

Pesach 5771: My Liberation is Yours

Michael Walzer

Every Jew knows that Pesach is a holiday of liberation. We remember that we were strangers and slaves in Egypt, eat the bitter herbs, discuss the cruelty of the overseers - and from these things we draw political and moral conclusions. This celebration has a purpose. Again and again in the Bible, the memory of our slavery is used to justify a commandment: "You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garments in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt...therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment (Deut. 24:17-18)."

But notice the pronouns. This was Israel's liberation, our liberation, and the commandments are directed to us. Only we can "remember" something that happened only to us. So what does the teaching of Pesach mean for other people? Can it have a universal application? It isn't universal in the way that the passion of Christ is for Christians - who believe that the sacrifice of Jesus brings salvation to all humankind. By contrast, the liberation from Egypt liberated the enslaved Israelites and no one else.

And yet the story of Israel's deliverance has had an extraordinary impact on non-Jewish readers - who do not imagine that they can be included in our liberation but rather that they can achieve a liberation of their own. The exodus from Egypt invites imitation. It isn't itself universal, but it is universally exemplary. And so it has been an inspiration for other people's liberation movements.

When I went to North Carolina in 1960 to meet and write about the black students who were sitting-in at segregated lunch counters, I listened to a remarkable sermon by a Baptist minister who not only described, but also mimed the Israelite exodus. He cringed under the whip, he stood at Sinai, he marched across the desert. For him, our story did not belong only to us. At the same time, he knew that his people had not been delivered from Egypt. They were still there. The civil rights movement of those years aimed at a future liberation (and worried that it might take 40 years). And this liberation would be particular to African-American history as our liberation is particular to our history - though it too might serve to inspire struggles for freedom in other times and places.

There is a political maxim that follows nicely from both of these histories: The liberation of the people can only be the work of the people themselves. Others can help, and should, but each liberation is a singular event. In the Bible, however, our liberation isn't exactly our own work, is it? According to the official version, we do nothing ourselves. We are delivered by God, carried out of Egypt on eagle's wings.

But does Israel's God provide such extraordinary services to any other people? One of my favorite prophetic texts, from the book of Amos, suggests that God does.

**To me, O Israelites, you are
Just like the Ethiopians - declares the Lord.
True, I brought Israel up
From the land of Egypt,
But also the Philistines from Caphtor
And the Arameans from Kir.**

Amos tells us that there have been many deliverances, though of the people mentioned here only we have survived to remember ours. And if we like, we can choose to "remember" something that is not included in the official version of the exodus story - the idea that human effort co-existed with divine deliverance, that our liberation was also our own work. Perhaps the best example of this subversive remembering is a midrash on Exodus 14, where the biblical text has the Israelites "greatly frightened" at the sea as the Egyptian army bears down upon them. "Stand by," says Moses, "and witness the deliverance which God will work for you today (14:13)." And then the sea is divided and the people walk across it on dry ground. This version of the story left the rabbis dissatisfied; the Israelites were too passive, too ready to "stand by." So the rabbis invented another version:

And if they went upon "dry ground," then why does it say "into the midst of the sea"? This is to teach that the sea was divided only after Israel had stepped into it, and the waters had reached their noses - only then did it become dry land (Midrash Rabbah, Exodus, 21,10).

It took courageous human beings marching into the water, not only God's decree, to divide the Red Sea. Every other liberation, every contemporary struggle, requires the same courage. So we remember that we were slaves in Egypt and learn not to oppress the stranger today. And we remember that we stepped into the sea and learn to support men and women in our own time when they take the same crucial courageous step.

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