Imagining Redemption

Passover, Pesach, is approaching. Fast approaching.

Now you may argue that it is still almost a full three months away, and you’d be right. But those who study Daf Yomi, the daily study of a page of Talmud, are already several weeks into their in-depth reading of the tractate of Pesachim and are already steeped in discussions about the search for chametz, leavened bread, and its elimination, and are considering the definitional parameters of matzah, unleavened bread, and marror, bitter herbs.

Of course, Daf Yomi students are accustomed to taking the long-range view, and, wouldn’t you know it, they will be completing this fascinating tractate which treats the holiday of Passover so comprehensively during the week just prior to erev Pesach, a mere several days before the eve of Passover!

Those of us who are not committed to the rigorous Daf Yomi daily regime, which includes the great majority of Jewish people, will begin our rapid and inexorable march toward Passover this week. For it is on this Shabbat that we begin the book of Sh’mot, the story of the Exodus. And henceforth, for many weeks, every weekly Torah portion deals, in a dazzling variety of ways, with the drama of our servitude and our redemption, with the heroes of the Exodus and with its villains.

Each parsha, for the next many Shabbatot, provides us with a not-to-be-missed opportunity to prepare ourselves, intellectually and spiritually, for the wonderful holiday which lies ahead.

Somehow, more than any other Jewish holiday, we tend to speak of “preparing” for Passover. These preparations entail a variety of activities. Cleaning the house, for example, and making sure that none of the foods forbidden on Pesach, even in minute quantities, are to be found. This certainly is an onerous chore. Purchasing the provisions for quite a few festive meals is an expensive and time-consuming task. Another important task is assuring that there are sufficient quantities of the ritual foods such as matzah and marror, the ingredients for charoset, and sufficient wine for the entire household. And a proper Seder table requires appropriate decorations, which include tablecloths, silverware, candlesticks, goblets, and often
floral arrangements and embroidered pillowcases and matzoh coverlets.

The more scholarly among us will spend significant time intellectually preparing for the festival. The Talmud tells us that the proper length of time necessary to review the laws and customs of Passover is thirty days, beginning on the day of Purim and extending throughout the entire Passover holiday. Preparation must also involve at least a perusal of several haggadot, if not careful study of at least some of one’s personal favorite haggadot.

But I have often thought that we are called upon for an extremely unique and quite challenging preparation which is often overlooked. I refer to the passage in the haggadah which originates in the Mishnah and which reads:

“In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see himself, lirot et atzmo, as if he personally left Egypt, as it is written, “And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8).

Note the underlined phrase: “for me when I went free.” We are called upon to personally visualize ourselves as having experienced the Exodus in all of its detail. How many of us are capable of such an imaginative feat?

For me, this is the greatest challenge of the entire Passover experience: imagining myself, picturing myself, as a helpless slave and then reliving the frustration of the initial phases of the redemption process;
personally witnessing a series of wondrous miracles; living through the original Passover experience, safely protected in our slave quarters while, hurriedly and almost surreptitiously, gulping down that first Passover festive meal.

And feeling, in the depths of my bones, the burst of sudden freedom, casting aside bonds and chains, and marching as a free man into an unknown wilderness. Is this not an almost impossible task? Can I possibly relive the powerful emotions that my ancestors felt millennia ago? How am I to “see myself as if I personally left Egypt”?

It is in response to such questions that I suggest a careful reading of all the Torah portions that we will be encountering, beginning this Shabbat and continuing for the next many weeks. My plan is to devote my columns for each of those weeks to a suggestion or two which might prove helpful in achieving this goal of creatively reimagining the entire experience as if we were there.

Let us begin our adventure with a teaching of the great commentator, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, Ramban, or Nachmanides. He provides a brief introduction to the entire Chumash Sh’mot, commonly called the Book of Exodus. But the very point of his introduction is to reject the common title of this second book of the Bible. Instead, he insists that the book be known as the “Book of Redemption,” Sefer HaGeulah. Why is he so insistent on his choice of this unusual title for this sacred and multi-themed book? And what does geulah, redemption, even mean?

