other nations and personages are mentioned and described later in the Torah, this is done only regarding their direct relationship to the Jewish people. So, one can certainly wonder at this seemingly xenophobic exclusive type of narrative. The Jewish people have always been a very small percentage, not only of the world's population, but also of the population of the Middle East itself.

The Land of Israel, the homeland of the Jewish people, is a very small country covering only a minute portion of the landmass of the vast Middle East. Why does the Torah, so to speak, ignore the rest of human society and geopolitical reality and concentrate only on the story of a small people who will inherit a very small slice of world territory? This question of Jewish exclusivity lies at the heart of a great deal of the internal and external debates regarding Israel and the Jewish people in today's world as well.

The story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt is the basis for the root concept of Judaism, that the Jewish people are mysteriously special and unique amongst all other peoples that inhabit the globe. As the Torah proclaims: "Has there been any other historic occurrence where one nation has been extracted from the midst of another nation?"

Many peoples have experienced revolutions against oppressors and the achievement of national freedom. But the story of the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt remains a singular and unique one. This is because the purpose for that exodus was not limited to achieving national freedom and personal comfort. Rather, as expressed so often by Moshe and written in the Torah itself, it was that this people should be a light unto the nations, a chosen people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation dedicated to the service of God.

It is because of this higher layer of freedom that the exodus from Egypt represents that the Jewish people have survived and prospered in spite of all odds and through all generations. Throughout the ages, many in the non- Jewish world have dealt with the issue of Jewish survival and its ultimate mystery. Judaism, Jewish values and ideals have penetrated and influenced all sections of humanity. One can say that it is the very exclusivity of the Torah narrative and of Jewish thought and lifestyle that carries with it the universality that the Jewish people have achieved. Among the many great paradoxes of the human story, this paradox of the exclusivity and universality of the Jewish people is primary.

Shabbat shalom

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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