

WHY DID GOD TAKE US OUT OF EGYPT, ANYWAY?

Note: Rabbi Ornstein delivered this dvar Torah on Shabbat Zakhor 5772.

Even with Purim on our doorstep, we are already looking past the Hamentaschen and the madness of the Megillah reading toward Pesach, which will find us whether or not we are ready to find it. As you may know, I just returned from our biennial congregational pilgrimage to Israel, the ultimate symbol for us of Jewish freedom, power, and self-expression. Experiencing Israel always makes me do more thinking about the nature and purpose of the Jewish people, whose journey really begins with the Exodus from Egypt, that pit of slavery and oppression. So, as I begin to think about my celebration of Pesach and my telling of the story of the Exodus at the Seder, I am wondering once again: why did God take us out of Egypt, anyway?

This morning in the Torah, we completed our reading of God's very long, complex, elegant instructions to Moshe and the Israelites concerning the construction of the Mishkan, the portable desert sanctuary, as well as of the sacred clothing to be worn by Aaron and his sons during their service in that sacred building. God began these instructions in last week's portion, Terumah, with an explanation for all of this construction: Let the Israelites build *Me* a holy place and I shall dwell in *their* midst. Numerous are the repeated explanations of

commentators that God never says that He will dwell in the sanctuary, for what mere physical building could hold God? Rather, they point out, the Mishkan is there to help us feel God's presence dwelling among us as a community. In this week's Torah portion, Tetzaveh, as we near the end of all the instructions for the construction, God takes the idea of the Mishkan one step further. Please look with me at Humash Etz Hayyim, Exodus 29:45-46, on pp. 516-517:

(Through the Mishkan) I will abide among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they will know that I the Lord am their God, who brought them out from the land of Egypt that I might abide among them; I the Lord their God.

According to this passage, God not only uses the Mishkan as an opportunity to dwell among the people, God's whole purpose in taking them out of Egyptian slavery was to be able to dwell among them and be their God. This appears at first glance to contradict Bible passages such as Genesis, chapter 15, in which God promises Abraham that his descendants will leave Egypt in order to escape suffering under Pharaoh's thumb, and then in order to enter the land of Canaan that has been promised to them by God. Further, framing the purpose of the Exodus as being about following a portable sanctuary around nomadically in order to experience God's presence is a very diaspora-like idea. What is the focus of our freedom and formation as a people: to be in relationship with God as we

move around the world or to be in relationship with God, to quote HaTikvah – Israel’s national anthem – as a free people in our land?

I am, of course, oversimplifying the Torah here. Since we take the text as a united whole, we know perfectly well that the Torah emphasizes both divine aspirations. God took us out of Egypt not so much for the purposes of freedom itself, but in order to give us the opportunity to experience God’s presence fully so that we could be God’s servants in a covenantal relationship and a shared mission: this is the essence of the “chosen people” idea, and it applies wherever Jews are, from Jerusalem to Albany and everywhere in between. But God also made clear from the moment that God called Abraham to start a new life that this new people we call the Jews would find the greatest fulfillment of its mission and its life in the land that we today call Israel. This dual sense of our mission as the Jewish people is quite ancient and it forms the basis for contemporary religious Zionism; however, it underlies even secular thinking about Zionism which may not emphasize traditional ideas about God making us a nation, but which certainly emphasizes the need for the Jewish people to have its own home in which to thrive, express itself and make a positive difference in the world.

Having just tasted the richness of both aspects of this great Jewish mission by being in Israel, what am I going to bring to my seder table this year and how is my celebration of Pesach going to be different? Part of what makes pilgrimage to Israel so enriching for me is that, paradoxically, it leaves me feeling deeply challenged and somewhat incomplete. I have made my home in our Jewish community, my family and I are firmly rooted here, and I need not explain to you how good America has been to the Jewish people. Nonetheless, I refuse to pretend that somehow our Jewish lives in America and Jewish life in Israel are equal, for they really aren't. Without whitewashing or idealizing Israeli life and society, I feel drawn to the rhythms and routines of Jewish identity and culture that are commonplace in Israel; its entire civil life, however secular it may be, is Jewish in a way that even the most intensive Jewish community in America simply cannot be by virtue of the fact that we are a minority here. Saturday is Shabbat, the whole country celebrates Purim almost with a passion, advertisements, street signs, and protest slogans that draw off of three millennia of Jewish sacred literature abound. Even more important, the existential anxieties of American and Israeli Jewry are vastly different, however much our two communities are intertwined as part of world Jewry. We Jews in America may feel physically safe, but we are constantly preoccupied with the threat of cultural suicide that is the

