

Pesach- The Spark of Freedom - (4-18-2003)

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"I shall go through Egypt on this night, and I shall strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from man to beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I shall mete out punishment - I am God. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are; when I see the blood I shall pass over you; there shall not be a plague of destruction upon you when I strike in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:12-13)

The plague of the firstborn differs from the rest of the plagues. The Torah issues no instructions about doing anything to avoid Jewish vulnerability for any of the first nine plagues, but in the case of the tenth, the smiting of the firstborn, it provides an elaborate ceremony involving the offering of the Passover sacrifice and smearing the blood on the doors.

The very name Passover is taken from these instructions of avoidance. We celebrate the fact that God passed over the houses in which the Jews lived when He smote the firstborn. In fact we are commanded to redeem our own firstborn because God saved them from the tenth plague. God sanctified the Jewish firstborn onto Him by sparing their lives when He killed the Egyptian firstborn.

The Maharal (The Book of Power, Ch.60) addresses the issue. He states that there was no need for ceremonies of avoidance concerning the first nine plagues because Israel was not vulnerable to them. We were vulnerable only to the tenth plague. The world had to change for us to escape its effects. We shall attempt to plumb the depths of his ideas in this essay.

STARTING NEW SOCIETIES

History records the startup of a brand new society only twice: once in the Bible with the formation of the Jewish nation following the Exodus; the second time about 200 years ago with the formation of the United States. The feelings and attitudes that must have surrounded the formation of the first new society, Israel, are shrouded in the mists of time. I believe that studying the second occurrence, which is still fresh, can help to shed some light on the first.

If we adopt the United States as our model, we are bound to conclude that new societies have some

special qualities that clearly separate them from the 'old world'. Their very formation indicates an absence of cynicism and testifies to a powerful optimism that expresses itself as a passionate belief in the possibility of a better tomorrow. Judging from the United States, this optimism is accompanied by a special clarity of vision regarding the difference between good and evil.

These phenomena associated with newness are especially apparent in times of crisis. It is impossible not to be struck by the sharp difference between the attitudes of the nations of Europe, the representatives of the Old World toward the Iraqi crisis and the way that President Bush and the American people have reacted. Even in Britain, the European nation that is an active participant in the war effort against Iraq, polls show little better than 50% approval of the war; contrast this with the 90% approval rating it has in America.

In sharp contrast to the rest of the world, Americans still believe in the moral obligation 'to stamp out evil,' in capital letters; (remember Reagan's Evil Empire slogan that the rest of the world regarded so condescendingly) they still have sufficient naiveté to believe that true democracy can offer the peoples of the Middle East a better tomorrow. A new society is the only harbinger of a new and better world. The Old World is reconciled to the world's flaws all too easily.

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON THE PLAGUES

This discussion about new societies allows us to see the Ten Plagues from a fresh perspective. The plagues were not administered as a punishment; they challenged Egyptian society to make moral changes. They called on the Egyptians to recognize that their social system was not working; that the way to achieve security was not by enslaving and persecuting the Jewish people. They were a message to Pharaoh and his people: 'recognize the existence of a higher justice.' They functioned as a reminder that God recognized the difference between good and evil.

Through the medium of the plagues God was asking the Egyptians to change their ways. Yet, despite the undoubtedly immense persuasive power of the

plagues, they simply could not bring themselves to do it.

Once again, the Iraqi story provides an excellent model. Many of us have been watching Saddam Hussein with incredulity. What was the man thinking? Did he really think he could successfully resist the determined onslaught of American might and survive intact? As he watched the steady build-up of American forces until the strike force approached 300,000 heavily armed and fully equipped troops, didn't he realize that unless he backed down he would be slaughtered?

The inability to respond sensibly to reality is an indication of inflexibility, not stupidity. People without any optimism, who have no belief in a better tomorrow, cannot change because they cannot imagine a different world. They are so mired in their old worldview that a different sort of life is totally unimaginable.

Such people are doomed to suffer their own downfall helplessly. People who are in the grip of an evil regime of their own creation cannot escape the hold that evil has on them anymore. They can no longer imagine themselves or the world as basically good. Since they cannot change, they perish.

