

Commemorating the Exodus from Egypt

By Rav Michael Hattin

THE CENTRALITY OF THE EXODUS – RAMBAN'S COMMENTARY

In Jewish history, certainly in Biblical history, the defining moment is the Exodus from Egypt. It is this passage from slavery to liberation that marks the birth of the nation of Israel and heralds their entry onto the stage of world history. For that reason, the pivotal episode is writ large and often upon the pages of Jewish tradition. Many ceremonies and rituals commemorate the Exodus, and not only at the season of Springtime and the holiday of Pesach. *Parashat Bo* alone contains twenty distinct *mitzvot*, nine positive and eleven negative, *all* of them relating to the Exodus from Egypt! Even the Revelation at Sinai, when God gave the Torah to the people of Israel, is regarded as the culmination of the Exodus event.

For the Ramban, the centrality of the Exodus from Egypt finds expression in the Torah's all-embracing legislation, as well as in the collective consciousness of the people of Israel. The unique significance of that historical event is a function of its overarching role in uprooting erroneous beliefs and planting in their place true theological principles. In Egypt, God heard our cries. He sent Moshe, and He then brought wondrous plagues upon the recalcitrant Pharaoh until the god king relented. In other words, the redemptive process indicates that the universe has a Creator Who is aware of human beings, interested in their fate, and able to overturn the forces of nature in order to save. The Exodus from Egypt demonstrates that God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, transcendent but never remote, absolute but always close by, and He reveals His will through His prophets and by the words of His Torah. In the words of the Ramban,

>From the time that idolatry entered the world early in human history, opinions concerning belief became confused. Some deny God outright, claiming that the universe has existed eternally... while others deny His awareness and knowledge of individuals... and yet others acknowledge His omniscience but reject His providence and involvement in human lives, saying that people suffer their arbitrary fates as do the fish of the sea... [these maintain that] there is no punishment or reward [for our actions], for He has left the earth.

When God chooses a congregation of people or an individual and performs on their behalf a miracle that overturns the conventions of nature and its laws, then it becomes clear to all that such opinions are wrong. The wondrous sign indicates that the universe has a God who created it, who is aware of it, who exercises providence over it, and who is able to intervene. When the said sign is announced ahead of time by a prophet, then the additional notion of true prophecy is reinforced, namely that God communicates with human beings and makes His will known to His servants the prophets. The entire Torah is thereby established on solid ground... (Commentary to 13:16)

THE EXODUS AND LATER GENERATIONS

According to the Ramban's reading, the Exodus from Egypt is the foundation for the entire Torah, because all of the Torah's principles concerning God - upon which the Torah's moral and ritual laws are based - derive their veracity from it. Insofar as human beings are concerned, there is little difference between no God and a God who is ineffectual, unaware or unconcerned. In all of the above cases, the impact on human life is negligible. If God not only exists, but also is aware, able and concerned, then life can have a higher meaning and the moral law can possess a transcendent source. But if He is unaware, uninvolved or impotent, then serving Him is futile.

But what of the "post-Exodus" generations, all of those men and women who never witnessed the wonders of the liberation from Egypt, whose only experiences of God are of the hidden and concealed God? What of us? Addressing them, the Ramban continues:

Because the Holy One, Blessed be He, will not perform signs and wonders in every generation for the benefit of the wicked or of deniers, He therefore commanded us to make a constant reminder and sign of what we have seen with our own eyes, and furthermore, to transmit that matter to our children, and our children to theirs, until the end of time... Thus, we are enjoined to write all that we saw of the signs and wonders upon our hands and between our eyes (i.e. *tefillin*), to write it further upon the doorposts of our homes (i.e. *mezuzah*), to make mention of it in the morning and in the evening (i.e. *Shema*)... to construct a *sukka* every year, and many other such things, all in commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt. All of this is to serve later generations as testimony concerning these wonders, so that they never are forgotten, and the denier will never have an opportunity to deny belief in God...

In other words, the events surrounding the Exodus were unique and unrepeatable. In general, God chooses to not perform overt miracles that involve a suspension of the laws of nature, not because of any lack of ability, but rather due to lack of will. The wicked and the deniers do not sufficiently merit a plain and explicit expression of God's existence, power and care.

THE POTENCY OF MEMORY

Thus, the Ramban undermines the popular misconception that the purpose of miracles is to create or to foster belief in God. Miracles are rather a precious gift, a special and exclusive bestowal that is granted to those who are already steadfast in their faith, as an enhanced expression of His love. They offer a concrete glimpse of God's absoluteness, and are not to be shared with the undeserving. After all, if miracles were about making us believe, then surely God would not be

averse to dispensing them with greater frequency. Conversely, one who is insensitive to more spiritual matters will not be swayed by miracles, no matter how forceful they are. Since the overall effect of miracles is not to nurture belief, their absence need not be an impediment to achieving it.

In lieu of miracles, though, those who believe possess a much more potent vehicle for transmitting true conceptions concerning God: memory. We vividly remember what took place and faithfully communicate it to our children through ritual acts that commemorate those events. Our children do the same and pass on the matter to their children, and so on until the end of time.

The Exodus is therefore remembered in a wealth of rituals that address every element of our daily lives. We record its message within the capsules of the *tefillin* and wear those objects daily, on our heads and upon our arms, in our minds and in our hearts. We inscribe the matter on the doorposts of our homes, just as our ancestors marked their portals with the bright blood of the Paschal sacrifice. We mention the essence of the story twice daily, when we rise and before we retire, in the course of the recitation of the *Shema*. How seemingly difficult it is, then, for the thinking Jew to be forgetful of that great drama, and to fail to internalize its eternal message. Difficult, but not impossible!

CONSCIOUS LIVING

How many of us consciously connect our performance and observance of these rituals with the story of the Exodus? How many of us are able to progress a step further and to associate the saga of the Exodus with its more fundamental goal of describing God's relationship to the world – His power, His knowledge and His involvement? No wonder that the Ramban concludes that in order truly to perform the mitzva of *mezuzah*, or any other mitzva act for that matter, one must perform it CONSCIOUSLY:

One who purchases a *mezuzah* for the price of a "zuz" (a relatively small amount), affixes it to his doorpost, AND FOCUSES UPON ITS MEANING, thereby acknowledges the creation of the world, God's

knowledge and providence, the notion of prophecy and all of the other cornerstones of the Torah. All of this, of course, is in addition to realizing God's great compassion upon His followers, for He took us out of that servitude to enjoy freedom and great honor, in the merit of the ancestors who revered His name...

But to perform even that "minor" mitzva consciously is to transform it from a trivial ritual act into a dramatic commemorative event that can very well transform our lives and remake our relationship with God! A tiny roll of parchment affixed to the doorposts of our homes can embody the Torah's most pivotal and important ideas about God. These ideas, in turn, are the pivotal elements in guiding our lives towards moral meaning and spiritual substance. The critical keys, then, to unleashing a mitzva's transformative power are deliberation, intent and thoughtfulness. When shorn of them, our mitzva acts often become static and tedious activities performed by rote, which fail to inculcate much of anything and certainly do not inspire. But possessed of them, we can yet be successful at not only perpetuating the historical memory of the Exodus, but also internalizing the foundation ideas that lie at its core.

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