

The saga of unparalleled drama that we will rediscover over dinner in the coming days has been called *Exodus, The Prince of Egypt, The Ten Commandments*, and more. But while we will celebrate our release, revere the power of our first teacher, and hail the creed that was revealed to us at Sinai, when we share this story we understand that the path to freedom and our humanity lies in a small gift that every person reading this has the power to bestow: *Names*.

Endnotes

1. *Teshuvot Maharam Schick, YD 169*.
2. *Teshuvot Maharsham 6:10*.
3. *Teshuvot Igrot Moshe, OC 4:66*.
4. *Teshuvot Yabia Omer, YD 3:9*.
5. *Minchat Asher, Shemot no. 1*.
6. *Ta'anit 20b*.
7. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva 3:14*.
8. Commentary on *Megillah 27b*.
9. Emphasis added.

The Metzuyanim Challenge of Too Much Acculturation

Rabbi Ezra Schwartz

Rosh Yeshiva and Associate Director, RIETS

Leil Haseder is the primary time for *chinuch*. It is the time when there is a *mitzva doraisa* (Biblical commandment) to transmit the values of Torah to the next generation and thereby guarantee continuation of the *mesora* (tradition). One of the core values that is often addressed at the Seder is the method by which Jewish identity can be maintained in an alien land. How can we as Jews maintain

our distinctiveness and not culturally assimilate into our surrounding society?

Often this conversation centers on the line in the Hagada, *she-hayu Yisrael metzuyanim sham* — the Jewish people were distinguished there. The frequently cited midrash in this context is that we were redeemed in this merit *lo shinu es sh'mam leshonam umalbusham* — we did not alter our names, our language, or our way of dress. These seemingly minor efforts actually maintained our distinctive identity and were the cause of our freedom. This theme is addressed time and time again at Pesach Sedarim the world over.

Yet, there are many problems in using this midrash as a template for how to avoid cultural assimilation in the year 2022, notwithstanding that this midrash as it is often quoted does not exist.¹ On a more fundamental level, the lessons of this midrash do not speak to our reality. A very large number of us have names that may be classified as non-Jewish. Nearly all of us speak the vernacular rather than Hebrew, and I would venture to guess, every reader of this *Torah To-Go* issue dresses in standard Western garb. Our clothing is cut from the same cloth and tailored in the same way as the clothing worn by our non-Jewish neighbors.

This is not only true in the United States in the 21st century. Already in the times of the Rishonim, as Rav Moshe Feinstein notes, we encounter Baalei HaTosafos with non-Jewish names. One of the Baalei HaTosafos was Rabbenu Peter (Peter is not by any stretch a Jewish name). While Hebrew was spoken by the Rishonim as a religious tongue, they conducted business in the vernacular.² We must

ask, what did *melamed she-hayu Yisrael metzuyanim sham* mean for the Rishonim and what does it mean for us? How can we maintain our unique identity and not melt into a large homogenous pot of Americana?

In a celebrated teshuva³ Rav Moshe Feinstein writes that distinctiveness in dress language and names was only necessary before the Torah was given. After *matan Torah* our distinctiveness comes through observance of Torah and performance of *mitzvos*. If so, the question of how to maintain our distinctiveness does not loom so large. Keep Torah, pure and simple. Adherence to Torah and *mitzvos* is the antidote to cultural assimilation.

Assimilation or Acculturation?

A point must be made regarding the terminology we are using. We often speak of assimilation. In fact, most of the conversation about the dilution of Jewish identity in 20th and 21st century America, the conversation that often comes in tandem with the rising rate of intermarriage and the consequent fear that Jewish identity as an independent group will become extinct, speaks of assimilation. However, assimilation is the wrong term for our conversation.

Sociologists distinguish between assimilation and acculturation. Assimilation refers to the conscious adoption of the values, mores, and norms of the surrounding society. It often has a very negative connotation and refers to the radical abandonment of core Jewish values. In contrast, acculturation is most often unconscious. It is far less radical, but from a religious perspective may still be problematic.⁴

When the Baal HaHagada tells us that *melamed she-hayu Yisrael metzuyanim sham*, the reference was to acculturation not assimilation. A slave would never consciously adopt the attitudes and norms of his master. The challenge Bnei Yisrael faced was one of acculturation. Would we unconsciously come to accept Egyptian culture, its attitudes and values? By not adopting Egyptian names, dress, and language we properly responded to that challenge.

