

I.

Chayav adam lirot et atzmo ke-ilu hu yatza mi-mitzrayim.

Each of us is *obligated* to see ourselves as one who *actually left Egypt* in the days of the Exodus.

This line from the Haggadah has become so familiar to us that we may fail to appreciate how radical it is: *How can we possibly fulfill such an obligation? How can I possibly see myself as someone who left Egypt? What would it actually entail to fulfill this commandment in any kind of real way?*

Indeed, a great contemporary charedi sage, R Moshe Shternbuch, definitively states that this mitzvah is the most difficult mitzvah of the entire seder night, as we see in SOURCE 1:

אמר לי פעם אחד מגדולי הדור זצ"ל, שהמצוה הכי קשה לקיים בליל פסח היא החובה לצייר שהוא בעצמו יצא במצרים, וברמב"ם מפורש שצריך לצייר שיצא עתה משעבוד מצרים, והוא חיוב גמור מה"ת, ומעיקר חובת הלילה... ולכן אף אם בכל חיובי הלילה כמו מצוה, מרור, ד' כוסות, וסיפור נפלאות הבורא אנו יוצאין, מ"מ מצוה זו היא הכי קשה ותמיד מסופק אם יוצא אף בדיעבד עכ"ד.

More difficult than staying up very late, more difficult than eating bitter marmor that brings tears to our eyes, more difficult than keeping our children and participants engaged and asking questions, the hardest mitzvah of the seder night is to shift our perspective. To move out of our default frame of reference and experience and see ourselves as something else – as someone else.

And yet, this is not just the hardest mitzvah, it is also according to R Shternbuch the most central mitzvah – מעיקר חובת הלילה!

The hardest and most important mitzvah – and yet, for so many of us this line – this obligation – passes almost unnoticed on the seder night.

Tonight I want to suggest that this year we ought to pay extra attention to these words from the Haggadah, to this mitzvah of the seder night. It is a mitzvah, in truth, for the entire year – as we will see together.

The mandate to see ourselves as though we left Egypt is the trigger of one of the most foundational assumptions and activities of Jewish ethics and Torah values: true identification with the other outside ourselves.

For it is only when we truly transcend the self and enter the shoes, or the mind, or the heart, or the circumstances, of the other, whether our ancestors leaving Egypt, or a neighbor down the hall with a very different life than ours, that we can successfully fulfill so many of the things the Torah asks of us – that the Divine challenges us to achieve.

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It is perhaps more important to take a closer look at this mitzvah this year than in any other year in recent memory.

Let us close our eyes and think about the signs we – and others – held around the country in moments of crisis over the past 12 months:

*Bring back our boys*, we shouted last summer, and prayed, and demanded. We fervently said, they are not someone else's sons, brothers, nephews, cousins. They are ours.

And then in the blazing heat of summer we stood alongside our Nigerian sisters and brothers and we cried out, *Bring back our girls!* Because they weren't someone else's girls. If we believe in the right to education for all children, then they are our girls.

And then we saw the signs, "I am Eric Garner." "I am a black American." If we believe that all lives matter, that we should be able to walk the streets of our cities without fear, if we identify with the fates of young black men in this country, perhaps we picked up those signs and marched along. Thousands of our fellow Americans did.

And across Europe, in so many cities, throngs who believe in the true freedom of the press, and in the importance of political satire, marched this winter with the placards, "Je suis Charlie Hebdo", and then only days later, in solidarity with our people, with the signs "Je suis Juif", to say that we all have the right to go into the grocery store and buy food without fearing for our lives.

And then, in Argentina, when Alberto Nisman was found dead in his home, hundreds of thousands of Argentinians – non-Jews – took to the streets with one message: "Yo soy Alberto Nisman" – I am Alberto Nisman! I have a stake in the just prosecution of the plotters of the AMIA bombing. I believe that there is blood crying out unanswered, still being covered up! If you silence him, you are silencing me – and I will not be silenced!

I can't remember any other year in which there were so many moments of this radical identification. How many times have we stood by the Monument, by the UN, and waved signs that say, "We stand with Israel", "We are with the victims of terror"?

But suddenly this year our collective, public language shifted from being one of standing next to the other to *actually being* the other – "I am a victim of terror"; "I am an Israeli." Feeling the pain of the other not in sympathy or even solidarity, but in identity, in *identifying ourselves as the other*.

Mah nishtanah hashanah hazot? Why is this year, this moment different, that we have adopted this language? Of course, a cynic might say that these are mere political slogans. This language is more impactful and so the world adopted it for its causes. And it no doubt also has something to do with globalization and an Internet age, a way in which we can actually access more of the many "others" around the world.

And while all that is true, I also want to suggest that for us as Jews this concept of complete identification with the other comes from a deep place in our collective communal consciousness. It is a communal consciousness rooted in the Pesach story and reenacted every year at the seder.

