

Our words tonight are devoted to questions of Jewish identity and peoplehood, and what it means to stake a claim in that process. I feel blessed to be a part of this community, one which so prioritizes our own active role in the flourishing of our religious and spiritual lives, and the broadest, most inclusive definitions of Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood. I am grateful to our amazing rabbinic team, to Rav Avi for this opportunity and for more than I can express and for his editorial guidance, to Shira for helping me with this drasha and every step of the way, and to each of you for making this Bayit a home for me.

May our learning together challenge us each individually, and bring us closer together as a community and as a family and as a people.

I.

“My mother is Jewish, my father is Jewish, I am Jewish.”

American journalist Daniel Pearl - who would hardly have been considered actively Jewish in almost any classical conception - uttered these as his final recorded words 10 years ago before he was murdered in Pakistan, and Mayor Ed Koch chose these words as his epitaph before died. I love these words because of what they say and what they don't say.

They say something fundamental about how I think of myself. My core identity is my Jewishness. That is powerful.

But they don't say “My mother is Jewish, my father is Jewish, therefore I am Jewish.” Of course, my Judaism is informed by the Judaism of my parents, by the Judaism of my grandparents, and of my teachers, but it is committed to anew - and even defined anew - by me. Just as they created a Jewish identity for themselves, so do I.

But what do we mean when we say we are Jewish? And who is in charge of what that means? Is everyone who says, “I am Jewish” – actually Jewish?

Pesach is the night of staking our claim in the Jewish community. It's the night when we say, I would have put the blood on the doorpost and gone forth from Egypt, even if – as the Sages tell it – 80% of my neighbors wouldn't have. And so it should be the night of the year when we recommit to that assertion – I belong to the Jewish community. But it also has to be the night when we ask – even we who come to the Shabbat Hagadol drasha and already consider ourselves deeply immersed in Judaism and Jewish identity – when we ask what Jewish community actually means!

What does it mean for us? What does it mean for our relationships with non-observant relatives and friends, or our more observant relatives and friends? What does it mean for Diaspora Jews and for Israeli Jews?

Let me ask you – and myself - what is the tie that binds each of us to the Jewish people? Is it a commitment to family, or to history? Is it an independently-arrived at sense of faith in the God of Israel, a feeling of being commanded by our God? Or is it a belief in the righteousness of our system of law - ritual and ethical? Is it an intangible sense of almost-racial belonging and association? Is it an identification with the suffering we have endured when *עלינו לכלותינו בכל דור ודור עומדים* - that in every generation simply because of how we were born, we have been victims? Is it a passion for Israel, or an affinity to the particular culture of our people - from art to literature to philosophy to language? Do we feel these connections with great pride? Do any of them make us uncomfortable? It is almost certainly some combination of these, in some proportion, together with others I have not mentioned.

Without judgment of our personal answers to the question of what connects us to the Jewish people, tonight, informed by that descriptive question, I want to move from there to a prescriptive question, the question that I think *should* engage us on Pesach.

Not what *does* bind us to the Jewish people, but what *should* bind us to the Jewish people? What does our tradition tell us should be the defining characteristics of who we actually are as Jews? And as important - who determines those attributes of our identity? Can anyone - or anything - else tell me whether I am Jewish or not?

Let me suggest that one way to answer this question is to start at the beginning. Not the beginning with Avraham, but the beginning of our people, our nation. With the Torah and the Haggadah as our story and our guide, I want to suggest that by finding out who we were *when we became a people* - what our first formative identifiers were, we can understand something about who we are always supposed to be.

II.

So when and how do we become a nation? This question, in the Torah, is actually more complicated than we might think. We might suggest that it happens as late as when we enter the land of Israel - how can we be a people without an established homeland?

Or maybe earlier - when we receive the Torah! It is our covenant with God at Sinai that defines us as a people.

Or maybe even earlier - when we leave Egypt. When we stake our claim as a people who want to be free and enter into a relationship with God.

One can argue that in certain places the Torah substantiates all of these viewpoints. But I'd like to suggest it happens even earlier than any of these.

