

TELL THEM OUR STORY

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IN THE VERY MIDST of being liberated from Egypt, the Hebrew slaves are commanded to remember their liberation. What we know from the text's emphasis is that, in the actual moments of the Exodus, the people were in a hurry. And we can certainly imagine it was an intense and probably frantic experience. And yet, during this scramble, God and Moses speak to the people, commanding them at length that they should remember this experience for all time and mark it with the *pesah* sacrifice:

שמות יב:יז-טו

וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן וְחֻגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֹג לַיהוָה
לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגְּלוּ: שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מַצּוֹת
תֹאכְלוּ.

Shemot 12:14-15

This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival for God throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread.

In the rushed moments of their fleeing, when perhaps they could have used a headstart to escape Pharaoh's clutches, the people are commanded to conduct a ritual meal and are instructed in the laws of *Pesah* (Shemot 12-13). The final plague has not even taken place when the Torah's narrative pauses, we readers on the edge of our seats, to lay out the ritual details.

Why would this be? Couldn't God and Moses have waited to give the people these instructions and commandments until after they escaped Egypt? Couldn't they have held the meal safely in the wilderness? After all, isn't this ritual designed to **remember** how God liberated them? It's difficult to understand why they would need this ritual **while** being liberated.

Could a born slave imagine such freedom, describe it, and thank God for it, before they have even left Egypt?

One answer to these questions can be found in contemporary thought. A now well-known study conducted by psychologists Marshall and Sara Duke of Emory University sought to determine what impact family stories have on children. Through recording and studying dinner conversations among four dozen families and testing the children afterward, the Dukes discovered that children who knew their family history—the particular stories of grandparents or the broader cultural narratives of their ethnic group—demonstrated greater resilience than children who did not: “The ones who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges. ... The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.”¹

When asked to explain these findings, the Dukes answered that a child who knows her family story—who knows, say, that her great-grandmother survived a boat ride from Poland to Ellis Island with only two feather pillowcases—is aware she belongs to a narrative that is bigger than her. She has what they call a strong “intergenerational self.” And when that child experiences her own challenges, she knows her great-grandmother did too, and that gives her strength.

As a result of these findings, Marshall Duke and others have publicly urged parents and grandparents to develop a strong family narrative, and to tell and retell family stories.

Looking back at Shemot, particularly Parashat Bo, one sees how the Torah interweaves narrative and memory. Even in the opening verses of the *parashah*, when God instructs Moses to approach Pharaoh, God tells Moses to anticipate some future time when Jewish

¹ Bruce Feiler, “The Stories That Bind Us.” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2013.

children will ask their parents about what happened in Egypt:

שמות י:א-ב

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל פַּרְעֹה כִּי אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי
אֶת לְבֹו וְאֶת לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְחִי אֵלָה
בְּקִרְבּוֹ: וְלַמַּעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבֶן בְּנֶךָ אֵת אֲשֶׁר
הִתְעַלְלִיתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֵת אֶתְחִי אֲשֶׁר שְׁמַתִּי בָם
וַיְדַעְתָּם כִּי אֲנִי ה':

Shemot 10:1-2

Then God said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your child and of your child’s child how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am God.”

So too in chapters 12 and 13, the verses narrate what is befalling the Hebrew slaves, but they are interpolated by commandments from God to commemorate these moments and to teach them to their children.

As strange or disjointed as this may seem to the reader, and all the more so to the Hebrew slaves themselves, perhaps God is stepping in here, in the midst of their frantic, fearful rushing, to say: “What you’re experiencing right now is historic. And I promise you, when you get to the other side of this horror—which you will—you need to remember this moment. You need to remember that you were once a slave, but I brought you out so you could be free, devoted to Me, no longer beholden to a tyrant. You are moving through something terrible, but you are going to make it out, and I don’t want you or your children or your children’s children to forget the gift of your freedom.”

At our Seder tables, we give all our attention and energy to teaching our children about our family story, the story of our people. Perhaps we could also apply

this wisdom beyond the Seder, in a way that looks like this: A child is facing something difficult. Maybe it’s as quick and minor as a fall on the sidewalk. Or maybe it’s a more serious, long-term struggle. The parent speaks to their child, saying, “What you are experiencing right now is hard. But, you want to know something? You come from a family that has gone through hard things. Your family members worked, struggled, and fought—so that you could be here. And you are! And because you’re part of this family, you’re strong and brave too. This hard moment will be part of your story, a story you get to tell, a story that’s part of our family story.”

What the Dukes and others have discovered in human psychology, the Jewish people have known since the Exodus. Since we were liberated and born as a nation, we have been taught to experience and to remember, and to teach our children what we remember. And it is true that knowing we are part of a bigger story can help us to see ourselves as less alone, belonging to something so big we can’t see the beginning or end of it.

But even more, what Shemot teaches us when it interweaves experience and memory is that storytelling itself is an act of liberation, a manifestation of freedom. When a person can, even in the midst of some terrible ordeal, pause to note how significant the moment is, to release themselves even momentarily from the experience—with enough distance to describe the experience as a story—that person has a kind of power.² The storyteller shapes the narrative and its meaning. In this way, telling an old family story and seeing our present experience as part of a story empowers a person immeasurably to carry on. ♦

2 Readers familiar with Viktor Frankl will notice the resonance between this notion of storytelling as liberating and the idea he taught and popularized in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1984), p. 75, and elsewhere: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”