

Two Covenants (Edited Transcript)

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The second story

On the night of the Seder we tell two stories. We tell the story of our liberation from slavery in Egypt through the miracles G-d performed through Moses. And we tell the story of the Jewish people's journey from being idol worshippers in the generation before Avraham (during the time of Avraham's father Terach) all the way through to receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. The Rambam rules that we are, in fact, obligated to tell both of these stories on Seder night, and both are covered in the haggadah itself.

Why is it important on the night of the Seder to mention both stories? Surely, the Seder is about only the one story - our going out of Egypt, our journey from slavery to freedom. What does the story of our journey from idolatry to Torah and truth have to do with Pesach?

I think that part of the answer lies in the meaning of Jewish identity. What does it mean to be a Jew? There is a very important essay written by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, entitled 'Fate and Destiny' (and extracted from a speech delivered in 1956 at Yeshiva University in New York). In the essay, Rav Soloveitchik outlines two overarching aspects, or 'covenants', of Jewish identity - the 'Covenant of Egypt' and the 'Covenant of Sinai'.

Two covenants

The 'Covenant of Sinai', as the name implies, refers to the covenant entered into at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Torah. But what is the 'Covenant of Egypt'? Rav Soloveitchik explains that there are two dimensions to being a Jew. One involves Torah and mitzvot - our purpose and principles, our Jewish values and moral mission. The other is the idea that all Jews share a common fate; that we are held together by the forces of history. This, he says, is the Covenant of Egypt. In Egypt we were brought together by the suffering, slavery, anti-Semitism and persecution we suffered at the hands of Egyptian society. These conditions forced upon us a certain set of circumstances. And even when we were finally liberated from these hardships, it was G-d who brought us out of Egypt, and took us to be His people. We didn't choose the manner or method of our deliverance, we didn't initiate anything, and we were, for the most part, completely passive participants. As the verse says, 'I will take you for Myself to be a nation to Me'. G-d didn't ask us, He simply 'took' us. This dimension of Jewish identity is, as Rav Soloveitchik explains, our common, G-d-given fate as a people. And there's no relinquishing it.

Let's understand this idea in a modern context. Looking at the events that are affecting the State of Israel, there is a genuine sense of bewilderment on the part of many Jews around the world. How can it be that, with all of the problems in the world today - with much of the Middle East in turmoil and engulfed in conflict, and large swathes of Africa besieged by religious extremist barbarians - Israel is singled out? It's perplexing enough to almost defy rational explanation. As Rav Soloveitchik mentions, modern political Zionism was partly borne from the idea (advanced by Theodore Herzl and others) that anti-Semitism in Europe could be thwarted if Jews had their own homeland. The irony, of course, is that the homeland we now have is the very source - or rather the pretext - for most of the anti-Semitism around today. I refer to political Zionism, but the concept of Zionism itself - the notion of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel, as mandated by G-d - is rooted in the Torah, and is thousands of years old.

Think about how the events which affect Israel and then affect Jewish communities all round the world pull Jews together. It doesn't matter what a person's level of observance is. You know when the pogroms came to Europe, and when there is a Holocaust, and when there are terror attacks - these events pull us together no matter who we are, where we are from, how Jewishly literate or committed or connected we may be. We are pulled together because this is our common fate. Rav Soloveitchik argues that this is a phenomenon which defies the laws of nature; that it arises from a supernatural covenant that G-d has entered into with the Jewish

people, and which binds us together and means we are always there for one another and feel deeply for each other. This is the Covenant of Egypt.

To further draw out the distinction between the Covenant of Egypt and the Covenant of Sinai ? and with an idea that goes right to the heart of Jewish identity and, more generally, human identity ? Rav Soloveitchik outlines two distinct approaches to life. There is, what he refers to as, the ?Man of Fate?, and there is the ?Man of Destiny?. This needs to be explained.

