



The Exodus – Its Legacy and Impact on Future Generations

A Davar Torah by Dr Menashe Tahan



The Exodus of a small nation of slaves from a mighty empire was a wondrous event. It was the only successful revolt and subsequent escape of enslaved people ever recorded in antiquity. Yet, after the liberation, the wonders continued, and the achievements of the now free nation were no less miraculous. These amazing accomplishments can be summarised as follows.

In ancient Egypt there were at least 500 gods. The people of Israel lived there for over 400 years, but they left the land with one G-d alone.

The Egyptian gods were not symbols of morality. In contrast, the G-d of Israel is the supreme moral being of the universe. By worshipping Him, our forefathers established 'Ethical Monotheism' which has transformed the spiritual values of our planet. Worshipping the highest ethical being who seeks to impose his principles on mankind was one of the greatest turning points in history - perhaps the most momentous of them all.

Egypt was a tyranny. There was neither written law nor constitution. In comparison, as soon as Israel left Egypt they adopted the most enlightened law ever, the highest moral code in history in which a sin is a crime and a crime is a sin. That law was not written by man,

leaving it subject to alteration or distortion, but is a divine law, which can never be corrupted.

Egypt was a class society in which there was no equality and no value given to the lives of slaves. The law of Israel, however, commanded absolute equality for all and equally sanctified every human life. It was the first human rights declaration ever known. The sequence of events leading to the giving of the law was striking – first we got liberty, then equality. "Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité", 3000 years before the French Revolution.

Typical of the ancient world, there were no social rights in Egypt. We, however, left there with the gift of the Sabbath, the first social privilege ever. No wonder that it is now universally considered to be one of the great Jewish contributions to all humanity.

Egypt was a house of bondage. In comparison, Israel turned slavery into a 'short-term lease'. A Hebrew servant served 6 years before being set free [(Exodus 21, (2-3)]. He was given help to start a new life, as commanded in Deuteronomy [(15, (12-15)]. Slavery however contradicted the very spirit of the law, since men are the slaves of G-d and a slave of G-d cannot be a slave of anyone else. Consequently, slavery was completely abolished by Israel thousands of years before Abraham Lincoln.

Morally, the Exodus shaped our national conscience. It made us sensitive to the suffering of others and particularly to the plight of the stranger in our midst. Accordingly, we were repeatedly commanded not to wrong or oppress strangers - "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt" [Ex. 22(20), 23(9); Levi 19(33-34); Deut 10 (17-19), 23(8)]. Concern for the welfare of the stranger cannot be better demonstrated than in the fact that the Torah commands us to love our neighbour in one place, but to love the stranger in 36. This eagerness to protect the stranger is the first

example of a moral struggle against tribalism and xenophobia ever known.

Similarly, the Exodus shaped our social conscience and made us more considerate and more charitable to the less fortunate, to the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger. We are commanded in Deuteronomy [24, (17-18)] to judge them justly. In addition, we were taught to share our good fortune with them, and in such a way as to prevent embarrassment. For instance, we were commanded not to collect all the agricultural produce,

such as sheaves, olives or grapes, from the fields, but to leave some for the strangers, orphans and widows to collect themselves, for "you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt" [Deut 24 (20-22)]. This consideration for the miserable and down-trodden of society, the insistence of the law of Israel that they should not suffer injustice, hunger or humiliation, and the obligation to share

affluence with them while guarding their human dignity, all represented a fundamental revolution in consciousness, unheard of before in the history of mankind. It was to all intents and purposes a humane form of socialism, 3000 years before Karl Marx.

These accomplishments had significant repercussions far beyond the society of Israel alone. Never in the history of mankind was there an event like the Exodus which made such an enduring impact on human civilisation. It acted like a gigantic motive force





that lifted human society to new heights, both spiritually and socially. It revealed to humanity a divine scheme for establishing a gracious society in which all are free under the law of God and all are equal before it; a society which sanctifies human life; a society of kindness and compassion; based on retributive and distributive justice where love was the foundation of justice.

No sooner had it become known, the story of the Exodus became a source of inspiration for other freedom movements, from the

dawn of history through to the time of Abraham Lincoln to that of Nelson Mandela. The Jewish poet Heinrich Heine was right to say that "since the Exodus, freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent". One example of this can be taken from British history. Oliver Cromwell himself compared his protectorship to the Exodus and called the English "New Israel". Thankfully he did not see himself as Moses, but as Yehoyada, the high priest, because he executed the monarch, the blasphemous, wicked

Atalya, who introduced idol worship into the holy land of Judea [II Kings 11 (1-16)].

Another example may be taken from the history of the United States, whose founding fathers aspired to establish a just, empathetic society modelled on that of ancient Israel. They saw their nation as "American Israel", England as "Egypt" and America as "the promised land". Benjamin Franklin suggested that a seal for the new United States should bear a picture of Moses parting the Red sea, with a motto reading, "Rebellion to tyranny is obedience to G-d". John Adams, the second

president of the U.S.A., acknowledged the great debt that humanity owed to the Exodus and its effects. In 1809 he wrote "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilise men than any other nation". He further wrote that if he believed solely in fate then, "I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations". And if he had faith only in chance then, "I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization".

Yet one of the greatest effects of the Exodus has been saved for the Jewish people alone. This is the crucial role that it has played in preserving the existence of the Jewish nation. The story of the Exodus has always given tremendous hope and fortitude in the face of adversity during the darkest hours of our history when it extended to us nothing less than a lease of life.

Who could have imagined that a small nation, whose sacred places were violated, whose homeland was savaged, whose people were scattered around the globe for 2000 years, who was oppressed, humiliated, expelled from many countries, slaughtered in many pogroms and decimated by the hand of the Nazis, would rise again from the valley of death to return to its ancient homeland and to restore in it its Jewish sovereignty as in times of old? Nobody could have contemplated it by any stretch of the imagination. The rebirth of the state of Israel, the gathering of the Jewish people there from 103 countries and the renaissance of the Hebrew language is one of the great miracles of all time. Sometimes it is difficult to grasp how lucky we are to be alive in an age when we can witness it unfolding before our very eyes.



There is no doubt that this tremendous happening occurred mainly as a result of the profound inspiration of the story of the Exodus. The Jewish people never ever forgot this story. Every generation recounted it on Passover night saying: "Now we are here, next year may we be in the land of Israel. Now we are slaves, next year may we be free people in the land of Israel".

This way the Exodus has kept our aspirations vivid and our hopes burning. It has become an intimate part of our destiny and an inspiration to our future. Its tremendous impact on our survival and our revival cannot be better summed up than by our chief rabbi, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who said once that, "The Exodus kept the vision alive and the vision kept us alive", and kicking.

The image on the left is from a 14th C Haggadah, Catalonia, Spain and shows the labour of the Israelites in Egypt. The centre image is part of a mnemonic for the 10 plagues and the image above, is the Baking of the Matzah. Both are from a 14th C, Castilian Haggadah, Spain. Images by courtesy of the British Library and Ilana Tahan.