

# Lirot Et Atzmo, Going Beyond Empathy: A Psychological Perspective

A central component of the Seder night is the retelling of the story of the Exodus of B'nai Yisrael from the slavery of Mitzrayim. Towards the close of the Maggid section is a statement unlike any other in Jewish liturgy:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו  
כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים.

*In every generation, each person is obligated to view himself as if he went out from Egypt.*

This is a remarkable requirement. Typically, holidays specify behaviors and observances to commemorate historic events. On Sukkot, we live in booths to remember the Jews' experience in the desert. On Chanukah, we light the menorah to mark the miraculous rededication of the Beit HaMikdash. There are some holidays that specify an emotional response: On Purim, and from the inception of Adar, we are expected to be happy, at Kol Nidre we are to be penitent. Only on the Seder night, however, are we not only expected but *commanded* to experience ourselves in a time and place other than our own. How and why do we, on this night so different from all others, do the seemingly impossible? How do we envision ourselves personally experiencing the journey from slavery



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to freedom, and to what purpose?

When I work with educators and students at Jewish day schools on the *middot* of *bein adam l'chavero*, interpersonal character traits, the critical skill of empathy is often an important focus. At first blush, it might seem that this psychological phenomenon of empathy is what the rabbis are asking of us. Empathy is defined as the ability to experience the feelings of another, to reactively experience *with* another person.<sup>1</sup>

Empathy, neuroscientists have suggested, is an important factor in species' survival, with mothers' empathy contributing to their response to their infant's cries.<sup>2</sup> We are somewhat pre-wired for empathy. Individuals viewing pictures of injured limbs and told to imagine it as their limb will display neurologic evidence of pain.<sup>3</sup> Neuroscientists have discovered "mirror" neurons in the brain's motor system which provide the capacity for us to mirror

others, to share others' experiences by enabling one person to project oneself into the minds, emotions, and actions of others.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the psychological ability to feel as others do is important; it contributes to our compassion and caring. But this form of empathy is not sufficient for the Haggadah, which requires more than caring about the plight of the slaves in Egypt.

Perhaps an alternate conceptualization of empathy comes closer to the Haggadah obligation to *lirot et atzmo*. The cognitive or perspective-taking view of empathy involves the ability to see the world as another does, to put oneself in their shoes. Early Piagetian research discovered that this skill is acquired developmentally. Young children are totally ego-centric, incapable of recognizing that others perceive and experience things differently than they do. As we grow, the cognitive ability to recognize and assume the perspective of another develops. We become able to identify



with characters in the books we read and the films we see, and the people we know. As we read the Haggadah, this cognitive empathy allows us to imagine the lives of the slaves, severely oppressed by the Egyptians.

Since the Haggadah requires that each of us relive the redemption as if we personally experienced it, cognitive empathy is not enough. Imagining the feelings of slaves experiencing freedom, or considering how we might have felt were we to have been there, might provide powerful understandings. On Pesach night, however, they will not suffice. We must become slaves redeemed from Egyptian tyranny. We must personally experience redemption.

The Rambam's version of *b'chol dor v'dor*, with slight changes in wording, makes it clear that we are required to go beyond empathy:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם להראות את עצמו כאילו הוא בעצמו יצא עתה משעבוד מצרים. רמב"ם, הלכות חמץ ומצה ז:ו

*In each and every generation a person is obligated to display himself as though he just now left the slavery of Egypt.*

**Rambam, Hilchot Chametz Umatza 7:6**

The addition of the words *b'atzmo* (himself) and *ata* (just now) make it clear that we must do more than *identify* with ancestors who experienced historic redemption, we are to experience, at the Seder table, the remarkable redemption and the experience of freedom. Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach, the Ponevezh Rosh Yeshivah, explains that only when we feel as if we had moments ago experienced the Exodus can we have the proper, powerful feelings towards the event. "One cannot compare the emotional excitement felt at the time of a tremendous personal salvation to the feelings one has toward that event when it is recollected later."<sup>5</sup> The Lubavitcher Rebbe elaborates that it must be not only personal but specific. "It is not sufficient merely to feel that *you yourself had been a (generic) slave and were set free and redeemed* as Rambam writes. Rather, one must perceive oneself as an Egyptian slave who was liberated from the uniquely harsh persecution of Pharaoh."<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, there is only one psychological parallel for going beyond empathically feeling for others or seeing through their eyes,

to actually experiencing an event, and it comes from research on trauma. When we experience trauma it is common to find that sights, sounds, or even smells reminiscent of the trauma can evoke memories of the event. A subset of traumatized individuals will have flashbacks or nightmares in which they fully re-experience the trauma, reliving the event as if it is happening at that moment. This re-experiencing is often so painful and distressing that trauma victims may avoid people, places and things that serve as reminders, so as to preclude memories and prevent flashbacks. Successful treatment for traumatic re-experiencing engages victims in developing the ability to focus on areas of mastery and control, even as they remember and re-experience traumatic events.

