

Shabbat Hol Hamoed Pesach 5783 - Where to Start the Passover Story?

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Shabbat Shalom.

Help me out here:

Let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start. When you read you begin with... ABC. When you sing, you begin with...Do Re Mi.

Sometimes knowing where to begin is easy, like with the alphabet. Yet it's not always so simple.

For example, if I were to ask you to tell me your family story, where would you begin? With the origins of your own immediate family? Or would you start with that of your parents, or even grandparents? But you know that your family story precedes your grandparents or the earliest generation you know about! So where does your family story truly begin?

The answer to where *our* family story begins, that of the Jewish family, is simple- it begins at Passover, when we left Egypt as slaves and became free. That's why the Torah says Nisan is the first month of the year, because the Jewish people were born at that time.

But where does the story of *Passover* begin? Now that's a complicated answer because there are multiple starting points.

A few weeks ago I shared a sermon about the multiple *endpoints* to the Passover story. Obviously we all know about the finish line of crossing the split sea. But there was also the moment even before they left Egypt when G-d gave them Rosh Hodesh, Jewish time; and there was receiving the Torah at Sinai seven weeks later; as well as the completion of the Mishkan/Tabernacle; Bob Berger later suggested to me that reaching the Promised Land 40 years later was also a finish line, and he is correct. Finally, every year at the Passover Seder is really a completion of the march towards freedom that began in Egypt. Those were the finish lines. Today I want to highlight four different starting points beginning with the Exodus and moving backwards in time.

It's tempting to start in the Book of Exodus, when every reader feels a chill when they read chapter 1 verse 8 - "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." We all know where this is headed, and it's all downhill from here. The rabbis disagree over whether this is actually a new Pharaoh or if it's the same Pharaoh with a new attitude.

How is it possible that Pharaoh would not know the basics of Egyptian history and that Joseph had saved his own country not too long ago? It's not possible, says the Midrash. The Etz Hayim Humash commentary quotes the Midrash: "Pharaoh knew that Joseph had saved Egypt but did not care. He did not let the information change his outlook." Then it adds: "through much of Jewish history, the people's well-being depended on the goodwill of a ruler. When the leadership changed, the fortunes of the Jewish community often changed as well."

Sadly, this was a pattern to recur too often and in too many places. When this Pharaoh takes over, whether he has a new outlook or is actually a new person, Boom - slavery begins. Without this wicked Pharaoh, there's no Jewish slavery in Egypt. And so begins the story of Jewish freedom.

But we have to go back further in time, because the Israelites do not all appear in Egypt by magic. How do they end up in Egypt to begin with?

Let's identify our second starting point. Recall the story that Jacob and his family of 70 permanently join his son Joseph in Egypt to live out the famine in Canaan. In order to survive, the family moves to be by the food which Joseph provides as Egypt's second in command. At first things are quite rosy, but the stage is set for that new wicked king who would arrive later. This second starting point is alluded to at the beginning of the last Torah portion in Genesis, Vayechi, which contains the narrative of the family going to Egypt. What's unusual about that Torah portion is that it's the only one in the entire Torah that begins not after a new line or a break in the text. Every other Parsha begins after what looks like in the Torah scroll a tab or hard return. But there is literally no extra space between the end of the previous portion and this one, Vayechi, as if to say the walls are closing in now. There is no room to breathe. This is the beginning of something bad. Without the Jewish family moving to Egypt, there's no Jewish slavery, and so no freedom either.

Our third starting point begins even earlier, because we have to account for how Joseph himself lands in Egypt. Let's go to the moment when Joseph's brothers throw him in a pit and then sell him as a slave down to Egypt. Remember what comes next: The brothers take Joseph's colorful coat, slaughter a *goat*, and dip the coat into the *blood* to present to their father in an act of horrific deception. That moment sets everything in motion because the Israelites are not slaves if Joseph doesn't end up in Egypt. And recall a moment generations later which will signal the imminent freedom of the Jewish people. Remember that right before they leave Egypt, the Jews are to slaughter a lamb or *goat* and place its *blood* on the doorposts of their homes for the angel of death to pass over them. These two acts are incredibly similar, and they serve as bookends of a

sort, of the Egyptian experience. It's like the Jewish people slaughtering the lamb and placing the blood is a Tikkun - a correction - of the brothers selling Joseph and then covering it up. Without the brothers selling Joseph to Egypt, there's no Jewish slavery in Egypt, and certainly no freedom.

But we can go back even further. There is an astonishing verse early in the Torah that maps this out hundreds of years in advance. In Genesis 15, G-d is talking to Abraham. And this is so long ago, he is technically not yet Abraham, but simply Abram, as his name has not yet been changed. In the Covenant Between the Parts, called Brit Bein Habetarim, G-d tells Abraham what will happen to his people: "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed 400 years. But I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they should go free with great wealth...And they shall return here in the 4th generation."

You heard that right. G-d called the shot 400 years before it happened. G-d wanted the Passover story to happen exactly as it did because it would be the crucible for the Jewish people and propel them forward for all time. Not just Jewish people, but all peoples who are inspired by this ancient story of the pursuit of freedom. We must include this starting line in our telling of Passover because it's the moment G-d decides this is best for the Jewish people and for the world. For all to see that G-d sides with the oppressed and the enslaved and that G-d insists on their freedom. We retell the Passover story every single year to remind us and inspire us to redouble our efforts to ensure that all peoples around us are also free.

So there we have four different places to begin to tell the story of Passover and its freedom: when a new king arises over Egypt; when the Jewish family permanently moves to Egypt in Parashat Vayechi; when the brothers sell Joseph to be a slave in Egypt; and finally when G-d prophecies to Abraham that their people will be enslaved before being freed.

But why do we need four different starting points to one story? Wouldn't it be simpler if it would be like the alphabet, with just one place to start? Of course it would. But real life is not so simple.

I think this can be understood when we examine another question, by way of example: When was the moment the modern State of Israel began? Let's start with May 14th, 1948 - Israeli Independence Day. Surely that's it, right? Well, no, because no book about Israeli history begins there. We wouldn't have arrived at that 1948 moment without the UN Partition Plan vote on November 29th, 1947, when the world effectively

voted Israel into existence. But that was only possible because decades earlier the British gave the Jewish state its support in the 1917 Balfour Declaration. But we have to go back even further to Herzl for organizing the First Zionist Congress in 1897. But we can't start there because when Herzl arrived on the scene there was already a pre-existing network of Hovevei Zion groups throughout Russia that were Zionist even before Herzl was! So you see, there is no simple answer because there are multiple true answers to when Israel really got its start.

For similar reasons, we have multiple starting points for the Jewish slavery in Egypt, not just one. Were the Torah to simply give one date, we might lose focus that multiple events set this in motion. That multiple people had their fingerprints all over this story.

It also reminds us that slavery and freedom are not achieved in a moment but are its own process. That's why there are so many starting points and ending points to the Exodus story. Slavery is a process, freedom is a process. And to spell out this story in full, we can't begin with ABC.

Shabbat Shalom.