

PESAH 2007

Mitzvah aleinu l'saper biytziyat Mitzrayim.

V'khol hamarbeh l'saper biytziyat Mitzrayim – harei zeh m'shubach.

It is a commandment upon us to tell of the exodus of Egypt.

And all who expand and elaborate in telling of the exodus of Egypt are praiseworthy.

-- from the Haggadah of Pesach

This evening we will sit down to one of the central mitzvot within Jewish tradition: the commandment to tell of the exodus of Egypt. We are commanded not only to remember the exodus, not only to “know” the story, but to speak of it aloud. “Even if all of us were wise and understanding, all of us elders, all expert in the Torah, still we are obliged to speak of the exodus from Egypt.”

This “telling” serves many functions. It nurtures and revitalizes our faith in God. It fosters people-hood. It instills in us empathy and compassion for those who are oppressed, enslaved, impoverished, and spurs us to action on their behalf. It points out the ways in which we ourselves remain (externally and/or internally) enslaved, and clarifies the path to freedom.

But the telling of the story is not only functional, a means to an end. The telling itself is an assertion of freedom.

The Zohar teaches that the exile in Egypt was an exile of speech, and the redemption a redemption of speech. Words – not only those spoken aloud, but also those which remain only in our heads – create reality.

This is why speech is such a powerful vehicle on the night of the seder. Speaking is a creative act. To articulate a vision of a new way of being, a new “order,” is to initiate the process of making that vision a reality.

Speech is redemptive, but it can also be enslaving. We all have stories that define who we are, both personally and nationally – stories of our origins, our identities, our family structures, our histories. Through words we articulate, and in articulating solidify, who we are and who we are not, what we do and what we don't do, what we are capable of and what is beyond us, how we live, what we value, who we relate to. The stories we tell ourselves become engrained in our consciousness – they become our consciousness. And these stories can become so familiar, so engrained, that we are no longer able to tell or hear a different story.

Emotionally, too, speech is both redemptive and enslaving. On the one hand, the ability to name our feelings can be freeing; without that capacity, we would remain forever chained to the power of our unspoken and often unconscious emotions. By naming it, we bring those feelings to the surface, and deprive them of their power. On the other hand, we often find that elaborating on certain feelings does not release us from their grip – it merely enhances their solidity and reality. The more we speak of how angry, hurt, unhappy, anxious, frightened or wronged we are, the more we energize those feelings, and the greater their power over us.

Even (or perhaps most significantly) intellectually, speech can be limiting. Our greatest creativity often occurs in the realm of preconceptual intuition, where ideas are sensed but remain inchoate. The articulation of them brings clarity, but often at the expense of wholeness, flexibility and openness of thought. Even the most eloquent among us sense so much more

than we could ever say. Immediately upon our giving voice to our thoughts, we ever after privilege that which is articulable over that which is inexpressible. And no matter how conscious we are of speaking provisionally, once we express an idea, viewpoint or understanding in words, we find that we now have an investment in that idea, that our viewpoint has become a bit more fixed, our understanding less fluid.

Human speech is meant to be an open door, a channel of connection and communication, a vessel through which insight and inspiration flows. Too often, however, our words form a solid wall, a barrier to true understanding, a vise constricting our minds, hearts and souls, tamping our imaginations and limiting our dreams.

In truth, speech is always in exile, and is always on the verge of being redeemed. The “telling” of the seder night – the *haggadah* – is precisely the process through which we again learn the true nature of *lashon hakodesh*, holy speech, redeemed speech, liberating speech.

The lesson is multifold. First, the structure of the haggadah itself teaches us about stories. Questions are samples – illustrative, not proscriptive
Don't tell Torah's story – our story
Two beginnings are samples, as are two entirely different reads (one spiritual, one physical) – through how many more lenses could the story be viewed, told? How many beginnings?

All the stories matter – all the viewpoints. We were all there; we all tell the same story, and we all tell it differently. Through the combination of all the stories we come closer to the true story – four children correspond to four references to God. All the questions, all the perspectives, represent some aspect of the Divine. Some more obvious, some more hidden.

We need to listen. We put our story out there so it can be challenged, revised, enhanced, by other stories.

Learn to value what cannot be articulated – safeguard against the dangers of speech.

Centered at home, not synagogue, and telling stories, not tefilah. This is about talking to each other, not yet to God. Talking to Godly in each other. Horizontal communication is the precondition of vertical communication. Before we can receive Torah – before we can truly understand and appreciate the nature of God's speech – we need to learn how to talk to each other.