

# PESACH: PERSONAL AND NATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF OURSELVES

A number of years ago, I accompanied students on a trip to Poland to visit various tragic sites of the Holocaust. One of my students approached me during the trip to discuss the complicated emotion she felt as a Jew of Sephardi descent who had no relatives who were killed or displaced by the Holocaust. While she experienced sadness, she also felt somewhat guilty and removed as others felt the devastation more personally than she did. She wondered what her place was in the tragedy. I reflected on this dissonance this past year when I watched the horrors of Oct. 7 play out from afar, across the world. I wondered, as my student had years before, did I have a place in this tragedy, which my friends and family were experiencing firsthand?

This question of personal experience, of both tragedy and redemption, is an important part of the Pesach story. One of the opening lines of the Haggadah, in which we begin to discuss the Exodus, directly addresses this disconnect.

Anyone reciting the words of the Seder was not present during the slavery nor at the redemption:

עֲבָדִים הָיינו לְפָרַעַה בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיִּצְיָאֵנוּ ה'  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִשָּׁם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה. וְאֵלֹהֵינוּ לֹא  
הוֹצִיאָנוּ מִן־עֵבֶר הַזֶּה בְּרֹחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ הַזֶּה אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם,  
הֲרִי אָנוּ וּבְנֵינוּ וּבְנֵי בְנֵינוּ מִשְׁעָבָדִים הָיינו  
לְפָרַעַה בְּמִצְרַיִם.

*We were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. And the Lord, our God, took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched forearm. And if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not taken our ancestors from Egypt, behold we and our children and our children's children would [all] be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.*

By immediately focusing us on our personal stake in the redemption, the Haggadah bridges the expanse of time and charges us with the mission to connect to the redemption story *as if* it had happened to us and our children. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in explaining this verse, hones in on the idea of personal versus national identity:

*As a nation, we have a national*



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*memory and identity. So when the Haggadah speaks of our experience in Egypt as slaves, while this refers to a specific generation and historical time period, as a nation we have that experience implanted in our memory and identity.<sup>1</sup>*

This idea of the implantation of national identity may be true for those who are descendants of the slaves who left Egypt, but does it extend to a convert who joined the nation later and is certainly not a personal descendant of the Egyptian slaves? Dr. Micha Goodman

<sup>1</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/pesach-family-edition>.

posits<sup>2</sup> that the concept of a personal versus a national identity is reflected in the debate of two Tannaim, whose opinions are found in a Mishnah in *Bikkurim* and a Gemara Yerushalmi. The debate revolves around the main text of our Pesach Seder, the recitation of *mikra bikkurim*, a passage said by a farmer as he brings his first fruits to the Mikdash. In it the farmer recounts the history of the Jewish people starting either from Avraham or from Yaakov, until we reach the land of Israel. The text states:

(ה) וְעָנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲרָמִי אֲבֹד אָבִי וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרָיִם וַיִּגְרֶשׁ שָׁם בְּמַטְי מִמֶּנּוּ וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי גָדוֹל עָצוּם וָרֹב. (ו) וַיִּרְעוּ אֲתָנּוּ הַמִּצְרָיִם וַיַּעֲבִדוּנוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ עֲבָדָה קָשָׁה. (ז) וַנִּצְעַק אֶל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת קִלְנוּ וַיִּרְא אֶת עַנְיֵנוּ וְאֶת עֲמָלֵנוּ וְאֶת לְחֻצְנוּ. (ח) וַיִּצְאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרָיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה וּבְמַרְאֵ גֹדֵל וּבְאֹתוֹת וּבְמִפְתָּיִם. (ט) וַיְבָאֵנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ. ... My father was a fugitive Aramean.

*He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to Hashem, the God of our ancestors, and Hashem heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. Hashem freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents, bringing us to this place and giving us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*<sup>3</sup>

A question arises: Can a convert who brings bikkurim recite this text? The Mishnah in *Bikkurim* 1:4 states that in fact he cannot—Yaakov was not his forefather, his ancestors did not go down to Egypt, did not experience

the affliction or the salvation of yetziat Mitzrayim, and were not brought by Hashem to Eretz Yisrael. Hence, decides the Tanna in the Mishna, the convert bringing his bikkurim is silent.

