

Feel as Though You Left Egypt, But I Was Never There!

The Jewish people left Egypt around 3,327 years ago. Once a year, ever since that momentous occasion in our history, we sit around a table with our families, friends and guests in order to commemorate that experience at the Pesach Seder. We do a variety of actions to remember that Exodus from Egypt. We eat matzah, drink four cups of wine, eat bitter herbs, lean like free people and read the Haggadah. As well as eating, drinking, leaning and talking, there is a mitzvah that many people skip over during the Seder without even realizing. That mitzvah is to feel as though you were in Egypt and G-d took you out. What is this mitzvah all about?

I Wasn't Ever in Egypt!

Right after the Torah tells us that we have an obligation to eat matzah on Pesach and that we are to remove the chametz from our homes, we are told that we should be engaging our children in discussion about the Exodus:

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעִבּוּר זֶה עָשָׂה
ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם.
שְׁמוֹת יג:ח

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying 'It is on account of this that Hashem did for me when I left Egypt.'

Exodus 13:8

The author of the Haggadah uses this verse as a proof text to make the following statement:



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בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות עצמו כאלו
הוא יצא ממצרים.

In each and every generation a person is obligated to see themselves as though they left Egypt.

Since the verse speaks in the first person, “did for me,” the Haggadah is telling us to feel as though ‘you’ left Egypt. Don’t just eat the matzah, remove the chametz, eat the bitter herbs and read the story of our salvation, as though it only happened to your ancestors, but feel as though you yourself were there! You were a slave, you had backbreaking work, you met Moses and saw the wonders and miracles of the plagues and then you were personally delivered from the slavery of Egypt, and you passed through the Red Sea to the freedom that G-d gave you.

Are we expected to fool ourselves? Are we expected to imagine something in our mind that we never went through and feel as if we did?

I would like to look at a few different ways to understand this crucial part of the Pesach Seder experience, which could not only change the way we see this part of the Seder, but how we look at the Jewish people and Jewish history.

Okay, You Weren't Really there, But They Were.

The clearest explanation of the question as to how we are expected to feel as though we personally left Egypt is given in the *Siddur of Rashi*, written by one of Rashi's students. He explains that the Haggadah is attempting to invoke a feeling of gratitude on our part. Our ancestors were actually in Egypt. Through an incredible display of miracles that G-d displayed in Egypt, our ancestors were taken out. Had they not been released from Egypt, they would have totally assimilated into Egypt and we would never have left at all.

Our history came down to that one crucial moment, do we stay or do we go? According to the commentators many Jews decided that they actually did not wish to leave and after over 200 years, they felt more Egyptian than Hebrew. Many of them died out in the plague of darkness, but many others remained and became part of Egyptian society and culture. Their descendants are not considered Jewish. They never made it to Mount Sinai which would have sealed their destiny as part of the Jewish people. However, hundreds of thousands did

leave with a faith in G-d and Moses his messenger.

By recalling that fateful decision our ancestors made all of those years ago, we can sit at our tables and say, “had they not been taken out, we would still be there.”

By recalling that fateful decision our ancestors made all of those years ago, we can sit at our tables and say, “had they not been taken out, we would still be there, so it’s as though were taken out ourselves.”

Act it Out!

In the *Laws of Chametz and Matzah* chapter 7:6, the Rambam discusses in detail the mitzvah to discuss the Exodus from Egypt. He explains that telling the story of the incredible events that happened at that time is a positive mitzvah from the Torah. In the seventh chapter he quotes our piece of Haggadah that each person should see themselves as though they left Egypt. But the Rambam does something very subtle, he adds one letter which gives a very different understanding of what he believes this command is expecting us to do:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם להראות את עצמו כאילו הוא בעצמו יצא עתה משעבוד מצרים.
In each and every generation a person is obligated to display themselves as

though they just left the slavery of Egypt.

In the Haggadah we are told to see ourselves as though we left Egypt. The word to see yourself is “*lirot*.” The Rambam adds the letter *hay* to the word so it now reads “*leharot*.” It’s a small change, but it makes a big difference. The word “*lirot*” is “to see,” but the word “*leharot*” means to “be seen” or to display in a certain way. What does the Rambam expect us to do? It is exactly as he says, act it out! Everything we do at the Seder is meant to be a reliving of the experience. They ate matzah, we do too, they were free and ate their Pesach Seder as free people, we do too by leaning. They ate bitter herbs, so do we.

This doesn’t only apply to the mitzvot that we do, it also applies to the many customs that each family and community has added to the Seder. For example, many Persian communities have the custom during the recitation of the Dayenu song to run around the table and hit each other on the back with a large scallion! (This is actually a custom in my family and can give guests unfamiliar with the custom quite a shock). The reason behind this is to relive the experience in some small way, the beatings our ancestors felt at the hands of the Egyptians. Why a scallion is used, I believe may be connected to a later description in the Torah where the Jewish people complain to Moses about the lack of food in the desert that they had plenty of in Egypt — the list includes fish, meat, melon, garlic and onions. So we take the food they complained about and use it against them by gently hitting them with it to show their lack of gratitude.

Other communities literally act out parts of the Exodus by wrapping matzah in cloth napkins and walking around with them on their shoulders to remember how our ancestors left Egypt in a hurry with matzah on their backs. Some jump over water to remember the splitting of the sea. Each of these and many others are customs handed down from generation to generation as a way of displaying as though we were there.

Actually You Were There! You Just Don’t Remember.