Ramban considers the second book of the Torah to be the sequel to the first book, which is commonly referred to as the book of Genesis. For Ramban, Genesis is primarily a book about the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is less a book about the creation of the universe than it is a book about the creation of the people of Israel. Its theme is “the status of our forefathers,” by which he means the ethical and moral stature of our first ancestors.

With the descent of our people into Egypt, exile, and slavery, there is a loss of “the status of our forefathers,” a diminution of their ethical and moral stature. Redemption is the process by which we regain that status, that ethical and moral stature. Redemption is not the Exodus from Egyptian bondage. Rather, it involves the revelation at Sinai, the construction of the Tabernacle, and, ideally and ultimately, the return to the Land of Israel. Redemption is the reclaiming of the ethical and moral stature of our patriarchs.

Following this approach, the requirement of “seeing ourselves as if we personally left Egypt” is less about imagining ourselves as slaves, or even imagining ourselves as marching out of Egypt as free men. Instead, it is about the implications of freedom for our reclamation of the ethical and moral stature of our forefathers.

Ramban offers us a profound insight: a slave, a person in bondage, is not free to act ethically and morally. This is certainly true of a person who is literally enslaved. But it is also true of one whose choices in
life are dictated by political propaganda, cultural influence, pressures to conform blindly, and other forces with which we are all very familiar nowadays.

Ramban’s thirteenth century concept of “the status of our forefathers” is explained beautifully in the nineteenth century commentary of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, known as the Netziv, in his introductory remarks to the book of Genesis. For the Netziv, the defining quality of our Patriarchs was the characteristic of yashrut, which he defines as an ethic that transcends piety and saintliness and extends to the ability to relate to people very different from oneself, working together with others in a harmonious and constructive fashion.

We now know of one way that we can “see ourselves as if we have left Egypt.” To do so, we must each come to grips with what it means for us to experience redemption. Following Ramban and Netziv, our charge is to reclaim what the former calls the “status of our forefathers” and what the latter terms the ability to act yashar. We must improve our ethical conduct, our interpersonal relationships, by cooperating with others in our surroundings and especially with those who are different from us. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were yesharim, and it is by emulating their “status” that we “leave Egypt,” depart bondage, and experience redemption.

Please join me again next week as we explore other approaches to the difficult task of “seeing ourselves as if we left Egypt.”

---

For information on magnificent stand alone homes in German Colony, Baka and Old Katamon. Call today: Eta: 054-723-3863

### Baka
100 sqm apartment in new project, 3 bedrooms, 2 full bathrooms, high ceilings, terrace (partial sukka) shabbat elevator and parking. **4,250,000 NIS.**

Duplex penthouse with elevator, two sukka terraces. 160 sqm brand new. Fantastic deal. **4,550,000 NIS!!!**

### Old Katamon
Fantastic garden apt in Old Katamon. High ceilings, authentic Jerusalem stone building, registered garden, 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms **4,600,000 NIS.**

New project 4, 5, 6 rooms available. Underground parking, shabbat elevator and storage. Starting prices at **3,800,000 NIS** - larger apts - **6,000,000 NIS.**

Beautiful apt, high end finishes, high ceilings, duplex, 113 sqm. 3 bedrooms 2.5 bathrooms, elevator and 20 sqm sukka terrace. **4,900,000 NIS.**

### Downtown
Saidoff Tower: 200 sqm on one floor, terrace, underground parking 24/7 doorman, pool and gym. 5 bedrooms. **Call for more info.**

### Talbiya
King David Crown apartment for sale. 24/7 doorman. 145 sqm on one floor, facing garden, 3 bedrooms, 2.5 bathrooms, terrace, parking, Shabbat elevator and storage. **USD 1,800,000.**

Beautiful apt in Talbiya, 107 sqm. Fully renovated with high end finishings- underfloor heating/central air, elevator, terrace, shared pkg. Old City, Mamilla, First Station. Was 4,400,000 NIS now **4,000,000 NIS.**

### German Colony
100 sqm apt in a new project ready in 2 years. 50 sqm registered garden, parking. **4,500,000 NIS.**

160 sqm on one floor, 2nd floor in small luxury building. Large sukka terrace. Parking, shabbat elevator, views, lots of light. **8,500,000 NIS.**

New luxury project. 3 and 4 room apartments underground parking and storage, starting at **3,000,000 NIS.**