This evening, I want to ask what our tradition teaches us about this notion of radical identification with the suffering other – and, in fact, with any other.

We begin with our mitzvah – the obligation to identify with our own ancestors who went forth from Egypt. We will ask: How deep an identification is asked of us? How do we achieve it? And what is its purpose? And then: how can we – and why in fact must we – go beyond the mitzvah of the seder night, of identification with our ancestors, and understand it as a mandate, and a tool, at the heart of so many mitzvot in our tradition and at the heart of our humanity?

II.

Let us turn to the Haggadah, to our lines, SOURCE 2:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים.

The hardest and most important mitzvah of the seder night.

I believe this profound question of what it means to identify with the other, and how to do so responsibly, can best be explored by understanding the placement of this mandate at the end of Maggid. *If it is so central to the seder night, why is it at the end of Maggid? Why not at the beginning?*

At face value, it seems it belongs much earlier in Maggid, over here, in SOURCE 3:

עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים ויוציאנו י"א א-להינו משם ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה. ואילו לא הוציא הקדוש ברוך הוא את אבותינו ממצרים עדיין אנו ובנינו ובני בנינו משועבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים.

If our ancestors hadn't been taken out of Egypt, we'd still be there today. The next logical thing to say is our line – so we see ourselves as though we had gone forth from Egypt.

In fact, in some versions of the Haggadah a portion of this paragraph from the end of Maggid is placed right here – it is at the beginning!

But a closer look reveals that the statement from Avadim Hayinu, that “if God had not redeemed our ancestors, we would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt”, and our statement at the end of Maggid, “one is obligated to see oneself as though I went forth from Egypt”, are not identical, and that our statement must come at the end. *For it is precisely because of how important it is, and how hard it is, that it must be built up to.*

Rav Soloveitchik develops the difference between these two statements in SOURCE 5:

דמה שאומרים אילו לא הוציא הקב"ה את אבותינו ממצרים היינו עדיין משועבדים לפרעה, רצה לומר בזה דסיפור יציאת מצרים אינו רק סיפור על העבר אלא דהסיפור נוגע אלינו, דאם לא היה מוציא הקב"ה את אבותינו ממצרים עדיין אנחנו היינו משועבדים לפרעה, אבל אין זה אומר דצריך לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא בעצמו יצא ממצרים. ולכך אומרים בכל דור ודור, דניתוסף בזה דצריך לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא בעצמו יצא ממצרים...

*The opening paragraph – Avadim Hayinu – tells us that the Exodus had an impact on us today; but our mandate, עצמו לראות את עצמו, tells us that the Exodus happened to us today.*

To come to that fuller understanding, to move beyond our sense of who we are today to link to the events of the past, takes a building up process, and so we must develop ourselves through the seder night in order to get there. And so we journey through the Maggid.

This consciousness of seeing oneself as though I went forth from Egypt is only reached as the fourth and final level of interaction with events of the past that takes place on the seder night.

The Maggid section opens up by recognizing the uniqueness of the seder night in moving us from level one – remembering the Exodus, *zekhirat yetziat mitzrayim*, which we do in the recital of Shema every day, to level two – retelling the story, *sippur yetziat mitzrayim*, which we do in the extended midrash of Arami Oved Avi, the account of the farmer who brings their first fruits and reflects on the history that got them to that moment. We recognize that retelling history helps us situate ourselves and move beyond ourselves.

And then we begin to transform from telling the story to the third level of interaction with the past: imagination. We point out symbols at the seder table, Rabban Gamliel's three requirements, the Pesach, Matzah and Marror, and we almost taste the bitterness and the deliverance, begin to imagine our servitude and freedom, and then we are told to take it to the next level. Only after we have:

- 1- remembered, and
- 2- retold the story, and
- 3- imagined the story and interacted with the symbols,

are we ready to bring ourselves fully into the narrative. On a night filled with fours, this brings us to level four of our interaction with past events, to our line.

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים

This is, I would argue, the peak moment of the seder night!

After all that build up, you can't just read this line and let it go. This is not just the end of Maggid – it is the pinnacle of Maggid! It is what we have been building towards, working on. Remembering, retelling, imagining and now reliving.

So it's not enough just to say the word of *עצמו את לראות אדם חייב* – we have to actualize that mandate!

When I lead a model seder or on seder night itself, I try to relive the scene of this moment of Exodus. With a piece of matzah in hand, I tell myself and my fellow participants a story – so let me invite you to close your eyes and join me in this story.

