A Revelation not a Revolution

Moshe Taragin

On this night we were chosen to inspire the world to monotheism and to moral conscience. Pesach is our Independence Day, the genesis of our nation, and the launch of our historic mission.

Sadly, during our long and bleak exile, this mission was suppressed. Exile banished us to margins of society, and we lived as an ostracized and persecuted nation of victims. Valiantly, we withdrew to a deep inner world of eternity, studying Hashem’s Torah, loyally submitting to his mitzvot, and building robust Jewish communities across the globe. For two thousand years, our influence upon humanity was muted, and we lived entirely “within” ourselves.

Sadly, because of this historical isolation, we lost our universal “voice,” as consciousness of our universal mission became clouded. Even during this long exile, there were “historical pockets” during which we influenced society at large. During the Jewish “Golden Era” in Spain (roughly 950-1400) and, more recently in 19th and early 20th century Western Europe, Jews shaped their host societies, achieving prominence in commerce, politics, science, philosophy, and culture. Yet even during these “universalist” moments we didn’t influence society with our Jewish values. We spearheaded general societal progress, but didn’t directly inspirit Jewish values. We helped society draft its “story” but it wasn’t our distinctly Jewish story.

Our Lost Voice

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l revived our “lost voice,” reminding us that “our story” is their story. We weren’t just meant to spearhead technological and cultural change, but to inspire the world through Jewish values. He reminded us that our Jewish ideals carved out the modern world of democracy, human dignity, family and social equality.

His writings about Pesach, in particular, highlight our universalist mission which was launched on this day of national memory. His profound ideas and elegant articulation continue to deeply impact my own Pesach experience.

As much as I identify with his overall message, I disagree with his framing of yetziat Mitzrayim. My respectful disagreement isn’t meant to detract from his overall message about our universal Jewish mission. Simply put, his vision of yetziat Mitzrayim differs significantly with my own.

Starting a Revolution

For Rabbi Sacks, yetziat Mitzrayim is a universal drama pivoted upon values and ideals common to all of humanity. The exodus from Egypt was a political revolution, showcasing a new socio- political model for humanity. Ancient society was oppressive and exploitative, leaving little room for personal freedom or for personal economic advance. The gods clearly favored established rulers who wielded unlimited power and preserved the rigid “order” of society. These societies of “might and power” held little regard for rights of the weak and of the vulnerable. Wealth was monopolized by a limited few, with much of society living on the brink of starvation. Strangers were distrusted as aliens, unentitled to rights or citizenship. These were cold, brutal and merciless societies.

To Rabbi Sacks, our liberation from Egypt introduced a new social paradigm to human history. He cites the historian, Paul Johnson, who wrote that the Jews introduced society to the notions of “equality before the law…the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person…individual conscience and personal redemption…collective conscience and social responsibility... and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind.”

For Rabbi Sacks, on Pesach, God intervened on behalf of the weak and the defenseless, and urged these former victims to craft a more egalitarian and compassionate society. The nation we fashioned would serve as a social microcosm for humanity, offering them “horizons of morality.” The exodus was the first, and perhaps, the greatest, political revolution in history. It didn’t merely overturn the established political order but distilled a new social fabric and a new vision of God Himself.

For Rabbi Sacks, “our story” is “their story” and, to a degree, their story is our story. Our story is embedded within humanity’s endless pursuit of political liberty, economic freedom, and social equality.

Revolution of Revelation?

In many ways, I completely agree that PART of “our” story is “their” story, but, our story contains numerous other chapters which aren’t related to “their story.” The exodus was not a social revolution but a night of covenant and of national selection. Hashem descended into history, reenacting an ancient covenant which had been in hibernation for two centuries and fulfilling an ancient promise to our ancestors. On this night Hashem once again chose us as His people, selecting us to receive His eternal Torah and to style our lives based on His will. On this magical night we were chosen to travel to the land of God and to build a Temple of ritual and divine encounter. This is the night of Jewish destiny, of the grand mission - to bring God into human realm through study, ritual, commandment, moral behavior, and settlement of the land of Israel. Pesach is not a night of social revolution but of ritual and religion.

Of course, an additional method of bringing Hashem into our world is by constructing an ethical social model for others to follow. However, this social agenda isn’t the only, or even the primary feature of our redemption or of the national mission launched on that night. This night we were called to the mountain of the divine. This night we were called to eternity and not just to social equality. This night we were called to heaven and not just to a city on the hill. This night was one of revelation not revolution.

Social Equality or a S’neh?

To illustrate his perspective, Rabbi Sacks portrays the departures of Avraham and Moshe from the homelands as escapes from morally dysfunctional empires. Avraham fled the wicked society of Mesopotamia and similarly, Moshe, identifying the exploitative tyranny of Egypt, ran away, ultimately initiating a social revolution.

Is this true? Do we have any record of ancient Mesopotamia as morally deficient? Theologically wayward maybe, but not morally dysfunctional - as Sedom was. Doesn’t Avraham relocate based on divine command and isn’t he more drawn to the land of Israel rather than escaping from the corruption of Mesopotamia?

Is Moshe’s heroism an ethical awakening in response to the horrors of Egyptian persecution? Wasn’t the rendezvous at the s’neh the turning point in Moshe’s career prompting him toward redemptive leadership? His conversation with Hashem at the s’neh surrounded the divine promise to our ancestors and our national destiny in Israel and not the design of a moral society. The private revelation at the “sneh” would later become a mass revelation atop this mountain of “Sinai.” Revelation, not revolution sparked both Avraham and Moshe’s relocation and redemptive fervor.

Part of History?

To reinforce his universalization of yetziat Mitzrayim, Rabbi Sacks writes “we do no justice to the originality of Israel’s faith if we seek to remove it from history altogether, for it was precisely in, and through history, that Israel sensed the providence of God.” Exodus cannot be severed from history because it was part of a larger social evolution.

Once again, I am not sure I agree. Yetziat Mitzrayim resurrected an eternal covenant between God and His people which lies beyond this earth and beyond human history. Of course, the revival of this covenant occurred at a particular historical juncture and influenced the broader trajectory of human experience. At its root though, Pesach lies beyond history. It is a night of Shir Hashirim and of a love - like no other love - between Hashem and His precious but sometimes errant people who He took as His wife. It is not a night of political theory or of social dynamics. It is a night of a marriage in heaven.

Rabbi Sacks restored an important Jewish voice which had vanished for centuries. As he himself writes “Jewish religious imagination, still suffering the effects of trauma and dislocation, has not yet recovered its poise, scope, intellectual breadth, or prophetic depth.” In our generation, Rabbi Sacks pioneered the rediscovery of that intellectual breadth and prophetic depth. I hope that others, many of whom he inspired and continues to inspire, will help us fully recover that voice.

He is correct, that our mission for humanity, which began the night of Pesach, forever changed history. However, Pesach was not a universal revolution, but a moment of national revelation. The march of social progress wasn’t launched on that evening; the march to the promised land was. Amidst the dark nightmarish world of Egypt, amidst unimaginable suffering, Hashem appeared to us affirming His love and His Loyalty to us. Revelation not revolution.

Pesach Same’ach