

Pesach : Celebrating Our History And Destiny (Edited Transcript)

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This is in continuation of last week's discussion on the festival of Pesach.

I hope that you have had a wonderful Pesach so far.

Last week we discussed the Dubnah Magid's perspective on this festival, namely, that it is not just about thanking G-d for our freedom but about thanking Him for the slavery and the oppression as well. It is the **total** Egypt experience - the suffering and the liberation, the pain and the miracles - which made us who we are as a people, establishing the very essence of Jewish destiny and identity.

This idea is captured in a magnificent image, in the verse which describes how Moses, Aaron, and the seventy Elders were on the mountain and saw G-d. Of course, they did not really "see" G-d, because G-d has no physical form; G-d's incorporeality is one of the basic tenets of Judaism. Rather, what they saw was a representation of G-d, in the form of *livnat hasapir uch'etzem hashamayim letohar* - "the brickwork of sapphire and like the essence of the heavens for purity" (Exodus 24:10).

What was this "brickwork of sapphire"?

Pain with a purpose

This verse is key to understanding the whole Egypt experience. The Jerusalem Talmud explains that this brickwork, which was right under the heavenly throne, represented the bricks and mortar which the Jewish people had been forced to make during their enslavement. It was a sign of G-d's solidarity with the Jewish people, that G-d remembered their pain and was with them in their suffering. This concept is encapsulated in a beautiful verse which says *Imo Anochi betzara, "I am with him in his suffering"* (Psalms 91:15). There are times in life that we go through great difficulties and suffering and through it all G-d says *Imo Anochi betzara, He is with us*. We have to go through that suffering for a higher purpose and for a greater good - for us and for the world at large - and G-d is with us in that pain and suffering. The brickwork conveyed to the people that G-d was with them and had felt their pain.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, one of our great sages of the previous century, asks the following: if the purpose of showing them the sapphire brickwork was to demonstrate that He was with them, why did He only show it to them on Mount Sinai, after they had been liberated? If He wanted to convey His solidarity with them while they were in pain, He should have done so **during** their enslavement. The Divine Presence was in the entangled Burning Bush, which represented the slavery and that He had not abandoned the people. So, asks Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, why did G-d only show them the vision of the sapphire brickwork **after** their liberation, once they were already on Mount Sinai?

Rav Sorotzkin explains that with the sapphire brickwork, G-d was showing them what they had achieved. The sapphire, as it says in the verse, was *k'etzem hashamayim letohar* - "like the essence of the heavens for its purity." It represents the highest spiritual level, the refinement and greatness that a person can attain. With these bricks G-d was showing the people what they had achieved while they were in Egypt. While they were enslaved, they thought that their pain and suffering was pointless; in their minds they were simply working with bricks and mortar, and they could not see any higher purpose to their suffering. When they got to Mount Sinai, however, they realised that, in retrospect, their suffering - along with their faith, prayers, growing connection to G-d and the tremendous miracles they had witnessed - had refined them and made them into great people who then merited receiving the Torah.

Through their unrelenting pain and suffering, their blood, sweat and tears as they worked with bricks and mortar, they were actually

building the heavenly sapphire brickwork, which reflected their greatness. Therefore G-d only showed it to them at the end, once they got to Mount Sinai; He wanted them to see that it was the entire process - the slavery and the resulting freedom - which elevated them and enabled them to receive the Torah.

Pesach, as we discussed last week, is not just about the liberation at the end, but about the whole process leading toward it. This is an important lesson for life: Sometimes we go through very difficult times and we may think the suffering is pointless. But as we go through it, there is a growth process whereby we become better people and get closer to G-d. We are building incredible heavenly edifices of merit in the next world, which sometimes we are not even aware of. Pesach is about building the heavenly brickwork - in our personal lives as well - just as the people did in Egypt in preparation to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Jewish nationhood is Divine in origin

The other dimension of Pesach - that it lays the foundation for Jewish history - is expressed in the writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of the most dynamic leaders of nineteenth-century German Jewry. One of his famous books, called *The Nineteen Letters*, was written in response to arguments put forth by the sceptics of his time, many of whom were leaving Torah Judaism. In the first letter in the book, Rav Hirsch puts forward all the arguments that people had against Judaism at the time, and in the remaining eighteen letters he refutes each argument. In letter number eight he sets out the course of Jewish history and explains the role of the Egypt experience in that context.

If you think about the origins of Jewish history, you will see that it does indeed have a very unusual beginning. Normally, the birth of a nation results from people living together in a particular area; borders are drawn and cultures are created. But we, the Jewish people, were born in exile, not in the Land of Israel. Jacob and his family went down to Egypt a mere seventy individuals, and we emerged a nation of millions.

Why was our birth as a nation so unusual?

Rabbi Hirsch explains that the purpose of creating the Jewish people was so that G-d could disseminate His message to the entire world as to what life is about and that there is a Divine purpose - namely, that humankind was placed on this earth in order to serve Him and do good. G-d created the Jewish people so that we would carry this message. We were born as a people with the purpose of upholding G-d's word. This is why we were born in Egypt, in the midst of the exile, as a nation without a land, without freedom and without dignity; we lacked all the basic building blocks of nationhood. G-d took us out of Egypt, straight to Mount Sinai where we received the Torah just a few weeks later. It was there, at the foot of Mount Sinai, that we were born as a people, when G-d gave us the Ten Commandments and all of the values and principles of Judaism as contained in our Torah.

G-d did not come to a nation already established in its land and say, 'here are the laws, here is a value system and a way of life.' Rather, he took a nation that had none of these things and gave us a Torah, saying, 'this is your defining essence, this is your very purpose.' And then, after he gave us our value system, He put us back into the Land of Israel, within the borders which had been promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, warning us that our claim to the land would be dependent on our loyalty to Him and to His Torah. The land was given to us in order to promote and strengthen the Torah's values; without this purpose, our claim to the land is weakened.

Rabbi Hirsch explains, in *The Nineteen Letters*, that the Egypt experience forms an integral part of Jewish history. The Divine plan was that the nation would be born into slavery, without its independence and freedom, and without its own dignity; G-d would then give us our freedom and dignity, and all of the markers of nationhood. They were not something that we created for ourselves, but something that He gave to us and thereby created us as a people. We emerged from that experience and went straight to Mount Sinai where we were given our founding values. We were born as a nation in a completely different way, in that our national identity comes directly from G-d.

Pesach is about the gratitude we have to G-d and the faith we have in Him, but it is also about the essence of Jewish history, and how it began in the most unlikely of places and circumstances, so that we would realise what our purpose is in this world. This is

why Pesach is not just about celebrating our freedom, but about celebrating the whole process - the slavery combined with the freedom - which makes us who we are and ensures that we can fulfil our true purpose and destiny on this earth.