We grew up as slaves, and never knew anything other than servitude. Our parents and grandparents were slaves, and perhaps once in a very long time someone mentioned the Land of Canaan and their national destiny, but we never even knew what that meant. All we knew was labor, and pain, and oppression, and travail. And suddenly one day a man named Moses appeared on the scene, and wonders and miracles started happening, plagues afflicting the Egyptians and sparing the Jews. And this crazy Moses is telling us we are going to be free – who even knows what that word means?! And he tells us to take a lamb – an Egyptian deity – and slaughter it one night, and eat the meat, and put the blood on the doorposts, and God – the true Hebrew God who has heard our cries and groans and done these plagues and wonders – is going to pass through Egypt and visit death upon the Egyptian firstborn, and we are going to up and leave and go free. It sounds crazy, but what do we have to lose? And the promised night comes, and we do it, and the plague is visited, and we hear cries all around us, and Pharaoh summons Moshe and sends us out and the

bread we were baking doesn't even have time to rise, and all of the sudden we are free, and we take our matzah and we walk around the table, across the room, across the bridge, from slavery to freedom, the future wide open in front of us.

That's a glimpse of one way to try to begin to fulfill this mitzvah.

Now we understand that this line at the end of the Maggid is not itself the fulfillment of, but rather the invitation to, do the work of seeing ourselves as though we went forth from Egypt.

How do we do it? The truth is, the Haggadah can't tell us precisely how. It may differ for each of us.

But we can point to some steps in the right direction of how to perform this mitzvah by taking a closer look at the formulation of the obligation and its proof texts.

III.

Turn to SOURCE 6, the Mishnah in Pesahim, the first formulation of our obligation to see ourselves as though we went free from Egypt.

Moshe Rabenu, only moments after the Exodus, imagines a future time when this newly freed people enters its land and begins to educate the next generation, a generation that did not experience the Exodus and sees only the rituals of Passover and wonders, what it's all about? Answers Moshe, in the verse cited by the Mishnah in SOURCE 6, that forms the core of this passage in the Haggadah,

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים

And yet, given that this mandate is for the generations, pretty soon even the parent telling this to a child will themselves not have been present at the Exodus. So how can they say ה' לי עשה? Say the Sages, what the Torah is telling us about how to communicate experience, is that we have to literally see ourselves as though we were there. We have to feel it so deeply that we can say without hesitation, God did this for me, לי, and mean it.

That's the first definition, or description, of the mandate – to feel it so deeply that we can say “I” – to absorb the experience of our ancestors and feel it as our own.

The Mishnah ends the discussion here. It seems to be satisfied with this resolution to the problem – that we simply must identify with the past generation, and this is what makes it possible to say to our children “Baavur zeh asah hashem li”. But the Gemara is not satisfied. In a strange Amoraic addendum, the Gemara in Pesahim 116b comments on this passage of the Mishnah, in SOURCE 7:

אמר רבא: צריך שיאמר ואותנו הוציא משם.

Rava states that we must say the words “ve-otanu hotzi misham.”

These words come from a verse from Devarim 6, another setting in which Moshe is instructing Bnei Yisrael how to explain the Passover rituals to a child who did not witness the Exodus. Let's look at SOURCE 8:

(כ) כִּי יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה הָעֲדוֹת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְקֹוֹק אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ אֶתְכֶם:

(כא) וְאָמַרְתָּ לְבְנֶךָ עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצִיאֵנוּ יְקֹוֹק מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה: ...

(כג) ואותנו הוציא משם למען הביא אותנו לתת לנו את הארץ אשר נשבע לאבותינו:

What is Rava adding by saying that we also need to recite verse 23? Isn't this just another instance of our children asking us in a future time why we observe the Pesah, and answering that God took us out of Egypt, describing it as if it happened to us? What does it add over and above our original proof text from Shemot 13, בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים?

I want to draw out two answers to this question, both of which teach us something about the purpose or scope of identifying with the other – our ancestors on the Seder night, and anyone outside ourselves in general.

The first is the answer of the Tzitz Eliezer, in SOURCE 9, who writes that what Rava is trying to teach us with this additional verse is that:

... לא מספיק שיאמר אמירה נעימה שה' הוציא גם אותו ממצרים, אלא צריך שיזכיר ויכלול את עצמו גם בהתכלית שהתבקש מזה, והיינו ממה שנא' בסיפא דקרא של "ואותנו" והיינו "למען הביא אותנו לתת לנו את הארץ אשר נשבע לאבותינו", ור"ל שיחד עם ההגדה לבן על "ההוצאה" ולראות כאילו "לי" בעצמי הוציא ממצרים, צריך בכורך עם זה – (and notice the beautiful language of Pesah here – בכורך עם זה – literally, “in a sandwich (*korekh*) with this”)

- להזכיר ולספר לו כי תכלית ההוצאה שהוציא "אותנו" מארץ מצרים היתה למען הביא אותנו ולתת לנו את הארץ אשר נשבע לאבותינו.

