

# ON PESACH, IDENTITY AND MORAL COURAGE

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The seder service is the oldest and newest of all religious rituals. Nothing in the culture of the West remotely compares to its antiquity. And yet each year we discover in it something new, something which speaks directly and with undiminished power to our contemporary situation. The Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, offers three short essays on aspects of the Exodus story to stimulate thoughts of your own around the seder table.

## 1. Moses' Question

The first question Moses asked God was *Mi anokhi*. Not 'Who are You?' but 'Who am I?'

At a simple level Moses was asking a simple question. Who am I to stand before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the Jewish people? What makes me worthy of this task? Moses was already showing that aspect of his character that made him the unique leader he became. He was modest, 'more humble', as the Torah later states, 'than anyone else on the face of the earth'. He had no sense of personal grandeur, no driving belief in his own destiny. He led not because he thought he was great but because the task was real, the need undeniable, the hour pressing and the call inescapable. He led because God left him no choice other than to lead. He had, in Shakespeare's words, greatness thrust upon him.

But at a deeper level Moses' was a different question. Who was Moses? How would a biographer have

described him at that point? He was found and adopted by an Egyptian princess, raised in Pharaoh's palace and brought up as an Egyptian prince. When, after the events that led to his flight to Midian, he rescued Jethro's daughters, their report to their father was, 'An Egyptian rescued us'. In appearance, manner, dress, speech he was an Egyptian – not a Hebrew, an Israelite, a Jew.

Moses' question, therefore, cut to the core of identity. Perhaps it is a question asked in some form or another by every adopted child. Who am I? Am I the child of those who brought me up? Or am I the child of my biological parents, Amram and Jochabed? Am I an Egyptian or an Israelite? A prince or a slave? Where do my loyalties lie?

In Moses' case it was no ordinary question. The implications were vast. Was he one of the rulers or the ruled? One of the powerful or powerless? Did he belong to the persecutors or the persecuted? The alternatives could not have been more extreme. Before him lay, on the one hand, a life of ease and honour; on the other, an uncertain fate fraught with suffering and pain.

Nor was it made easier by Moses' first experience of the Jewish people. Intervening to save one of them from the brutality of an Egyptian taskmaster, the next day he found himself pilloried by the very people to whose defence he had come. The first recorded words spoken to Moses by an Israelite were, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' Not yet a leader, he already

found his leadership being challenged. It was the first intimation of what was to become a recurring theme of the Mosaic books. The Jewish people is not an easy people.

Perhaps Moses thought he could avoid the question. His flight to Midian was an escape from physical danger. He had killed an Egyptian officer. He faced a capital charge and a warrant was out for his arrest. But it was also an escape from the psychological burden of choice. Midian was neutral space. In Midian you do not have to decide whether you are an Egyptian or an Israelite. Moses was simply – as he said at the birth of his first child – 'a stranger in a strange land'. Not an Egyptian or an Israelite but an outsider, someone who could have been either, whose origins were obscure but perhaps no longer relevant.

What Moses discovered, alone with his flocks on the mountain, was that there are choices from which we cannot hide. Almost the first words God says to him are, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' God is not here telling Moses who God is. The answer to that question comes later, in one of the most haunting, enigmatic statements in religious literature: *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, 'I am who I am.' Or, 'I will be who I will be.' In his earlier speech God is not telling Moses who God is but who Moses is. He is the son of his father, the descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is not a prince of Egypt but a child of Israel. And being a child of Israel, he

cannot, may not, be indifferent to their fate.

In a very real sense, Moses is a symbol of our time. Britain is our Midian – a place untouched by the tyranny of the Holocaust, the Egypt of the twentieth century. Midian is somewhere else, neutral space, where the question of identity is no longer so pressing, where in the fullness of time a Jew can forget that he or she is a Jew.

