



Passover: The exodus journey echoes our own

NJ Jewish News, MetroWest, April 5, 2012, p. 28

The Passover Hagaddah instructs us to participate in the seder as if we personally escaped Egypt. I believe that our life's journey metaphorically re-enacts the Exodus. Hence, the Israelites' escape from slavery and the prolonged journey to the Promised Land resonates so deeply.

Our inner world consists of many psychological parts.¹ You must have noticed the Inner Critic, the part that tears you down; or the Altruist who loves and helps others. We are all aware of our Joyful-Child, the People-Pleaser, or our other emotional characters. It's as if different people reside within, creating an inner tribe². Each part alternately takes control, causing us to experience intense, fleeting emotions which momentarily feel permanent. With maturity, we develop a wise leader who views and connects with each inner character, helping us to control our feelings and responses.

A famine in Canaan forced Jacob's family to join Joseph in Egypt. At birth, infants must exit the secure womb and enter a strange world too. Next, Joseph sought to sequester his family within Goshen, a fertile area that was separate from the Egyptians. Similarly, parents seek to provide a nurturing and protective setting, separating offspring from harsh reality, so they form a strong inner world.

Subsequently, Egypt's new Pharaoh became tyrannical and enslaved the Jews. Moses was sent by G-d to free the Israelites, but Pharaoh rejected Moses' entreaties. Likewise, although small children adore and accept their families as perfect, adolescents are notorious for rebelling and shedding the yoke of "slavery." Parents become the Pharaoh, resistant to letting their children "go."

The struggle for separation is two-fold. The initial transition is from family to individuality. Do you know any teens that want to spend time with their families? The second, more difficult partition occurs internally. Aware that their minds were constrained by their upbringing, adolescents attempt to escape "slavery" by rejecting the limitations imposed by their families.

Upon first leaving home, youth experience the excitement that the Israelites' felt upon their escape. For the Israelites, the euphoria quickly dissolved as they encountered hardships, such as no water. For young adults, exhilaration is replaced by fear, and questions about who we are and the nature of our purpose on earth. Instead of liberation, we face privation. We must search for inner connections, a difficult feat. Eventually, we accept our inner discoveries, leading us to comfort and a sense of having found sweet water, as the Israelites had done.

When faced with hunger, the Israelites yearned to return to Egypt. Where do young people run when they are emotionally hungry or have no money? Home, of course! For the Jews, G-d miraculously supplied sustenance and delivered careful instructions on gathering manna.

Disobeying G-d's orders, the Israelites earned divine wrath. How could they defy G-d when they had just emerged from slavery and witnessed multiple miracles? How can young adults disobey parents when they pay all the bills? Often, when overwhelmed with intense emotions, people rebel, doing the forbidden as a way of externalizing emotions. It's easier to act out and cope with "drama", as opposed to dealing with emotions inwardly. The latter requires inner strength which the newly emerging self has not yet acquired.

The Ten Commandments offers another parallel. Like the Jews, we each possess governing principles. Unconsciously embedded within, these "commandments" control us and are only exposed when we experience their failure. For example, many of us go "all out" for our friends, only to suffer shock and hurt when they let us down. An inner governing rule of the expectation of reciprocity is exposed.

Moses ascended Mt. Sinai for forty nights. Feeling abandoned, the Israelites panicked and demanded that Aaron create a new G-d. Stalling, Aaron had the Israelites relinquish their gold. How frightened they must have been to actually surrender their jewels! The melted gold transformed into a calf, which the Israelites worshiped. Furiously, G-d dismissed Moses from Mt. Sinai, who smashed the tablets upon viewing the idolatry.

The golden calf offers important lessons. Babies howl in terror when alone. The "blankie", their link to Mom, soothes them. The young, embarking from the familiar safety of home, also panic. Lacking an inner leader, they find "idols" to which they can attach. One example, excessive "partying," simultaneously combines the excitement of freedom and the panic of aloneness by providing the pseudo-intimacy of quick sexual flings and emotional reprieve obtained through chemical euphoria. Such toxic "idols" hinder the growth of a healthy inner leader. G-d instructed the Israelites to seek introspection through prayer, paving the way for finding the inner leader who helps navigate the inner wilderness successfully.

The Israelites wandered through the wilderness for forty years, facing multiple challenges before gaining access to the Promised Land. We also wander within our inner wilderness. With each obstacle, the Israelites sought deliverance; they protested, cried, demanded to return to Egypt, and defied G-d's instructions, eventually even creating an idol to worship. Each struggle mimics our own excited but panic-filled journeys towards autonomy, filled with yearning to return to previous, familiar comfort.

The seder ends with the exhortation: "Next year in Jerusalem." As we re-live the original Exodus at seder, perhaps we are also evaluating our inner worlds. Whether we have already connected with our personal inner leader or rely on the security of an external savior, we can view our inner journeys in the coming year from this perspective, and each make progress in discovering our strengths and the part of G-d that resides in us.

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1 Schwartz, R, Internal Family Systems Therapy, 1995.

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