*According to the Tzitz Eliezer, identification with the other is not just about a moment of static solidarity and connectedness upon leaving – it is about being part of a journey to some ultimate goal or purpose. If I have just seen myself in connection with my ancestors as though I went free from Egypt, and then returned to the me of today, I have not seen my process of identification through to its conclusion. Connecting beyond ourselves is about accompanying the other through to an ultimate arrival, to a more final destination. There has to be a למען – an “in order to”.*

This is not to say that there isn't a power simply to stepping outside ourselves to connect to someone in a different place than we are, but Rava comes along to ask us, where is this taking you? Are you standing in solidarity for a moment, or are you identifying for the long haul? To truly fulfill the mandate of חייב אדם לראות את עצמו, we must follow through to the למען, to the actualization and fruition of the journey.

In other words, the identifying with the past actually leads us to a goal, to a destination. To an action. And here the Haggadah introduces its own purpose for the identification with our ancestors and the reliving of the past experience: The desire, the need, the obligation to thank God.

And so the Haggadah continues in its own narration, immediately after our עצמו את עצמו, by saying:

לפניך אנחנו חייבים להודות להלל לשבח ... למי שעשה לאבותינו ולנו את כל הניסים האלה... ונאמר לפניו שירה חדשה, הללויה.

Therefore we must thank, praise and exalt... the One Who performed all these miracles for our ancestors and for us... and we will sing before God a new song – Halleluyah.

Because we have now experienced God's salvation through our identification with those leaving Egypt, we cannot help but praise God for saving us.

*And in fact, according to many commentators, it is only by achieving the identification with our ancestors that we can say the שירה חדשה, the Hallel.* If we didn't feel that we were freed from Egypt, we wouldn't be obligated, or allowed, to say Hallel at the seder this Friday night. The Rav's uncle, the GRY"Z, R' Velvel Soloveitchik, explained this in his writings. The GRY"Z explains that there are two kinds of Hallel, the Hallel we sing over something that happened to our ancestors a long time ago – that is called קריאת הלל, and the Hallel we say for being delivered right now from a dangerous situation. That is called שירת הלל. The Hallel of פסח night is supposed to be a שירת הלל – as we say, שירה חדשה, ונאמר לפניו שירה חדשה. But it only reaches that level if we were saved from a dangerous situation right now! He expresses this in SOURCE 10:

חידושי הגרי"ז סימן רי

... וזהו דאמר כאן חייב אדם לראות את עצמו וכו', דאם אין רואה את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים הרי ל"ש הלל של שירה, וזהו גם מה שממשיך כאן לפיכך אנחנו חייבים וכו', למי שעשה לאבותינו ולנו וכו', ונאמר לפניו שירה חדשה, והיינו אחר שיש חיוב לראות את עצמו כאילו יצא ממצרים, לכך יש עליו חיוב לומר הלל של שירה ואומרים הללו - ה.

This is the first lesson of Rava's pasuk. What comes out of going beyond ourselves to experience the experience of the other is a journey towards action, towards a concrete conclusion.

*Full identification must be active, sustained - must be towards a purpose, towards achieving a goal. This is what Rava teaches.*

And there is also a second lesson embedded in Rava's addition of **ואותנו הוציא משם**. Something that goes beyond the **לי עשה ה'**. **בעבור זה עשה ה'**. Something in the process of identification with the other that Rava feels is missing that compels him to this proof text.

If we take a closer look at the language, we see that "baavur zeh asah Hashem li" focuses on the individual – on me. But "veotanu hotzi misham" focuses on the collective – on we.

The experience of identifying with the other need not only be at an individual level. This in two senses. We as individuals can identify not only with other individuals, but also with an entire people. A sense of empathy and connection outside oneself can be to an entire nation that one feels a part of. It's not just **לי עשה ה'** – not a solitary experience of going beyond one's current place and time, but a bigger connection to an entire group – **ואותנו הוציא משם**.

In fact, I believe the author of the Haggadah believed this to be the case as well, as the Haggadah includes an entire line that is found neither in the Mishnah nor in the Gemara: **לא את אבותינו בלבד גאל הקדוש ברוך הוא, אלא אף אותנו גאל עמהם**, emphasizing the sense of the identification with the collective. This is a part of the seder night – identifying with the whole being-born Jewish people in that moment in our journey.

I also think there is a second dimension here: That we as a collective can identify with another collective. That the entire group can identify with another group. We as a people, a community, can collectively feel something impacting another community, and that can be a powerful source of relationship and action.

This is what happens when our Bayit feels a connection to the Jews of France, for example. Something in our collective comes together as a group to feel an identification with fellow Jews in some other place.

From Rava's added verse we have learned two things:

- 1) Identifying with the other means not just connecting for the moment, but walking the road, experiencing the journey together, bringing to some fruition and some action.
- 2) Identification can be a collective experience, not only an individual one.