result of being an assimilating minority. The Jewish state may always have to be vigilant about its physical safety, but as a living, sovereign Jewish state it can devote its spiritual and cultural energies to far more productive concerns: these include, among others, what to do with power, how to create a just society founded upon Jewish values, and the role that Israel plays as the center of the Jewish world and as a modern nation in the international community. For me, Israel is this nagging goad that I hope will never stop nagging me. It keeps whispering in my ear, “Dan, you are the descendant of those who left Egypt to enter a relationship with God in the desert, and then to enter the homeland that God gave us as an inheritance for building that relationship. You may be comfortable in the diaspora, but aren’t you really still trying to follow God as a nomad like your ancestors did? That Israelite caravan with its portable sanctuary left the Sinai desert a long time ago. Why don’t you come home, and fulfill both parts of God’s plan for us when God took us out of slavery?” I will be listening for this nagging voice that is Israel when I lift up the matzah, tell the story of the Exodus, drink the four cups of wine, and finally sing “L’shanah Ha-baah Bi-Yerushalayim,” next year in Jerusalem.

I hope you will not think that I am simply blathering starry-eyed, post-trip nonsense that will wear off in a couple of weeks. I am not. I have felt this way

about my place and our place in ancient and contemporary Jewish history for a long time, and my biennial trips to Israel only refine my sense of cognitive and spiritual dissonance. I am not making aliyah tomorrow, and I am fully aware of how much the State of Israel relies upon America and its Jews, however much some Israelis are into the myth that they are entirely self-sufficient. Further, I would not be doing the work that I do if I did not value what we have as a Jewish community here, and if I was not fully aware of how much Jewish life outside of Israel has yielded over the past two millennia. Nonetheless, I am happy to be challenged and pushed to remember where ideally I should be, through my encounters with the grit and the miracle of Israel, past, present, and please God, future.

As we get ready for Pesach, what can you and I do to respond to that nagging, goading challenge, short of uprooting ourselves, Exodus-style, and living in Israel? First, if you have not been to Israel or you have not been there in a long time, begin to make plans to go there. You can go with Ohav in 2014, you can volunteer there, you can plan a family trip around a bar or bat mitzvah, you can connect with another organized tour or program. The point is for you to go, and if you won't go, to facilitate your children and grandchildren going. Plan on having a lot of safe, wholesome fun, prepare to retrace the steps of our ancestors, and

stay open to the fact that such a trip is more than a trip, it is a pilgrimage that echoes, howbeit faintly, the pilgrimages to the Jerusalem Temple from long ago. Second, if you are filled to the brim with anxieties about Israeli politics, Iranian threats, and conflicts with the Palestinians, set them aside for a while, and just reconnect with Israel as a blessing, as our extended family whom we love, just because. I am frankly so tired of the way that American Jews, on the left and the right, have reframed the Jewish state as one huge problem, as if it were a bunch of sick, dysfunctional relatives we fret over but never see or enjoy. Israelis mouth off plenty about politics and other vital issues, and they struggle with issues aplenty, but first and foremost they live their lives in their country. We Jews in the diaspora are so frightened at times of our own shadows that we can't seem to get past this "Israel as huge problem" narrative, which is unhelpful to us and to Israel. We try not to spend all of our time talking about our loved ones in terms of what ails them and what they are not. Why, then, do we seem to do this almost obsessively when talking about our "loved ones" who are the State of Israel? Finally, be ambassadors for the Jewish state: learn more about her ancient and contemporary history, get the facts and share them with our friends, neighbors and family, Jewish and non-Jewish who just don't know those facts. Most of all, convey your love for Israel to them with your stories, your ideas, your

values, not a naïve, ignorant love of an Israel that can do no wrong, but a mature love of an Israel that gets so much right.

Today is Shabbat Zakhor, when we remember Amalekite aggression and the way that Haman the Amalekite tried to destroy the diaspora Jewish community of Persia. These themes of Purim resonate so strongly with us Jews and with all people who have tasted oppression that even in Israel, the ultimate anti-diaspora, Purim is celebrated with gusto. Just as the different passages of the Torah about the Exodus help us to do, so too, Purim and Pesach hold us in a creative tension between our experience as Jews outside of Israel and our connection to Israel: the cultural, political, physical, and spiritual center of the Jewish people. Let's use this next month of remembrances and celebrations to remember why God liberated us from Egypt, to enjoy the sacred privilege of being Jewish that God has given us where ever we are in the world, and to never stop striving to return to the place from which Torah goes forth: Zion and Jerusalem.