

Sparks

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Passover - In the Name of Love

Passover commemorates the miraculous exodus of the Jews from Egypt. After 210 years of oppression and cruel servitude, an entire people leave in astounding record time, faster than it takes dough to leaven into bread. We celebrate this event with a festive meal and ceremony called the *Seder*, during which we recite the *Haggadah*—the telling of this wondrous historical episode.

The Exodus from Egypt, however, is not just another milestone in the history of the Jewish people. In fact, every holiday is actually a memorial to the Exodus. Even Shabbat is referred to as a “*Zechar L’Yitziat Mitzraim*,” a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, although it has no apparent connection to the Exodus. In addition, every Jew is obligated to see himself as if he personally had left Egypt and to recount it every day.

The first of the Ten Commandments is: “I am YHVH your G-d Who took you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” The Zohar, the magnum corpus of Jewish mysticism, explains: “This is the foundation and the root of Torah, all the commandments, and the complete faith of Israel”.

Thus, the Exodus is the seminal event of the Jewish calendar and of daily Jewish consciousness.

Although the obvious theme of the holiday is freedom it is commonly referred to as Passover. Wouldn’t “the Holiday of Freedom” or the “Exodus” be more appropriate? Jewish tradition teaches that it is so named because G-d passed over the houses of the Jews when He caused the death of the first born of the Egyptians during the tenth plague. This disturbing image of G-d, hopping and skipping over the Jews’ homes, is also hinted at in the Song of Songs, which is read on Passover: “Behold the voice of my Beloved comes skipping over mountains, hopping over valleys.”

Indeed, the oral tradition emphasizes that it was G-d Himself who was skipping. The Jerusalem Talmud establishes that G-d personally came to redeem Israel, He did not send an agent. A verse in Exodus reads, “I will perform judgment—I am YHVH.” The famous Torah commentator Rashi from the eleventh century explains that G-d is assuring them that “I Myself and not an agent” will deliver you from your oppression and enslavement. Couldn’t G-d have simply decreed the death of the first-born without all this skipping around? What is the significance of His personal involvement?

It is common knowledge that the Jews in Egypt deteriorated to the 49th level of spiritual impurity and moral decadence. Our sages tell us that G-d saved them just before they fell to the last level, the fiftieth, which is total spiritual suicide and obliteration. In other words, the Jews were actually unworthy of liberation. So why did G-d free them nonetheless?

A careful reading of the Exodus story shows that the predominant message of the liberation of the Jews is the revelation of the profound truth of “I am YHVH.”

We know that each Divine name indicates a different encounter with G-d, revealing different attributes and perspectives of the Divine truth and our relationship to G-d.

Elokim is G-d revealed as the Creator of nature, borders, rules, principles, and regulations. This is the name that appears throughout the creation story. In addition, this name refers to G-d when He is revealed as a Judge, committed to laws, order, justice, consequences, cause and effect. G-d, as *Elokim*, responds measure for measure to the choices and deeds of people. Therefore, G-d as *Elokim* cannot save the Jews, because they don't deserve it.

However, G-d is not only referred to as *Elokim*, but also as YHVH. This divine name is mentioned when G-d is revealing His compassion. It indicates that G-d is not only a Creator, a Ruler, and a Judge, but also a compassionate Sustainer. He lovingly extends and shares His being with us, perpetuating our existence at every moment. We do not exist independently of YHVH, rather we are unified with Him as the rays of the sun are to the sun or the thought is to the thinker. Therefore, YHVH suggests that G-d is like a compassionate parent and we are His children.

G-d as *Elokim* is committed to the laws of nature and only works within the limitations of time and space. Therefore, G-d as *Elokim* could not liberate the Jews from Egypt.

G-d as YHVH, however, is beyond nature. He is the miracle worker Who, in the name of love, can transcend time and space and perform supernatural feats.

Indeed the exodus of the Jews was miraculous. The Egyptian military security was so tight that no slave had ever succeeded in escaping Pharaoh's captivity. And yet the entire nation of three million people left Egypt in less time than it takes for bread dough to rise. To mobilize my own family to leave the house takes longer than that. G-d, however, not only suspended the laws of nature, He also suspended the laws of justice. This perhaps is the greatest miracle in the exodus story -- that even though the Jews were undeserving and unworthy to be liberated by G-d as *Elokim*, they were nonetheless saved by G-d as YHVH.

Judaism teaches that the essential name of G-d is YHVH, and that the essential attribute of G-d is love and compassion. This basic truth is embodied in the Exodus story and therefore we must remember the exodus daily.

The name *Elokim*, however, is really only an aspect of the name YHVH. In other words, the divine attribute of justice is an aspect of the attribute of love and subordinate to it.

Such is the way of true parenthood: because of my love for my child I establish for her rules and regulations. I create a world of law and order where her choices incur real consequences. I judge her, reward her and discipline her, all for the sake of empowering her to take responsibility and become who she can be. However, since my judgment is because of my love and thereby subordinate to it, there may be times when I will be compassionate towards my child even though she does not deserve it. I will "pass over" my standards of judgment and be compassionate, in order to save my child. I will overrule my rules in the name of love.

This is the meaning of the verse in the Song of Songs; "Behold the voice of my beloved comes skipping over the mountains, hopping over the valleys." Nothing can stand in the way of G-d's love for you. No obstacle is too great. His love transcends all barriers.

This is the inner dynamic of this miraculous event and this is one reason why this holiday is commonly referred to as Passover. G-d, in order to pass over the homes of the Jews, passed over His attribute of judgment in the name of love. The Zohar teaches: "Even though G-d loves justice, His love for His children overcame His love for His justice."

One more vital point needs elucidation: Why did G-d require the Jews to sacrifice the Pascal lamb and smear its blood on their door-posts? Did G-d really need this sign to identify Jewish homes and pass over them?

There really is one obstacle that can stand in the way of G-d's love. G-d can love us, but He can't make us believe that he loves us. A poignant passage in Isaiah portrays this impasse. The Prophet is defending the people, claiming that they are sinning because G-d is not present for them. G-d responds [Isaiah 65:1]: "I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for Me. I was ready to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said 'Here I am, here I am.'"

G-d may pour upon us all His love, but it is up to us to acknowledge and accept it. We have to make some overture, some sign, which is what smearing the blood on the door-posts was all about. G-d did not need an identifying sign, but we had to identify ourselves as wanting redemption and believing it can happen. G-d says to the Jews, "Nothing can stand in the way of My love for you, except you."

Passover is the time to experience and acknowledge G-d's unconditional love for you. That's why it is the foundation of all the holidays, of all of Judaism. Without the acknowledgment that G-d loves you enough to redeem you even when you're not worthy, you have no inkling of G-d's relationship with you. That's why we read the great love poem, the Song of Songs, on Passover. That's why we spend hours reciting the Haggadah, like an enamored lover describing every minute detail of how her beloved proposed to her.

The more we acknowledge G-d's love, the more we will experience His unconditional love.

May you have a happy Passover, basking in G-d's loving presence.

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