The promise of our nationhood is given to Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov over and over again in Bereishit. But only once does God say when this will happen, when God says to Yaakov (SOURCE 1), "Don't be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation - a גוי גדול - there". *It is only in this promise to Yaakov that we find out that we will become a nation - a גוי - in Egypt.*

And in fact, this is what happens. We become a nation in Egypt, not when we enter Eretz Yisrael, and not even when we receive the Torah, and not even when we leave Egypt, but simply over the course of the generations we spend in Egypt. At that time, we become a people, a nation, the גוי גדול that God tells Yaakov we will become.

And so when the Israelite farmer brings his first fruits to the Temple and looks back at the journey that brought him and his fruits to that moment, he says exactly this, in the text which, together with its midrash forms the core of the Haggadah.

(SOURCE 2 - VERSE 5)

The plain sense of the text reads like the plain sense of the Exodus narrative, that our father Jacob went down to Egypt, dwelt there, and became there a nation - great, mighty, and numerous.

Let's take some time to unpack this moment of nation-becoming. We know we became a nation, but what characteristics of us made that a reality? What was it about us that made us become a nation?

The Haggadah expands on this verse in beginning to define our nationhood in the Arami Oved Avi section on this phrase of becoming a great nation - the fulfillment of God's promise to Yaakov.

(SOURCE 3)

What the Torah called a great nation – גוי גדול, the Haggadah calls something altogether different: מצויינים שם. What does this actually mean? It tells us that the Children of Israel, in Egypt, were distinct. Marked by difference. That we stood out in some way. What is the foundation, the textual hook, of this midrashic interpretation?

In the version in our Haggadah, it seems to be the word גוי – nation – that grounds the Haggadah's interpretation. *We actually became a nation in Egypt. We were not just a group of assimilated Egyptians who began as Hebrews but had lost ourselves, and had now grown numerous as part of the Egyptian people, albeit as slaves. We were not an Egyptian slave class, or even a group of immigrants, being oppressed by the residents of the land. No - we became a גוי. We became something with a *distinct* identity, with a nature.*

But how? What constituted that identity? *What made us a גוי, and what made us מצויינים?* For this we really have to unpack the meaning of a single word: גדול (*gadol*).

If you look at the next source (SOURCE 4), you'll see that many versions of the Haggadah, from the Geonim and down through the medieval period, to The Vilna Gaon, and to Rav Soloveitchik, punctuate the midrash on this verse differently. They have our comment, about the Israelites being distinctive in Egypt, as a comment not on **ויהי שם לגוי** - there they became a nation, but on **ויהי שם לגוי גדול** - there they became a **great** nation. This makes sense, because almost every place in the Torah that we are described as a **גוי**, we are described as a **גוי גדול**. And so it seems like something about what made us stand out was our **גדול**-ness, our **גדלות** and our **גדולה**.

I want to suggest 3 interpretations of what **גדול** means in this pasuk, the first from the plain sense of the text of the Torah, and the latter two emerging from midrashic interpretations, but still deeply rooted in the peshat.

Each will take us in a different direction of what defines us a nation.

This first is the simplest – we grew great in numbers, from a family to a people, by virtue of sheer critical mass.

This is the plain sense of the text – but not only that, it is the whole thrust of the fulfillment of the promise to our ancestors.

Let's spend a few moments looking at the story of our formation as a nation in the first Chapter of Exodus, of Shemot.

(SOURCE 5)

The list of 70 descendants of Yaakov, listed in the end of Bereishit, is reproduced here, and we see a picture of a family. And suddenly, in 2 verses, verses 6-7, everything changes.

Yosef and his whole generation dies, and the children of Israel - *and perhaps here for the first time they don't simply mean the family of Jacob (Israel), but the people named Israel* - are fruitful and multiply many times over and greatly. Not only that, the Torah uses an unusual expression at the end of verse 7 - **ותמלא הארץ אותם** - the land was filled with them.

This is a deeply resonant phrase. This is the language of the promise - or the mandate - God gives to Adam in Bereishit Alef and repeats to Noah (SOURCE 6) after the flood. With all the spread of nations after the flood, and the Tower of Babel, this expression, of filling the earth, is *never used* from the time God charges Noah to do it - until now.

