

THE EXODUS THAT CONTINUES

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PESAH IS THE anniversary of our redemption from Egypt, so it is not surprising that, during this holiday, we are called upon to tell the story of the Exodus and remember that God took us out of Egypt. However, Sukkot and Shavuot are also in remembrance of the Exodus, and in fact we are called upon to remember the Exodus **every day** when we recite the Shema. What is more surprising is that so many of the *mitzvot* that we have are bound up with the notion that God took us out of Egypt. A connection to the Exodus is repeated over thirty times in the Torah,¹ and applies to dozens of *mitzvot*. So it is clear that remembering that God took us out of Egypt is a core and constant part of what it means to observe *mitzvot* and have a relationship with God. But why? Why does the Torah keep on drawing our focus back to this event?

One way to understand this emphasis is as a call to gratitude. Because God took us out of Egypt, we owe Him our thanks. Moreover, we owe God our loyalty. We are God's slaves now, and we must obey God. Were it not for God's interference we would still be slaves to Pharaoh, with no agency and with no dignity. We must perform the *mitzvot*, whether we want to or not, because how could we not do what God asks of us after all that we have received?!

I understand this explanation and find it coherent, but it also feels uncomfortable to me and maybe even counter-productive. There is something petty, and frankly even annoying, about someone who keeps on reminding you that you owe them, that you need to be grateful to them, implying that you would be nothing

without them. It is certainly true that we ought to be grateful, but it is also the case that constant reminders of that fact might inspire more resentment than loving obedience. For example, gratitude and loyalty are the least we owe to our parents. But does it benefit the parent-child relationship for parents to lord that over their children? Is it healthy for parents to speak overly much about how they must be obeyed? Probably not.

R. Tzadok ha-Kohen, however, reads these repeated calls to remember the Exodus differently. He notes that remembering the Exodus is considered a key component of the experience of keeping Shabbat:

דברים ה:טו

וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצִיאֲךָ ה'
אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה; עַל כֵּן צִוְּךָ
ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת.

Devarim 5:15

*And You should remember that you were
a slave in the land of Egypt and HaShem
your God took you out from there with
a strong hand and an outstretched arm.
Therefore HaShem your God commands
you to observe the Shabbat day.*

And he asks our question: Why is keeping Shabbat linked to the Exodus?

R. Tzadok explains what he thinks is the true nature of this relationship by framing the Exodus from Egypt in spiritual, rather than physical, terms. He refers to the

¹ You can find a complete list (in Hebrew) on the website Mehalkei ha-Mayim:
<https://www.mayim.org.il/?holiday=הרחבה-מצוות-זכירת-יציאת-מצרים-הרחבה#gsc.tab=0>.

Zohar, which characterizes Egypt as a source of impurity. Accordingly, *yetzi'at mitzrayim*, leaving Egypt, should actually be seen as a process of purification. When God took us out of this physical land, He was simultaneously extracting the people of Israel from their own place of spiritual darkness and distance. According to this Kabbalistically-influenced framing, the emergence from Egypt is not only, or even primarily, a process of physical emancipation; rather it is also a process of spiritual growth and reconciliation with one's original, pure self.

God's saving us from slavery and taking us out of Egypt does not merely create the material conditions for us to be able to serve God—for we now have the free time to do so—but also creates the spiritual conditions for us to serve God correctly and to fear God. Now that we are no longer sunk in the depths of impurity, we are capable of embodying and performing holiness. According to R. Tzadok, the connection between emerging from Egypt and serving God is not that we serve God in order to pay off a debt of gratitude. The reason they are linked is that the Exodus enabled us to serve God. Being pure enough to serve God was impossible before we went through the growth process of being extracted from the depths of Egypt. Remembering the Exodus is our acknowledgment of that transformation.

R. Tzadok further explains that the constant reminders that we have about God's taking us out of Egypt are not a way for God to needle us about something that we already know; they aren't plaintive and insistent reminders that we ought to do what's right. Rather they are the Torah's way of reminding us of who we are now that we have left Egypt. Now that we are free, now that we are pure, we are capable of doing what is holy and what is right:

פרי צדיק, ואתחנן

וענין של זכרון יציאת מצרים שהזהירו עליה כמה פעמים - הוא כדי שלא יפול האדם בעצמו אחרי שיחשוב וידע נגעי לבבו ושלא יתיאש חס ושלום. ... לזה נזכר יציאת מצרים להורות - שאף מי שמשוקע חס ושלום - בכל מקום שהוא מכל מקום זרע ישראל - לא ידח ממנו נדח - מאחר שקשורים בשורש בה' יתברך - ואם אך ירצה לשוב לה' ולדבקה בו יעזרהו ה' יתברך כימי צאתנו מארץ מצרים.

Peri Tzaddik, Va'Ethanan

And the idea of remembering the Exodus from Egypt about which we were warned numerous times is so that a person should not fall within himself after he thinks and knows the influences of his heart, and he shouldn't despair, God forbid. ... This is why the Exodus from Egypt is mentioned, to demonstrate that even one who is sunk, God forbid, in whatever place he is, he is nevertheless the seed of Israel [who] will not be entirely pushed aside,² because they are tied into the source in the Blessed God. And if a person wants to return to God and to cleave to Him, Blessed God will help him, just like the days of our departure from the land of Egypt.

R. Tzadok understands that the constant reminders around the Exodus are not guilt trips, they are encouragements. They are designed to help us see how far we've come. God does not need to tell us that we are indebted, to nag us and make us feel guilty and obligated. Rather, remembering that God took us out of Egypt reminds us that God is there to support us and help us grow.

Because R. Tzadok views Egypt in spiritual terms, he also believes it is an emotional place—or mindset—to which we are at constant risk of returning. And because he views the Exodus as a spiritual process of internal redemption, he also sees the healthy emergence from the low state that Egypt represents as something that we can experience for ourselves if only we need it, want it, and work towards it. The Torah needs to remind us of the Exodus precisely because it is not a singular historical event, but because it is a constant, recurrent possibility.

Yes, we do *mitzvot* because we were redeemed, but we also **can** do *mitzvot* only because we were redeemed. And whenever we feel that we have fallen, whenever we feel unredeemable, we are called upon to remember that Egypt is not a permanent state of being. If we left Egypt once, we can emerge from it again. ♦

2 See 2 Samuel 14:14.