

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld  
ASBI Congregation  
Bo 5779

### With our Children We Shall Go Forth

I recently completed two cross-country drives with our children. We spent almost one week of their winter vacation with family on the east coast but “vacation” is really not the word that springs to mind when contemplating travel with five children for twelve hours. We spent some very special time together with family. We had a journey together. We took a trip together. But I wouldn’t call it a vacation. I thought of this when reading the *parashah* this week. Pharaoh, at one point, seems to give in to Moshe’s demands, “let my people go that they may serve me.” Pharaoh says, “you go, leave the kids behind.” Contemplating twelve hours in the car, I might have said, “sure - keep the kids, we’ll be back in three days” but, fortunately, Moshe had a different answer.

Who comes with us and who gets left behind is a central question of this morning’s Torah portion and illustrates something quite important about Jewish life on a broad scale. But before we can ask that question there is an even larger question that needs to be asked: who was the exodus for? For whom are we creating Jewish experiences?

Who was the exodus for? This seems like a question too obvious to even ask. The signs and wonders and miracles of *yetzivat mitsrayim* were undertaken by God on our behalf in order to free us from slavery. And, in turn, out of gratitude to God we remember the exodus, maintain *yetzivat mitsrayim* as a central orienting point of Jewish life, and observe mitzvot throughout the year that commemorate the exodus and express our gratitude.

But that isn’t the primary way that the Torah deploys the memory of *yetzivat mitsrayim*. Remembering the exodus is not an end in itself but always the motivation for another mitzvah. Time and again in the Torah, we are reminded that God took us out of Egypt in the context of other mitzvot. The long list of *mitsvot* in *Parashat Mishpatim* in *Sefer Shmot* are surrounded by remembering the exodus. The long list of ethical and ritual mitzvot in the middle of *Sefer Vayikra* in *Parashat Kedoshim* includes the command to remember the exodus. In *Sefer Devarim*, we remember the exodus in chapter 5, 10, 15, and 16, and 24. We do not perform mitzvot in gratitude for the exodus or to simply remember the exodus but rather, the exodus was to enable us to perform mitzvot in the manner that can only be possible among a people who experienced alienation, slavery, and oppression.

We read this morning, and study at every Passover seder the phrase **בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם** which can either mean that we perform the mitzvot of Pesach to express gratitude to God for taking us from Egypt, or it can mean, as Ibn Ezra and a midrash quoted by the Passover Haggadah says that it does, that God took us out of Egypt so that we could commemorate the exodus. That isn’t circular. We were slaves in Egypt in order for us to go on to freedom where we could cultivate a life of mitzvot in which we employ the ethical sensitivity and compassion that we learned from being slaves.

So on a basic level, in the words of the contemporary Tanakh educator, Rabbi Menachem Leibtag, the story of *yetzivat mitsrayim* that we heard this morning, the Torah’s account of the exodus, is not a “history of our redemption” but is the “redemption of our history.” It’s not a story of what just happened to occur to us in the distant past, it is the story that we tell and which defines what it means to be a Jew.

But there is an even more surprising answer to the question “who was the exodus for” that can be found in this morning’s Torah portion. We began this morning by reading:

**וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פְּרַעֲהוּ כִּי־אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת־לְבָבוֹ וְאֶת־לֵב עַבְדָּיו לְמַעַן שְׂתִי אֶתְּי אֶלָּה בְּקִרְבּוֹ:**

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs בְּקִרְבּוֹ, in him.

As God introduces the final stages of the miracles exodus from Egypt, God explains that Pharaoh’s heart is hardened so that there will be an even greater demonstration of God’s power, all for the purpose of demonstrating God’s power to Pharaoh himself and to his people.

This too is a partially obscured theme of the Torah’s account of *yetziat mitzrayim*.

“בְּזֹאת \*תִּדְעַ\* כִּי אֲנִי ה' ,  
 “לְמַעַן \*תִּדְעַ\* כִּי אֵין כֵּה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ”  
 “לְמַעַן \*תִּדְעַ\* כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּקִרְבֵּי הָאָרֶץ”

“So that *you shall know* that I am the Lord”

“So that *you shall know* that there is none like the Lord our God.”

“So that *you shall know* that I a the Lord in the midst of the land.”

This year, for the first time that I can remember, I wondered why we had to place blood on the doorways of our homes to avoid the final plague. Why was that necessary? God could spare the Israelite homes without the need for any external sign! But the Egyptians needed to know that the blood of the *Korban Pesach* placed by the Hebrew slaves on their doors had the power to stop a plague.

In one of the final stages of negotiations between Moshe and Pharaoh, Pharaoh is on the verge of conceding to Moshe and letting his people go to serve God and in the midst of this negotiation Pharaoh says “מִי וְמִי הַהֵלֵךְ” who, exactly is going?”

Moshe responds that “we will go with our young and our old, with our sons and our daughters and with our flocks in our midst for it is a festival of the Lord.”