So something long-awaited is happening in this particular people being described as filling the earth. Something essential is coming into the world through this family turning into a nation. This really is the fulfillment of the promise that God made to our ancestors. If Avraham or Yaakov could have seen us then, they'd be amazed to know that their little family did actually produce hundreds of thousands - even millions - of people! Reaching that critical mass was momentous.

So perhaps this is what the midrash means when it says that גוי גדול means were we מצויינים – physically so. We were a hereditary group of Hebrews, or Canaanites, not Egyptians. So we looked different, and we imagine that we married our own - so we were a separate-looking people. In fact, the Vilna Gaon (cited in “An Exalted Evening” (Rav - OU Press) p.66-67)) suggests that גוי is linked to the word גויה, which means physical body. This is our racial definition of the Jewish people as a blood community. We were a family, we married our own, and we grew in numbers, and so we became a גוי גדול - a large nation.

In this racial definition of peoplehood, we are a family, unified by blood, where even converts are incorporated into this racial blood community. And when we grow to a critical size, we become a nation.

I get this definition – it is the part of me that stirs deep inside when a Jew I have never heard of or met is killed somewhere in the world. It is the part of me that mourns for every victim of Newtown, but feels a special connection to Noah Posner, and to his family, and to his rabbi, and to his shul. And it is the part of me that feels at home in a new place when I see or meet someone Jewish, without knowing a thing about them.

But I want to pose two problems with this description of our nationhood.

First, this definition is foisted on us from the outside. Turn back to verse 9 (SOURCE 5). Our first moment of description as a nation isn't our own or on our own terms - it is Par'oh, concerned about our population growth. I find it fascinating that in fact Par'oh is the first to call us a nation, an עם. And indeed, that has often been the case - we have been defined by our detractors, our enemies, and our oppressors, defining us through the lens of their fear, or hatred, or any agenda. We have been robbed of the opportunity for self-definition. A racial definition of Jewish peoplehood is too often imposed in a negative way by our enemies and does little work to explain why we should want to identify with this community.

Even if Par'oh is right to some degree – and he is - none of us can or should be satisfied with size and blood as a foundation of Jewish identity. To define ourselves as a people just because we went from being a family to being a people - this is not enough. To feel connected by blood – as powerful as it is – is a thin sense of identity. What is our purpose? What are our values? How do we define ourselves?

We could answer that as slaves, perhaps, we had no chance to define our own identity. Overworked and oppressed, how could we cultivate a sense of self-generated peoplehood? And indeed, so much of the Midrashic and Hasidic and Kabbalistic literature that talks about the Exodus talks about the idea that we were redeemed only because of God's kindness, despite our having sunk to the lowest levels in Egypt. But this, too, should not satisfy us. A Jewish identity that is imposed upon us by a redeeming God choosing us as a people may be far more welcome than an identity imposed upon us by a hateful enemy, but it is still imposed from the outside. It does not answer the central question of what deeper purpose and value grounds our sense of peoplehood.

And so the Sages were compelled in another direction, to ascribe to us the first stirrings of true and meaningful identity even in the midst of slavery.

III.

Here we turn to the second and third interpretations of what גדול might mean.

Many commentaries link this idea of מצויינים שם - גוי גדול not to physical standing out on account of population growth of a distinct nation, but something about our behavior that was different.

The Rabbis, in an extraordinary passage in the Midrash, actually posit what the substance of our becoming a people was in Egypt. I find these words very powerful. I find them so powerful because they clearly express Hazal's dissatisfaction with the sorts of answers we saw above. Hazal used the medium of midrash – of interpretation – to read back into the Torah a much more robust sense of the beginnings of peoplehood. Let us take a look.

(SOURCE 7 - read first two paragraphs)

This source suggests that the Exodus from Egypt had two components to it - Divine Hesed, and our merit. On the one hand, God had a promise to Avraham to fulfill, and the time had come, and it was simply God's promise and lovingkindness that freed us. But God wanted to do it on some merit of Israel, but God found us bereft of mitzvot to earn our Exodus. What to do? We find two very different answers.

R' Matya ben Harash suggests that it was the korban Pesah and the presumed brit milah which preceded it, the things we classically think of as "the first mitzvot we received as a nation", which merited our Exodus from Egypt.

