

Slaves or Pagans?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Four Questions, *Mah Nishtanah HaLaylah Hazeah*, that are asked in the Haggadah, act as an introduction to the ideas behind the festival of Passover. These questions were already mentioned in the Mishna, written some 2,000 years ago. In fact, the idea that we should ask questions is mandated in the Torah, written much earlier. Four times the Torah says something like, "And when your children ask you why are we celebrating this festival, then you should answer..."(Exodus 13:14, etc.)

Thirty years ago I attended an interfaith conference in Vienna hosted at the Schwarzenberg Palace, and the guest of honor was Prince Schwarzenberg. (The Schwarzenbergs were one of the most important dynasties in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and staunch Catholics, producing cardinals as well as princes. The empire is long gone. They no longer own the palace, and the count is now Czech and a salaried member of the EU.) At the conference, the late Sir Sigmund Sternberg presented Prince Schwarzenberg with a Haggadah in gratitude for his work on reconciliation. The prince rose to thank him, saying that he was always impressed by the fact that the Haggadah and indeed the rabbinic tradition encouraged asking questions, in contrast to the Catholic Church, which discouraged questioning and valued submission to priestly authority.

It was a moving speech, and fortunately no one from the Jewish attendees, got up to contradict him. After all, in the rabbinic world of today questioning is confined to a very limited academic context, and challenging religious authority or tradition is both frowned upon and positively discouraged. You are more likely to get a flick of disapproval, if you are not charged with heresy. But I thought that comment was really telling and in fact did fairly represent the intellectual state of the Talmudic academies until medievalism took hold.

On the upcoming Seder Night or nights, we are going to be asked to analyze and to challenge and to expect answers. The primary questions are why we were slaves in Egypt and why we were freed. And how come we are still around 3,000 years later. All this was originally asked at a time when slavery was the universally accepted norm of all human societies around the world. It still amazes me that the campaign to end slavery only began in the eighteenth century, and it has still not been entirely eradicated. It was something that most people encountered personally one way or another, whether through what we call feudalism, conquest, or commercial activity.

Slavery means the dehumanization of a person. No freedom of choice, no rights, no protections. Just daily humiliation of the worst possible kind, in which human bodies are treated as animals, with little hope of escape or freedom till one dies, which might be at any moment. As I have said, such states exist in the world today. Even in the USA although it is completely prohibited by law, there are still cases of slavery enslavement of

undocumented agricultural workers, involuntary sex trafficking, to name just two examples.

That a whole nation was enslaved and then miraculously freed was remarkable and certainly worthy of commemoration. The Talmud responds by saying that we start explaining this in terms of how we once were downtrodden and at the very lowest rung of humanity. "We start with humiliation and end with praise." But now, thanks to our culture and religion that created this bond between us and God, we have succeeded in freeing ourselves (or being freed) and surviving all the subsequent attempts to either enslave us or destroy us.

What was it, asks the Talmud, that caused us to be at this very low state of affairs in human society? Two answers are given. We were slaves, and we were pagans. One state was imposed on us by other humans. The other was a matter of our own primitive way of thinking about the world and our place in it.

We escaped. And our story was adopted by other slaves. Africans who were sold and transported to the Americas (often by their own chieftains, or by Muslim traders, and by Christians and Jews, too). There is much debate in our fractious society as to whether you can compare situations of discrimination, slavery, and genocide, one to another. Usually the arguments are either ignorant of facts or misguided. There may be similarities, but there are never exact copies. In some cases the slaves were enslaved by their own people. In some it was possible to attain freedom under certain conditions. In some examples slavery was accompanied by an intentional, planned program to obliterate a people and a culture. In others it was simply a matter of religious, commercial, or political gain. Some were enslaved as the result of a conflict, competition, or simply the survival of the fittest.

It is invidious to compare one tragedy to another. To suggest that Israel treats Palestinians with the same desire to exterminate as Nazi Germany did of the Jews is just malicious deceit. There are no gas chambers on the West Bank. To say that Jews cannot claim to have been discriminated against or excluded is likewise ignorance. Jews have been framed and indeed lynched in the USA, let alone elsewhere, albeit not in the same numbers as blacks, by any means. To compare modern American treatment of blacks to the Nazis is also laughable. The Constitution of the United States forbids discrimination. Although it cannot control personal prejudice, and it is true that prejudice in attitudes and policies have and continue to have a debilitating and humiliating impact on the victims. I can detect within myself resentment at anti-Jewish discrimination. But who can possibly evaluate or weigh human suffering in a fair and objective balance?

Appealing to history is always problematic. History is the eyes of the beholder. You cannot always compare different examples, situations and precedents. All deaths, all suffering, all discrimination and hatred is evil and must be addressed. Our own as well as others. But how shall we compile a scale of suffering?

There is a debate within the black community in the USA today over how to address and ameliorate the position of blacks in the USA. On one side there are academics like Cornel West or Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who have reached

the pinnacle of academia. While obviously recognizing the awfulness of slavery and discrimination, and the mistakes of the current judicial system, they are prepared to admit to a degree of responsibility on the part of the black community for its own failures today. On the other side, the journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates typifies those who lay all the blame squarely on the white, imperialist world. Should the black community share any responsibility for the parlous state of much of it? Is it guilty of exaggerating victimhood or even perpetuating it? Perhaps reparations and financial compensation are the solution to black disadvantage.

I have heard it said that as the Israelite slaves were compensated, and survivors of Nazism, why not the blacks? There are blacks occupying the highest rungs of political, financial, and academic life (unlike Jews under Nazism and Communism), and at the same time others suffering at the bottom of the heap. But so are disadvantaged, poor whites. Isn't social welfare a form of reparation?

I wonder if this is precisely why the rabbis of the Talmud chose to introduce an alternative narrative to slavery—that once we, our antecedents, were pagans. We had no value system, no moral codes, no sense of human dignity, obligations, or responsibility for others. That which elevated us from paganism was Torah, the Bible. If we abandon it, we lose the *raison d'être* of the Jewish people. The Bible itself has told us this, time and again. Others can nowadays claim the right to be free of oppression, to struggle against discrimination. We know from experience that ultimately it takes auto-emancipation. We cannot rely on others (although we may still need their help). We must take our destiny into our own hands, as many deprived, oppressed and suffering people have succeeded in doing.

The Seder advocates freedom not just as an escape from a situation, but as the condition of creating a better alternative, a moral, spiritual world in which we are enabled fulfill our potential. What defines us is not just our freedom, but what we do with it. For us it is our culture and our religion too. That's the true meaning of freedom—not just the removal of the shackles, but using the gift of freedom to be better people. That's precisely why the Talmud says that each one of us should say, "He took us out of there."

Happy Pesah.