IV.

850 years after Rava's addendum was formulated, the Rambam, in his own version of the Haggadah, revises the mandate, and with it, the message. The Rambam will add yet another dimension to our understanding of identification with the other. Look at how he formulates the obligation differently in SOURCE 11 from how it was in the Mishnah in SOURCE 2 – comparing the underlined parts:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם להראות את עצמו כאילו הוא בעצמו יצא עתה משעבוד מצרים שנאמר +דברים ו' ואותנו הוציא משם וגו', ועל דבר זה צוה הקדוש ברוך הוא בתורה +דברים ה' וזכרת כי עבד היית כלומר כאילו אתה בעצמך היית עבד ויצאת לחירות ונפדית.

Why does the Rambam add a totally different verse, from Devarim? And why does Rambam intensify the commandment, changing from “see yourself” to “show yourself”?

And not only that, but the Rambam also adds that we must begin by seeing ourselves as slaves in order to see ourselves as free.

The more I read this Rambam, the more convinced I become that the Rambam is taking the challenge of the Mishnah, of identification with the other, and pushing it to its extreme, to what I call radical identification. What do I mean?

The proof text the Rambam chooses is from the Moshe's recounting the Aseret Hadevarim, the Ten Commandments, to Bnei Yisrael. Moshe begins there with an impossible framing, saying to the assembled new generation, the generation that mostly did not know slavery but were born in the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, he says to them in SOURCE 12:

דברים פרק ה (ג) לא את אבותינו כרת יקוּק את הברית הזאת כי אתנו אנחנו אלה פה היום כלנו חיים:

It's simply not true! The covenant was with the parents of this generation, and not with them. But Moshe pushes on, telling them that the Ten Commandments were said to them. When he gets to the fourth commandment, keep the Shabbat, he culminates:

דברים פרק ה (ט) וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים ויצאך יקוּק א-להיך משם ביד חזקה ובזרע נטויה על כן צוּך יקוּק א-להיך לעשות את יום השבת: ט

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt?! This generation was even less a slave in Egypt than it was a participant in the covenant at Sinai! This is the foundation for Shabbat?

It's one thing to try to feel freedom, as the version in the Mishnah suggests, to relate as a free person to my ancestors being newly freed. I can try to find ways to feel free and liberated. But this proof text asks me to truly enter an entirely other historical reality – to become a slave.

*This explained Rambam's change from לראות to להראות. It's not just an internal act of perspective, incorporating someone else's experience in how I see myself. It is so much becoming the other that I can portray it to other people. It's not about seeing myself anymore – לראות את עצמו. I am gone, in some sense! My "I" has utterly fallen away to enter into the identity of another. It's להראות את עצמו – to have so much become another that I display myself as a different person – my "I" is gone.*

I believe the Rambam is forcing us to confront the deepest challenge of identification – truly transcending the self.

Let's review the difference between lir'ot and lehar'ot.

Lir'ot, I would argue, to see myself as though I went forth from Egypt, is to attempt to integrate a different identity into myself. To say, imagine if I, Steven Exler, had a time machine, and I could travel back and experience what my ancestors went through. What impact would that have on me today? How would it color Steven Exler? I have to see in me an aspect of them.

Lehar'ot is something more radical. It is asking me to leave my sense of self and, so to speak, occupy the identity of another person or group. Not to be Steven Exler the slave who leaves Egypt, but actually to climb inside the heart and mind and body of Moshe, or Miriam, or the rank and file Israelite experiencing slavery and suddenly exposed to a dream, and then a reality, of liberation.

What's the difference? To me, the difference is this very question: *can I transcend the boundaries of my own self, the limitations of who I am, to truly understand and relate to the other?*

While the Mishnah's formulation, and even Rava's ואותנו הוציא משם, ask us at most to imagine ourselves experiencing something different – as ourselves, I believe the Rambam, with his language of lehar'ot and his proof text of becoming the slave, truly challenges us not just to relate to the other, but to in some way become the other.

This is what I call radical identification, even radical empathy.

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So we now understand that the Rambam has taken us, by way of Rava in the Gemara, from the Mishnah's formulation of identification to the Rambam's radical identification.

We've understood that identification with the other necessitates a four phase journey: from memory, to narration, to experiencing in oneself, to going beyond oneself.

We've understood that going beyond oneself is not just a momentary activity, but involves journeying with the other towards a purpose, and that it can be not just with an individual but with a collective. And now we've seen that radical identification – truly transcending the self to enter a new reality – can be the most powerful form of identification. And that the seder night, according to the Rambam, pushes us to do just that with our ancestors, with our moments of national liberation.

What the seder night is asking us to do is to get beyond our inclinations and judgments, to somehow leave our framework of self, and somehow – somehow – understand what it is like to be someone else.

