

Bkol Dor v'Dor: The Eternality of Antisemitism and the Persistent Hope of Redemption

Rabbi Dov Winston

The one phrase we keep hearing over and over is that this Pesach will not be like any other that we have experienced before. Our lives certainly have changed since October 7th and all one needs to do is look at the facts on the ground, the demonization of our precious homeland and the clear rise in antisemitism surrounding us. This Pesach will certainly be different for us, but I would argue that this Pesach is similar to the Pesach that our grandparents and great-parents celebrated. Indeed, the Pesach of 5784 has more in common with many of the Pesach celebrations of the past than most of the Pesach celebrations in our lifetimes.

Allow me to explain.

Antisemitism is on the rise, hatred and anti-Jew sentiment is palpable but we must understand that this is the Jewish story. Our Pesach Haggadah teaches us:

וְהָיָא שְׁעֵמֶדָה לְאַבּוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ. שְׁלֹא אֶחָד בְּלִבָּד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתָנוּ, אֲלֵא שְׁבָכָל דּוֹר וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתָנוּ, וְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילָנוּ מִיָּדָם.

And it is this that has stood for our ancestors and for us; since it is not [only] one [person or nation] that has stood [against] us to destroy us, but rather in each generation, they stand [against] us to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hand.

Truly, in every generation they come for us. In every generation, they seek to destroy us. Even in our modern era of political correctness, openness and acceptance of all, the deep-seated need to hate the Jew once again has crept up. This is the first Pesach in my lifetime that our nation will be able to proclaim that “In every generation...” is not just a baseless phrase, but, rather, a promise. In every generation, and in ours too, they will stand up against us and we are living that now.

The paradigmatic representation of antisemitism is perhaps Egypt. Others would likely point to the nation of Amalek. Yet, our Haggadah does not point to either in its depiction of our enslavement and the subsequent Exodus. Our Haggadah curiously points to Lavan:

צֵא וְלִמַּד מֶה בִּקֵּשׁ לָבֵן הָאַרְמִי לַעֲשׂוֹת לַיַּעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ: שִׁפְרָעָה לֹא גָזַר אֲלֵא עַל הַזְּכָרִים, וְלָבֵן בִּקֵּשׁ לַעֲקֹר אֶת־הַכֹּל. שִׁנְאָמַר: אֲרָמִי אֲבִד אָבִי, וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרָיִמָּה וַיִּגְר שָׁם בְּמִתִּי מַעֲט, וַיְהִי־שָׁם לִגְוִי גָדוֹל עָצוּם וְרַב.

Go out and learn what Lavan the Aramean sought to do to Ya'akov, our father; since Pharaoh only decreed [the death sentence] on the males but Lavan sought to uproot the whole [people]. As it is stated (Deuteronomy 26:5), "An Aramean was destroying my father and he went down to Egypt, and he resided there with a small number and he became there a nation, great, powerful and numerous."

Go back to your knowledge of the story of Yaakov in Lavan's home. When exactly did Lavan seek to uproot Yaakov? He was a terrible father-in-law. But, a murderer with vicious intentions to wipe out his daughters and grandchildren? There is not one indication of that in the Torah. In fact, it would be counterintuitive, why would Lavan want to kill his own family?

We, therefore, must endeavor to answer three questions:

1. Why is this the paradigm text of the seder evening?
2. Why do we experience pain in every single generation?
3. If evil is always up against us then how can we ever feel freedom, and particularly this year, how can we experience redemption?

The Haggadah's Paradigm of Antisemitism

Let us delve more deeply into understanding the verses that our Haggadah expounds. When we dig just a little we will find that the interpretation that we take for granted is actually a highly debated topic. Who is the Aramean and who is the father that is referenced in these verses? Ibn Ezra suggests that we are speaking of Yaakov only. Ibn Ezra feels that the verse should best be interpreted as, "When my father, Yaakov was in Aram he was perishing." Rashbam disagrees and says that this verse speaks of Avraham, indeed he was an Aramite, lost and exiled from his birthplace, Aram. Yet, Rashi, our rabbis and the Haggadah all offer an explanation in distinction from these other creative interpretations. They insist that the verse is best translated as, "Lavan sought to destroy my father, Yaakov."

Why were they so insistent on this interpretation? Moreover, our rabbis vilify Lavan to no end. They say his name is Lavan, meaning white, because he was pure in wickedness (Bereishit Rabbah 60). They equate Lavan with the evil Bilaam and even feel that they might have been the same person (Tagum Pseudo Jonathan Bamidbar 22:5). Where does this hatred come from? Why did they feel so strongly that Lavan must be depicted as the enemy?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l and others offer a unique insight into why Lavan was so evil. Lavan's actions did not appear to be cruel. He never once sought to murder his family. True, he was not a particularly nice person, he certainly was not honest in his dealings with Yaakov, and absolutely would not receive the father in law of the year award, but never was he blatantly evil. However, he did try to keep Yaakov and his family prisoners in his home. He had sought to force them to stay in with him and if he would have been successful then the house of Yaakov would have ceased to exist. They would have become an extension of the house of Lavan and not the Bnai Yisrael.

Rabbi Sacks writes poetically:

This interpretation of Arami oved avi is not the plain sense...It was the genius of the Sages to give it an interpretation that connected it with Pesach and the Exodus. And though it gives a far-fetched reading of the phrase, it gives a compelling interpretation to the entire narrative of Jacob in Laban's house. It tells us that the third of the patriarchs, whose descent to Egypt would actually begin the story of the Exodus, had himself undergone an exodus experience in his youth. Ma'asei avot siman lebanim, "the act of the fathers are a sign to their children," tells us that what is happening now has happened before. That does not mean that danger is to be treated lightly. But it does mean that we should never despair. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives experienced exile and exodus as if to say to their descendants, this is not unknown territory. God was with us then; He will be with you now. I believe that we can face the future without fear because we have been here before and because we are not alone.