R. Yehuda in a *baraita* brought in the Yerushalmi 1:4 disagrees:

תָּנִי בְשֵׁם רַבִּי יְהוּדָה גֵּר עֲצָמוּ מִבְּיַא וְקוֹרֵא. מַה טְּעָמָא כִּי אַב הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְתִּיד. לְשַׁעֲבֵר הֵייתָ אַב לְאָרָם. וְעַבְשִׁיו מִיָּפוֹן וְהִילֵךְ אֶתְהָ אַב לְכָל־הַגּוֹיִם.

*It was stated in the name of Rabbi Judah: The proselyte himself brings and makes the declaration. What is the reason? (Gen. 17:5) "For I made you the father of the multitude of Gentiles." In the past you were the father of Aram, from now onwards you will be father of all Gentiles.*

Since Abraham was the father of many nations including gentiles, Rabbi Yehuda concludes that the convert is included in the history of the Jewish people and therefore would say the *mikra bikkurim*.

The Rambam<sup>4</sup> rules in favor of R. Yehuda, explaining,

הַגֵּר מִבְּיַא וְקוֹרֵא שְׁנֵאֲמַר לְאֲבָרָהֶם (בראשית י"ז ה) "אַב הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְתִּיד" הָרִי הוּא אַב כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ שְׁנֵאֲמַר תַּחַת כַּנְּפֵי שְׂכִינָה.

*A convert may bring the first fruits and make the declaration, for [Genesis 17:5] states with regard to Abraham: I have made you a father to a multitude of nations. Implied is that he is the father of all those who enter under the shelter of the Divine presence. For he taught all mankind faith.*

Rambam said as much in his letter to Obadiah the convert in response to Obadiah's question: was he as a convert allowed to say prayers that included words such as, "Our God and God of

our fathers," "You who have sanctified us through Your commandments," "You who have brought us out of the land of Egypt," and others? Rambam answers emphatically that he can.

*...[S]ince you have come under the wings of the Divine Presence and confessed to the Lord, no difference exists between you and us, and all miracles done to us have been done as it were to us and to you ...There is no difference whatever between you and us. You shall certainly say the blessing, "Who has chosen us," "Who has given us," "Who have taken us for Your own" and "Who has separated us"; for the Creator, may He be extolled, has indeed chosen you and separated you from the nations and given you the Torah.*

According to Rambam, anyone who accepts the ways of Hashem, which Avraham taught, is counted as one of Avraham's children, whether biologically related or not. It is the mandate, not the bloodline, that provides the identity. It is the association with the national mission—not the personal experience—that makes the convert a member of the Jewish people who experienced the history of the Jewish story.

According to this view of the Yerushalmi, which the Rambam learns *l'halacha*, the *mikra bikkurim* that forms the main structure of our Pesach Seder is not merely recounting the personal history of the Jewish people from their founding until their settling of Israel. If that were the case, the Rambam would have ruled like the opinion in the Mishnah in *Bikkurim*, which clearly reads the story as a personal and familial narrative. Instead, the *mikra bikkurim*

<sup>2</sup> Mifleget Hamachshavot podcast.

<sup>3</sup> Devarim 26:5-9.

<sup>4</sup> Mishneh Torah Hil. Bikkurim 4:3.

transcends the actual story and becomes a story about the national mission, the identity of the Jewish people—one that is open to and inclusive of anyone who partakes of the mission. Anyone who associates themselves with the children of Avraham Avinu becomes, de facto, an actual child of Avraham's mission. It was not necessary to personally experience the story of yetziat Mitzrayim, as certainly the ancestors of the convert did not; rather the message of yetziat Mitzrayim is the core identity that we are discussing at the Pesach Seder.

