



## To Be a Nation

Studies approximate that 90% of Jews in Israel celebrate *Seder* night. Some even speak of 94%. It's a little surprising, because *leil haSeder* clashes head-on with the prevailing values in today's world of Israeli thought. We would expect a night so familial, so tribal, so national – to arouse disgust and alienation rather than sweeping devotion. Indeed, Israelis often complain about the stifling family evening. They enjoy complaining about the event, but probably enjoy the *Seder* itself even more.

Why is it so accepted (in some circles, almost expected) to complain about a family event such as *leil haSeder*? Because the dynamics of this occasion threaten the highest value of modern Israeli society: “freedom.” When I sit between Aunt Gila and Aunt Tzila, I do not have the freedom to listen to music I like, or drink beer (which is *chametz* anyway), or dress as I please, or talk about topics that interest me and tell the jokes that make me laugh. Instead, I must behave according to the family rules. Despite this, Israelis earnestly devote themselves to *Seder* night. It turns out that after paying lip service to the idol of “freedom,” we are very happy to be integrated into a close family-tribal framework.

Pesach is the holiday of freedom. But what sort of freedom are we talking about? The *Haggadah* describes it: “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. And the L-rd our G-d took us out.” The slavery was national-political, and the freedom was national-political. We rejoiced in our national autonomy, but that didn't mean the enslaving Egyptian establishment had been replaced by a parallel Hebrew one. The Hebrew governmental establishment was probably quite loose in the desert years. In fact, our ancestors did not even have an

orderly legal system, until Yitro came on the scene.

*Bnei Yisrael* passed from a life of slavery to a life of freedom, with a political system that does not enslave or oppress. But at no stage were they freed from the world of family, community and people, and from all the structures of language and customs that accompany these frameworks.

The Children of Israel suffer together, are redeemed together, sing together. If a person had chosen to disengage from this identity, it is to be assumed the Torah would not have called it “freedom.” Perhaps it would actually be “exile.”

When *Bnei Yisrael* request a king, Shmuel clarifies what they will receive: “He will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen... He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks and bakers... you shall become his slaves.” Quite a few of the kings of Yehuda and Israel did act as Shmuel feared. Still, one can get the impression that the Jews maintained a healthy suspicion about their kings, and severely limited their authority. When Navot refuses to sell his vineyard to the powerful king Achav, Achav responds surprisingly like an adolescent – going to his house, lying in bed and turning his face to the wall. Even his evil wife Izevel can't wrench the vineyard out of Navot's hands without a cunning trick. It turns out that law and tradition did not allow the king to behave as was customary in other kingdoms, and simply expropriate the property of his citizens.

On the political level, the Torah believes in freedom and suspects overly powerful regimes. But nowhere in the Torah is there a contemporary interpretation of the concept of freedom, which includes alienation from communal identity.

The Torah does not perceive family and national identity as burdensome, but rather as a constitutive element of a person's personality. The ideal that contemporary culture strives for is a person who is not bound by the shackles of family, community and people. He or she is an abstract, theoretical human, from whom the deep and basic layers of identity have been stripped.

In the '99 election campaign, Meretz's election slogan was: “To be free in our country” (*lehiyot chofshi beArtzeinu*). The “nation” (*am*) was forgotten, probably by mistake. But our national anthem, *HaTikva*, insists on the “nation,” לְהִיּוֹת עַם חֵפְשִׁי בְּאֶרֶצְנוּ. We experience freedom together, as one nation. Our shared identity does not trample on freedom at all. On the contrary. It is one of the conditions for it.

And if we forget that all year long, *Seder* Night reminds us of the truth.

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