



Telling God's Story

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Whose story do we tell on the Seder night?

The answer, at first, seems obvious: the story we tell is our own, the story of our deliverance from slavery to freedom. It is the core story of our people. It is the grand drama of Jewish history in which we are still enmeshed today.

But this week's *parashah* offers another interpretation, one in which it is God, not (only) ourselves, at the center of the story:

שמות יג:

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעִבּוּר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם:

Shemot 13:8

You shall tell your child on that day, saying, "It is because of what God did for me when I left Egypt."



This verse, imagining a parent telling their child about the Exodus, includes two central figures: not just the parent, but God. The parent does not just tell their own story. It is the story of them and God, together. It is not only the story of the Jewish people we tell on the Seder night. On the night of the year most devoted to storytelling, we tell our children God's story as well.

A *midrash* in Devarim Rabbah tells a story of what happened to the Jewish baby boys born in Egypt and sentenced to death in the Nile. In response to Pharaoh's decree, Jewish women, unwilling to condemn their sons to death, ventured into the wilderness to give birth to their babies, away from Egyptian eyes. When the babies were born, their mothers, understanding that to bring their babies back with them meant certain death, turned to God. "I have done my part," they said, "and now, it is time for You to do Yours."

And, according to the *midrash*, God did.

דברים רבה (ליברמן) א:טו

א"ר חייא הגדול: ישתבח שמו של הב"ה, הוא בכבודו היה עושה להם כך. והיו התינוקות גדלים בשדה כצמחים הללו, והיו מתגדלין ונכנסין בעדרים לבתיהם, הוא שיחזקאל אומ' "רבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך" (יחזקאל טז:ז).

Devarim Rabbah (Lieberman) 1:15

R. H̥iyya the Great said:.... May the Name of the Holy Blessed One be praised, since He Himself cared for them.

The babies grew in the field like grass, and after they grew, they returned to their homes in flocks. This is what Yehezkel said, "You grew like the grass of the field" (Yehezkel 16:7).¹

¹ This *pasuk* is also quoted in the Maggid section of the Haggadah.



God becomes a surrogate mother to the Jewish people's abandoned babies. The image of God the *midrash* offers is markedly different from the one usually conjured by Shemot. Whereas in Shemot God is often understood as a warrior fighting to free the Jewish people from Egypt, the God of this *midrash* is a mother, caring for her infant. Whereas in Shemot God cares for His children by bringing punishment and death to others, the God of this *midrash* cares for Her children the way we do: by nursing them, washing them, and cherishing them.

Eventually, when the danger has passed and it is time for the children to be returned to their parents, God brings the children home:

והיאך היו מכירין לילך אצל אבותיהם?
 אלא הקב"ה היה נכנס עמהם והיה מראה לכל א' וא' בית אביו, ואומ' לו: קרא לאביך פלוני ולאמך
 פלונית,
 ואומ' לה: אין אתה זכורה כשילדת אותי בשדה פלוני, ביום [פלו'], מקודם חמשה חדשים.

How did they know which home was their family's?

The Holy Blessed One accompanied them, pointed each and every one to his parents' home, and said, "Call your father this and your mother that."

The children would say to their mothers, "Don't you remember when you gave birth to me, on this day in that field, five months ago?"

God's kindness to the lost children of Egypt is not limited to the care God gives them while their parents cannot care for them. God's kindness extends to making sure that the children know who they are, telling them their parents names, the circumstances of their births, and where they came from. In a world in which the Egyptians intended to extinguish Jewish families, God rebuilds those families by making sure that Jewish children know who they are. In this *midrash*, God saves the Jewish people by making sure that our children know their parents and their parents' stories.



The *midrash* concludes with another reunion, this time, between God and the children at the Yam Suf:

כשבאו לים וראו אותו היו מראים לאמותם באצבע, ואומרי' להן "זה אלי ואנוהו" (שמות טו:ב), זהו
שגדלני, זה אלי ואנוהו.

When they came to the Sea and saw Him, they pointed Him out to their mothers with their fingers and said to them, “This is my God, and I will honor Him” (Shemot 15:2)—this is the One Who raised me, “this is my God, and I will honor Him.”

It is the children God cared for who first recognize Him at the greatest miracle the Jewish people have ever experienced: not as the great warrior who has saved them from the pursuing Egyptians, but as the One who raised them and returned them to their homes.

In this ending, the *midrash* offers us a glimpse of what the Seder night might be: a chance to return God’s favor to us, the parents who passed through Egypt.

Every family that gets to care for their own children, to feed and raise them themselves, is tasting one of the immeasurable gifts of freedom. When we raise our children ourselves, we have the merit to do for them what God did for the children of Egypt: dressing them, holding them close, and loving them. Care is the gift of freedom. It is a gift not all of our ancestors had, and a gift still denied to many.

And yet, the side effect of the harrowing upbringing of those slave children was growing up with God. When they grew up, they recognized God immediately; it came as naturally to them as recognizing our own parents comes to us. Our children, cherished by human hands, do not grow up recognizing God the way they recognize their own parents. In a world where God



sometimes feels impossibly far away, this gift of raising our own children, one of the most precious human beings can hope for, also means we have a responsibility. Just as God told our children our stories when we were absent, we must tell our children God's story as well.

On the Seder night, we step into God's role: whereas God in Egypt told those children their parents' stories, making sure they would understand how to be part of their families when they were reunited, on the Seder night, we tell our children stories of God, making sure that when they encounter God in the world, they will recognize Him. Just as God taught our children our names and stories when we were unable to, on the Seder night, in a world where it sometimes feels like God is our absent parent, we tell our children about God.² In telling our children the story of the Exodus, we are telling them who God is.

This is God's Name, we say. And this is His story. God gave birth to us long ago in a land called Egypt. This is how you will recognize God when you meet Him: He is the One Who frees slaves and loves the broken hearted. He is the One Who cares for those no one else can care for.

He is the One Who brings lost children home.

² For more on the image of God as absent parent, see R. Akiva Mattenson's prize winning essay, "Out Beyond the Sea," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/out-beyond-sea>.

