

**Yizkor | Pesach 5782**  
כ"ב ניסן תשפ"ב | April 23, 2022  
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In 1996 the President of Israel, Ezer Weizman, addressed the German Bundestag with a speech written by Israeli novelist, Meir Shalev. President Weizman said,

It was fate that delivered me and my contemporaries into this great era, when the Jews returned to and re-established their homeland. I am no longer a wandering Jew who migrates from country to country, from exile to exile. But all Jews, in every generation must regard themselves as if they had been there, in previous generations, places, and events. Therefore, I am still a wandering Jew, but not along the far-flung paths of the world. *Now I migrate through the expanses of time*, from generation to generation, down the paths of memory. I was a slave in Egypt. I received the Torah at Mount Sinai.<sup>1</sup>

President Weizman understood that although he and others who have chosen to make Israel their permanent home are no longer “wandering Jews” in the literal, physical sense, a Jew is obligated to wander through time and space regardless of their physical location in the world. It is on Passover that we read in the Haggadah,

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיִּיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִילוֹ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם

In each and every generation a person must view themselves as though they personally left Egypt. This tradition comes directly from the Talmud (Pesachim 116b), and it offers us an annual challenge as we gather around the *seder* table with family and friends. What does it mean to see ourselves as Jews who wander through time, imagining ourselves as ancient Israelites who

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<sup>1</sup> Ezer Weizman, speech to the German Bundestag, 1996; quoted in *A Night to Remember*, eds. Mishael Zion and Noam Zion.

witnessed the plagues and experienced deliverance from slavery to freedom? Even if we accept this obligation upon ourselves, how exactly can we make ourselves feel as if we personally were liberated from Egypt?

Before we try to imagine what it would be like to be our ancestors, let us take a look at ourselves and our own experiences. According to Dr. Bruce Greyson, author of *After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal about Life and Beyond*, some people who have near death experiences describe it being a sort of “life review.” One individual said, “I realized that I was a passive observer in the process, and it was as if someone else was running the projector. I was looking at my life objectively for the first time ever. I saw the good as well as the bad.”<sup>2</sup> This person described their experience as basically watching a movie of their own life, complete from beginning to end, omitting no detail. Dr. Greyson’s research about these NDEs led him to conclude that “they are ultimately not about death, but about transformation, about renewal, and about infusing our lives with purpose right now.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, people who have NDEs are often radically changed by their experience. The NDE gives their life a new sense of purpose and mission. They are not terrified by the experience, but enriched.

If that is the result of seeing one’s own life played back for them, imagine then the feeling you might have of watching *someone else’s* life review. How incredible it might be to stand in the shoes of someone else and experience their life as they did! We would be able to tap into a deep sense of empathy and understanding, truly recognizing the life-altering experiences of other people. That is precisely what we are asked to do on Passover at the

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Greyson, *After*, loc. 627.

<sup>3</sup> Greyson, loc. 3,752.

*seder*. We are obligated to see ourselves as if we were our ancestors. You must imagine what it was like to sit there on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, sandals on your feet, bags packed, lamb's blood smeared on your doorpost, waiting for the moment when Pharaoh would finally set you free. Wouldn't that experience change you, or at the very least shape your perspective and your attitude toward the years you have remaining before you? We are asked to see ourselves as personally going forth from Egypt because doing so could change us for the better.

To a degree, this is what we try to do each time we gather to recite the Yizkor memorial prayers. When we remember a loved one, we do not just remember them for who they were and what they did for us, but also for their experiences and what they endured. How did the experiences of their lives shape them? What were the defining moments in their lives? What were their deepest regrets? What were their greatest achievements? In recalling the answers to these questions, we truly remember who they were, and we learn from them. Yizkor is a powerful moment because it invites us not only to remember our loved ones, but to try to transform those memories into actions. When we depart from shul today, we should strive to live our lives in such a way that emulates our loved ones, that demonstrates the lessons we learned from them and from the experiences of their lives. The brilliance of Yizkor on Passover is that it invites us to imagine what it might have been like to actually be our loved ones, to stand in their shoes, and to experience their lives.

We are obligated to see ourselves as if we personally left Egypt because tasting freedom for the first time could help us value each and every moment of our lives, rather than taking this all for granted. We are obligated to see ourselves as if we personally left Egypt because feeling the weight of our bags on our backs and the heat of the sand beneath our toes helps us

to empathize with those who even today must flee and traverse dangers to reach a place of safety. We are obligated to see ourselves as if we personally left Egypt because witnessing the miracle of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds would remind us that miracles do happen, and that God does have a role in our world. When we recite Yizkor on Passover, we try to see ourselves as if we were our loved ones. We try to imagine what it would have been like to be them, and how the lessons of their lives can be embodied in our own.

President Weizman also said in his speech, “I am a wandering Jew who follows in the footsteps of his forbearers, and just as I escorted them there and then, so do my forbears accompany me and stand here with me today. And just as memory forces us to participate in each day and every event of our past, so does the virtue of hope force us to prepare for each day of our future.” This is one of the many brilliant ideas embedded within Judaism. We are intimately interconnected with those who came before us, and we hope to be a part of the lives of those who will come later. We care about the past because we are invested in the present and hopeful for the future. Remembering the lives of our loved ones, and the lives of our ancestors, helps us to maintain these memories, strive to emulate them now, and share them with those who come next.

Wherever we choose to make our homes, we are all wandering Jews. Passover invites us to wander not only through space, but also through time. Yizkor is an exercise in doing just that. May we all be enriched and inspired by journeying back through time to experience the lives of those who came before us. May the lessons we learn be the ones we live by. May their memories be for a blessing.

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