What R' Matya is saying is that at the end of our journey in Egypt we finally got mitzvot, and then and only then did we become a distinct and unique nation ready to merit liberation. These mitzvot made us stand out.

So perhaps that *is* what defines us as a nation. In fact, in another midrash, the Rabbis use the very term from our Haggadah, מצויינים – marked – to refer to mitzvot. A tziyun, in Tanakh, is a guidepost or a sign - a marker that helps someone know where to go or not to go - *something that provides direction*. In a verse in Jeremiah 31 (SOURCE 8), we find God telling Yirmiyahu to tell Israel on their way to exile, הציבי לך צינים - "set up signposts" - so you can find your way back, so you don't get lost either physically or spiritually when you are in the Diaspora. What are the signposts that show us the way when we are in exile, ask the Rabbis? (SOURCE 9) They are mitzvot. That's what makes us distinct - even to ourselves. That's how we know – and remember – who we are.

So perhaps mitzvot are our defining characteristic, what form us as a nation, what made us become who we are.

And this is a second interpretation of גדול in the phrase שם לגוי גדול. The idea that גוי גדול might mean גדול במצוות – a nation made great by observing God’s commandments – is alluded to in a beautiful pasuk in Devarim Chapter 4.

(SOURCE 10)

Here Moshe is telling Bnei Yisrael what gadol truly means. In the plainest sense, the text is saying, “what other great nation is there that has...” these various attributes. But we also can read these verses as "מי גוי גדול? אשר "...לו - what makes a גוי גדול? A nation which has statutes of righteousness. This is Torah. When we finally get a few mitzvot, we can come together as a people, and become something great. Mitzvot are what define us.

I really get this. So much of the rhetoric of all the Jewish identity debates – not just today, but in our ancient texts, break our Jewish people down into those who observe mitzvot and those who don’t. And the bond I have with those who I know live the same ritual and ethical life as I do, who share that commitment to prayer and kashrut and Shabbat – is a deep and tight bond. When I meet someone who shares my commitment to the world of mitzvot, to Torah study, our conversation begins at a totally different point. I feel deeply Jewish in this definition.

But these mitzvot show up at the 11th hour of our sojourn in Egypt. We’ve already been formed as a people. This may have helped us merit redemption, but it did not create us as a people.

And allow me to pose a second challenge to this definition. Like the defining aspect of population growth – the physical גוי גדול, was in a way externally defined by Par’oh, this definition is externally defined by God. We are in covenant with God at Sinai, but at the same time that mountain was held over our head. *We did not define ourselves with mitzvot, we were commanded them. So while mitzvot are indeed integral to some sense of Jewish identity, they are not foundational – they cannot be the most basic thing that ties us together as a people.*

So we know the phrase גוי גדול refers to something great about us, and the word מצויינים means a distinction - a standing out - of substance, but it cannot be mitzvot. What is it?

Now we come to the second half of the midrash, and the third definition of gadol.

(SOURCE 7 - last paragraph)

R’ Eliezer Hakappar biRebbi shouts back at R’ Matya ben Harash!

He suggests that our worthiness of redemption was not the result of these last-minute, externally imposed mitzvot, given by God in the final hour. No - we didn’t need God’s mitzvot - we had our own self-legislated practices! We had innately within us four things that accompanied us our whole journey in Egypt, or at least much longer than just these last few days. These are the things which define us because they are the ways we defined ourselves. These

are our self-chosen, self-imposed, self-determined, aspects of peoplehood. And what are these four self-defined characteristics, these things so deep inside us that they make us a nation?

What a list – as powerful today as they were then:

We were not even suspect of being sexually immoral. We respected the sanctity of family and marital relationships - partnering only with whom it was appropriate and when it was appropriate - retaining our own sexual ethics in the face of the different Egyptian system. We did not try to compensate for the pain of physical bondage with sexual promiscuity - no, we kept our desires in check and lived in ways that honored each other's dignity in the realm of physical, bodily relationships.

