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Pesach: The Geulah of Gerut: Pesach as Transformation

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The story of the Jewish enslavement in Egypt is repeatedly linked to exhortations about strangers (*gerim*) in the Torah. “Love the stranger,” Deuteronomy 10:19 tells us, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” “You shall neither wrong a stranger, nor shall you oppress him,” warns Exodus 22:20, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Iterations of these sentiments feature no less than thirty-six times in the Torah, begging the questions: Why such repetitive emphasis and why this connection between empathy and Egypt?

The relationship between the obligation to love a stranger and the experience of having been one seems linear enough. As Rabbi Natan says in Bava Metzia 59b, “Do not taunt your neighbor with the blemish that you yourself have.” Do not do unto others what was done to you. Do not render someone else an alien. Do not oppress a vulnerable person in your midst-- "כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצריים"-- because you were once in that place of degradation. Let the pain of your personal past guide you toward a more compassionate future. Jewish history must yield Jewish obligation.

Insofar as our lowly origins ground our moral vision and our ethical mission for all time, retelling the story of the enslavement—on Pesach, and also throughout the year—becomes a central religious obligation. We start our tale in the thick of our misery, in עבדים היינו, to remind ourselves of the deep responsibility that was generated from our encounter with oppressive otherness.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, however, in his book *Pachad Yitzchak*, suggests an alternative approach to the centrality of the *ger* in our tradition generally and specifically on Pesach. Our experience with *gerut* in Egypt, he argues, refers not just to our status as strangers, but to our status as *gerim*, as actual converts. He writes:

“The Exodus was an act of conversion, as we see in Tractate Yevamot, as all of the laws of conversion are learned out from it” (<i>Pachad Yitzchak</i> on Pesach, Essay 2).	”יציאת מצריים הוי מעשה גירות כדחזינן ביבמות דכל דיני גירות ילפינן מהתם”
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According to the Talmud, our ancestors initiated the process of conversion just before leaving Egypt. By the time they reached Sinai, but not before, they were full-fledged Jews. They had to undergo a series of transformative rituals--circumcision, immersion, and sacrifice--before they could receive revelation and definitively enter the covenant.

Rabbi Hutner's claim is rooted in Yevamot 46a, which is itself codified by Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Forbidden Intercourse 13:1-5.

1 Israel entered the covenant [with God] with three acts: circumcision, immersion, and offering a sacrifice. 2 Circumcision took place in Egypt, [before the Paschal sacrifice, of which Exodus 12:48] says: "No uncircumcised person shall partake of it." Moses our teacher circumcised [the people]. For with the exception of the tribe of Levi, the entire [people] neglected the covenant of circumcision in Egypt. Regarding this, [Deuteronomy 33:9 praises the Levites,] saying: "They upheld Your covenant." 3 Immersion was performed in the desert before the Giving of the Torah, as [Exodus 19:10] states: "Sanctify them today and tomorrow, and have them wash their garments." Sacrifices [were also offered then], as [Exodus 24:5] states: "And he sent out the youth of the children of Israel and they brought burnt offerings." They offered them as agents of the entire Jewish people. 4 Similarly, for [all] future generations, when a gentile desires to enter into the covenant, take shelter under the wings of the Divine presence, and accept the yoke of the Torah, he must undergo circumcision, immersion, and the offering of a sacrifice. A woman [who converts] must undergo immersion and bring a sacrifice, as [Numbers 15:15] states: "As it is for you, so shall it be for the convert." Just as you [entered the covenant] with circumcision, immersion, and the offering of a sacrifice; so, too, for future generations, a convert must undergo circumcision, immersion, and must bring a sacrifice. 5 ... In the present age, when there are no sacrifices, [a convert] must undergo circumcision and immersion. When the Temple is rebuilt, he must bring a sacrifice.

א בשלושה דברים נכנסו ישראל לברית--במילה, וטבילה, וקרבת. ב מילה--הייתה במצרים, כשנאמר "כל ערל לא יאכל בו" (שמות יב:מח). מל אותם משה רבנו, שכולם ביטלו ברית מילה במצרים, חוץ משבט לוי; ועל זה נאמר "ובריתך ינצורו" (דברים לג:ט). ג וטבילה--הייתה במדבר, קודם מתן תורה: כשנאמר "וקידשתם היום ומחר וכיבסו שמלותם" (שמות יט:י). וקרבת--כשנאמר "וישלח את נערי בני ישראל ויעלו עולות" (שמות כד:ה), על ידי כל ישראל הקריבום. ד וכן לדורות, כשירצה הגוי להיכנס לברית, ולהסתופף תחת כנפי השכינה, ויקבל עליו עול תורה, צריך מילה וטבילה והרצאת קרבן; ואם נקבה היא, טבילה וקרבת: שנאמר "ככם כגר" (במדבר טו:טו). מה אתם במילה וטבילה והרצאת קרבן, אף הגר לדורות במילה וטבילה והרצאת קרבן. ה ... ובזמן הזה שאין שם קרבן, צריך מילה וטבילה; וכשיבנה המקדש, יביא קרבנו.