Our national identity is emphasized again at the crescendo of the Maggid ceremony. Before raising our glass of wine, we declare:

בְּכָל־דּוֹר וְדוֹר חַיֵּב אָדָם לְרַאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ  
הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם, שְׁנֹאמֵר: וְהִגִּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם  
הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי  
מִמִּצְרַיִם. לֹא אֶת־אֲבוֹתַיִנוּ בְּלֶבֶד גָּאַל הַקְּדוֹשׁ  
בְּרוּךְ הוּא, אֲלֵא אַף אוֹתְנוּ גָאַל עִמָּהֶם.

*In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he left Egypt, as it is stated (Exodus 13:8): "And you shall explain to your son on that day: For the sake of this, did the Lord do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt." Not only our ancestors did the Holy One, blessed be He, redeem, but rather also us [together] with them did He redeem.*

No longer is the story of Pesach one that happened to a distant people millennia ago, rather it recurs every day and every year to each of us as we annually accept the national mission of the Seder. What happened on a personal level is superseded by the national, by an examination of what this story means to us, generations later, who are picking up the mantle of that generation and dedicating ourselves year after year, to that very same covenant that the Jews dedicated

themselves to so many years ago. It is not the specific history of Avraham or Yaakov or the Jews who left Egypt and entered Israel, but what those Jews represented—a belief in one God, an understanding of God's role in history, a dedication to the mission of the Jewish people to spread the understanding of God and to build a just and moral society. All who include themselves in that covenantal experience are children of Avraham Avinu, and therefore say the *mikra bikkurim* as if it had actually happened to their family.

This is the answer I wish I had told my student sitting on a bus outside a mass grave in Poland. The Holocaust is indeed a personal story for so many, but more importantly it is a national story. It happened to some families and not to others, but it happened to all of Klal Yisrael and takes its place among the litany of tragedies that we memorialize at the Seder:

שבכל דור ודור עומדים עלינו לכלותינו והקדוש ברוך הוא מצילנו מידם.

*Rather in each generation, they stand [against] us to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hand.*

We memorialize the communities of Speyer, Worms and Mainz, the communities ripped apart by the Crusaders and other tragedies during the Kinnot recitation. Whether those tragedies happened to us or not, they have become part of our national memory and mourning.<sup>5</sup> The Holocaust is not just a story of a tragedy that befell some of the Jews, but a tragedy that hit right at the heart of our mission, one that bound us together as Jews, and one that we feel as a Jewish people.

This sense of mission and purpose was not only reflected on Oct. 7 and the aftermath, but was awakened in Jews

across the globe. While we personally sit on the sidelines of the war, our national and covenantal identity is not only present, but strengthened. Earlier this year I had the honor of accompanying my Stern students and their Yeshiva College counterparts on Operation Torah Shield 3, visiting Israel to volunteer, learn Torah, and express our oneness with the Jewish people. One of the most common questions I heard over the course of the trip was, "Why are you here? Why did you leave your homes to enter a war zone?" The question took me by surprise; where else would I want to be? I had a hard time formulating an answer that summed up what it meant to me to have the privilege to come to Israel and show support for my nation. Perhaps the answer is this: *mikra bikkurim*, our national identity is bound up with those who live afar who are sacrificing not only for themselves but for the Jewish people.

As a Jew who lives in America, I cannot recite my personal story of being in Israel on Oct. 7. And while many, many of my friends' children are fighting in the IDF—my children right now are not. I certainly experience some of what my student felt visiting Poland—guilt at not being personally at the center of this Jewish story. And yet, the events of Oct. 7 and the aftermath have had the impact of reminding the Jewish people, not only in Israel but around the world, of the sanctity of the mission of the Jewish people, of the covenantal nature of our experience, of our unity as a nation that transcends the boundaries of the personal and enters the national story. When we raise our four cups this Pesach, let us tell our children and ourselves what it means to have a national identity, and to be part of the Jewish story, children of Avraham Avinu.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Dr. Yaelle Frohlich for this insight.