

## **Pesah 5779**

### **The Fifth Question**

Shabbat shalom and hag sameah.

Pesah is a festival of questions. Even back when the Rabbis were first inventing the Seder, we read in the Mishnah that they would do things in order to stimulate the children to ask questions. And of course the four questions of the *Ma Nishtana* trigger the telling of the whole Pesah story at the Seder, just as we did last night. So questions are appropriate for this time of year.

Here's a "fifth question" that my former senior rabbi, Jonathan Jaffe Bernhard, asked me once. I didn't have an answer then, but I have thought about it every Pesah since.

It starts with a verse from this morning's Torah reading:

*And they [the people] baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves [Shemot 13:39].*

By this time, the people had slaughtered the Pesah lamb and painted its blood on their doorposts. God's instructions to Moses and Aaron clearly state that it is to be eaten in family groups, with people's skirts tied up (this is what you did in preparation for moving fast!), their shoes on their feet and their staffs in their hands and in a hurry. The people are expelled from Egypt earlier than anyone expected which explains the flat matzah. But - here's Rabbi Bernhard's question - why hadn't they prepared any other provisions for themselves in the meantime?

The more closely we look at this question, the better a question it becomes. Moses instructs the people about the Pesah lamb and how to eat it on the tenth of the month - that's four whole days before the sacrifice. They do take the time to deprive the Egyptians of their valuables. But it appears that nobody - nobody out of 600,000 people! - thinks to pack a picnic basket.

Why not??

Let me offer two answers.

The first is to blame the leadership. Even though God tells Moses how the people are to eat the meal - hurriedly - Moses not only doesn't convey this information: he also doesn't explicitly say that they will be leaving. The actual words he and Aaron deliver to the people tell them about the lamb and the coming plague, but not about the urgency. He never tells them that the Exodus is imminent: indeed, he says, "Don't go outside til morning," as if to suggest that come morning, they will still be in Egypt.

The Torah doesn't offer us any explanations for Moses' omission, so we are left to search for our own. We can come up with a couple of reasons for his behavior.

First, perhaps Moses, too, was just in a tearing hurry. In his rush to convey all of the rules of the Pesah sacrifice (and there are a lot of them), telling the people also that they should be ready to run might just have slipped his mind. My brother has a punchy little phrase for this: "Operation successful: patient dead." By paying too much attention to the details, Moses fails to share the most critical piece of information.

Or perhaps Moses was just making an executive decision on God's behalf to feed the information to the people gradually. Let them get the hang of that lamb thing, he might have thought, and get the blood up on the doorposts, and *then* we'll deal with freedom. One step at a time, and let's not raise expectations too high at the outset. Some contemporary leadership theories, too, have this approach - build trust slowly and incrementally so it will last.

But whether it was haste or a deliberate strategy, not telling the people directly about the Exodus is something that is going to have consequences both for the people and for Moses. The people are going to be hungry and thirsty - something that will strongly contribute to their mindset of 'are we there yet?' - and Moses is truly going to suffer for that. In the end, his reaction to it will deprive him of his opportunity to enter the land he has been leading them towards for so many years.

But I'm not so sure Moses should take all the blame. Because even though he doesn't give the people the full picture, they really are very passive. "Just as Moses and Aaron told them, so they did," we read. We can imagine them trudging from Egyptian house to Egyptian house to pick up treasure, going, "Well, I don't know, this thing with the blood is a bit odd, isn't it, still it makes a change from working, I suppose, and why is it so dark out there? Oh well, wonder what these folks are going to give us, eh?"

In other words, it looks as though the people have internalized the slave mentality completely. It doesn't matter whether it's an Egyptian taskmaster, God or Moses and Aaron giving the instructions - they just carry them out and mutter resentfully while they are doing so. They seem not to have noticed the run of plagues that had been happening in accordance with the original promise they had been given that they would be redeemed with God's outstretched arm and some extraordinary punishments [Shemot 6:9]. They simply can't imagine what it means to be free - to have choices, to refuse orders, to take responsibility for themselves. They have been too damaged by all those years of slavery.

The element that links these two reactions - Moses' and the people's - is the same. The common theme here is fear. We can imagine Moses being so worried that he'd misinstruct the people about the sacrifice that he simply doesn't remember, in that moment, to tell them they'd better eat in a hurry and be ready to travel. Or perhaps he fears dealing with their reaction and the inevitable questions and panic were he to say, "Tonight's the night." And on the other hand, the people's fear means that they cannot recognize their historic chance for freedom even when it's staring them in the face.

And fear is something that we've seen before in the story. Pharaoh is the embodiment of it. He is so fearful that he is ready to destroy not only the Israelite boy babies but the Egyptian ones too. His fear translates into tyranny, arrogance and ultimately his own destruction.

The symbolic message this detail of the Exodus story carries for us is a profound one. If we cannot master our fear, then it will master us. It will cause us to lose leadership over ourselves and it will deprive us of nourishment.

But by contrast: if we can master our fear, if we can independently take decisions that equip us for the journey that is our lives, we can become truly free.

We read last night at the Seder - and will read tonight again - that our task is to re-experience the Exodus. In a well-known Hebrew wordplay, the word for Egypt - Mitzrayim - is understood of being a place of constriction - the place in which we are bound by fear. By contrast, the Exodus - Yetziat mitzrayim - describes coming out of that place.

This Pesah, let's see if we can experience the taste of true freedom.