The story of the Exodus is thus the story of how every Jew became a Jew, so to speak. Lineage would not suffice to receive the Torah. Upon leaving Egypt, every individual had to choose to appropriate his or her inheritance. Everyone had to decide to take upon themselves the burdens and the gifts of faith, and to enact this transformation. As *Pirkei Avot* 2:12 enjoins us:

Prepare yourself for the study of Torah, for it is not an inheritance for you.

התקן את עצמך לתלמוד תורה כי אינה ירושה לך

The Torah, "מורשה קהילת יעקב" (Deuteronomy 33:4)--was not and is not, in some essential way, a "ירושה," a gift bestowed. One must prepare for it,

work for it, become worthy of it. This is what *bonei Yisrael* did as they exited Egypt. They took ownership over their Judaism by willfully choosing it.

This choice would form the basis of Jewish choices for all generations to come. As Maimonides emphasizes, quoting Numbers 15:15, "As are you, so shall the *ger* be before the Lord." As we were converted, so should we convert others. The paradigm for spiritual transformation is our own. This is the lasting legacy of the Exodus.

In light of this, loving the *ger* takes on a whole new valence. We ought to embrace not only strangers, but also converts, "כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצריים," because we were all converts once. The foundational story of our people is a story of our own awakening to faith and commitment, and we must therefore humble ourselves before all who elect to join us on our ongoing journey.

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The Pesach *Hagadah* instructs us:

In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see herself as if she left Egypt. בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצריים

Maimonides famously renders this as an obligation to *show* oneself, להראות, to be one who has left Egypt. What would it take to both see oneself as redeemed and to show oneself to be so?

Rabbi Hutner's reading of *gerut* adds a whole new dimension to this obligation. To exit Egypt, we now know, is to actively transform oneself as our ancestors did. It is to convert anew into a life freely chosen. It is to reaffirm one's commitments and to fortify one's faith. The claim embedded in the *mitzvah* of retelling the Exodus story is that that process is never ending. It must be told again and again, for it is so easily forgotten. Pesach after Pesach, we must *see* ourselves as capable of such choice. We must remember that we are not static beings lacking the possibility of growth and change. We can always become something new. On Pesach, we must also *show* ourselves to be transformed. Through intense preparations and festive *seder* celebrations, we must externalize our commitments and vocalize our passions. We must demonstrate our willingness to actively engage with our tradition, to appropriate it as our own. In so doing, we announce ourselves to be *gerim* all over again, ones who have consciously and conscientiously taken on the Jewish tradition.

This, says Rabbi Hutner, is the essential message of Pesach and the significance of its timing as well. He writes:

Nowhere in history do we find an instance of the renewal of God's leadership as we find in the redemption from Egypt. Behold, all of the laws of conversion are learned from the Exodus, for then the Israelites exited in order to enter under the wings of the Divine. And is not the apex of renewal conversion itself? ... From every angle, the Exodus was the greatest revelation of the power of renewal in the history of nations or people. There is a whole verse that attests to this in the Torah: "Today you are leaving, in the month of Aviv [spring]" [Exodus 13:4]. That is to say, the Exodus is in the month of renewal ... for spring is [about] renewal ... The practice of [seeing oneself] "as if one left [Egypt]" illuminates within us the power of renewal, such that all of our divine service can be made new again each and every day ... Forevermore the redemption from Egypt will stand as the most outstanding spring in history. (*Pachad Yitzchak* on Pesach, Essay 76, paragraph 16)

... אין אנו מוצאים בכל ימות עולם הופעה של התחדשות בהנהגתו יתברך, כדרך שאנו מוצאים אותה בגאולת מצריים. הלא כל הלכות גירות נפקא לן מגאולת מצריים. משום שאז יצאו ישראל להכנס תחת כנפי השכינה. והלא שיא-פסגתה של כח ההתחדשות היא היא הגירות. . . . דמכל הצדדים היתה גאולת מצריים הגילוי היותר ענקי לכח ההתחדשות בתולדות גוי ואדם. ופסוק בפני עצמו נתיחד לזה בתורה: "היום אתם יוצאים בחודש האביב." כלומר, היציאה היא בחודש ההתחדשות. . . . דאביב היינו ההתחדשות. . . . והעבודה זו של "כאילו הוא יצא" מזריחה בנו את כח ההתחדשות בכל עבודת השם שלנו שתהא נעשית אצלנו בכל יום ויום כחדשה. . . . ולנצח תשאר גאולת מצרים האביב המובהק בכל דברי ימות עולם.

The story of the Exodus is the story of the rebirth of the Jewish people. It is the ultimate springtime tale of rejuvenation and redemption. But more than a tale, it is a learned practice: the practice of seeing ourselves as converts, the practice of willful self-transformation. In the words of the poet Alexander Pope, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast; Man never Is, but always To be blest." In every generation, and on every Pesach, a Jew must see herself as ever in the process of becoming a Jew.



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