"My father was a wandering Aramean…."

(Deuteronomy 26:5-8)

Pesach 5764 / 2004

The Mishnah (200 CE) gives us the following guidelines for how we are to tell the story of the Exodus at the Seder:

> [The seder leader] begins with degradation and ends with praise, and interprets "My father was a wandering Aramean…." (Deuteronomy 26:5-8) until he finishes the entire passage. (*Mishnah Pesachim*, ch. 10)

At this point in the Seder, we will divide up into pairs or small groups to study these verses and discuss an important question related to each verse.

1. My father was a wandering Aramean, and with just a few people, he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, and there he became a great nation, mighty and numerous.

Jews trace our ancestry to wanderers and strangers. In this verse, the 'wandering Aramean' might be Abraham, who was born near Aram (present-day Syria), or it might be Jacob, who spent several years living in Aram.

Being a wanderer or stranger means that you are never fully 'at home'; it often means being vulnerable. How well does this describe the situation of the Jewish people throughout our history? Who are wanderers and strangers today?

2. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed hard labor upon us.

The Midrash asks: "What does it mean, 'They imposed hard labor upon us'? – They would impose a difficult task upon the week and an easy task upon the strong, a light burden upon the young and a heavy burden upon the old. The work was futile and without end, for the Egyptians wanted not only to enslave them but also to break their spirit." Stories like this are reminiscent of the Nazi and Soviet tactics of forcing prisoners to do degrading and ultimately unnecessary hard labor.

Perhaps inspired by the experience of slavery in Egypt, Jewish law teaches that one is prohibited from giving a servant a meaningless task; for example, one is prohibited from instructing a servant, "rake under this tree until I return to give you another task to

perform." Rather, the servant must be given a task that can (at least theoretically) be completed.

What is the connection between work and dignity? What does it mean for someone to be forced to do meaningless work?

3. We cried out to Adonai, the God of our ancestors, and Adonai heard our plea and saw our affliction, our misery, and our oppression.

The Midrash teaches: "God saw that the slaves showed compassion for one another; upon completing their own work-quotas, they would go help others." In other words, they persisted in behaving in a civilized and decent manner, despite their desperate conditions.

In particular, the Israelite overseers are described in the Torah as being especially self-sacrificing. After Pharaoh issued a decree that the slaves would no longer be given straw that was a necessary ingredient in the bricks they were making, the Israelite slaves were unable to fulfill their daily quota of bricks. When the Egyptian taskmasters counted the bricks and found the quota unfulfilled, the Israelite overseers refused to deliver their fellow Israelites to the Egyptians. Instead, they submitted themselves, and willingly suffered the punishment in order to lighten the ordeal of their fellow Israelites. According to the Midrash, it was acts of compassion like this that led God to intervene.

Imagine yourself as one of these Israelite overseers. What was your motivation for becoming an overseer? How did your friends and family react to your decision to become an overseer? Does anyone accuse you of being a 'collaborator' with an oppressive regime? How do you respond?

4. Then Adonai took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, with signs and with wonders.

Those 'signs and wonders' included the devastation of Egypt and the deaths of many (presumably) innocent people. (The Torah is very clear that at least by plague #8, the Egyptian people were sympathetic to the Israelites, and yet they still suffered the effects of all the plagues, including the Killing of the First Born, because of Pharaoh's intransigence.)

Must there always be a human cost to freedom?

“My father was a wandering Aramean….”

(Deuteronomy 26:5-8)

Pesach 5765 / 2005

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The story of Passover took place thousands of years ago; yet we begin our re-telling by referring to our ancestor Jacob as “my father.” Jews have very long historical memories. In fact, this is one of the points of the Passover Seder: as we will read later on tonight, “In every generation, each person has the responsibility to see himself or herself as one who **personally** came out of Egypt.” We say that what happened to our ancestors actually happened to **us** as well.

- What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of having such a long historical memory?
- Does this make us similar to, or different from, other peoples around the world?
- Must we exercise caution when we interpret the events in the lives of our ancestors as applicable to us as well?

2. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed hard labor upon us.

The midrash understands the Hebrew phrase **וַיָּרֵעוּ אוֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִים**, *vayarei’u otanu ha-mitzrim*, translated here as “the Egyptians dealt harshly with us,” as meaning “the Egyptians made us appear to be evil.” In other words, the first Egyptian act against the Hebrews was a propaganda campaign, to convince the Egyptian people that the Hebrews were degenerate and worthy of being enslaved. A campaign of oppression cannot succeed

without such a propaganda process, because almost no one is comfortable oppressing people they feel are innocent.

- Does this interpretation have any contemporary implications?
- Can you think of other parallels throughout history?

3. We cried out to Adonai, the God of our ancestors, and Adonai heard our plea and saw our affliction, our misery, and our oppression.

Why did God "hear" before God "saw"?

When oppression exists in our world (and there is plenty of it!), we often fail to 'see' it until we 'hear' about it. In other words, the mere fact of oppression is not what spurs us on to action. Rather, we are inspired to act against oppression when someone (perhaps a victim of oppression) reminds us about it.

Many of us are vaguely aware that there is a genocide under way in the Darfur region of the Sudan, even as we speak, tacitly supported by the Sudanese government.

- What have we done, as individuals or as a community, to respond to this genocide? What haven't we done? Why?
- What could we 'hear' or 'see' that would encourage us to respond?
- In other genocides throughout history (the Holocaust; Cambodia; Rwanda; etc.), what made other people in the world respond or not respond?

4. Then Adonai took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, with signs and with wonders.

- When have you felt redeemed or saved -- by God, by a person, or by some other force?

