

Pesach: We Belong

Moshe Taragin

The Pesach tale is a story of many stories. It is a story about theology and religion: G-d introducing monotheism into an ancient pagan world. It is a story of history: G-d awakening a dormant promise made to our ancestors and now implemented with their descendants. It is a political story about a band of downtrodden slaves overthrowing a regime of persecution and exploitation. However, Pesach is also a story of human identity- how we assemble identity and how we interact with those in our radius. It is a story of family, community and society.

Emancipation of slavery consists of more than just eliminating bondage; freedom demands unshackling oppressed imaginations. Slaves live narrow and isolated lives, tapered to assure self-survival. Hostility and violence shrink human identity inward, severing us from broader ideas and wider networks of people. Loneliness and emotional seclusion rob us of our larger dignity and purpose. Slaves and the enslaved among us, live alone and "reduced".

The redemption from Egypt restored communal and social identity to shrunken slaves. Introducing Moshe's initial meeting with Pharo, the Torah traces Jewish lineage back to the original sons of Ya'akov. Possessing no practical purpose, this "tracing" was crucial in

liberating their enslaved imaginations. Broader family identity had been crushed by slavery and this list of Jewish lineage reacquainted the Jews with their pedigreed past, with the power of family, and with the memory of family history. To their surprise, the slaves actually had a past – and a golden one at that.

They didn't just have a past but they also enjoyed a future. Before the seventh event of "arbeh", the Jews are instructed to narrate this story to their grandchildren. The vision of sitting near a grandchild must have been unthinkable to slaves who were often separated from their immediate families, let alone disconnected from future generations. Our lives matter far beyond the years we inhabit this earth. Our lives aren't isolated "points" in some larger history of humanity, rather we exist along a timeline and a trajectory of "family": our ancestors paved the way for our lives just as we enable and empower our descendants who we may never actually meet. Hearing of their past pedigree and of their future grandchildren, former slaves now inhabited a community of history.

The actual night of our liberation was pivoted upon a different community- the immediate family. The Pesach sacrifice is a quintessentially "family experience" as the entire animal must be consumed by midnight or, at the very latest, by daybreak. Additionally, the meat isn't eaten as a main course but instead as a dessert, further limiting the amount that each individual consumes.

Minimally, it takes an entire family to fully finish a Pesach korban in time.

The ceremonies during the night of our departure were pivoted upon immediate family in a different manner. A sacrifice is only valid if blood is applied upon the altar; that night, in the absence of a formal or ceremonial altar, a rudimentary altar was swapped in- the entrance to a Jewish home. Blood was painted upon the doorframe, as the portal to a Jewish family formed the first altar in Jewish history. The events leading up to this night taught the slaves about a historical community, while the night of the Pesach sacrifice itself lessoned them about the community of family.

What happens if a nuclear family can't fully consume a Pesach animal? Other can join as long as they enroll as part of a "chaburah"- a registered group of diners; partaking of the Pesach cannot be ad hoc. This process highlights a third type of community to which we belong- one bonded by shared interest and united in the joint performance of a common project. The members of this type of community aren't fused by historical fate, nor aligned by common genes, but linked by joint ideals and commonality of purpose. Overall, the holiday of Pesach celebrates our "belonging": to history, to family, and to society.

It wasn't only the resurgence of Jewish imagination which demonstrated the value of community. Egypt itself witnessed the dissolution of its own communal

structures. The contagious illness of "shechin" forced a widespread quarantine, separating Egyptians from one another. Now viewed as sources of possible contagion, former neighbors and friends became threatening sources of this ghastly infection. To paraphrase the Torah: they could not stand in each other's presence. The harsh lockdown into private cells of loneliness began.

During the event of 'barad', as fiery hail rained down, pious Egyptians sequestered in the relative shelter of their homes. It is heartbreaking to imagine hearing the anguished cries of fellow citizens being crushed and burnt alive by flaming boulders, while completely powerless to provide any help or assistance. Lonely Egyptians were slowly living through a nightmare of social degeneration. Society was crumbling before their very eyes- until those eyes could no longer see.

During the week of "choshech" darkness descended upon the skies of Egypt and within the hearts of the Egyptians. Unable to stand, walk or even communicate, all social interaction ceased. The country went dark and silent, as a former superpower was reduced to a horde of petrified zombies- frozen in place and suspended in darkness.

This combination- the dismantling of Egyptian society and the remodeling of Jewish communal consciousness- showcased the value of community and society- a feature of our identity we often take for granted, but

one which has eroded during this past year. Man is a "social animal" attaching himself to various forms of community. Communal life draws us from away from the self-centrism of personal interest and it creates dignity of character and nobility of purpose. As Jews, we stand before G-d as part of a "collective" of Jewish history; we craft family life and invite G-d into our homes and our families.

The corona pandemic has certainly forced us to reimagine identity and character. Features of identity long taken for granted or assumed, are now being reevaluated and reexamined. Leading up to this experience, modernity, and its dizzying pace of change had blinded us the values of community, family and society. Modern culture, politics and economics encouraged unbridled individualism, and boosted personal expression. Obsessed with forging "personal identity" we often overlooked the power of common experience and the kinship of community. The internet-heralded as a "great democratizer"- has actually trapped us in prisons of individual experience. Granted unlimited and private access to the world, each individual curates their own playlists, sets their own "preferences" and surfs through the surrounding culture in the solitude of personal screens, rather than alongside others in a mutual or shared experience. Without the time and resources to join actual live communities, we exchanged them for "virtual communities", becoming even more detached from actual human contact; social media

replaced social life.

Our family life often became little more than background music for our own particularistic interests. We paved independent but solitary paths, pursued private goals and disappeared into our lonely screens. During the week of supernatural darkness, the Egyptians could not make eye contact because they were blockaded by a barrier of darkness. Today we struggle to make eye contact because we are unaccustomed to looking at a face which actually looks back at us. Black screens have no eyes and, endlessly staring at this blackness, our eyes have become media sponges rather than bridges into the soul of others. The pandemic merely outlined the imprisoned lives we created for ourselves. We were on the verge of emotional and social quarantining even before we were forced inside our homes. We just didn't realize it.

As G-d helps us outlive this pandemic we, hopefully, can set a better balance between achieving and between "belonging", between community and between individualism. We can better merge "personal space" and collective commons, better blend self-expression with joint projects. Having spent so much time in our homes, we can better value the loving embrace of family and not only the thrill of public success. Having endured a once-in-a-lifetime calamity, we can be more

attuned to the collective memory of human history and to the resonant echo of Jewish history. Far less interested in announcing that "We are here" we can better listen to a quiet inner voice which reminds us that "We belong".