We were not even suspect of abusive, hurtful speech. We treated language as holy, not profane. Even with the unimaginable strains of servitude, and the desire to get ahead just by criticizing a neighbor, or to let off steam through hurtful speech, we remained dignified. We recognized how potent words are, and we used them only for the right purposes.

We did not change our names. It's so obvious, and yet so powerful. How strong is the desire in a new place to fit in, to go by the names of the culture or the place. Par'oh gave Yosef an Egyptian name, and yet Yosef named his own children Hebrew names, and retained his Hebrew name. What a statement of commitment to tradition and family and history.

We did not change our language. Perhaps this is the greatest factor of our standing out. In an instant after meeting someone, we distinguished ourselves. We spoke in the language of our own ancestors, preserving something private, sacred, and personal, something that linked us to each other across generations and set us apart from the culture around us.

These are what made us metzuyanim. Not just looking different, a subgroup within Egypt. No - we stood out in our actions, our values, our commitments - and even our reputation - לא נחשדו - we were above suspicion. לא שינו - we were impervious, in *some senses*, to the surrounding culture.

We've noted up until now that our first definition as a nation was imposed upon us by Par'oh, frightened of our size and threat, and our second lovingly assigned by God, bound to us and remembering a promise to redemption. But only in this midrash do we see how *we made ourselves a nation* - the traits and practices which we committed to which help shape us as a people.

And what's even more amazing? This third definition as a nation – our defining characteristics that we took on ourselves - the Rabbis essentially made this up! Yes, they were interpreting texts, but they were, at the same time as saying the essential aspects of our identity are the ones we generate ourselves, actually generating those aspects themselves! They were modeling what they taught – that some part of what it means to be Jewish is actually what we decide it means, and what we make it for ourselves. It is in the act of grappling with our sacred texts and

interpreting them in ways that create meaning that Hazal find the answer to the question of what makes us a self-created people.

The midrash truly says this – look again! The mitzvot were things God had to give us to occupy ourselves - נתן להם ...הקב"ה שתי מצוות. But the four items on Rabbi Eliezer's list were already בידינו – in our hands (וכי לא היה בידם של "ישראל) – a part of us.

I deeply resonate with this idea. This is us telling ourselves who we are, investing our sense of peoplehood into the conversation.

So what *are* these aspects of our *self-realized identity*? Sexually appropriate behavior, careful speech, retention of our traditional names and our traditional language. They are not mitzvot, per se – what are they? How do we classify them, and what do they represent?

The midrash groups these four items into two pairs, even linguistically – our not being suspect: of sexual immorality and lashon hara; and our not changing: our names or our language. I want to think together about what these two pairs represent – two building blocks of our peoplehood that even stand independent of mitzvot.

The **first pair**, our not being suspect of sexual immorality and lashon hara, represents our moral identity. We were never suspect of sexual immorality or of speaking ill of a neighbor. This was our moral foundation. In becoming a people, we set standards for ourselves. Standards of self-restraint, standards of respect, standards of privacy, standards of human dignity. That was part of what it meant for this nation to become a nation - to make a universal expectation of its people that they abide by standards of behavior that make us better human beings for being held to that code.

I must comment here that I find it so striking how these two moral issues arise today.

Isn't it true that one of the biggest challenges, that has plagued us over the past few years, especially in the Orthodox community, is the question of sexual abuse within the ranks of our leaders? We must set the highest standards for interpersonal morals in sexuality, one of the hardest areas, in which human weakness is so real. This is central to our identity – we must be uncompromising in calling out and addressing wrongdoing in this area so that we are לא נחשדים – not even suspect of anything untoward. And one must never think that calling out a sexual abuser of any kind is lashon hara.

But - once those who have done wrong have been called out and the situation has been addressed, and out into the hands of those who make our community safe, we have to draw a line. Speaking ill of those who have done wrong, once there is no longer any purpose, once there is no longer any safety-promoting action to be taken - bad-mouthing them for bad-mouthing's sake is lashon hara. There is a reason this list is in the order it is in the midrash. Sexual appropriateness comes first. But then there comes a moment to remind ourselves that our speech must still remain sacred.