But can we? Can we forget and still be honest with ourselves? Today, in an age of post-modernism and deconstruction, there is an assumption that identity is no longer fixed, absolute, given. We can be whatever we choose to be, and for however long or short a time. Cultures are no longer monolithic. We inhabit diversity. We can try out any of the world's literatures or cuisines or faiths. Already through the Internet – the so-called Multi-User-Domains – we can embark on a series of relationships in fictitious or simulated roles. Virtual reality will make this an ever more convincing experience. Post-modern identities, Michel Foucault argued, are not discovered but invented. We are who we decide to be.

But there comes a moment for each of us, as it did for Moses, when the question *Mi anokhi*, 'Who am I?' is inescapable. There is only one answer. Imagine Moses, having asked the question, hearing the following words by way of reply: 'You are whoever you choose to be. You can be an Egyptian and live the life of a prince. You can be a Midianite and spend the rest of your days as a shepherd, untroubled and obscure. You can be an Israelite in exile, dreaming distant dreams. Or you can go back to Egypt and take your place among the slaves. Feel free to choose. Remember: nothing matters except what you want. Don't let me influence you in any way.'

We know, without having to be told, that this cannot be the voice of God. It is the voice of fantasy, in which nothing exists except our desires. Increasingly we are building

a culture of fantasy. Reality is not fantasy. It is that which exists regardless of our choices. Objects are real because they impede our movement. People are real because they have wills of their own. Reality is the world we did not choose to enter. And we discover our place in it, ultimately, by learning who did choose that we should enter it, and why; by reflecting on who our parents are, and where they came from, and what their story is.

That is why Jewish identity (converts excepted) is a given at birth – and why Pesach is the oldest and most profound answer to Moses' question, 'Who am I?' For I learn who I am by hearing my ancestors' story and knowing that I am one of its characters. I enter it midway, and whatever I choose will itself be part of that story, and I can opt out of it only at the cost of being false to my past and to myself.

That is the fundamental significance of the Haggadah, and why the seder service begins with questions asked by a child. On the surface, the Haggadah answers the question, 'What is this?' What is Pesach, matsah and maror? But beneath the surface the real question is, 'Who am I?' The greatest gift we can give our children is to tell them the story of where we came from and who our ancestors were. For we discover who we are, not by an outward journey into the culture and society that surrounds us, but by an inward journey into who gave us birth, and who bore them, and what happened to them to make them what they were.

God gave Moses his identity when He told him that he was a child of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their story was his, and the time had come to write a new chapter. And that – no less – is what we give our children on Pesach. 'This is your people and its story. Take it and make it yours. A hundred generations have each added their chapter. And there is one which bears your name, and only you can write. This is the past of which you are the future. This is who you are.'

## 2. The Jewish Story

If you want to understand a people, listen to the way it tells its stories.

In telling the story of the Exodus, the Mishnah states a simple rule. *Matchil bigenut umesayyem bishevach*, 'Begin with the bad news, end with the good.' To be sure, Rav and Shemuel differed as to what this meant in practice. Shemuel held that it meant telling the story of the Exodus, beginning with slavery and ending with redemption. Rav argued that it meant telling the wider story of Jewish identity, beginning with the idolatrous background from which Abraham emerged and culminating in the covenant at Sinai. In fact, on seder night, we do both. However, Rav and Shmuel disagreed only on the scope of the story, not its structure. Both understood that a Jewish story is one that begins with the bad news and ends with the good.

In the literature of humanity there are several kinds of story. There are those – we know them from childhood – that end with the words 'And they all lived happily ever after'. We call them fairy stories, fantasies. In their world the evil dragon is slain, the wicked witch defeated, the curse lifted, the conflict resolved. Judaism is not about such stories. The battle against evil is not complete. The messianic age has not yet come. Until then we live in a world in which after Pharaoh comes Amalek, and after Amalek, other tyrants. Injustice must be fought in every generation. The legacy of the Exodus is not a world in which 'they all lived happily ever after'. Instead it is Shabbat – a world in which rest is temporary but no less real for that, in which, one day in seven, we experience pure, unmediated freedom and gain the strength to continue the journey and the fight.

