

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Once We Were Slaves; Now We Are Adolescents (OY!)

Remember your teenage years? That unique time of life that is a blend of adventure and awkwardness, loving, and losing, passing and failing, reaching for the stars and sometimes landing in the mud. Our bodies and our minds are growing and changing along with our emotions and relationships, and it's hard to keep track of the pace. To a teen or young adult, sometimes parents and other authority figures are trusted mentors; other times, they're seen as roadblocks to reality. As children, all of our plans are given to us with very little choice in the matter. Now, we finally have the opportunity to think for ourselves and make our own decisions...sometimes to our detriment.

What does this have to do with Passover? When we were slaves in Egypt, we simply did what we were told to do. Yes, of course it was oppressive. At the same time, all of our decisions were made for us. Whose job is it to cut the straw? Haul the bricks? Bring water to the other slaves? All those decisions were made by the taskmasters. As the Israelites were presented with the option of freedom, it became a mysterious, exciting, earful proposition. Pharaoh did not want to let us go, just as some parents are reluctant to see their children go off on their own. In today's world, we see some parents who are very ready for their children to "leave the nest," while others would like to keep their kids with them forever. Likewise, some children can't wait to grow out from under their parents' shadows, while others adopt the Peter Pan philosophy and never quite grow up. And of course, most of us experience different emotions at different times.

There is a Midrash (biblical legend) that suggests 70-80% of the Israelites who were enslaved in Egypt chose not to leave with Moses and the rest. How could that be? Sure, slavery was hard. But when you compare it to fending for yourself in an unknown wilderness, to some, it was a no-brainer. And how do we regard parental advice? Shortly after leaving Egypt, Moses presents to the Israelites G-d's words, and then pledges to bring them back in writing. By starting with Commandment #1, Moses basically says, "If you remember nothing else, remember there is just one G-d." (Creative mistranslation from Exodus 20:1) And as soon as Moses leaves, what happens? We build and worship an idol! Do we learn from our mistakes? It takes time. But if you want to see adolescent behavior playing itself out, try comparing the storylines of Dr. Seuss' Cat in the Hat and the Tom Cruise movie Risky Business with Exodus.

Leaving Egypt, like a Bar/Bat Mitzvah or graduation party, is about celebrating new freedom...and then embracing new responsibilities. It can be exciting and scary at the same time, just like any transition. Celebrating Passover every year gives us the opportunities to re-live how different kinds of suffering help us learn and grow. Perhaps that is why it took four years to travel through the wilderness. We needed the time to grow up.

L'shalom,

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