THE CALL FOR CHANGE

The first nine plagues were only directed at the Egyptians. It is they who had to change. It was they who were being shown that their social system did not work; the world simply would not support it. There was no reason for the Jews to be affected by these plagues. They were not the ones who were being asked to change their social system. They were the enslaved and persecuted minority. It was the Egyptians that God was addressing. Consequently there was no need for the Jews to do anything to protect themselves against the effects of these plagues.

The tenth plague was different. As a result of the tenth plague, the Jews were released. But before they could be released they had to establish that they weren't simply being let go to set up the same sort of system they were being released from.

The fact that the oppressed are released from bondage doesn't necessarily mean that they will build a better world. All too often they share the values of their oppressors and given the opportunity, establish the same sort of society they escaped, except that this time they are in charge.

The idea of the Redemption was to initiate the birth of a better world, not a new edition of the old one. The Jews had to demonstrate that they were different than the Egyptians. Unlike the Egyptians, they were

prepared to change. They could be entrusted with the task of building a better world.

To see how the Jewish people passed this test, we must get a better grip on two ideas: the significance of the firstborn, and the covenant of Abraham.

THE COVENANT OF ABRAHAM

The Egyptian exile was mentioned for the first time in Genesis 15, in the context of the Covenant sealed between God and Abraham in that passage. Rabbi Dessler explains that the Covenant with Abraham concerned the creation of a point of incorruptibility in the human soul, often referred to as the *pintele yud*, or the Jewish point, the inextinguishable spark of holiness present in all the descendants of Abraham.

God gave man limitless free choice. Before Abraham came along, the entire human being was up for grabs in the existential war between good and evil, between the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer hara*, the good inclination versus the evil inclination. The world was entirely destroyed once by the grip of evil in the Flood, and it narrowly escaped the same fate once again at the time of the great Dispersion.

Abraham changed all this. Through the exercise of his own free choice, he established an unassailable point of purity in the soul of his descendants. There would always be a tiny spark in each Jew that was totally immune to the blandishments of the *yetzer hara*, a spark of holiness that would always respond to the call of God. Man was no longer entirely up for grabs and therefore the world would never be totally conquered by evil.

This limitation of man's free will through his own voluntary free will decision was the Covenant of Abraham. The prophecy of the Egyptian exile was an integral part of this covenant because only the suffering of the exile was powerful enough to affix this inviolate point in the collective soul of the Jewish people. It was necessary to demonstrate existentially that no amount of suffering or oppression or exposure to evil could ever extinguish the stubborn spark of optimism and attachment to justice in the Jewish soul.

This point of holiness contains everything we listed about new societies. It is a point free of cynicism. It is a point of unshakable faith that can never be stripped of its optimistic vision concerning the possibility of a better tomorrow. It is a point in the human soul that can never get confused about the difference between good and evil; this point in the Jewish soul can never learn to tolerate evil. It is this point that enables the Jewish people to constantly arise from the ashes of destruction and begin building a new and better world. It is the point of our attachment to God.

REDEMPTION MOMENT

From this standpoint the moment of the Redemption arrived in the 209th year of the exile:

"During these many days, it happened that the King of Egypt died, and the Children of Israel groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to God. God heard their moaning and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the children of Israel and God knew."
(Exodus 2:23-25)

Even after two centuries of undeserved persecution with no redemption in sight, the Jewish people still remembered their separate destiny. They still cried out to God. They still remembered the Covenant. They were still waiting for a better tomorrow. They still cried out against the injustice of their situation, and still expected God to intervene and destroy the evil.

God saw and God knew that the impregnable point Abraham had labored to establish had survived the test of time. It was still there. The Covenant of Abraham was safely sealed. It was time to remember the Covenant, bring the Redeemer to rescue Abraham's children and start building a better world.

The Passover sacrifice embodies this redemption moment. It is a yearly reenactment of the point of attachment. It keeps the moment of Redemption in the Jewish soul fresh and vibrant. Historical moments of redemption are less than useless. The redemption must be immediate and alive.

