



Experiencing Emancipation: Momentary Freedom and Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

The Pesach Seder brings with it a plethora of spiritual opportunities. We drink the Four Cups, consume *matzah* and *maror*, ask the four questions and, of course, enjoy a celebratory meal. But the true essence of this sacred night is to retell and re-experience the Exodus from Egypt. "*Chayav Adam Lir'Os Es Atzmo K'Illo Hu Yatzah Mi'Mitzrayim* (A Person is obligated to view himself as if he left Egypt)." The rabbis explain that we each have our "Egypt"; we each have those circumstances which keep us shackled and enslaved. Through remembering our redemption from Egyptian servitude, we can experience emancipation from our personal servitude. By retelling and reliving the past, we can bring that redemptive energy to our present circumstances. This is a concept we have learned and discussed extensively, yet find difficult to actualize. We have celebrated many a Pesach Seder, we have fulfilled the obligations, yet don't feel unburdened or emancipated when it is over. We execute the details, but have yet to feel the redemptive energy of this holiday. How do we maximize the Seder experience and allow ourselves to experience this personal freedom?

Amazingly, the answer is found in the Haggadah:

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah said: "I am like a man of seventy years old, yet I did not succeed in proving that the exodus from Egypt must be mentioned at night-until Ben Zoma explained it: "It is said, 'That you may remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life;' now 'the days of your life' refers to the days, [and the additional word] 'all' indicates the inclusion of the nights!"

The commentaries are bothered by the inclusion of this section in the Haggadah. The great sage Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah is not referring to the night of Pesach, he is referring to the nights throughout the year. There are two distinct obligations which relate to remembering the Exodus. Each and every day we have the mitzvah of "*Zechira*", remembering the Exodus. This can be fulfilled by simply mentioning that God took us out of Egypt (we fulfill this obligation through the recitation of the third paragraph of Shema). On the night of Pesach, the mitzvah is "*Sippur*" an in-depth retelling and recounting of the entire Exodus narrative (we fulfill this through the Haggadah). Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah is discussing the obligation of "*Zechira*". As such, why is this discussion included in the Haggadah?

Although there are many answers, I would like to share with you one that relates not to the content of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah's words but rather to his personality. The Talmud (Berachos 27b) relates the story of the search for a new head for the rabbinical academy in Israel. There was a short list of distinguished personalities for this important position, but the list was ultimately narrowed down to one man, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah. The delegation approached the great sage and asked if he would become the Rosh Yeshiva (head of the academy).

They went and said to him: "Will your honor consent to become head of the academy?" He replied: "I will go and consult the members of my family". He went and consulted his wife. She said to him: "Perhaps they will depose you later-on (Rabban Gamliel, the previous head was removed from the position)". He replied to her: [There is a proverb:] "Let a man use a cup of honor (expensive crystal glass) for one day even if it be broken the next".

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah's wife understood that in Jewish communal service it is a good idea to look at how the community treated your predecessor before accepting a position. Rabban Gamliel, the previous Rosh Yeshiva, was older and more highly regarded than Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah. Yet, Rabban Gamliel fell out of favor with his rabbinic colleagues and was fired (the background to this episode is beyond the purview of this essay). Rabbi Eleazar's wife felt the risk for her husband was too great. To which Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah responded, "I am not blind to the potential risks. I am not ignoring the reality that perhaps those who respect me today may turn on me tomorrow. But there is an opportunity right in



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front of me now; there is promise and possibility at my doorstep. How can I not take advantage? My dear wife, better to use the beautiful goblet today and see it break tomorrow than to never use the goblet at all.”

In the words of the English poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” All opportunities come with risk. In fact the greater the opportunity, the greater the risk and possibility of failure and defeat. If one only takes advantage of the opportunities for which he is guaranteed success, he will accomplish very little.

We must see the beauty in every opportunity, seize it with full force and commitment and try to the best of our ability to succeed. And if we fail, we know that we have grown from this opportunity, learned from this experience, are enriched as a result and better prepared to tackle future life initiatives.

The greatness of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah was his willingness to engage life without the being assured of success. Perhaps, this is why this section is included in the Haggadah. Freedom doesn't come with a guarantee of success. Freedom only guarantees our ability to try. Sometimes we try and succeed and sometimes we fail miserably. All too often we are scared to try if we can't be guaranteed success. Deep down, we fear failure. For some it is a result of past failures, for others it may be a lack of self-confidence. We lose out on so many life opportunities because we are simply too scared to start. And we come to the Seder with an opportunity to become free; to free ourselves of the things which are holding us back, to free ourselves from the very things which shackle us to mediocrity and underperformance. As we are about to free ourselves of our burdens, we think, “how long will this last? I can let go of my pain, frustration and animosity for a couple of hours. I can let go of the grudges and shattered dreams for a night, but it will all come rushing back tomorrow? What's the point of allowing myself to feel freedom if I can't perpetuate it?” And it is in that very moment that we hear the voice of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah, “better to use the beautiful goblet today and see it break tomorrow than to never used the goblet at all.” Better to experience even just a few hours of freedom than none at all.

In one week from now, we will IYH sit at our Seder and we will strive to feel free. We are going to do whatever we can to leave our personal Egypt. For a few hours, we are going to find a way to extricate ourselves from the shackles and bondage which keep us tethered to compromised life circumstances. We know that we may not be able to free ourselves forever, but if we can drink from the goblet of freedom for a few hours, if we can feel that freedom coursing through our veins, we know that we will strive to be free again. Even if the next morning we may be right back where we started, once one drinks from the chalice of freedom, he will yearn, pine and desire for more. We often think that our goal is to succeed: we forget that our obligation is to try. Allow yourself to feel free for a few hours, let go of whatever is holding you back and experience emancipation. Tomorrow will be dealt with tomorrow. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah and the Pesach seder teach us to maximize the moment in front of us now.