

TELLING THE REAL STORY

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The Mishnah in Pesahim provides a basic framework for how to tell the Pesah story, מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח / beginning with degradation and ending in praise" (Mishnah Pesahim 10:4). This is a helpful guideline for the telling of any story; listeners like to hear a story of triumph and victory. The overcoming of adversity increases the dramatic tension. But at the Pesah Seder, we aren't telling people stories that they don't know; there is no real element of suspense. Even the children who don't know why we lean or why we dip twice know that in the end of the story, everything turns out alright. If we hadn't been redeemed, we wouldn't be alive to hear and tell the story. So why do we need to start in the low place? Why don't we just start the Seder with Hallel, praising God for our freedom?

The requirement to tell the story in this manner, moving from the negative and going to the positive, serves another function. Telling the story from the difficult beginning accentuates the complexity of growth, healing, and success. All redemptive processes leave their scars. The struggle is not forgotten even once the victory has been obtained. The costs are still real, and the trials at the outset are an inextricable part of the joyful conclusion. There is no freedom without the slavery that precedes it. The praise at the end of the story derives its reality and its relevance from our awareness of where the story began.

We need this rule to be in place when we tell our own stories because it reminds us that everyone we encounter is carrying their past with them. Our Rabbis teach in the Mishnah:

משנה בבא מציעא ד:י

כשם שאונאה במקח וממכר כך אונאה בדברים... אם היה בעל תשובה לא יאמר לו זכור מעשיך הראשונים
אם הוא בן גרים לא יאמר לו זכור מעשה אבותיך
שנאמר "וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו" (שמות כב:כ)

Mishnah Bava Metzia 4:10

Just as there is exploitation in business transactions, there is also exploitation in speech... If he is a penitent, no one should say to him, "Remember

your prior deeds." If he is the child of converts, no one should say to him, "Remember the deeds of your ancestors," as it says, "Do not exploit a convert (lit. stranger or refugee) and do not oppress him" (Shemot 22:20).

Telling our story with all of the difficult pieces intact reminds us to be sensitive in this way. The penitent never fully "moves past" his old ways, and therefore, it is cruel to remind him of his past behavior. The child of converts never forgets where they came from and are always concerned about belonging. What you think of as old scars and topics that can be referenced lightly might still be felt as acute and festering wounds by the person who bears them. A person can be in a new stage in their life, look and feel fine, and all it might take to bring them back to their most painful moment could be the offhand comment that you make to them.

A person who is remarried is not necessarily free from the devastation of the loss of their first spouse. Someone who has struggled with infertility might not have forgotten the months and years of disappointment in trying to conceive, even once they've had children. Getting the new job does not erase the sense of shame and insecurity that prolonged unemployment can bring.

When we tell the story of our redemption from the beginning, incorporating the suffering into our narrative, we make the telling real. This process should increase our awareness of the pain that can endure beyond any happy ending. The story of our freedom includes the story of our shackles. Every year, we repeat, "*avadim hayyinu*, we were slaves," because that slavery remains a part of us. The Haggadah reminds us of the ways in which our history still marks us, how everything we've endured still shapes us, our feelings, and our perceptions.

And we should use the awareness of our own painful moments to increase our sensitivity to the hidden pain of the people we encounter. ♦