A second great literary genre, which we owe to the Greeks, is tragedy. Tragedy tells the story of mankind in a world governed by impersonal forces. To be human is to dream, to wish, to plan. But our dreams crash against the rocks of a



reality fundamentally indifferent to our existence. Oedipus and the other great figures of Greek drama fail to defeat the forces of fate, as they were bound to do. Hubris is always punished by nemesis.

The Judaic vision is the denial of tragedy. Our hopes are not illusions. Our dreams are not destined to fail. The reason is that beyond the impersonal forces of nature is God, not God the 'first cause' alone, Creator of the world, but God who intervenes in history, who rescues slaves and relates to humanity in whom He has set His image. God is the objective reality of the personal, the Thou at the heart of being. Because of this, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we do so without fear 'for Thou art with me'. In our journey through 'this dark world and wide' we are not alone. There are tragic moments. But there is no tragedy in the Greek sense. Defeat is not written into the script. To the contrary, written into the very structure of the narrative is the promised land, the good society, the destination beyond the horizon which we have not reached but which we know is there.

The principle of *matchil bigenut umesayyem bishevach* applies to more than the Pesach story alone. It is the shape of Jewish narrative as a whole. The book of Bereshit, dominated by sibling rivalry, ends on a sublime note of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. The Mosaic books end with Moses on the very brink of fulfilment, seeing with his own eyes the land to which he has led his people for forty years.

Had these been Greek books, we would have had a very different division. The book of Bereshit might have run on into the first chapters of Shemot. The Mosaic canon might have included Joshua (the so-called Hexateuch). The biblical story would then have been retold as tragedy. The peaceful scene between Joseph and his brothers would have been only a prelude to Egyptian slavery and persecution. The hopes

of Moses would have been mere dreams when set against the troubled story of Israel in its land in the days of judges and kings. Our moral imagination is shaped not only by what happened but also, and even primarily, by how we tell the story of what happened; where we begin and where we end; how we frame our telling of events.

*Matchil bigenut umesayyem bishevach* is the rejection of fantasy and tragedy, optimism and pessimism alike. The Jewish story does not ask us to believe in a world in which there is a simple happy ending. Nor does it allow us to believe that every aspiration ends in failure. In the long run, justice always prevails over oppression. Freedom always triumphs over tyranny. But the battle must be fought again and again, just as the story of the Exodus must be told in every generation.

Judaism is not blind to the existence of evil. We feel it, taste it, in the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery. But neither is it resigned to it in Stoic acceptance. If you seek to understand the Jewish people, listen to the way it tells its story. A people whose narrative 'begins with the bad news and ends with the good' is a people who, knowing the reality of evil, discovered the route from suffering to hope.

### 3. The Courage of Women

Ask anyone who the human hero of the Exodus is, and the answer is almost certain to be Moses. It was he who confronted Pharaoh, he who together with his brother Aaron performed the signs and wonders, he who led the people out of Egypt into the desert and the long road to freedom. Moses dominates our consciousness of the biblical story – Moses the prophet, the leader, the lawgiver, the epic figure standing between God and the people Israel, wrestling with both.

Yet the opening chapters of the book of Shemot tell another story, one no less fascinating, perhaps

more so. A close reading of the text reveals that most of its heroes are heroines. The story of the going out from Egypt is, above all, the story of six remarkable women. Without Moses there might have been no exodus. But without the heroism of women there would have been no Moses. Who were they?