This is another audience of the exodus. We left Egypt so that our entire community, young and old, adult and child, men and women, could serve God together. That is what it means to be gathered as a Jewish community. Community means everyone together. Obviously not everyone would participate in identical ways. Some sat on wagons. Some pulled wagons. Some participated in slaughtering animals for sacrifices. Some people ate those sacrifices. Men and women, adults and children, young and old, do in fact each have their own distinct halakhic status. But our exodus enabled all of us together to serve God all of us together.

And this too is the way of the Torah. There are mitzvot for children and there are mitzvot for adults. But if only children do certain mitzvot, like volunteer at a soup kitchen or study the weekly Torah portion, or visit patients in a nursing home, and they do not see adults performing those mitzvot, the children will understand that they aren’t important.

As we heard at the beginning of the parashah this morning: וְלְמַעַן תִּסְפְּרוּ בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵי וְבָנֹתֵי בְנֵי וְבָנֹתֵי בְנֵי וְבָנֹתֵי בְנֵי וְבָנֹתֵי בְנֵי we witnessed wondrous miracles in Egypt so that we could tell them to our children and grandchildren.

Some mitzvot can only be done well by adults, and yet children need to become acclimated into these mitzvot if there will be adults in the next generation to perpetuate them. It isn’t obvious who is the target of the mitzvah and who is its main constituent.

The dynamic that I’ve described is true for the entire matrix of Torah and mitzvot but I want to share three concrete examples of the way that this dynamic expresses itself as we make decisions for our community.

One of the most appealing and distinctive features of our shul community that I noticed when I moved here was the relative economic diversity of our shul. Whereas my childhood friends cannot afford to live in the neighborhood in New York where we all grew up, there are middle class members of our community as well as more wealthy people here. But, as this neighborhood becomes an ever more appealing place to live, that diversity is threatened. Before 2012 the median cost of a one bedroom apartment was less than one-third of the median monthly salary in Chicago. But since 2012, Chicago has not been an affordable city according to that metric. We cannot solve that problem on our own, but we can look to expand our eruv to include some of the blocks north of Irving Park where there are beautiful apartments, just a little more than one mile from this building and where it is substantially cheaper to live.

That investment in our eruv, which I hope we can make, would allow a broader spectrum of our community to live together and perform mitzvot together in just the manner that Moshe explained that mitzvot are meant to be performed.

In the coming months, we are considering replacing our collection of “grey and black” siddurim with one siddur only which will make announcing pages far less cumbersome and will make our services less daunting to newcomers who often struggle to figure out why we have so many different books and where we are in each one of them as we pray. I have a small collection of siddurim and I have a few favorites that I like to use when I am able to davven at home. I particularly appreciate being able to fit a siddur in the palm of one hand so that it’s heft is not a distraction while I pray. But I do not think that the shul should select a siddur based on the one that I like to use.

In fact, if any of you can start a sentence with the words “my favorite siddur to use is.....” then you are not the person I am particularly worried about when selecting a siddur for the shul.

Those of us who are already comfortable in shul should feel comfortable in shul no matter which siddur the shul provides and we can also bring our own siddur from home. But our stakeholders and our constituency includes first-time visitors, people who cannot read a word of Hebrew, and men and women of every possible religious background who attend our shul as guests of our members, as people on a religious journey, or just because they are curious about us. The chance to see our community through their eyes is so enriching and exciting and the privilege of being a local Jewish resource to anyone and everyone in our neighborhood is such a special privilege and a great responsibility.

And, starting in February we are considering moving *Anim Zemirot* to its customary location adjacent to the Psalm of the Day which we recite before Torah reading. We hope this will encourage those children who go to groups on Shabbat morning to come to shul with their parents early enough to join the congregation for a few minutes before groups begin. By front-loading the service we hope it will enable more people to be in shul for more of Mussaf. And by streamlining the final minutes of our services each week, we hope that those final minutes will be graced by more decorum.

Our children, think we had a family vacation, because we created the experience around them. They went hiking, they went to the movies, they learned to play the ukulele. They had a vacation because we made that choice as a family. But we are constantly making choices of that sort. Moshe understood that one purpose of the exodus was to demonstrate God’s power to Pharaoh himself and to the Egyptians, and one purpose of the exodus was for the future.

Children need to learn how to be good Jewish adults. Adults need to make sure that we are transmitting our values and traditions to the children of our community, and we need to find moments when all of us together can sing praise to God in a way that justifies God’s own investment in us when we were redeemed from Egypt.

Not every person is able to perform every mitzvah and not every person is obligated in each and every mitzvah. But as a community we need to make sure that everything gets done. We should cultivate an

awareness of the mitzvot that we are performing as a community and take pleasure in the mitzvah of accomplishments of others.

Last week I solicited loans on behalf of furloughed federal employees and so many of you stepped forward to offer your help. Thank God, that help has not been needed but I was so proud to hear about the generosity of our community. And we should all be proud to live in a community with so many decent and caring people.

We should tell the story of how we do mitzvot together. That story began at *yetziat mitzrayim*.