- What are some "signs and wonders" that you have witnessed in your own life?

"My father was a wandering Aramean…."

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Pesach 5766 / 2006

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How did we get to Egypt in the first place? For many of us, the story has personal and contemporary resonances. One of our ancestors (Jacob, the "wandering Aramean") was experiencing desperate financial circumstances. He moved his family to Egypt, where conditions and opportunities were better. Why Egypt? For the same reason that many Eastern European Jews came to the United States: because they already had a relative there who would 'sponsor' them and help them to adjust to their new land.

As the Passover story begins with a story of immigration, let's think about our own immigration stories, and about others' immigration stories taking place today.

- To the best of your knowledge, when did your ancestors (or yourself) come to the United States? Why did they come?
- How do you think their immigration experience was similar to or different from that of Jacob and family in the time of Joseph?
- Immigration to the United States – legal and illegal – is of course a big news story this month. How do you compare the stories of today's immigrants to the stories of immigration in your family, and immigration to Egypt at the beginning of the Passover story?

2. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed hard labor upon us.

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without such a propaganda process, because almost no one is comfortable oppressing people they feel are innocent.

Let's stay with the immigration theme:

- When/Why do societies feel threatened by immigration? How do those societies react? How much of the threat is real and how much is imagined?
- Why would Jewish tradition encourage us to remember a time when we were immigrants and strangers?
- What are the implications of the Torah's commandment, ואהבתם את הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים– "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt"?

3. We cried out to Adonai, the God of our ancestors, and Adonai heard our plea and saw our affliction, our misery, and our oppression.

The Talmud tells us, with depressing prescience, עבד בהפקירא ניחא ליה. A slave generally is not bothered by his servitude. (*Ketubot* 11a) In other words, a slave can adapt very quickly to the condition of being a slave and can even start to see its advantages; i.e. a slave doesn't have to make decisions, doesn't have any independent responsibilities, and probably doesn't have to think very hard. A slave who has never tasted freedom is especially likely to remain docile and to accept this condition as his/her lot in life. Many entire societies have been content to be enslaved for long periods of time. What makes the story of the Exodus so surprising is that the Israelites were **unwilling** to tolerate servitude. It took God, Moses and Aaron a long time to bring the people to that point, such that at the beginning of the book of Exodus, the people complain to Moses and Aaron that their appeals to Pharaoh are only making the situation worse. Eventually, however, the people do 'cry out to Adonai.'

- Is it possible today for someone to be 'in need of liberation' but not to realize it?
- If so, what is the responsibility of someone else (perhaps someone analogous to Moses and Aaron) to help such a person to realize the need for liberation? What are the pitfalls in such a process?

4. Then Adonai took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, with signs and with wonders.

It is often noted that Moses is not mentioned directly in the haggadah – in large part because these four verses, the core of the 'story-telling' part of the haggadah, do not mention him. In this re-telling of the story, all the focus is on God. (Though it is certainly not inappropriate for us to bring Moses into our free-flowing discussion that is based on the traditional text of the haggadah.)

- Is this the way it should be? What are advantages and disadvantages of telling the story of the Exodus without focusing on the remarkable personality of Moses?

“My father was a wandering Aramean….”

(Deuteronomy 26:5-8)

Pesach 5767 / 2007

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Somehow – for some reason – the Israelites remained a distinct nation in Egypt, rather than amalgamating into the general society.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762-1839), known as the Hatam Sofer, wrote that Israelites would have been absorbed into the general society and disappeared, were it not for a few major aspects of their Israelite identity that they held onto:"*SHem*" (they did not change their names); "*Lashon*" (they spoke a distinctive language), and "*Malbush*" (they retained distinctive clothing).

It is ironic that rabbis have often included this message within the Haggadah, given that the Passover Seder itself originated as a conscious imitation of a Greek Symposium and is therefore an example of assimilation and cultural borrowing.

In YOUR life and the life of your family, how do YOU balance the twin imperatives of absorbing the best that the general culture has to offer, and retaining a Jewish identity?

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The midrash understands the Hebrew phrase **וַיָּרֵעוּ אוֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִים**, *vayarei’u otanu ha-mitzrim*, translated here as “the Egyptians dealt harshly with us,” as meaning “the Egyptians made us appear to be evil.” In other words, the first Egyptian act against the Hebrews was a propaganda campaign, to convince the Egyptian people that the Hebrews were degenerate and worthy of being enslaved. A campaign of oppression cannot succeed without such a propaganda process, because almost no one is comfortable oppressing people they feel are innocent.

- When/Why do societies feel threatened by the presence of a minority (especially an immigrant minority)? How do those societies react? How much of the threat is real and how much is imagined?

- Why would Jewish tradition encourage us to remember a time when we were immigrants and strangers?
- What are the implications of the Torah's commandment, ואהבתם את הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים– "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt"?

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We have the custom of removing 10 drops of wine from our wine cup, corresponding to the Ten Plagues, because we want to diminish the fullness of our joy (symbolized by the full cup) in light of the suffering of others. Sensitivity to the suffering of enemies has always been a hallmark of Jewish tradition. The Book of Proverbs tells us, בנפול אויביך אל תשמח, 'Don't rejoice when your enemy stumbles.' Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir famously said (paraphrased), "We could forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but we cannot forgive them for making us kill their sons."

- Some people appreciate and praise this Jewish attitude.
- Some, however, criticize it as a form of weakness (we ought **not** be sensitive to our enemies; after all, they are our enemies!).
- Others criticize this attitude as a psychological rationalization, which simply makes us less uncomfortable with the suffering of enemies but does not encourage us to eliminate that suffering.

With which perspective above do you agree?