THE FIRSTBORN

To see how the Passover sacrifice operates let us now turn to the subject of the firstborn. There is nothing special about the firstborn child per se. More often than not, the most talented children are the ones that come later. The special quality of the firstborn child comes is in the fact that he is the first and as such, represents the entire next generation. He or she is special only in terms of the generation of children as a collective group. Being the first expression of the power of the parents, when he is lumped together with the rest of the kids, he stands out.

The death of all the firstborn is a symbolic way to declare that the world has come to an end. Inasmuch as the firstborn children symbolize the next generation of humanity, they embody the collective hope in the future. A world without any firstborn is a world without a future.

The first nine plagues were about the past and the need to reform and reshape the future; as such they did not concern the Jewish people at all. The tenth plague was no longer about change - God had abandoned the possibility of getting the Egyptians to change. The Tenth plague was about ending the world. Therefore it concerned everyone; when the world stops and there is no future, there is no future for anyone. The Old World is consigned to the dustbin. Everyone has to get off.

The only way to continue existence is by starting a new world, creating a different future that is not a projection of the past. This new world is also symbolized by the firstborn. The Jewish firstborn had to be attached to God with the aid of the Passover sacrifice. The formal establishment of the incorruptible point of Abraham is the guarantee of the ability to start fresh and build a new world.

FREEDOM

Passover is the season of freedom. All of us are bound by our own cynicism, by our own lack of optimism about the future. Most of us have learned to accept the limitations of our lives, have ceased to struggle against them and have reconciled ourselves to life in the old world we have become used to. We must learn to reorient ourselves to what we find oppressive. On Passover, we must regard these aspects of our lives as plagues that are sent by God to get us to change.

Passover was designed to ignite the glowing ember of the indestructible point that we have inherited from Abraham. In the light of the fire cast by the point of holiness that exists in all of us we can recover our optimism, our faith in ourselves and in the future. We can experience the regeneration of our connection to God. We can set out to build a better tomorrow for ourselves and for the world.

Through our suffering in Egypt we earned the right to have God initiate our spiritual awakening by blowing the smoldering ashes of our *pintele yud* back to life. It is the only time in the year when we can rely entirely on what is called *itrauta dilieylo*, literally 'stimulation from above' - a spiritual awakening that requires no effort on our part, with God doing all the work. We need only to link ourselves to Abraham through joining the ancient ritual of the Seder and partaking of the matzah, the remnant of the annual Passover sacrifice.

To bring a sacrifice is to attach oneself to God. There are two types of sacrifices: *korbonot yachid*, individual sacrifices that focus on the individual attachment to God, and *korboot tzibur*, public sacrifices, that focus on attaching the Jewish people as a nation to God. The Passover sacrifice is the only sacrifice that focuses on the Jewish family:

"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel, saying: On the tenth of this month they shall take for themselves - each man - a lamb or a kid for each father's house, a lamb or a kid for the household...Moses called to all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Draw forth or buy for yourselves one of the flock for your families, and slaughter the Pesach offering.'"
(Exodus 12)

Through the Passover sacrifice, the Jewish family attaches itself to God and refreshes the inviolate point of holiness that is Abraham's legacy. The blood on the doorway signifies the separation from whatever is going on in the world outside. Whatever the prevailing spiritual winds in the outside world, within this house there is a Jewish family free of cynicism, dedicated to the good, confident of the future always ready to fight evil and strive for a better world.

We all recite in the Haggada, possibly the most ancient text in Jewish liturgy, "In each generation every Jew is obligated to feel as though he or she had personally experienced the Exodus." If we are obligated to feel something, God must help us to fulfill our obligation if we attempt it with all our hearts. The mitzvot were given to us as a means of bringing ourselves to life spiritually. We are all the children of Abraham, Jews who wish to experience their *pintele yud* burst into flame. Let us do our part by performing the ancient ritual of the Seder with our families and God will surely do His part.

He will expand our tiny dot of holiness till it fills the world and brings all of mankind a better tomorrow.