- The first and second were Shifra and Puah, the midwives who defied Pharaoh's order that they should kill every male child.
- The third was Jochebed, wife of Amram and mother of Miriam and Aaron, who had the courage to have a child despite the risk that, if it were a boy, it would be drowned.
- The fourth was Miriam, Moses' sister, who watched over the fate of the child at some danger to herself, and resourcefully secured its return to be nursed by Jochebed.
- The fifth was Tsipporah, Moses' Midianite wife, who accompanied her husband on what both knew would be a hazardous mission, and whose promptness in circumcising her son saved – so the text implies – Moses' life.
- The sixth, in some ways the most remarkable, was Pharaoh's daughter who adopted Moses, knowing him to be a Hebrew, and brought him up in the very palace in which her father was plotting genocide.

Each of these is a vignette of courage in the face of tyranny that today still compels our admiration. To gain some sense of the degree of heroism involved, try reading the biblical story with Germany substituted for Egypt, and for Pharaoh, Hitler. These were brave people by any standards, undaunted by tyranny and the fear of death. Let us consider just one in greater detail, the case of Shifra and Puah.

One of the landmarks in the moral history of mankind was the judgment against Nazi war criminals in the Nuremberg trials of

1946. This established that there are certain crimes in relation to which the claim that 'I was just obeying orders' is no defence. There are laws higher than the law of the state. There are crimes against humanity which remain crimes, whatever the law of the country or the orders of a government. There are laws, quite simply, that one is morally bound to disobey; times when civil disobedience is the morally necessary response.

This principle, articulated by the American writer Henry David Thoreau in 1848, inspired many of those who fought for the abolition of slavery in the United States, as well as the late Martin Luther King in his struggle for black civil rights in the 1960s. Where does the idea come from? What political philosophy gives rise to the idea that there are moral limits to the state, that there is a law above the law?

We are familiar with the idea that the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, was a spiritual revolution – the birth of monotheism against the backdrop of a world of many and contending gods. But it was also, and not least, a political revolution. For the first time a whole series of ideas appeared which, ever since, have shaped our concept of a good society: the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, freedom as an ideal, equality before the law, and welfare as a requirement of social justice. The Mosaic books are, quite simply, one of the most influential of all political texts.

The social order of the ancient world – the Sumerian city states and the Egypt of the Pharaohs – was hierarchical and absolute. The kings themselves were seen as gods. The structure of society, so myth and ritual proclaimed, mirrored the deep structure of the universe. The ziggurats of Babylon and the monumental temples of Egypt were visible symbols of total power. The idea that there might be some other source of authority, prior to and independent of the state, was unthinkable. In the world of myth, to challenge the king was to defy reality itself.

Against this background, the full drama of the Exodus becomes clear. It was more than the liberation of slaves. Moses' mission was nothing less than a complete redrawing of the human landscape. If God is not in nature but above it, then neither is He 'in' any existing order of society. A transcendent God relativises all social structures. For the first time they can be seen for what they are: things made by man that can be unmade by man.

A quite astonishing proposition is taking shape. The image of God is to be found, not in kings only, but in the human person as such. All human life is sacred. All power that dehumanises is *ipso facto* an abuse of power. Slavery, far from being part of the natural order of things, is intolerable, a crime not only against man but against God. 'My son, My firstborn, Israel.' In these monumental words, the God of heaven and earth says to Ramses, the Egyptian sun-king: they may be your slaves but they are My children. The story of the plagues is both theological and political. Theologically they affirm that the Creator of nature is supreme over the forces of nature. Politically they state that over every human power stands the sovereignty of God, defender and guarantor of the rights of mankind.

In such a universe, the concept of civil disobedience is not revolutionary but self-evident. The very notion of authority is defined by the sovereignty of right over might. Even when wrongfully challenged, leadership has to justify itself. Hence Moses' words to God during the Korach rebellion, 'I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them.' Indeed, in one of the truly revolutionary moments in history, social criticism is born in Israel simultaneously with institutionalisation of power. No sooner are there kings, than there are prophets mandated by God to criticise kings.

Nor is this part of Israel's internal politics alone. It applies equally in

exile. The books of Daniel and Esther – the classic exilic texts – could almost be described as variations on the theme of civil disobedience. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden image. Daniel disobeys Darius' command to worship him alone. Mordekhai will not bow down to Haman. A 'stiff-necked people' may sometimes find it hard to worship God. But it will certainly worship nothing less!

