

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

Re-imagining our Lives, Re-defining the Possible

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In the intelligence community, there is a phenomenon known as a Failure of Imagination. That is to say, failure to predict a particular event associated not with an absence of intelligence, or failure to gather appropriate clues, or succumbing to a pattern of active deception on the part of one's adversary, but a failure to interpret them in a correct manner simply because the pattern being formed was inconceivable to those who were assessing the data. Associated with cataclysmic events, such as Pearl Harbor and 9/11, a failure of imagination is, in essence a defeat generated by a weakness within oneself, a limit of the mind.

Failures of imagination are not only dangerous when it comes to intelligence communities staving off potential threats, but, in precisely the opposite direction, when it comes to one's own self-perception. Failure to imagine, to truly conceive, of one's success in any given area, is a form of defeat before one has even stepped on to the playing field.

In one of the core passages we read last night, the Haggadah tells us,

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In every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he left Egypt.

The statement, on its face, seems paradoxical. How is it possible that in every generation a person must conceive of himself or herself as having belonged to one particular generation, a specific historical moment, when our ancestors were in fact taken out of Egypt?

At the simple level, the answer is, as is written in the very opening lines of the Maggid section, that a person is simply meant to believe that if the Exodus had not occurred in a particular point in time, than we, today, would still remain enslaved in Egypt:

עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים. ואלו לא הוציא הקב"ה את אבותינו ממצרים, הרי אנו ובנינו ובני בנינו משועבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. And if the Almighty had not taken our ancestors from Egypt, we ourselves, and our children, and our grandchildren, would be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.

And yet, it seems to me that there is an equally important alternative approach, perhaps an even more important, more profound, deeper truth in the rabbinic dictum, חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים, that we ourselves must imagine that we were amongst those who left Egypt. We must ask a simple question: who were those Jews?

The Torah tells us that the process of Exodus was from a simple matter. Moshe came with a message of redemption, both to the Jews as well as to Pharaoh. It was a very complex undertaking. Pharaoh does not respond well, enacting more draconian policies than even those which had been in place, and the Jews grow more and more despondent. The Torah relates, as Moshe continued to speak of the forthcoming redemption, the Hebrew slaves were not moved:

ולא שמעו אל משה מקצר רוח ומעבודה קשה

They did not listen to Moshe out of a lack of spirit and from intense labor.

What is this רוח קצר? What is רוח altogether? When the earlier Pharaoh dreams of cows and of wheat, and is disturbed, and Joseph is pulled from the dungeon, and interprets the dream, Pharaoh, astonished, remarks, הנמצא כזה איש אשר רוח אלוקים בו, could one find a man so filled with the spirit of God? When the spies, full of defeatism, demoralize the people into from believing that they could inherit the land, and Caleb stands, almost alone, against these nobles, the Torah says, ועבדי כלב עקב היתה רוח אחרת עמו וימלא אחרי, my servant Caleb, who had a different spirit about him, and followed after me. When Moshe prays for a successor, and God informs him that it will be his devoted disciple Joshua, the Torah describes him as איש אשר רוח בו, a man filled with spirit.

Ruach is a life force, a creativity, a sense of inspiration. And, after centuries of bondage, it was precisely what the Jewish people lacked, מקצר רוח. Their souls and their spirits had been crushed. They could no longer imagine what it could possibly mean to be a free person.

For each one of us, חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים, requires us to enter a realm of imagination, in which we begin to consider the very possibility of extracting ourselves from situations which we deem to be completely inextricable. Perhaps it is a situation in the workplace, a broken relationship, a bad habit into which we have fallen. מקוצר רוח, at a certain point, we fail to imagine the possibility of extraction, of rehabilitation, of repair. Like the Jews of ancient Egypt, our defeat is not only a matter of the objective circumstances, but the sheer confines of our own minds, which can no longer conceive of a life more meaningful, more fulfilling, more successful.

It is very easy to be cynical about such a message. The cynic in each of us scoffs at the thought that simply changing our mentality can begin the process of leading to new realities on the ground. But, to fall prey to that kind of cynicism is missing perhaps the most important character in the entire story of the Exodus, the story of Moshe.

Let us ask ourselves a simple question: who was Moshe? Did he appear from nowhere to simply whisk the Jews out of Egypt? Did he have no background, no story, no personal history of his own?

Of course not. Moshe started out, a young man, bnmning with idealism.

ויהי בימים ההם ויגדל משה ויצא אל אחיו וירא בסבלותם וירא איש מצרי מכה איש עברי מאחיו. ויפן כה וכה וירא כי אין איש ויך את המצרי ויטמנהו בחול. ויצא ביום השני וירא והנה שני אנשים עברים נצים ויאמר לרשע למה תכה רעך. ויאמר מי שמך לאיש שר ושפט עלינו הלהרגני אתה אמר כאשר הרגת את המצרי ויירא משה ויאמר אכן נודע הדבר. וישמע פרעה את הדבר הזה ויבקש להרוג את משה ויברח משה מפני פרעה וישב בארץ מדין וישב על הבאר.

Moshe had dreamt of changing the world. He, rather shockingly, bucked his aristocratic upbringing and chose to identify as a Hebrew, relating not to palace elites as his brethren, but to the slaves, ויצא אל אחיו. Not only that, but he did the unthinkable- he killed an Egyptian officer for doing his job, that is, oppressing a Jew. And then, on the next day, he sets out to bring peace and harmony to the Jews he aspires to lead. He believes in the possibilities all around him, and he believes in himself. And, as we know, all this is shattered. Moshe retreats to Midian. He ceases to identify as a Jew, and, according to rabbinic tradition, is at least willing to allow his son to be raised as an idolater. His idealism, so powerful in his youth, is drained. It is hard to tell if there is anything left at all, except cynicism regarding the dreams of his youth. The Hebrew slaves go on suffering, and Moshe is unconcerned.

As we all know, God wrests Moshe from the deserts of Midian and forces him back to Egypt. He forces Moshe to rediscover within himself that sense of righteous outrage at the oppression which the Hebrew slaves continue to suffer. He forces Moshe to rediscover within himself the belief that the world can change, and that he can be the agent for bringing about that change. He forces Moshe to, for the first time in decades, believe.

As a congregation, this is the moment in which we find ourselves. We all know of the glorious past of our institution. But, do we believe sufficiently in its future? Can we imagine every last seat in the sanctuary filled, spilling out and over into the Stein? Or, do we too suffer from a failure of imagination?

Surely, like Moshe, we have had reason to grow cynical. Surely, like the beleaguered and oppressed Hebrew slaves, we might, at times, suffer from a certain sense of קצר רוח. But, in precisely those moments, our Sages' mandate, הוא עצמו כאילו הוא, ויצא ממצרים, that we must conceive of ourselves as if we too had left Egypt, as if we too had lived and breathed and experienced that which we, only shortly before, deemed simply beyond the realm of possibility.

There is a place for clear eyed, deliberate realism. At the day to day level, when planning tactics, realism and sobriety are the coin of the realm. But, when one sets his sights, when one decides what he wishes for his destination to be, clear eyed realism is nothing short of a shackle. One must dream of the greatest heights, and then, with the best that preparation and prudence have to offer, figure out how one wishes to get there.

Let our imaginations not fail us. Let us not miss this moment, our moment. Let us dream a future as bright as our illustrious past. For, in every generation, we must consider ourselves as if we had been the very ones who, though they thought the day would never come, left Egypt.