And these moral commitments create cohesive community because they set behavioral standards that help us trust each other. So many social and political philosophers have written about the ways in which forming cohesive groups depends just on this - on being able to trust each other, the living synchronous community of our peers. We need that desperately today - the sense that we can trust some foundational practices and commitments that can make us more at ease with each other, closer to each other. These shared morals create what I call (hand gesture!) horizontal community.

Looking back for a moment at this definition of Jewish community as based on shared morals, we may be inclined to say, “that’s great, but isn’t what really matters and defines us our genealogical heritage and connection?” In an amazing passage in the Talmud and the Rambam’s commentary on it, we see it may not be so clear.

(SOURCE 11)

The Talmud here is saying that these shared moral commitments and moral markers are what define us as a people, and one must have these to convert in. But Rambam goes even further

(SOURCE 12)

Rambam here says that people that lack these definitive character traits of Jews should have their lineage examined - they are suspect of not being part of the Jewish family! So sometimes our defining moral traits actually in some way override our most basic definition of Jewishness as based on blood and lineage.

But even morals alone do not define us as a people. They go hand in hand with culture.

This is the powerful **second pair** of defining characteristics - not changing our names or our language – which represents culture. What is culture? It is - in a way - the morally neutral shared identifiers of a community. Language is not fundamentally right or wrong. Neither are names - or art or literature. But they are our shared forms of expression and communication that set us apart - the ways we connect just to each other - the ways we feel just who we are. We need that to become a community, to become a people. Jewish culture, almost indescribable, and certainly hotly debated, is so much a part of who we are. Whether it is our names or our foods or our libraries in our homes, these are the parts of us that in certain ways most shape what it means to be Jewish.

And while our morals connect us in horizontal community, our culture also creates a connection to the past – to vertical community. **לֹא שִׁינּוּ אֶת שְׁמֵם וְלֹא שִׁינּוּ אֶת לְשׁוֹנָם** is also a statement about a commitment to prior generations. It is about saying, “if those who came before me did it this way, there is something special to it, and I want to do it that way, too.”

Let me illustrate this idea of vertical continuity with a powerful exchange detailed in the Midrash Eliyahu Rabbah. To get there, I must tell you that there are actually many later variations on this list of the things which merited the

Children of Israel their redemption - this list of foundational attributes of our peoplehood. In certain ways, each list reflected another vision of what the building blocks of Jewish communal identity must be.

While the oldest list is these four we've discussed, a different version includes that we did not abandon the covenant of brit milah.

Developing the notion of not giving up brit milah, the Eliyahu Rabbah expands this idea of vertical community even further.

(SOURCE 13)

Imagine this moment in Egypt - the Israelites have remained faithful to the practice of circumcision, even knowing that these baby boys could be taken from them at any moment. The Egyptians, eager to empty us of our distinct identity, offer to lighten our bondage - probably our greatest wish in Egypt in those days - if we just give up this practice (and of course we hear echoes in this midrash of the many times our surrounding societies - until today - have critiqued or challenged this fundamental covenantal act). But we refuse. Why? Because of loyalty to our ancestors. They didn't give up this cultural commitment - how can we? In fact it's so striking how it is not about *our own* commitment to God - it is about our commitment to our ancestors who did not abandon God!

In fact, I think this describes how many of us may feel precisely today about brit milah. For some of us, it is about commandedness - and about God. For others of us, it may be about the spiritual meaning of the ritual.

But for many of us, who may even feel uneasy about this act, it is about continuity of the tradition. Did our parents, our grandparents, our great-grandparents - abandon this tradition? No. So how can we? We cannot forget this part of our Jewish identity. Even as we continue to dynamically define it as we evolve, we must not sever the tie to our past.

In light of this midrash of the four foundational items - not being suspect of sexual immorality, not being suspect of evil speech, and not changing our names, and not changing our language, we have drawn some inferences about what our Jewish identity means.

First, that after Par'oh and God called us a nation, we were ultimately self-defined through these practices.

Second, that these practices teach us the building blocks of our Jewishness - morals and culture, and horizontal and vertical community. If the Rabbis envisioned these as what our defining characteristics in Egypt *were*, I believe they are telling us that these are what our defining characteristics *should be – even until today*.

This is the third definition of גדול.

For Rav Soloveitchik points out that the word gadol, while often taken to mean physically large, can also mean two other things.