So, by the time we come to the Talmud, the principles of civil disobedience are clear. There is no 'agency for wrongdoing'. If X commands Y to do something wrong, and he does so, Y is to blame even though he was only obeying orders. The reason is simple: 'If there is a conflict between the words of the master and the words of the disciple, whose words should one obey?' No human command overrides the commands of God.

It is often thought that the Western political tradition is built on the foundations of ancient Greece. In one sense it is. The Greeks were master theorists of the forms of government. 'Democracy' – rule by the people – is a Greek concept. What the Greeks lacked, however, was any theory of the moral limits of power. The result was described by Lord Acton. The Athenians, he says, were 'the only people of antiquity that grew great by democratic institutions'.

Their experiment, though, ended in failure for this reason: 'the possession of unlimited power, which corrodes the conscience, hardens the heart, and confounds the understanding of monarchs, exercised its demoralising influence on the illustrious democracy of Athens.' Their mistake was to believe that 'there is no law superior to that of the State – the lawgiver is above the law'. Without an overarching moral law, democracy – as Alexis de Tocqueville said – has no defence against the 'tyranny of the majority'. Greek political thought is about the sovereignty of



the state. Jewish political thought is about the sovereignty of God, and hence the moral limits of the state. That is why the Torah will always stand as the foundational text of human liberty.

How moving, therefore, it is that the first recorded instance of civil disobedience in history is the story of Shifra and Puah, two ordinary women defying the greatest ruler of the ancient world in the name of simple humanity. Midrashic tradition added much to the bare bones of the biblical narrative. But the story as it stands – told in a mere seven verses – is limpid in its clarity. They ‘feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do.’ That is all. But it was enough to change the landscape of the world.

Perhaps one further note is in place. Greek literature does know of one famous case of disobedience – Sophocles’ Antigone, who buries her brother in defiance of King Creon who has ruled that he stay unburied as a traitor. Sophocles’ play, though, is a tragedy. Antigone pays for her defiance with her life. Contrast this with the end of the biblical story. Shifra and Puah were not sentenced to death. Instead, ‘because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own’. Luzzatto’s comment is insightful. Sometimes women become midwives to compensate for their infertility. That was the case with Shifra and Puah. Because they saved the lives of other people’s children, God blessed them with children of their own. In

Judaism the moral life is not fated to be tragic. The classicist and politician Enoch Powell once said, ‘Every political career ends in failure’. That is a Greek thought, not a Jewish one.

The opening chapters of Shemot are the story of one great man and six outstanding women. I have hinted at the significance of two of them. Somewhere, some day, a monument will be erected in the name of freedom, the sovereignty of God and the sanctity of life. It will bear the names of two women, Shifra and Puah, who by their courage first showed that though tyranny is strong, compassion is stronger still.

*The matsah, which represents the redemption was hidden for some time, and only at the end of the meal is it revealed. This symbolizes the ultimate Redemption. Once the latter is realized and is revealed, we will understand that it was with us all the time, throughout the centuries of suffering in the diaspora, although it was concealed from our view.*

(Rabbi Abraham J Twerski, *From Bondage to Freedom: The Passover Haggadah* Shaar Press, 1995)

Arnold de Vries is a London-based artist whose paintings reflect his deep attachment to Israel, Torah and the tapestry of events in Jewish history.

*Me’afelah le’or gadol [From Darkness to Light], captures some of the darker moments of our collective past and the light of redemption. The illustrations on pp. 18, 39, 46, 52 and 54, are studies for the painting.*

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*‘This is your people and its story. Take it and make it yours. A hundred generations have each added their chapter. And there is one which bears your name, and only you can write. This is the past of which you are the future. This is who you are.’*

Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, ‘On Pesach, Identity and Moral Courage’