The Mishnah provides guidelines for how to tell the story – start with disgrace and end with praise) but does not inform us where that story should begin. Let us contemplate for a moment where would be the best (or most logical) point to start the story of the Exodus. One could entertain several possibilities.

The simplest and most obvious approach would be to begin with Bnei Yisrael’s enslavement in Egypt. After all, that is exactly where the book of Exodus begins! On the other hand, one could start a bit earlier, with the story of Yaakov and his family going down to Egypt; or even with the story of Yosef being sold by his brothers – for that is the underlying reason for how we got there. However, if we continue with that logic, we could go back another generation or two to the story of Avraham Avinu, or maybe even begin with the story of Creation!

This dilemma appears to be the underlying reason behind the Talmudic dispute between Rav and Shmuel, in their interpretation of the Mishnah’s guideline to begin with a derogatory comment.

Rav – מתתחילה עבדים זרים – “At first our ancestors were idol worshipers…”

Shmuel – עבדים היה – “We were once slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt…”

Even though one could suggest that Rav and Shmuel argue concerning what is considered a more derogatory statement – the fact we were once slaves, or we were once idol worshipers – their dispute may also relate to this more fundamental question – concerning where the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim actually begins – from our slavery in Egypt (Shmuel), or from the time of our forefathers (Rav).

Even though Shmuel’s opinion seems to be the most logical, we will now explain how Rav’s opinion may stem from a more fundamental thematic consideration, relating to the very essence and purpose of our celebration of Pesach.

In Parashat Lech Lecha, when G-d first chose Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation, they entered a covenant, in which G-d not only promised the Land to Avraham’s offspring, He also informed Avraham that before inheriting that Land, his offspring would need to endure many years of enslavement and oppression in a foreign land. Only afterward would G-d redeem them, and then in a most glorious fashion. It appears that this long historical process of ‘slavery and redemption’ was part of a Divine plan that would facilitate the transformation of this chosen family into G-d’s ‘model nation.’ When this nation would arrive at Mt. Sinai and collectively enter into an eternal covenant to become G-d’s people, they would also receive numerous laws to guide their society to become kind and sensitive to needs of the less fortunate. The Torah will use the refrain of “Remember you were once a slave in Egypt” or alternatively, “Remember you were once a stranger is someone else’s land” as a motivating phrase following each of these commandments of social sensitivity. To prove this point, see Vayikra 19:36-39 and the other examples listed in the footnote.

In another example, toward the conclusion of the Law section in Parashat Mishpatim, we find:

“You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”

From this perspective, Bnei Yisrael’s slavery in Egypt and their subsequent redemption was not incidental; rather it was part of an orchestrated set of events with a Divine purpose. This experience of bondage in Egypt could be understood as a sort of ‘basic training’ – to prepare Am Yisrael for their future destiny.

As the purpose of that process was to facilitate the goal of becoming G-d’s ‘chosen nation,’ it was first forecasted when G-d convened the Brit bein HaBatarim with Avraham Avinu. Telling the story once a year, and beginning that story with Avraham Avinu, is critical, because it will ensure we remember and apply its message in our daily lives as G-d’s people.

Therefore, at our Seder, when we begin our story by first thanking G-d for keeping His covenantal promise to Avraham Avinu, we are not only thanking G-d for His kind act of Redemption, but we are also reminding ourselves how that story must affect the manner in which we behave every day (and night) of our lives.

Or as Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya shared with his colleagues at their all-night Seder in Bnei Brak: “We tell the story once a year so that we ‘remember the day we left Egypt’ every day (and night) of our lives.”

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1. Pesachim 10.
3. See Bereishit 13-14.

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