With this we now can understand something magnificent. When we read the story of "Arami Oveid Avi" we invoke this memory of the very first person who tried to wipe us out. Was he a blatant

antisemite, absolutely not. Could he have destroyed our people? Without a shadow of a doubt. Our rabbis were teaching us that in every generation we face enemies – some of them are blatant but others are much vaguer. Hitler and his Nazi regime were blatant antisemites. Hamas are blatant antisemites. Yet, there are others who offer a much more vague form of Jew-hatred that are equally evil. If not even more so. Those who are incapable of thinking critically and who accept that maybe Jews aren't all bad but the state of Israel, is truly abhorrent - these are the people who cause so much more pain. These are the Lavan's of the world that we are referencing at our Pesach seder.

Yet, even with all of these people in mind both the rabid antisemites and the subtle ones, regarding all who seek to destroy us in one form or another, Hashem tells us – I will save you from them. And when we read “Arami Oveid Avi” we do so to demonstrate that there is a good chance, no matter what era you are in, that you as a Jew are being oppressed, you are being hated, you are experiencing the redundant paradigm of Lavan, but that just like Hashem has brought these horrors upon us, so too will He save us, much like He has in every generation.

The Everlasting Pain of the Jewish People

Our rabbis also wonder why it is that there is such animosity towards the Jewish nation and in the Talmud (Shabbat 89a-b) they make reference to Mount Sinai where we received the Torah. They explain that the mountain received the name Sinai because it is similar to the Hebrew word for hatred, “sina”. This is the mountain that has brought hatred upon us because the other nations see us and our acceptance of the Torah and they hate us because we accepted it when they refused to do so.

The Vilna Gaon expresses further that this hatred is so deeply rooted that we are not even aware of the countless moments throughout our history where they sought to destroy us but Hashem thwarted their efforts completely unbeknownst to us. Certainly, as we reflect on the tunnel system that Hamas has designed, we can understand even more deeply how true this statement is. We will never understand how or why October 7th happened but who knows how many October 7th's were prevented without our knowledge.

As to why or how we can comprehend the fact that God has allowed the hatred towards us to continue, there are multiple perspectives offered but that of Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, is most resonant. He expresses that although we can speculate from here until the end of time as to why God allows for this evil to live on, we must not try and understand the reasons for it. Hatred of the Jewish nation is as inevitable as the Jewish nation and it is not up to us to figure out why but perhaps, what we can do, is allow for these moments of destruction to serve as catalysts for change in ourselves and in our connection with one another.

You see, what is really amazing is that there are two promises that the Haggadah offers. Two expressions of “In every generation...” One that we shared already and one that our rabbis express to us that “In every generation we are obligated to see ourselves as if we have left Egypt.” I would argue that this too is a promise. That you will be able to feel like you are leaving Egypt because indeed we will have our own Egypt in every generation. Even so, Hashem tells us, do not fear, because just like I took you out from Egypt thousands of years ago so too will I take you out in every generation.

This is why, I think, our rabbis tell us that Pesach is a Leil Shimurim (Rosh Hashana 11b). The night of Pesach has often been seen as a time of great safety and security for our nation. Many have had the custom throughout the ages to keep their doors unlocked on the night of Pesach because of this promise that Hashem will watch over us. I would argue that this is a promise offered to us not just on the night of Pesach. Rather it is specifically on this night that we must remember that Hashem is **always** watching over us. It is not only on Pesach that He protects us but on Pesach we are reminded of His eternal protection.

Ultimately, though, we are left with asking ourselves: what now? If we do accept that there is this eternal promise of antisemitism then what are we supposed to do? Is there anything that we can do? Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook once explained that while it is true that in every generation they will stand up against us and it is further true that we must envision ourselves as having left Egypt we also must recognize the critical role that each and every one of us plays in that redemption. We thus understand that with every small effort that we attempt to heal our broken world and further advance our people on the global stage we will be doing our own small part in bringing the redemption.

I'd like to offer two specific pieces of advice for this year. The first is to understand the critical nature of education. It is our responsibility to help educate those who are uneducated. So many people who are anti-Israel are often that way because they accept the 30 second TikTok videos they watch and not because they are hateful individuals. If we can commit ourselves to spreading truth one by one then we will truly make an impact. Moreover, there is a terrifying reality that our hostages will be enslaved in Egypt this year. We must still tell over the story of the Exodus but we should consider doing so with an empty seat at our own seder table. In so doing, we will remember that there are those who are still in bondage and we can further pray for them to experience their own redemption.

Ultimately, we understand very well why we have to see ourselves as if we left Egypt every year because every year we are forced to confront different forms of Egypt. We have been reliving this story for thousands of years. And although we can never comprehend the pain that our nation has experienced, when we accept that we will always have this turmoil we can also accept that we will somehow be able to get through it.

The pain this year is so raw. In order to offer some semblance of healing please consider illuminating your evening with thoughts, prayers, moments of reflecting on the Egypt that we all have experienced this year. Further, we must focus on using this time of redemption to bring real redemption to our world.

Bkol dor vdor, they come for us in every generation and in every generation we have been victorious with the help of the Almighty. In this generation we will be as well. We can never forget that.

Wishing everyone a Chag Kasher v'Sameach!