V.

This is the עיקר, the essence, of the seder experience, what it is all building up to.

But what about the rest of our lives? Does the notion of radical identification begin and end with climbing into the identity of the Israelite leaving Egypt?

I want to argue now that there is something much more fundamental, and much further reaching, to this activity.

I believe identification with the other, the radical identification of going beyond the self, is the bedrock upon which Jewish interpersonal ethics, and most parts of Torah rest. It is the vehicle for successfully achieving the words and demands of Torah in our world.

It begins on Pesah with our national and personal rebirth, and it flowers out to become a critical part of so many relationships, so many behaviors, and so many mitzvot.

Take the example of tzedakah.

The essential role of radical identification in tzedakah, and how hard it is, is beautifully illustrated by Rav Wolbe, a contemporary baal mussar. In speaking about the commandment of tzedakah in the framework of the Torah's mandate to give a person what they lack, די מחסורו אשר יחסר לו, he describes the need to truly enter the other's frame of mind and their reality to understand what they need. So we try to do it, and what happens? Turn to SOURCE 13:

נניח, שמעתה אנו מצליחים בהתלמדות זו: אנו באמת מתרכזים על ריענו לדעת מה חסר לו. אבל הננו מתפללים על דבר חדש: רוב הפעמים אנו מוצאים, כי חסר לו בדיוק מה שחסר גם לנו, ואיך זה רוב בני אדם שאנו פוגשים סובלים בדיוק ממחסורנו אנו? כאן שוב האנוכיות שלנו הטעתה אותנו: אנו מודדים כל אדם עם קנה-המידה שלנו, והחסר לנו נדמה לנו שחסר גם לו. איך זה? אנו רואים את עצמנו בתוך הזולת, כאילו כל אדם הבא לקראתנו הוא רק ראי שבו אנו רואים שוב את עצמנו! הוי אומר: עדיין לא יצאנו -

(and hear in the word "yatzanu" the language of the Exodus from Egypt – to free ourselves from something)

- מהמבט האנוכיי שלנו כדי לראות שהזולת איננו זהה עמנו. אחר הוא, שונה מאתנו בתכלית, ועלינו לעמוד על מה שהזולת שונה מאתנו ולחפש את החסר לו, ולא את החסר לנו!

This is our natural instinct – to imprint ourselves, to project ourselves onto the other.

A successful Jewish life depends on cultivating the capacity not to project ourselves onto the other, but to leave ourselves behind, at least for a moment, and enter the other.

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Dr. Michael Fishbane, in his Jewish theology "Sacred Attunement", builds this notion by pointing to the Babylonian Talmud Sotah 21b, in SOURCE 14:

א"ר יוחנן: אין דברי תורה מתקיימין אלא במי שמשים עצמו כמי שאינו, שנאמר: +איוב כח+ והחכמה מאין תמצא.

The words of Torah are only fulfilled by one who nullifies himself [makes himself naught – ayin]. As it is written, “Wisdom is achieved through ayin.” (Job 28:12)

He then continues, explaining how the verse from Job has been reread, in SOURCE 15:

“From whence [me-ayin] does Wisdom come?” asks the sage in scripture. And R Yohanan responds out of the depths of his spiritual consciousness, through a bold revision of the text: the wisdom of Torah is achieved by oneself becoming as naught. The original query has thus become spiritual counsel – an ideal of radical self-transformation. Becoming ayin is an ultimate act of divestment. It is the practice of pure doing. In life, such selflessness culminates in hesed. It is the renewal of creation through the revelation of love.”

*For me, the teaching of the seder night is that that “naught” is not a nullification of the self, but a going beyond the self to truly occupy, embody, or identify with the other. It is the leaving of the self, the “divestment” as Dr Fishbane calls it, that transforms the world.*

Everything is built on identifying with the other. Whether through regular identification – bringing awareness of another into ourselves, like the plainest sense of the Mishnah and **חייב אדם לראות את עצמו** challenges us to do, or through radical identification – really trying to enter the world of another, as I believe the Rambam’s reformulation of the seder night imperative – **להראות** – mandates us to do, we dedicate one night a year to this activity, and we mark it as a tool and technique we want to cultivate.

VI.

But we must note: there are limits and risks to radical identification.

The first is that it can immobilize you, as in this profound story in Shemot Rabbah 1:27, in SOURCE 16:

**וירא בסבלותם: מהו וירא? שהיה רואה בסבלותם ובוכה ואומר, "חבל לי עליכם! מי יתן מותי עליכם, שאין לך מלאכה קשה ממלאכת הטיט!" והיה נותן כתיפיו ומסייע לכל אחד ואחד מהן.**

Moshe, portrayed in this and so many other midrashim as a true model of radical identification, feels the suffering of the other so much that he wants to die – with them, for them, because of their suffering! Who is Moshe? He a person in a place of complete strength and privilege and power having just emerged from Pharaoh’s house, but he identifies so radically that he can hardly live.

