



Pesach and Jewish Continuity

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Can the message of Pesach retain its meaning in an era of tsunamis, financial instability, al Qaeda and Richard Dawkins? This is not only a question about Pesach, but actually about the whole of Judaism. If Pesach is no longer relevant to our children, then we have no hope of enabling the Jewish past to inform the Jewish future. If we are unable to relate to the history of the Jewish people, and we fail to be inspired by its achievements and governed by its rules, then we may as well shut up shop, and go with the flow of assimilation.

The Pesach experience, especially the Seder, is seminal to the process of what is sometimes called Jewish Continuity, a precious goal, something for which we all strive and hope. Every person reading this wants to have Jewish grandchildren who are not merely Jewish by name, but have a sense of Jewish history, an appreciation of Torah concepts and ideals and at least a modicum of observance, all coupled with the will and enthusiasm to impart all of that to their children.

It is clear that in Anglo-Jewry we have not broadly succeeded in doing this. To be sure, the observant community is growing in leaps and bounds, but elsewhere, in many of the heartlands of Anglo-Jewry, the message is not getting through. To be sure, there are many notable exceptions: Shuls, communities and outreach programmes that have had a major impact, but in many places, the prognosis looks less promising.

One of the keys to success is persistence. There is a beautiful parable for this, which I hope will make things clearer. (It also involves a frog, which makes it suitable for Pesach!) A frog once fell into a bowl of milk. It realised that it had no hope of survival, as the milk was deep and the walls of the bowl too high to climb – the best it could possibly manage would be to tread water / milk for a while until fatigue set in and drowning became inevitable. So, thought the frog, why bother – I might as well drown now and save all the trouble. He shut his eyes, stopped struggling and drowned. A second frog fell into a bowl of milk. After making the same assessment as his lantsman, he closed his eyes and drowned. A third frog fell into a bowl of milk, but this one was a fighter. He paid no heed to the hopelessness of the situation, and ignoring all evidence to the contrary, remained convinced that he would survive. So he paddled and kicked with all his might, determined to keep going. As his flailing became more and more vigorous, the milk began to turn into butter and when most of it had solidified, he simply climbed out, exhausted, but alive to jump another day. The application of the parable is clear – continuous efforts, despite perilous conditions, are likely to produce some results.

The Haggadah tells us:

In every generation, one is obliged to see oneself as if one has personally come out from Egypt.... Not only did the Holy One, may He be blessed, redeem our ancestors, but He redeemed us with them...

Can we really see the exodus as a personal experience – didn't it happen over 3300 years ago? The truth is that unless we see Judaism as an experience of the here and now, we are unlikely to survive. History is interesting, but obviously, it lives in the past – in books and memories, but not in the present. We can't sell people a history book as a lifestyle, unless the experiences are direct and meaningful today.

Pesach and the Seder represent for us the conjunction of past and present. Rabbi Berel Wein, a contemporary Jewish thinker and historian, points out that as a child, he sat at his grandfather's Seder, at which his grandfather recalled his own childhood experiences with his grandfather, a man who could remember the great 19th century ethical teacher, Rabbi Yisroel Salanter. At Rabbi Wein's



Seder, he sits with his grandchildren, who will be able, in due course and God willing, to share stories about their grandfather with their own grandchildren. Thus at one current Seder, we can see an experience potentially spanning several generations. As Rabbi Wein points out, very few (less than 20) such structures are needed to bridge the gap between the exodus and the present day.

But creating cross-generational shared experiences requires tremendous effort; it is only possible if the imperatives, ethics and goals of the past are shared with the present generation. Otherwise, in our minds, grandfather's grandfather is a dinosaur, an artefact from a long-dead age, while grandchildren's grandchildren inhabit a future unimaginably different from our present world. The redemptive spirit of Pesach seeks, through our own efforts, to redress this – it links us to our past and, perhaps more importantly, it helps to assure our future. Only if we take Judaism and its wealth of ideas and experiences seriously can we say that we ourselves have been redeemed. We always have the chance to start afresh – to be redeemed and commence the path of spiritual growth once again. If we are prepared to do this, we, like the frog, may be able to climb out of the milk once and for all and create an unshakeable link across the generations. This is true Jewish Continuity.

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