One of the most intriguing answers in how we are expected to see ourselves as though we left Egypt comes from Rav Shimon Schwab in his book *Maayan Beit Hashoeiva*, Shemot 13:8. His mind-bending interpretation is that you were there, you just don’t remember being there. When the Torah says “What Hashem did for me” that is a literal verse -- it is not speaking in metaphorical or theoretical language; the Torah says it because the Torah means it. You were in Egypt, and you were taken out.

He explains this phenomenon in the following way: Your body is made up of many parts. It is a known fact that the body you have now is not the same body you had as a baby or even as a child. Over your many years living on earth your body has changed. You not only have grown, but billions of your cells have died out and new ones have appeared. If you were to look at a picture of yourself as a newborn, you most likely wouldn’t have realized it was you without your mother telling you that you are the cute baby in the photo. That baby doesn’t look like you, sound like you, smell like you or feel like you, but it is still you. You don’t



even remember being a newborn! But that was you whether you remember it or not.

The Jewish people are very much the same. Our ancestors are not different people who we descend from, they are us, just an earlier version of us, just like that baby was us all those years ago. The fact that those Jews in Egypt sounded, looked and acted differently is irrelevant. You are looking at the Jewish people the wrong way, says Rabbi Schwab — we are one large organic being that spans thousands of years of Jewish history. We were “born” as a people in Egypt over 3,000 years ago and have slowly been growing as a people ever since then.

According to this view, you were in Egypt and G-d took you out. You don’t remember being in Egypt? That’s okay, you don’t remember being born either, but others have told you that you were and can describe to you what the experience was like.

I believe another way we can understand this is by recognizing that we have personal memories of

the past, but there also is a collective national memory that we as a people are part of as well. By sitting at the Seder and performing the mitzvot, we are tapping into our national memory and consciousness that we have been part of for thousands of years.

This idea is alluded to in the way the Torah describes Jacob and his family in contrast to his brother Esau and his family in the Torah. When Esau travels with his family, the Torah (Bereishit 36:6) uses the words “*et kol nafshot beyto*, all the souls of his home.” When Jacob’s family is counted at the beginning of Sefer Shemot, the Torah states that he has “*shivim nefesh*, 70 soul” in his family. The word soul for Jacob is in the singular even though there are 70 of them, to illustrate the combined soul nature of Jacob and his family.

It’s All About the “Time” of our Freedom.

The Torah refers to Pesach in a few different ways, one of them is “*zman cheruteinu*” which means the “time of

our freedom.” In order to understand this expression Rabbi E. E. Dessler in the book *Sanctuaries in Time*, based on a lecture he gave on Pesach 1944, gives us a deep and kabbalistic understanding of the Jewish view of time which we can use to explain how we are expected to see ourselves as personally leaving Egypt.

We usually understand time as being made up of past, present and future, in the form of a “timeline.” When we experience something, we live it in the present and the present has no real connection to what happened during that time in the past. For example, we celebrate Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday in November. That date has no inherent connection to the theme of giving thanks. It was a random date chosen by President Abraham Lincoln to celebrate the blessing of the harvest and the preceding year. The exact date has no real connection to any experience. Any date could have been chosen. The Jewish view of time is totally different. It’s less of a timeline and more of a time spiral.

When the Haggadah says we should see ourselves as though we are leaving Egypt, it means that we have the potential to access the experience of freedom available during the time period and go free as well.

We travel through the year very much like a person travels on a train and arrives at various stations along the way. Each of these “stations” gives us something we can experience at that time. For example, the period in which Passover occurs is a time of freedom, and we experience an element of freedom as we pass through that time. Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah, so as we pass through that time period, we experience a re-acceptance of the Torah that propels us throughout the year. Sukkot is a time of happiness and faith, so as we leave our homes and move into the sukkah at that time of year, we acquire faith in G-d and the happiness that ensues from this. Yom Kippur is a time of forgiveness, which means held within that time is the ability for us to cleanse ourselves of past mistakes. This is true of all the other holidays.

When we arrive at Passover we are in a place of potential freedom. Just

as our ancestors were able to tap into that energy and go free from Egypt, so too, we are able at that time to free ourselves from all that enslaves us from being who we really can be. When the Haggadah says we should see ourselves as though we are leaving Egypt, it means that we have the potential to access the experience of freedom available during the time period and go free as well. That is the power that Pesach has within it.

It's All About Your Imagination.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski in his Pesach Haggadah *From Bondage to Freedom* explains that we are expected to really use our imaginations at the Pesach Seder. “Our imaginations are very creative as evidenced by how vividly we can dream in our sleep and daydream while we are awake,” he writes. Based on this, he recommends

that you “create three dimensional scenes in rich color. You should meditate and create scenes in your mind. See yourself in the straw pits, mixing it with mud, baking it into bricks. You can hear the scolding of the Egyptian taskmasters and feel the lashes in your back.”

You can now visualize the plagues that were brought into Egypt and see yourself leaving Egypt with the throng of Jewish people by your side. Finally you stand at the Red Sea and hear the thunder of Pharaoh’s chariots approaching, you feel the terror of being trapped and then see the glory of G-d as the waters divide.

He concludes that this is the requirement to feel as though you left Egypt, as the “sweet taste of liberty cannot be appreciated as long as oppression is only an abstraction.” This use of imagination allows you to appreciate the greatness of the Exodus and properly acknowledge our gratitude to G-d.

May we all truly connect to the true spirit of Passover, and feel the freedom that it can bring us to ultimately free us from the exile we are presently in and to bring the ultimate return of our people to Israel as we say “Next Year in Jerusalem!”

