



Today and Tomorrow: The Role of the Future Generation in Present Events

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The story of the Exodus from Egypt, as told in the book of Shemot chapter 12, unfolds on two interwoven planes. One is the historical Exodus from Egypt, and the other consists of the events of commemoration and future remembrance of the Exodus. In the language of our Rabbis, it is said that the chapter describes both “Pesah Mitzrayim” (the Pesah in Egypt), including the original pascal sacrifice and the experience of the Exodus for those who were there, and “Pesah Dorot” (the Pesah of the generations), the one that would be celebrated every year in the future. This interweaving likely reflects the belief, hope, and perhaps even a sense of destiny, that this event would transcend the present and become etched in history. It imbued the ancient participants with a profound awareness, even in the midst of the unfolding events, that they were witnessing something momentous, something that would demand remembrance for generations to come. The Torah’s description creates for us the impression that the participants in Egypt transcended their immediate experience. They lived through their present moment, while simultaneously imagining the future, envisioning themselves being remembered by generations to come.



Shemot 12 comprises a command from God to Moses and Aaron that takes place at the beginning of the month of Nisan. Verses 2-13 refer to the two weeks between that first day of Nisan and the night of the Exodus, telling Moses and Aaron how the Israelites must prepare and offer the pascal sacrifice in real time. Here, the first jump to the future occurs—God commands these same people to celebrate this day in the future as well: “And this day shall be for you a memorial, and you shall celebrate it as a festival to God throughout your generations” (12:14).

From there, there is a move back to the present: “And Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, ‘Go and take for yourselves sheep’” (12:21), and then again back to the future: “And you shall keep this matter as a statute for you and for your children forever...” (12:24). This back-and-forth occurs a third time in the chapter with a return to the description of the present: “And it came to pass at midnight” (12:29), and then again to the description of the future: “this is the night of God’s watch over all the children of Israel throughout their generations” (12:42).

The future is described in the chapter using many different words: “This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to God throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as a law for all time” (12:14). “You shall observe this as a law for all time, for you and for your descendants. And when you enter the land that God will give you, as promised, you shall observe this rite” (12:24-25). These words are significant for several reasons. They create a certain perception of the future. It includes descendants—children, generations—and is characterized by life circumstances different from the present: “when you come to the land.” The focus on memory is an assertion of the aspiration that the future will be perceived as meaningful. These future-oriented words create a dynamic interplay within the chapter, moving not just between present and future, but across past, immediate future, and distant generations.



The variety of time frames in the story of the Exodus is also evident in the different appearances of the root נ.מ.ש. (to guard or observe) in the chapter. This root is the source of one of the names given to the night of the Exodus: “*leil shimmurim* - the Night of Watching.” The act of guarding and the root נ.מ.ש. are significant in the chapter. They accompany the movement through time—forward and backward—and indicate three basic characteristics of the present and the future.

1. Guarding in the Present

Slaves live in the present. They have no future or past. Therefore, the demand for the Israelites to prepare themselves and to pay attention to time is radical. It constitutes a first step in their departure from the consciousness of slavery. In other words, guarding in the present takes place in Egypt on the eve of the Exodus, between 10th and 14th Nisan. At this time, the Israelites are commanded to guard the lamb (“and it shall be for you a safeguard”; 12:6). The change in consciousness from slaves to free people is facilitated by the demand to prepare for the Exodus. As a result, despite the power of God’s actions, the Israelites are not passive. Their activeness is highlighted and expressed through the act of guarding, which takes place over time. Thus, an act in the present becomes, in essence, an act that is oriented towards the future.

2. Guarding in the Future

Guarding is an act that is required in the future in order to remember the past. As the verse states: “You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as a law for all time” (12:17). Memory is not a passive phenomenon; rather, it is an active process unfolding in the present and operating in relation to the past. It is not something that is occasionally drawn upon, but rather an ongoing action occurring in the present that can lend meaning and significance to the past.



3. Guarding the Past

Guarding not only accompanies the present and the future, but also provides perspective—drawing back before the present: “The length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of the 430th year, to the very day... It was for God a night of vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that same night is God’s, one of vigil for all the children of Israel throughout the ages” (12:40, 42). Thus, the present itself is understood and given meaning from the historical context—it is not just a starting point, and it does not occur in a vacuum. Its significance is derived from its connection to the past.

The essence of the commemoration that the Book of Exodus teaches us in this chapter is expressed by a vibrant and dynamic young generation, addressing the future in relation to its past. The core of this future remembrance, achieved by future generations taking on the responsibility of “guarding” the memory, is revealed through a dialogue set in the future: “When your children ask you, ‘What does this service mean to you?’ You shall say, ‘It is a pascal offering to God, Who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt’” (12:26-27).

This passage reveals a fascinating perspective on the future through three key points:

- (a) **An enduring future:** The text expresses an optimistic and remarkable belief in a future generation, even amidst crisis and uncertainty. It assumes a continuing lineage, where future Israelites will carry the torch.
- (b) **A distant memory:** The future generation will be so far removed, at least in their understanding, from the historical context of the Exodus. They won’t inherently grasp the significance of the commemorative rituals.
- (c) **Critical descendants:** These future descendants will end up questioning the practices of the commemoration. While it suggests the need to actively re-engage with



the past in every generation, it also opens the possibility of a dynamic and evolving relationship with the past.

Since the horrible attack on October 7th, I have personally felt that we are in a moment in history that has similarities to the Pesah Mitzrayim of so long ago. What is happening to the Jewish people—what we have been involved in over the last six months—feels historically significant. But the moment feels so weighty and overwhelming that it's easy to be swallowed up by it. It's easy, at times, to feel overpowered and unmoored by the turbulence of the storm we're in. That's why now more than ever the experience of the Israelites in Egypt is so crucial. Like they did so long ago, we can anchor ourselves in the context of our distant past, and reshape our present by imagining what we intend to bestow upon generations to come. And perhaps, just as for our ancestors so long ago, this act of creating remembrance can be a powerful source of hope for us once more.

