Exodus—the Secret of Our Nationhood

Each Passover, we focus our attention on the historic struggle between Moses and Pharaoh, and the enslavement of the Hebrews. Yet, the story of our people in Egypt is more than a collective memory; it is an accurate depiction of our current situation.

The Exodus is the culmination of a process that actually began when a Babylonian pundit named Abraham discovered the reason for humanity’s woes and tried to tell the world about it. Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* narrates that Abraham was an inquisitive young man whose father, Terah, owned an idol shop in downtown Ur, a bustling city in ancient Babylon.

Selling idols and amulets was good business, but Abraham was displeased. He noticed that his townspeople were growing increasingly unhappy. Night after night, Abraham pondered the enigma of the Babylonians’ woes until he discovered a profound truth: Humans are devoid of kindness. According to the book *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* (Chapter 24), Abraham observed the builders of the Tower of Babylon and saw them quarreling. He tried to persuade them to stop fighting and cooperate, but they only mocked him. Eventually, they fought each other to death, and the tower was never completed.

The distraught Abraham began to tell his countryfolk to leave their egos and hatred aside and focus on connection and brotherhood. He suggested they would rise above their hateful egos and unite.

Abraham began to garner followers until Nimrod, king of Babylon, grew unhappy about Abraham’s increasing popularity and expelled him and his entourage from Babylon. Wandering toward what was to become the land of Israel, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, spoke to anyone who cared to listen. After some time, Abraham’s company numbered tens of thousands of disciples and followers.

Maimonides writes that Abraham indoctrinated his son Isaac into the notion of connection above hatred, Isaac taught Jacob the exact same tenet, and after a few generations, a unique assembly of people was created. They were not yet a nation, but they had a unique form of unity. Their “glue” was the idea that hatred can be triumphed only by deepening their unity and mutual love. Abraham’s people had no biological affinity, yet their solidarity grew stronger by the day thanks to their efforts to unite.

The exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt was the final stage in the forging of the Israeli nation. When they came out of Egypt, they stood before Mt. Sinai, whose name derives from the Hebrew word, *sinaa* (hatred). Moses, who united them in Egypt, scaled the mountain to bring back the Torah—the code of unity—while the people of Israel prepared themselves to receive it by committing to unite “as one man with one heart.” With this commitment, they passed their test. They were declared not only a nation, but one tasked with being a role model of unity, “a light unto nations.”

Our World Is Egypt

The formation of the Israeli nation seems to narrate the unlikely forging of a nation from complete strangers. In truth, however, this story depicts the battle we all face between our innate hatred of others and the need for connection.

Pharaoh, the evil inclination, has turned our 21st century world into a contemporary Egypt, where egoism is king and narcissism is the trend. Our polluted and war-stricken world, polarized society, ubiquitous depression, and sickening trends such as live broadcasts of suicide on Facebook, indicate that Pharaoh is the king of our planet, and our world is Egypt.

As we have our inner Pharaoh, we also have our inner Moses, but he cannot succeed alone. Without directing all of our forces and desires toward connection, we will remain in Egypt, slaves to our egos, and the world will continue to go from bad to worse.

Currently, we are so divided that if we had to recommit to being “as one man with one heart” and thereby become a nation, we would unanimously decline. We are willful slaves to our egos. The book *Yaarot Devash* writes that the word “Jew”(*Yehudi*) comes from the word “united”(*yihudi*). As long as we remain apart, we are not Jews, just as we were not Jews before we united and agreed to strive to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This Passover let us give a final blow to separation and to egoism; let us strive to connect with one another at the heart! In trying times such as ours, our unity is vital. It will restore our peoplehood, make us “a light unto nations,” an example of solidarity and cohesion, and free us from the scourge of narcissism and the rest of our social ills.

Happy and kosher Passover, dear people of Israel.