Moshe turns that identification to purpose – and works together with his brothers. But we must be mindful of that risk: that in going beyond ourselves, we don’t utterly lose all the tools and strengths we have at our disposal. We cannot completely let go of the gifts and identity we have when we transcend ourselves.

The second limitation is that identification with adversarial others, as powerful as it can be, can also be going too far:

Remember our original proof text for identification, from Shemot 13 – **עשה ה' לי** – **בעבור זה עשה ה' לי**. This verse from appears one other place in the Haggadah. Where? In the discussion of the wicked son! Let’s look at SOURCE 17:

**רשע מה הוא אומר מה העבודה הזאת לכם. לכם ולא לו. ולפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל וכפר בעיקר אף אתה הקהה את שיניו ואמר לו, בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים. לי ולא לו. אילו היה שם לא היה נגאל.**

The very same text which we use for radical identification we also use for exclusion. 'ל means getting inside a different me, but it also means me and not you.

We have to recognize that while every person, every collective, should be identified with because of our shared humanity, journeying all the way to the fulfillment of the mission of the values, of every person, of every group, is neither possible nor right.

This is where we return to the questions of contemporary times. I am Alberto Nisman. Bring back our boys and girls. But am I anyone? Who am I not? Should I be someone who would not be me? This question arose in the “Je suis Charlie Hebdo” campaign of a few months ago. Charlie Hebdo embodied certain values – primary among them were freedom of speech and freedom of the press. I identify with these values. But as a satirical newspaper it also crossed boundaries that make us uncomfortable. It made mockery of certain things that are sacred to people in this world. That is complicated. So can I really say “Je suis Charlie”? Even as I am completely appalled by the cold-blooded murder of Charlie Hebdo’s staff, and even as I think that the murders can have no possible justification, still I don’t necessarily want to say that I am Charlie. I stand with Charlie. I believe justice must be done for Charlie. I believe Charlie must be allowed to keep doing what it does. But am I Charlie?

It’s the difference between the Mishnah and Rava – between identifying with the moments, but not embracing every one of the values – sometimes there have to be limits.

And it is the reason that the notion of radical identification begins with identifying with our own ancestors. The foundation of it all is the identification with our inner own – and then, through the lens of Torah, we filter the identifications with all people, our greater human family.

R David Silber, in his Haggadah commentary, suggests these two 'ל's are in conversation, and we purposefully move from one to the other as what he calls a “transition from exclusion to inclusion”.

*It is not to say that we must agree with or feel an alliance with every person, or that the project of identifying with every person needs to result in a blanket endorsement of them, but perhaps the journey of the 'ל in the Haggadah, from the exclusion of the rasha to the identification of the seder participant with a relative of the past challenges us to try to identify in some way with every person. I think if we can, we can deepen our own humanity.*

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For as hard as we have said radical identification is, the fact is that human beings are wired this way. Research in the last 25 years has uncovered the existence of mirror neurons. When we do a certain action, like pick up a book, certain neurons fire in our brain. Neuroscientists have discovered that those same neurons will fire when we see someone else pick up a book. And it goes beyond motion. The region of the brain that fires when we are sad, also fires when we see someone else who is sad. This is a scientific way of articulating, I believe, the fundamental wisdom of the Bereishit story: we are all related. We are all connected. We are all made of the same ancestor in some way. We are actually hardwired to be empathic

– to feel what someone else is feeling. But to get by in the world, we have desensitized ourselves to some of those reactions.

We must reawaken that sense of connectedness.

What the seder night tells us is that experiencing freedom is only achieved through empathy, through identification with someone else.

VII.

What do we do with this tool of radical identification?

I want to suggest 5 sparks, 5 uses – each one a value of our Bayit, each something I learn from you, our amazing community, and that I hope we can strengthen each other in in the days ahead.

Let me preface these 5 examples by saying, ideally we don't need to utilize guesswork to try to understand the other. As much as possible, we encounter the other, we know them, and we know precisely what they want or who they are. That is certainly the ideal scenario, and it is a foundational value of our Bayit – to encounter every other, regardless of background, affiliation, orientation, or ability.

But sometimes in life, that access or that encounter is not possible. That's the case on the seder night, when we simply can't go back in time to know exactly what leaving Egypt was like. So we have to draw on the resources available to us and try to go outside ourselves and get into that persona of the other. And that's the case, in life and in death, when we cannot ask or know what the other person is or wants. We cannot fall back on just doing what we think is right. We have to expend the energy to enter as best as we can what we think is the reality of the other.

