

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

Re-telling the Story; A Passover Byte From Rav Binny

There are moments in time one needs to forget. And yet, so often, these same moments, we really need to remember. Such a moment came into my life on August 9th (the twentieth of Av) 2001.

An innocent, beautiful afternoon in the heart of Jerusalem surrounded by the music of children's laughter. Lives full of promise captured in a mother's hug, or a young soldier's grin. The fulfillment of years of toil viewed through the contented sigh of an old man, leaning on his walking stick as he watches his grandchildren enjoying the treat of an ice cream on a hot summer's day.

All of this magic, ripped apart by the nuts and bolts, explosives and hatred of a suicide bomber in a Pizzeria. It was one of those moments you try not to think about, that you decide to put behind you. For me, it is relatively simple to let go of such moments. I hug our children a little tighter, and find enormous strength in every smile and cuddle... And yet, such moments, one can never really forget.

Once again, for so many of our brothers and sisters in Israel it is not so simple. There are many empty places at the Passover Seder, making the challenge of remembering that which we wish to forget, and never forgetting that which we must always remember, all the more difficult.

What is the balance between remembrance and letting go; between dreaming of tomorrow, and learning from yesterday?

The central theme of the Seder night, indeed the entire festival of Pesach (Passover), is all about remembrance.

"Va'Yomer Moshe El Ha'Am, Zachor Et HaYom HaZeh..." "And Moshe said to the Nation (of Israel): Remember this day..." (Exodus 13:3)

On this night, we are commanded to remember the story of our exodus from Egypt 3,200 years ago. However, there is something unique about the way in which we remember the story on the night of Pesach.

Maimonides, in his *Sefer HaMitzvoth* (Positive Commandment 157) tells us that the Mitzvah to remember the exodus from Egypt on the 15th night of Nissan (Pesach) is based on the verse *"Ve'Higad'ta Le'bincha" "And you shall tell your son (children) on that day..." (Exodus 13:8).*

Yet this same obligation to remember the story of Egypt exists every day, and indeed for precisely this reason mentioned in the Shema we recite three times daily. Indeed, our Hagaddah makes mention of this very fact, when Rabbi Eliezer Ben Azariah explains how he learned that the mitzvah to recall the exodus from Egypt applies not only every day, but every night as well.

What then, is different about our mitzvah to remember the story on the night of Pesach?

Rav Chaim Brisker explains that all year round we recall, but this night we actually *re-tell* the story. The difference is that one can recall an event on one's own, but to tell the story, requires a listener. A beautiful thought, but for one fact:

The Talmud (Pesachim 116a) points out that at a certain point in the Hagaddah, the child asks the parent, and if the child is not clever (or old) enough, or there are no children, then the husband and wife exchange the questions, *and if a person is alone, he asks himself...!*

Here then, is a new bent to the Seder evening; the issue is not just to teach, but also to re-tell the story, even if one already knows it! Most fascinating, although the focus is still the re-telling of the story to the next generation, if one has no one to ask, and no one to teach, one should ask one- self!

I recall once, riding on the New York subway, and noticing how much room I had to sit on the normally over-crowded ride. It took me a minute to realize why. I had been reviewing a section of Talmud for a class and, pre-occupied by a particular issue, was re- hashing the give and take of the tractate in the original Aramaic to figure out what I was missing. The only problem was, I hadn't realized how loudly I was "reviewing" the subject. Gradually, people started edging away from this strange man babbling aloud to himself in Aramaic! How many of us would choose to sit down next to someone mumbling aloud to himself?

What can possibly be the point of asking myself questions I already know the answer to? If, especially as Rav Chaim points out, the Seder night re-telling is meant to be an inter-active dialogue?

Maimonides, in his *Hilchot Chametz U'matzah* (7:3) adds a dimension, which may serve to unlock this puzzle.

Explaining the reason for a person's obligation to re- tell this story even to himself, (based on the verse "*Zachor Et HaYom HaZeh...*" "*Remember this day...*") he states that this is just as the Torah tells me: "*Remember the Sabbath day*" ("*Zachor Et Yom HaShabbat*"). What does remembering Egypt have to do with remembering Shabbat? Why does Maimonides find a correlation between the two?

The Talmud (Pesachim 106a) points out that the commandment to remember Shabbat, as expressed in the Ten Commandments, is fulfilled when one makes Kiddush on Friday night. In fact, it is precisely on Shabbat that we learn that the Jewish concept of remembering is not passive, but rather active. We do not remember that original gift of Shabbat, given us so long ago, by what we think, but rather by what we do. In Judaism, to remember is to re-live; to re-experience.

How and why do I ask myself the Seder questions if I am alone? In Judaism, I am never alone. Not only because my relationship with G-d means I always have a silent partner, but also because I am together with four thousand years of Jewish history.

On the night of the Seder I am sitting at the table with Moses and Aaron, and every Jew that ever was willing to put his or own blood on the door, and identify with the Jewish people. I am sitting with every Jew who sang when the Red Sea split, as well with every Jew who cried, when

another Jewish child was thrown in the Nile. We sit with all the Jews of Babylon, dreaming of their beloved homes burned to the ground by Nebuchadnezzar and his hordes, as well as every Jew who stood on the train platforms of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and finally understood...

And in our time, we sit as well with every Jewish mother and father who sheds a tear over the empty place setting of a child lost in the violence in Israel, and every child who understands they will no longer be able to share their lives with the father or mother who loved them more than life itself...

The theme of the Seder table is all about the Jewish family, and by re-experiencing the story of our birth as a nation; we connect, in the deepest sense with the rest of our family, past, present, and future. Indeed, we rediscover, yet again, who we really are.

May Hashem bless us soon, to partake, in a Jerusalem filled only with the sounds of peace, together, as one family, at one magnificent Seder table.

Wishing you all a Chag Kasher Ve'Sameach,
A happy Pesach full of growth, joy, and peace,

Binny Freedman