First, it can mean mature, autonomous, and independent. When the Torah says that a child becomes gadol, it doesn't simply refer to his age or physical size, but to his growth to adulthood, to maturity. And so it is here, suggests the Rav. We became not a large nation, in particular, but a mature nation. Just as when child grows she cultivates her values, so, too, here - together with our growth in numbers was actually a formation of identity, of commitment to preserve our language and our names, our rituals, and our morals.

And we see this idea of gadol meaning responsible for each other – connected as a morally responsible community – when we look at the emergence of Moshe Rabenu, who seems to grow up - to become גדול - twice.

(SOURCE 14)

Moshe physically grows up in verse 10. But in verse 11, he grows up in the sense of taking responsibility. Feeling connected to his family, his community, the Jewish people. This act, of showing that growing up means taking responsibility for - of putting ourselves on the line for - our own people, is what our national formation was about when the pasuk says ויהי שם לגוי גדול.

The Gri"Z says this simply, plainly, and beautifully.

(SOURCE 15)

The term גוי גדול speaks of greatness in quality, not in quantity.

I think about these definitions – shared culture and connection to present and past, when I think about the complexity of peoplehood in Israel today. When an immigrant from the former Soviet Union, born of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother, makes aliyah and joins the IDF and dies in the line of duty, and is denied burial in a Jewish cemetery, we have to be troubled! It's not a simple thing, but we must find the ways to recognize that commitments of morals and culture should weigh heavily in Jewish identity and peoplehood.

And so the Torah and the Haggadah have told us three things in their sparse language describing the Children of Israel, transitioning from the House of Jacob to a People of Israel. They told us, in the plainest sense, that it means our family grew and multiplied, and became gadol - great in numbers, great in quantity, a nation of blood connection. But that was not enough.

They told us that we were given mitzvot, making us a nation great in its received tradition of obligation to commanded acts – ritual and ethical. But that was not enough.

And then they told us that the mature people we became in Egypt self-defined, made a commitment to morals and to self-preserved culture, created cohesive community and maintained a link to the past. And we need all of that today.

Now we can return to מצויינים in the Haggadah (SOURCE 3) - in Rabbinic Hebrew, it simply means marked. But in modern Hebrew, as we know, it has come to mean excellent. This is what we are challenged with. *The Jewish people - however we constitute ourselves, cannot simply stand out - we must be outstanding.*

IV.

But until now we have assumed that this vision of who we were when we became a nation remains as relevant for us today as when we were becoming a nation in Egypt.

In a fascinating responsum – on giving our children secular names – Rav Moshe Feinstein disagrees.

(SOURCE 16)

Rav Moshe suggests that even if Rabbi Eliezer Hakappar was right, that all of these self-definitions, the cultural and moral aspects of our identity, and the vertical and horizontal community which he cited, merited our redemption, they were *only* meaningful because they distinguished us *before we received the Torah!* Once we received the Torah, our entire Jewish identity was bound up in the 613 commandments. Nothing else was essential. The Torah doesn't command us to speak Hebrew, so it is not so important anymore whether we speak Hebrew or not, or even whether we take Jewish names or not. Yes, it is a preference, but what ultimately defines us as Jews today is mitzvah observance, not culture or morality or community connectedness.

In other words, Rav Moshe reads these midrashim in context - these foundational aspects of Bnei Yisrael that defined us in Egypt were just relevant for who we were in Egypt - when we were enslaved, and before we got the Torah. Once we were free, and we received the Torah, everything changed. The Torah became our basis for identity, and nothing else mattered that much.

I understand this inclination, but I see it a different way.

To me, the way we were formed as a nation in Egypt, prior to receiving the Torah - in fact because it was prior to receiving the Torah - constitutes something *most* foundational about who we are. There is a deep, basic part of our identity from before the Torah that must remain, that binds us together even when the Torah is not what binds us together.

That is, according to the Sages, it seems to me, our commitment to a cultural identity - names and language, and the commitment to our basic moral code - respect for each other's boundaries through arayot and each other's favorable judgments and wellbeing through lashon hara. In fact, this is why I think Rabbi Eliezer calls these items mitzvot! They were never commanded to us by God in Egypt, but *they were our mitzvot* – our sense of what it means to be a people.

