

A Thought on the Haggadah – Pesach 5774

(given at Congregation Beth Jacob of Beverly Hills)

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We usually look at the Haggadah through the Historical/National lens, focusing on the national experience of leaving Egypt. This is clearly a correct read of the Haggadah but I would suggest that the Haggadah is far richer and can be looked at and mined for gems using many different lenses. Looking at the Haggadah through an Individual/Future lens can help us to find ideas to carry us forward through current and future struggles towards our own redemptions. The Haggadah is more than just a Historical record of Geulah (redemption) it is also a roadmap of future Geulah. We should be able to mine the Haggadah for gems and signposts in our lives. This, perhaps, is one layer of meaning in what Rabbi Yehoshua states “We were redeemed in the month of Nissan and we will be redeemed in the future in the month of Nissan (T.B. Rosh HaShanah 11a).

The word Mitzrayim (Egypt) is connected to the word *maytzarim*, narrow places. Egypt symbolizes the narrow places of every person’s life from which they call out to Hashem to be saved. This is what King David refers to when he says “From the narrow places (*meitzar*) I called out to G-d, He answered me from the wide expanses (Tehillim 118).” We find echoes of the more individual in the Haggadah such as the idea that each person must see themselves as if they left Egypt. We express this idea at the end of *Ha Lachma Anya* at the very beginning of the Haggadah when we say that we left Egypt in the first person. Our answer to the Rasha as well is personal and speaks about him potentially not experiencing the Geulah.

Jim Collins is a well know author who researches business issues. One of his books is a record of the companies he researched to try and answer why during difficult times some companies weather them and even thrive and others do not. He uses an example of two teams who were preparing in October of 1911 to be the first group to reach the South Pole. Roald Amundsun led his group to success and was the first to claim the South Pole. Robert Falcon failed, reaching the Pole 34 days after his rival and dying along with his entire team on the return trip. Again, Collins asks why one group was able to succeed while another failed miserably in the exact same conditions at the exact same time.

To answer his question about the business world, Collins looked at pairs of companies in the same industry where one did well and the other did not. One specific question they had was if “luck” was a factor in the success of a company. His group defined luck as having three aspects:

- a) Events which are mostly independent of the key players’ actions
- b) Events which are unpredictable and
- c) Events with significant consequences

While we would not refer to such events as luck, this is also a good definition of the ups and downs of life which we all must navigate. Collins' team concluded that "luck" is not the deciding factor. Companies did not differ very much in terms of how many good or bad event occurred to them. He found that the key difference was what he termed "Return on Luck" or R.O.L. How did the companies deal with these difficult situations and how did they prepare for them and think about them. That was the key.

Collins found that companies which were always expecting difficulties and preparing for them fared much better when they inevitably came. In the Haggadah we say that in every generation the nations of the world stand up against us to destroy us. Some look at this line and accuse the Rabbis of having a victimization complex, but I think it is exactly one of the strengths that Collins found. The Jewish people survive because Hashem has promised that we would but also because we are always prepared for the persecution which will come in some form at some time. Just as the companies who put away cash and didn't grow too fast even when things were looking great lived through the rougher times, so too we are able to survive because we realize that things can change all too quickly. In our own personal lives as well, we would do well to prepare ourselves for the rougher times in life which are part of the normal cycle of things.

The idea of R.O.L. is that we are not a ship tossed about on the ocean without any hope of control, we have a destiny and we must move towards it. Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik¹ speaks about two lenses for looking at one's life: Yeud and Goral. Goral is the paradigm of beign acted upon and not being able to control anything. Yeud is the ability to see ones destiny and to move towards it even through difficult circumstances.

This was certainly the reality of leaving Egypt, it was our national destiny and when we were able to see it as a people we were able to accomplish great things in some very tough times. The same paradigm can be used in our own personal lives. We are not being acted upon, we are actors and can make a difference and thrive. This is the Ramban's understanding of the idea that Hashem tests us (*nisayon*). We are given challenging situations in order to bring out the potential that we have not yet been able to bring to the surface.

Seeing the destiny requires recalling the journey and this is why we are required to start with the less stellar points of our History (*matchil b'gnus...*) when we repeat the story of the Exodus. We dip twice to remember Yosef's coat dipped in blood which began this journey and the dipping in the sheep's blood to place on the doorpost which marked our ascent out of it.

We toast the four steps of Geulah with the four cups and begin to count toward receiving the Torah on the 2nd night of Pesach. These are the acts of looking forward and seeing our destiny even when we are not there yet. We focus on the future and prepare for it. We know that

¹ His essay *Kol Dodi Dofek* where he speaks about the covenant of destiny specifically in regards to the Jewish people at this juncture in our history

we will experience narrow places but we prepare for them and when we experience them we keep our head above water and look to our destiny using the tools hidden in the Haggadah.