I think identifying with the other helps us do hesed. It's not always easy to do hesed – to visit the sick, to make the time to connect to those less fortunate than we, or even to shlep shiva chairs over to someone's home who is in mourning. It's not always compelling, convenient, or comfortable. But if we can put ourselves in the place of the person in need, we can truly understand the impact our visit or errand will have – and even try to do it in the way that will be most helpful to them. This may even mean not visiting sometimes, if we think that a visit is really not what the person wants or needs in that moment when we try to put ourselves in their shoes. And it includes strengthening our commitment to be with others in their time of joy. Does it really matter if I make it into the circle at a distant family member's wedding? It might not matter so much to me, but it matters to them, and I want to push myself to do it.

I think identifying with the other helps us do activism, and this is where the slogans of this year came into play. If they are my sons, my daughters, I am going to stop at nothing to bring them home. If I am Charlie Hebdo, then I have to fight for freedom of speech at all costs. If I am Eric Garner, then I feel the urgency of revisiting police practices all the more strongly.

I think identifying with the other means being truly inclusive, truly welcoming. It's simpler to fill our Bayit, and our personal homes, with the people more like us, people whom relating to does not require a journey too far outside the confines of my own familiarity. But if I can truly identify with those quite different from

me, I may discover that they, too, as different as they may be from me, are also seeking connection and home, and I will open home to them – and continue to make our Bayit a place that welcomes all people, including the elderly, people of all capabilities and physical and cognitive states, and those struggling in life. People with backgrounds like ours and different. With observance and views like ours, and different.

I think identifying with the other is essential to truly honoring the memory of our loved ones and perpetuating their legacy. When we say in the Memorial Prayer, תהא נשמתו/ה צרורה בצרור החיים, it means “let their soul be bound up in the bond of the living”. I say in total honesty – we are the living, but theirs is the soul. We honor the memory of loved ones, I think, not just by continuing doing the good things we do, but by trying to do what they would do, or what we feel they would want us to do. That might mean truly making a change in some aspect of our behavior.

Finally, I think identifying with the other is critical if we want to make any headway in coexistence and peace with our enemies. I cannot argue or debate or meet them on my terms – I have to meet them on their terms. I don't have to agree with them, I don't have to accept them, and I don't even have to like them. But I need to see the world from their point of view for a few moments in order to have any meaningful exchange with them, even if I ultimately utterly reject that view.

This is what the Tiferet Yisrael says on Pirkei Avot 2:4 – דע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס. Know how to answer the heretic. It doesn't mean to know every pasuk cold so you can counter every argument. It means know how he thinks – to be able to actually engage him in the way he relates to the world.

VIII.

It was told of Reb Aryeh Levin, the “Tzaddik in Our Time”, that he took his wife to the emergency room after a fall. The doctor asked him what was wrong, and he replied, “We hurt our leg”.

“We hurt our leg”.

This simple statement – applied not just to one closest to us, but to our family, our nation, and every fellow human – is perhaps the simplest way of describing the mandate of the seder night and the way it serves as a foundation for our human and ethical lives.

“We hurt our leg”.

This is transcending the self and achieving radical identification.

It takes a building up process, as on the seder night, which serves as the paradigm.

And from that paradigm we learn that it demands identification not just for a moment, but walking the road in the shoes of the other.

And it can be done not just individual to individual, but individual to collective, and group to group.

It cannot be done at all times, and it cannot be done fully with all people, but we are hard-wired to do it, and if we work at it, we can recapture that most basic need, and gift, of radical identification.

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Rabbi Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin brings us back to the Seder night, one week away. When we come to the culmination of Maggid, having remembered and narrated and experienced, we reach the moment to feel. To go beyond ourselves and enter the reality of another, of the slave, and then the freed slave. To begin the journey of radical identification. Of empathy in its most basic form. It will – it should – it must – do something to us, as Rav Tzadok writes in SOURCE 19:

ר' צדוק הכהן מלובלין - פרי צדיק ויקרא לחג הפסח

היינו שבלילה צריך האדם להרגיש בנפשו חדשות, שצריך האדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים וכו' והיינו שאז הרגיש אדם בנפשו הרגש חזק שיצא מן המיצר,

It is a feeling of newness, as the spark of our soul is fanned into flame as it merges with the souls of others.

The מיצר, the מצרים, the constraint, that we are trying to free ourselves from - is in some sense ourselves. Let us challenge ourselves this Pesah night to go beyond ourselves. First, to experience the Exodus as one of our ancestors – to truly fulfill the mitzvah of the seder night that we have invested so much energy tonight in understanding.

To try becoming אין for a moment to enter the world of another.

And then, let us draw on that strength of radical identification to do all the things we value – all the things our Bayit values, the Torah values, and what we believe God values, deeply and fully, the whole year round.

Hag kasher vesameah.