THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Imagine That!

There was a time when I would only go out of my way to listen to speakers who were older and more experienced than I. Recently, however, I have changed my preferences and have begun to seek out speakers, rabbis and teachers, who are young and relatively inexperienced. I find their ideas fresh and often very much on the mark. After all, they are in much better touch with our fast-changing world than I am.

Once, during a visit to Israel, I sat in on a series of lectures which were designed to prepare the audience for the upcoming Passover holiday. The speaker, a brilliant young rabbi, focused upon the *Seder* night, and particularly upon the text of the *Haggadah*. He spent most of his opening lecture elaborating upon what he considered the most difficult task with which we are all confronted on the first night of Passover. The task is described in the following famous passage:

"In each and every generation, a person must see himself as if he personally left Egypt. As it is written, 'And you shall explain to your son on that day that it is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt (*Exodus* 13:8).'" The requirement is explicit in the biblical text: the Lord did it for *me*, when *I* went free from Egypt.

The young rabbi candidly confessed to his audience that he had never been able to fulfill this requirement. Indeed, he didn't think it was possible, certainly not for most of us, to envision ourselves as if we personally had experienced slavery and redemption. "This," he insisted, "is the most difficult task we are faced with on the *Seder* night."

When I first heard this assertion, I found it to be quite provocative. I wanted to protest but maintained my silence in respect for the young rabbi. I attributed his conviction to his relative immaturity. I have never found this obligation difficult. Personally, I have found it quite easy to imagine myself as a slave and to personally exult in the emotional experiences of redemption and freedom.

I usually forget the content of most lectures that I hear almost as soon as I leave the lecture hall. This time, however, I could not rid my mind of the young rabbi's

statement. I began to question my own inner certainty. Had it really been so easy for me all these years to envision myself as one of those who had experienced both slavery and the Exodus?

In the midst of my extended preoccupation with the young rabbi's assertion, a long-forgotten memory suddenly surfaced in my mind. I was taken back in time to another lecture I had heard just before Passover many years ago. This time, the speaker was not a young rabbi at all. Rather, he was an old and revered Chassidic *rebbe*, a survivor of the Holocaust who had spent years in Auschwitz and had witnessed the vicious murder of his wife and children with his own eyes.

That old *rebbe* was Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam, may his memory be blessed, who was known as the Klausenberger *Rebbe*, after the small town in the Balkans where he had served prior to World War II.

In that lecture, Rabbi Halberstam recounted his own puzzlement over a lecture he had heard very long ago from one of his mentors. I no longer remember the name of that mentor, but Rabbi Halberstam was careful to identify him in detail because of the strange and almost unbelievable experience that he reported.

The mentor said that he had no difficulty at all imagining himself to have been in slavery in Egypt and to have been redeemed. In fact, this mentor reported that he could clearly remember the experience. He could

recall in great detail the burdensome work he had to perform, the dirty hovel in which he was forced to live, and the sighs and groans of his companions. He could even still see, in his mind's eye, the cruel face of his tormentors as they sadistically whipped him for not producing his daily quota of bricks.

The Klausenberger *Rebbe* confessed that when he first heard his mentor make those claims, he had difficulty believing them. He thought that his mentor had made such a claim just for the effect it would have upon his listeners. He stressed that sometimes it is justified for a speaker to resort to hyperbole to make his point more dramatic and more graphic.

But then the *rebbe* continued to say that after many years, he had come to realize that his mentor was telling the absolute truth. "It took the experiences I had during the horrible years of the Holocaust," he exclaimed, "for me to realize why my mentor was able to recall his experiences in ancient Egypt's tyranny."

The *rebbe* then went on to elaborate upon two psychological processes that are necessary to invoke during the *Seder* night as we recite the *Haggadah*. He used two Hebrew and Yiddish terms respectively: *koach hadimyon* (the power of imagination) and *mitleid* (empathy).

The lesson that the old *Rebbe* related to me and to the dozens of other eager listeners that evening so long ago was that we are often restricted by our own tendencies to rely upon our reason, rationality, and intellectuality. We underplay the powers that we have to fantasize, to imagine, to dream freely. In a sense, we are slaves to reason and need to learn to allow ourselves to go beyond reason and to give our imaginations free rein. Only then can we "see ourselves as if we had personally endured slavery." Only by cultivating our imagery can we ourselves experience the emotions of freedom and liberty.

We are all required to imagine ourselves as if we are the other person. If the other person is poor, the *mitzvah* of charity demands that we ourselves feel his poverty. If he is ill, we must literally suffer along with him. This is empathy, and to be empathic, one must rely upon a well-developed imagination.

Imagination and empathy are not words that one often hears in rabbinic sermons, but they are the words that the Klausenberger *Rebbe* used that evening. And, as he concluded in his remarks, he learned about

those words through the bitter suffering that he endured when he was enslaved in Auschwitz, and he appreciated redemption when he himself was finally freed from his personal bondage.

The young rabbi who started my thinking about this had, through his good fortune, never really experienced anything remotely resembling slavery. Naturally, he was thus deprived of the ability to really appreciate freedom.

After a few days, I approached the young rabbi and shared with him the words that I had heard decades ago, before this young rabbi was even born. I told him what the Klausenberger *Rebbe* had said about empathy and imagination. The young rabbi responded politely and with gratitude, but with a gentle smile got in the last word: "But the Klausenberger *Rebbe* didn't say that learning to imagine and to empathize were easy."

I had to admit that the young rabbi was correct. Creative imagination and compassionate empathy are not easily attained. Achieving them may indeed be the hardest task of the holiday of Passover.

But I feel confident that the young rabbi agreed with my assertion: Learning to use one's powers of imagination in order to empathize with the plight of others is the essential objective of this magnificent holiday, *zman cheiruteinu*, the season of our freedom.

Chag Sameach!

A happy holiday! ■