

Seeing & Showing

An attempt to reconcile the two versions of the Hagaddah text might suggest that seeing oneself as a liberated slave necessarily leads to showing oneself as such and vice versa. In some cases, self reflection leads to changing the way in which one acts in the world. In other cases, action must precede understanding. The obligation to "see" and/or "show" oneself as a liberated slave suggests that memory is a two-fold process that involves both reflection and action. Just as the command to "remember Shabbat" or to "remember what Amalek did" imposes obligation, so too, the commandment to remember our slavery in Egypt cannot be fulfilled through passive memory alone. During the seder, we can fulfill the double command to show and to see ourselves as having come forth from Egypt by retelling the story in our own words and through the lens of our own experience.

- from "I Was Redeemed From Egypt: Reenacting the Exodus in Every Generation", Rabbi Jill Jacobs

Learning Through The Body

How does one educate the body? Since the days of antiquity, Western civilization has mistakenly believed that it is possible to convince the body by reasoning with it, by telling it what it may and may not do. And so it hoped in vain for effective ethical conduct through education. At its best, Western civilization was talking to the mind and never really reached the body. The body is not accessible to logical reasoning. One can only teach it by making it do things. One does not learn to swim by reading books on swimming technique, nor does one become a painter by merely contemplating the styles of different schools. One learns to swim by swimming, to paint by painting, to act by acting. One learns how to do anything by doing it. This applies nowhere more strictly than in the realm of ethical action.

- *Essential Essays on Judaism*, Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, ed. David Hazony, p.22

The Challenge of Memory

And Moses said to the people, "Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the Lord freed you from it with a mighty hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten."

And you shall explain to your son on that day, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt."

And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, "What does this mean?" you shall say to him, "It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out of Egypt, the house of bondage."

- Exodus 13:3, 8, 14

Experiencing the Exodus

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו
כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים.
- משנה מסכת פסחים פרק י משנה ה

In every generation, each person is obligated to *see* himself as if he went out of Egypt.

- Mishna Pesachim 10:5

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם להראות את עצמו
כאילו הוא בעצמו יצא עתה משעבוד מצרים
- המשנה לפי הרמב"ם, הלכות חמץ ומצה ז: 1

In every generation, each person is obligated to *show* himself as if he personally went out just now from the slavery of Egypt.

- the Mishna in Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah; Laws of Hametz and Matzah* 7:6

Past, Present, Future

We all know the aphorism, "the past is no more, the future has not yet come, the present is fleeting." In my opinion this is wrong. The past is not gone; it is still here. The future is not only anticipated, it is already here, and the present connects the future and the past.

- from "Avelut Yesbanah and Avelut Hadashah: Historical and Individual Mourning", Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

There is a past that persists in its existence, that does not vanish and disappear but remains firm in its place. Such a past enters into the domain of the present and links up with the future. Similarly, there is a future that is not hidden behind a thick cloud but reveals itself now in all its beauty and majesty. Such a future, drawing upon its hidden roots, infuses the past with strength and might, vigor and vitality. Both—past and future—are alive; both act and create in the heart of the present and shape the very image of reality.

- *Halakic Man*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

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From Memory To Action

The Nesiya Commentary

Why does memory play such a central role in the Jewish tradition? Can we change our past, present, and future through what we choose to remember? Does memory inspire action?

The Torah often obligates us to remember: *Remember the seventh day to keep it holy; Remember what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt; Remember the day on which you left Egypt.* Upon reading these verses, one cannot help but ask: how can I remember something that didn't happen to me? Do I have to be part of something in order to remember it?

Memory is a paradox. On the one hand, a personal memory is something that happened in the past, and a collective memory is usually something that never happened to us personally. On the other hand, human beings have a unique ability to connect with events that they never experienced personally. To remember, to "re-member," means to make ourselves whole, to shape a connection between disparate realities, between our present and the past.

Judaism seems to assume that without memory we lack wholeness, we are "dis-membered." The holiday of Pesach is founded on Jewish memory. In spite of the passage of 3,500 years, we are commanded to experience the Exodus as if we were there: "In every generation, each person is obligated to see himself – *lir'ot et atzmo* – as if he went out of Egypt" (Mishna Pesachim 10:5). From eating matzah and bitter herbs to singing joyous praise to God, the Pesach Seder enables us to personally experience the Israelites' journey, from the bitterness of slavery to the joy of redemption. When we recline and drink four glasses of wine, it's easy to demonstrate freedom. But what happens when the Seder is over? It is not enough to relive the Exodus with playful acts of liberation at a festive table. Ritual enactment is only a first stage.

Maimonides quotes a different version of the Mishna in Pesachim that helps us understand how Jewish memory is supposed to work. Instead of focusing on the inner experience of seeing oneself, this version of the Mishna focuses on the need to demonstrate visible, physical changes in our behavior. "In every generation, each person is obligated to show himself – *le'bar'ot et atzmo* – as if he personally went out just now from the slavery of Egypt" (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Hametz u'Matzah, 7:6). This version of the Mishna, which appears in Sephardic Haggadot, is saying it's not enough to simply "see yourself as if you left Egypt." We must act now, and continually, as if we had been redeemed.

The commandments to tell the Pesach story assume that present and future generations will otherwise forget. The Pesach Seder assumes that we have the ability to create memories to help us do things we otherwise wouldn't be able to do. By trying to act as if we were there, we take on the challenge of changing our present and future. In Judaism, the act of remembering is supposed to serve as a catalyst for ethical and spiritual behavior.

On Pesach we do not transcend time; we commit ourselves to the challenging task of living in multiple times. We "neither perceive the past as 'no more' nor the future as 'not yet' nor the present as a 'fleeting moment'" (Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*). The Rabbis express a unique faith in our abilities to use the past to transform the present and future when they boldly proclaim that each one of us, at all times, is required to show ourselves as if we personally went out from Egypt.

Making it Relevant

Personalizing the Exodus

In what ways can you see yourself as having "personally experienced" the Exodus from Egypt? What aspects of your own life would you like your children and grandchildren to remember?

Acting it Out

Sephardic tradition includes a number of ways of experiencing the Exodus during the Seder, such as hitting each other with scallions to represent the taskmasters, and walking around the table with matza to reenact the liberation from slavery. Invite participants at your Seder to discuss or act out some aspect of their future life which might be influenced by "memories" of going out of Egypt.

Translating to Action

How would you like your celebration of Pesach this year to affect your actions in the future? Is there something specific that you would like to do this year as a way of translating into action the values we learn in the story of the Exodus?