The Man of Fate

One of the most difficult things we grapple with as human beings is the notion of suffering. And, in fact, the Gemara relates how when Moses encountered G-d directly on Mount Sinai, he had one question for Him ? the question of why some righteous people suffer and some wicked people prosper. G-d's answer: ?No man can see me and live?. On this, Rav Soloveitchik explains that the question of human suffering is one which doesn't have an answer. Or, at least, an answer any human being can process. This is the meaning of ?No man can see me and live?. Because as human beings we see a fraction of reality. We don't see the next world; how all scores are settled, and how the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. We are unable to probe the inner mysteries of the universe ? of the next world or even this one. We cannot comprehend G-d's grand plans that encompass a sweep of centuries and even millennia. As mere mortals, we cannot begin to understand ?how? and ?why?. To understand that, we would have to fathom unknowable secrets. We would have to be like G-d, Himself.

But Rav Soloveitchik points out another problem with the question of why there is suffering. It's not just that as human beings we do not have the capacity to answer the question, it is the fact that the question itself is fundamentally disempowering. People ask ?why? when they feel they have no control over their lives; when they feel like passive objects at the mercy of forces they can't fathom. But even if they do understand what's going on, how does that change anything? Rav Soloveitchik explains that halachah, Torah law, emphasises another, more important question. It's not ?why?, but rather, ?what do I do now?? This is the question that preoccupies the Man of Destiny.

We now return to Rav Soloveitchik's Covenant of Egypt and Covenant of Sinai, and how they relate, respectively, to the Man of Fate and the Man of Destiny. It is a subject that goes right to the heart of the human condition.

What do we do now

We have seen how, in confronting suffering and moments of personal challenge, a human being can respond in one of two ways. The Man of Fate, says Rav Soloveitchik, asks ?why?. The Man of Destiny, on the other hand, says the Rav, asks, ?what do I do now??.

The halachah, we have said, aligns with the latter, more empowering response, the approach of the Man of Destiny. And what does the halacha say we should do? What, according to halacha, is the appropriate response to human suffering? Says the Gemara ? in a ruling codified by the Rambam ? we do teshuva; we repent.

Now this is easily misunderstood. If our response to times of trouble is to repent, then a person could interpret this to mean that our suffering is a punishment from G-d ? but it's not so. We can never know why G-d does things or why he allows certain things to happen. But what we do know ? whatever happens ? is that the correct, Torah-mandated response is to look inward and seek to become better people. The halachah is explicit on this. In the same way we are required to attach tsitsit to a four-cornered garment and affix mezuzahs to the doorposts of our house, so, too, in times of distress, we do teshuva, without getting into the question of causality. What Rav Soloveitchik says is that the process of repentance is a highly empowering one. Because all of a sudden, the question we are asking when confronted by circumstances over which we have no control is not the passive, inert ?why?; it's ?how can I become a better person as a result of these challenges that I am facing??. The challenges themselves become the means for us to improve our lives, and instead of being passive objects, we become proactive, creative actors who have a direct impact on shaping our own existence.

Here's a crude and oversimplified illustration that nevertheless brings out the idea. You are in the sea and a wave comes at you. If you are a Man of Fate you will ask yourself the question, "why is this wave coming at me?" The answer to that involves tides and the moon and gravity; an interplay of forces that are beyond your control. In the end, the wave will crash down on you, plunging you under the water, and there's nothing you can do. But if you are a Man of Destiny, you will dispense with the question of why and focus your energies on how to ride the wave.

Taking control

We all encounter waves of unrest and mishap at some stage in our lives. By asking ourselves how we can become better people through these difficulties, we transform our circumstances into something that serve us and take control of our destiny.

That's the human condition ? and it applies equally to the question of Jewish identity. There is the Covenant of Egypt which represents the historical forces and common fate that holds Jews together. The covenant is supernatural and binds us to our fate and to each other whether we like it or not. It is a Jewish identity that is forced upon us through the irresistible tides of history and circumstance, and though we may try to struggle away from them and ask "why?", there is no escape. When these historical forces emerge they do not distinguish between what kind of Jew we are. We are all swept up in the wave together.