This is perhaps one of the most live debates today about Jewish identity. What is the meaning of a powerfully self-identified Jew who speaks Hebrew and carries a Jewish name, and transmits that to the next generation, and is passionate about Judaism and Israel and Jewish culture, but does not observe halakhah. Or - the mitzvot that they do observe - it is not because they are mitzvot, because they are commanded. Where does that person fit into Jewish community and Jewish identity?

Isn't this Haverat Knesset Ruth Calderon? She is passionate about Talmud as our culture, she is deeply identified as a Jew, and she is creating opportunities for people to read the literature of our tradition, but she does not connect herself to the world of Torah and mitzvot in a traditional sense.

Rav Moshe would not understand her Jewish identity. But, I want to argue, Rabbi Eliezer Hakappar biRebbi would! He would not deny that the 613 commandments are our heritage and we're expected to challenge ourselves to observe them, but he'd find room to see in her Talmudic lecture on the Knesset floor a deep and rich Jewish identity.

And aren't these some of our friends and family who join us around the table at seder night? They may not choose traditional mitzvah observance, but they seek to connect to our Jewish culture, to the link to the present and the past that the seder night gives us. Rabbi Eliezer is telling us that they are Jewish in a fundamental way.

And isn't this our Bayit community? A place that aims to offer people a way in – a chance to preserve the link to the community of present and past, to feel a part of something without checking at the door for their mitzvah credentials? Rabbi Eliezer is telling us that the ties that bind all those that walk in this door seeking connection are greater than our differences.

And, if read against Rav Moshe, he is telling us that part of what is essential to Jewish identity is that we who count ourselves as defined largely by Torah and mitzvot need to challenge ourselves to look for the morals and culture of our people and deepen our connections to those things. And to ask ourselves what we have to contribute to the ever-evolving parts of those moral and cultural foundations. Because these aspects are בִּיְדֵינוּ – up to us.

V.

We asked what it means to be a nation, and who defines our identity, and we turned to the Haggadah's notion that וַיְהִי שֵׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל – מִלֵּמַד שֶׁהָיוּ מְצוּיִינִים שָׁם.

We understand that we became a great nation that stood out. That greatness was expressed in 3 ways. We grew גדול as a family, we grew גדול in receiving mitzvot, and we made ourselves גדול through some foundational morals and cultural commitments that connected us to each other and to the past. We wondered whether in the wake of

the giving of the Torah, this third category might fall away, and I aimed to argue that Rabbi Eliezer would champion it as as important an identifier of Jewishness as ever.

As we sit down at the seder and open our Haggadot in two nights' time, I'd like to suggest there is a great reversal at play. I think we would say in general about our lives today that we know a lot about who we are, and precious little about who God is. *In the Haggadah, I think, it is the opposite.*

Our image of God, and God's role in history, is quite clear. Mighty hand, outstretched arm, 10 plagues, no intermediaries.

But - most importantly - who are we? Beyond slaves and subjects? What is the beginning of the Jewish people? If we are to see ourselves as though we were slaves and became free, we must devote our time on the seder night, and on Pesach, to unpacking that question. *The Haggadah is right to push us to question what we truly know about ourselves as members of the Jewish community, and what that bond is all about.*

Daniel Pearl's final words are the words on my lips on the seder night – "I am Jewish". I *am* Jewish. But what does that mean? Are we defined by family? By mitzvot? How do I recommit myself to watch my relationships, to watch my speech, to stand out in my language and my name? Can I heed R' Eliezer's call, to recognize the role that shared moral commitments and culture play in creating a deep and broad bond between Jews of all kinds, and see that as a maturing of my sense of Jewish identity? We must challenge ourselves, each to be מצויין פה, to challenge each other to be מצויינים פה - not just standing out, but outstanding. *Not just standing out, but outstanding.*

May we ask ourselves these questions, may we honor our culture and our morals alongside our commitment to Torah and mitzvot and Jewish family, may we see ourselves as active agents in determining what it means to be Jewish, and may we be blessed with a חג כשר ושמח!