

Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman



Beginning with Disgrace and Ending with Praise

“The Exodus from Egypt will always remain the spring-time of the entire world.”
(Rav Kook, *Meged Yerachim*)

The Exodus from Egypt was a formative event, and not only for the Jewish people. It is a story that extends beyond the Jewish world; a story which has had an impact on other cultures and nations as well.

It symbolizes the ability of human beings to believe in their own G-d-given abilities and to prevail, and surely that is the hope of any person enslaved, in body or in soul. The word “spring” conveys hope that a meaningful change will occur and herald a better future.

The Exodus is a prototype for liberty.

It is no coincidence that the founding fathers of the United States drew inspiration from the Torah. Across from Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the US Declaration of Independence and Constitution were signed, hangs the Liberty Bell, one of the most iconic symbols of American independence. It bears the following inscription from the Tanach: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

The Mishnah in Pesachim, which deals with our telling of the story of the Exodus on Seder Night, stipulates that we should “begin with disgrace and end with praise.” In other words, the story of *yetziat Mitzrayim* begins with slavery, with the adversity our forefathers suffered in Egypt. Only afterwards do we praise G-d, Who delivered us from

slavery, brought us to *Har Sinai* and gave us the Torah. Ostensibly, the explanation is simple and logical – first, a description of the slavery and hardship, and then the story of redemption and liberty.

However, in the Gemara two opinions are presented as to what constitutes the “disgrace” mentioned in the Mishnah. Rav says we should start by saying that “in the beginning our forefathers were idol worshippers,” whereas Shmuel believes we should begin by saying “we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” The Gemara then relates a story about Rabbi Nachman, who asked his slave: “In the case of a slave whose master delivers him from slavery and gives him his freedom and silver and gold as well, what should the slave thank his master for first?” The slave replied: “He should thank his master for giving him his freedom, and only then should he praise him for giving him a lot of money.” Accordingly, Rabbi Nachman stipulated that we should begin the Haggadah by saying “we were slaves.”

To understand the debate between Rav and Shmuel, let us briefly discuss freedom. There is freedom of the body (freedom from) and freedom of the soul (freedom to). On the one hand, when *Bnei Yisrael* left Egypt, they had freedom of the body, freedom from hard labor and physical bondage. On the other, when they received the Torah at *Har Sinai*, they were given freedom of the soul. Freedom to use their spiritual gifts to grow as individuals and as a people.

So on Seder Night, which freedom we should thank G-d for first? Physical or spiritual?

According to Rav, the spiritual bondage was the greater “disgrace,” hence he underscores the spiritual freedom and starts with the words “in the beginning, our forefathers were idol worshippers.” Shmuel of course knows spiritual freedom is important, but it cannot be achieved without physical freedom. Therefore, he says we have to begin by expressing our thanks for the physical freedom by saying “we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.”

The key message we are instructed to pass down from generation to generation is that G-d facilitated – and facilitates – both types of freedom. Moreover, we cannot have one without the other, and when we know how to use both our physical and spiritual freedom for the greater good and growth of society, that is perhaps the most profound praise we can give to the Almighty.

Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman is Head of the Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora in the World Zionist Organization and one of World Mizrahi's representatives in the National Institutions.