But there is another dimension of what it means to be a Jew ? the Covenant of Sinai. And this is a Jewish identity that we choose. It's a Jewish identity of vision, of mission, of purpose. When we bind ourselves to the Covenant of Sinai, we no longer simply ask the question "why?", we ask the question "how?". How can I become a Jew of destiny? How can I fulfill my divine mission and purpose on this planet? By asking ourselves these questions, we transform our Jewish identity from one which is forced into one which is chosen. In Egypt we were forced ? Hashem said, "I will take you for Myself to be a nation to Me?". At Mount Sinai, G-d presented the Torah to us, and we responded, na'aseh v'nishma ? "we will do and we will hear/understand?". We accepted. There was an aspect of choice involved. It was something we opted into.

And so, too, today, we can live as Jews who are forced into our Jewish identity which we carry with pain and resentment; or we can actively seek out ? and be uplifted by ? a Jewish identity that we choose freely because it is meaningful and true and Godly and of eternal value ? both in this world and in the next world.

That's why on the night of the Seder we have to tell two stories. We tell the story of the going out of Egypt ? we eat the maror, and acknowledge the pain, and recognise the set of circumstances ? the slavery and even the liberation ? that we were forced into. But then we tell another story ? the story of a journey from idolatry to truth, from darkness to light, from a pointless servile existence in Egypt to a reignited sense of mission when G-d gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai. We say in the hagadah, just before the section on the four sons, Baruch shenatan Torah l'amo Yisrael, "Blessed is He who gave the Torah to His people, Israel?". This is beating heart of the Covenant of Destiny, the core of what it means to be a Jew.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that there are two words which refer to a group ? one is machaneh, a "camp"; the other is eidah, a "congregation?". Machaneh is a military term ? when you have a common enemy you gather together in a camp to defend and protect yourself. It is the Covenant of Fate. Eidah comes from the Hebrew words yiud, "destiny?", and eid, "testimony?". It is something more expansive, more affirming; something beautiful, inspiring and meaningful; something of eternal value. Rather than being something that is forced on us, it is something we initiate and affirm. It is the Covenant of Destiny.

The route to freedom

On Seder night, we embrace both. And in fact it's our route to freedom. If you think about it, the human condition and, by extension, who we are Jews, is a constant battle with the concept of freedom. As the Mishnah says, "against your will you are born, and against your will you die?". So much is taken away from us, so much of life is out of our control. The Gemara affirms this: Hakol bidei shamayim, chutz miyirat shamayim, "everything is in the hands of heaven except for the awe of heaven.

Everything is out of our control except for one thing ? and it sounds like it's a small thing, but really it's everything. Yirat

shamayim, awe of Heaven? our moral choices. It's this freedom to choose between right and wrong that gives our lives meaning and makes us Godly. And if we live by our moral choices with that sense of mission then we can transform all of our circumstances, forge a legacy and achieve our destiny. We can create something of lasting value, something that is eternal.

Similarly, what makes us free as Jews is that even in the midst of acknowledging the fate imposed upon us by historical forces forces which defy all logic, and which cannot be explained in the normal, rational terms we turn it into something we choose; something of meaning. Because this is the very mission that G-d gave us at Mount Sinai.

This is why we need two stories on Seder night. Because if we're just going to sit there eating maror and talking about slavery about the forces of adversary that rose against us then and in every generation since then what are we giving our children? How is this meant to inspire a new generation? Where is the vision?

We need to give them the sense that our Jewish identity is something we choose not because we have to, but because we want to. We need to help our children understand that the central aspect of our identity stems not from the hatred we have suffered at the hands of others, but from the joy, meaning, inspiration, privilege and eternal value that comes with living a Jewish life. We need the second story.

Wishing you all a chag kasher v'sameach a joyous and kosher Pesach.