Similarly, the challenge of our community, in all its shades and faces, is the challenge of acculturation. Even within those communities that accept the midrash of *lo shino es sh'mam* as pure halacha,⁵ speak Yiddish rather than the vernacular, dress in distinctive Old-World clothing and refer to their children with Hebrew or Yiddish names, there still is a degree of acculturation. These communities have also to a limited extent bought into the larger American culture. The rhythm of Chassidic music very closely resembles the rhythm of American music at large. The high-end products advertised in Charedi publications are nearly identical to those exhibited in the larger American society and bespeak values that have been absorbed from the society outside. Speaking Yiddish at home but English at work does not guarantee that the values digested at work will not permeate the home.

Although acculturation is inevitable, for our Modern Orthodox communities the challenge to maintain a distinct identity and not absorb too much of the external culture may be even greater. Precisely because we are more assimilated and consciously adopt those Western values we find meaningful,⁶ precisely

because we are more a part of the larger American culture, maintaining our distinctive Jewish flavor can be an even greater challenge. We are more embedded in the larger American culture, both intellectual and popular, than our more charedi brethren. For us, the question of what it means to be *metzuyanim* is even more poignant.

How Much is Too Much?

Rav Moshe's approach, that in today's world Jewish identity is maintained through fealty to Torah and performance of mitzvos, is obviously part of the puzzle. If we do not strenuously uphold every *s'if* in *Shulchan Aruch* we certainly are overly acculturated. However, even if our *dikduk b'mitzvos* is impeccable, we must ask ourselves: Is this enough? Is it possible that we are fully halachically compliant but still too acculturated?

Are we true to the value of *metzuyanim* when we are overly proud of attaining the highest levels of excellence in sport? Put otherwise, does lionizing our prowess in sport, and lauding our ability to do so while being halachically compliant, itself mean that we are overly acculturated? Do we take too much pride when a member of our kin makes it to reality TV? Does our desire to be accepted in these venues itself demonstrate too much acculturation? Does our black and white approach to politics depicting some as good and worthy and others as bad, represent too much buy-in to the dominant mode of today's American political discourse? Would a Torah true outlook, an outlook that is less acculturated, be more nuanced? Many in our community overly identify with a particular political candidate, ignoring

aspects that clearly run counter to Torah values.⁷ Does this also demonstrate too much acculturation, too much buy-in to the dominant culture?

Different communities will have different answers to these questions. What level of acculturation, of Americanization, is too much? Whatever the answer may be for us, it is appropriate that each of us use the Pesach Seder as a time to question the degree of our acculturation rather than a time to bewail assimilation.

Endnotes

1. Various Midrashim numerate the reasons we merited to leave Mitzraim. Not a single one places these three elements, names, dress and language together. See R' Elli Fischer's article at https://www.academia.edu/28574595/_They_did_not_Change_their_Names_their_Language_or_their_Dress_The_Life_cycle_of_a_Peculiar_Midrashic_Variant
2. See *Igros Moshe, Even HaEzer* 3:35; These same points can be made about the time period of Chazal as Rav Asher Weiss notes in his essay at the beginning of his *Minchas Asher on Shemos*.
3. *Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim* 4:66.
4. See the citation from Monica Richarz in this context https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_assimilation
5. A partial listing of these poskim is found in Rav Asher Weiss, *Minchas Asher, Shemos* page 1.
6. See Dr. Haym Soloveitchik *Rupture and Reconstruction the Landmark Essay Revisited*, page 55 where he makes this point about Modern Orthodoxy's relative degree of assimilation in the context of the larger distinction between assimilation and acculturation that we are addressing.
7. See Rav Aharon Lopiansky "Gone Missing" *Mishpacha Magazine*, January 12, 2021.