With elegant pedagogic skill, the Haggadah teaches us how to re-experience the trauma of slavery from the position of freedom and mastery. Our Seder tables are a model of good teaching technique. Using powerful narrative, embellished with characters that draw us in, we tell and retell the story. We are engaged in the story through the use of visuals and

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song. In some traditions, participants even enact the drama of the Exodus. Yet while we speak extensively of the trauma of our years of slavery and affliction, we do so from the perspective of free men and women. We eat the maror and matzoh of slavery, but we recline, dip twice, and drink wine, signs of free men, and of royalty. As our telling the story and engaging in the rituals assists us in stretching our cognitive and emotional capacities beyond empathy, and we are able to view ourselves as having gone out from Egypt, our Seder takes us on an emotional journey.

Why does the Haggadah require this of us? Why must we personally journey from the devastation of slavery to the joy of redemption? Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, in *Siftei Chaim*, argues that the obligation to feel as if one was redeemed from Egypt is not an end in itself, but a means to a larger goal.<sup>7</sup> The true

purpose is to have us express our deep and genuine gratitude to Hashem. Immediately following the Haggadah's imperative to personally experience the redemption, it continues with *l'fichach anachnu chayavim l'hodot, l'halel*, we therefore are obligated to recite praise and thanksgiving, making clear our obligation to thank Hashem. It is because we experience the Exodus ourselves, Rabbi Friedlander explains, that we can feel the personal need to express gratitude to our Redeemer.

A second explanation for the seemingly difficult requirement to see ourselves as slaves and as redeemed is to inculcate in us a prominent and lasting empathy for others. Freed from slavery, we are now masters, and the prescription of the *Haggadah, l'irot et atzmo*, cautions us to be vigilant in our concern for others, particularly those who are strangers. The Chatam Sofer, *Parashat Ki Teitzei*, states that one of the goals of this personal reliving of the Pesach story is so that we empathize with the convert. As the Torah tells us:

וְאֶהְבֶּתֶם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ  
מִצְרָיִם.  
דְּבָרִים י״ט

*You should love the proselyte, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

**Devarim 10:19**

On the Seder night, we personally experience being strangers in exile, oppressed and abused, and this personal experience should color how we relate to others in similar circumstances.

These two reasons provide compelling answers to the question of why the Haggadah demands that we go beyond empathy to experience the Exodus personally. The *Ba'al*

*Haggadah* understood that while reviewing history and perspective taking can impart important knowledge, the best teacher is personal experience, and the most powerful lessons come from our lived and experienced journeys. Both the gratitude to Hashem that Rabbi Friedlander suggests is the Haggadah's underlying goal, and the empathy for others outlined in the Torah and that the Chatam Sofer cites, are critical in shaping our psyches and influencing our actions well beyond the Seder night. As we go beyond empathy to personally travel from slavery to freedom, we learn that our gratitude to our Redeemer cannot be limited to a moment in time. We learn that wherever we are and whatever befalls us, we must know, always, who we are, how far we have come, to Whom we owe our salvation, and what is forever expected of us.

**Notes**

1. Hinnant, J. B. & O'Brien, M. (2007) Cognitive and emotional control and perspective taking and their relations to empathy in 5 year old children. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 168(3), 301-322.
2. Preston, S. D., & deWaal, F. B. M. (2002). Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases. *Behavioral and Brain Science*, 25, 1-72.
3. Van Der Heiden, L., Scherpiet, S., Konicar, L., Birbaumer, M., & Viet, R. (2013). Inter-individual differences in successful perspective-taking during pain perception mediates emotional responsiveness in self and others. *NeuroImage*, 65, 387-394.
4. Rizzolatti, G., & Craighero, L. (2004). The mirror neuron system. *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, 27, 169-192.
5. *Rav Shach Haggadah*, p.137.
6. *The Kol Menachem Haggadah* p. 144.
7. *Moadim*, Vol II pp. 355-363.