

From the Rabbi

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“Where Are You Going?”

The Sephardim have a charming seder custom, as follows: Each person at the table takes a turn with the broken piece of matzah. He holds it on his shoulder as if carrying a burden on a journey. The next person at the table asks, “*Mi atah*” (“Who are you?”) The person with the matzah answers: “*Yisrael*” (“I am a Jew”). Then, “*Minayin ba’ta?*” (“Where are you coming from?”) Answer: “*Me’avdut Mitzrayim*” (“from Egyptian slavery”). Finally, “*L’an telekh*” (“To where are you going?”) Response: “*L’eretz Yisrael*” (“to the Land of Israel”).

Each participant has to take a turn, so that everyone will feel what it’s like to be asked those questions and give those answers. As with much of our surviving liturgy, these are not pat responses. They are existential statements. If you’re a Jew – by birth, by choice, or as is the case among increasing millions of our folk, by birth *and* choice – then you need to take those questions seriously. Pesach is as good a time as any to do so.

You need to be willing to see yourself in the Jewish story. You need to consider whether your day-to-day life is built around that greater Jewish journey. If it isn’t, fine. But at some point you should try to articulate to yourself why you’re no longer – or not yet - a part of the story, and to come on in if you’re ready.

Ours is a story of great hope. We were down and diminished, but we showed faith and determination, and we went forward toward a vision of humanity propelled by the call of a

demanding and beneficent Creator. We joined the family of nations in that endeavor. But we also retained our own particular family identity. *Mi atah?* Who are you? *Yisrael*. Israel, the God-wrestlers, a people stubbornly unique.

That plan paid off for us, except where it didn't. On the positive side, it allowed us to preserve our unique vision like a flame against the wind, when for most of history the winds blew in the opposite direction, toward inhumanity and chaos. When the zeitgeist blew our way, we could link hands with every humanitarian cause and creed, walking proudly toward what we hoped would be the triumph of Godly light. *Bayom ha-hu*. "On that day it will all be One."

On the negative side, it made it easy for the bad guys to single us out for brutal treatment. They always knew where to find us, and what to blame us for. Mostly they blamed us for keeping the flame of moral consciousness alive, even when we didn't always do it so well.

Alas it is the story of slavery-to-freedom-to-The Land that got us to where we are today. The ancient story tells us to be out there among the nations, and also to be our own *unique* nation. It tells us to envision peace, acceptance, and love, and it tells us to guard our uniqueness especially in those times when peace, acceptance, and love don't prevail in the world.

Which leads us to our own time. The current iteration of our ancient story places us within a global Jewry whose center is the seventy-year-young State of Israel. Israel makes it possible for us to live fully Jewish lives wherever we are in the world, even as we live as full citizens of our respective nations. Israel sets the scales for the unfolding of Jewish scholarship; for the development of the Hebrew language; and for the ongoing redefinition of Jewish secularity.

Israel translates our pre-modern identity into a fully modern socio-political profile, fully conversant with the modern world.

Today, great innovations in Jewish learning, language, custom, practice, and communal modeling are going on *outside* of Israel, especially but not exclusively in the United States. More and more, Israelis are learning about Jewish possibilities beyond those presented to them in their own country, especially with regard to egalitarian, liberal understandings of Jewish religious life. More and more, the future of Jewish identity lies in a vibrant partnership between Israel and Diaspora.

But no one believes that these great strides in Diaspora Jewish creativity – or the confidence of Diaspora Jews who are doing the creating – is possible without the strong center that Israel provides. This is part of the answer to why Israel needs to matter to any Jew who thinks he or she is part of that quaint ancient tale.

The other part of the answer [as to the question of why Israel needs to matter] is that when Israel errs as a beacon of the Torah's ethical ideals, all Jews feel the blowback. All Jews, all over the world, even Jews who aren't particularly connected to the aforementioned story. Without rehearsing those errors here, we can all nonetheless come together to encourage Israel to be the best exemplar of what we want to be as a people, even at this seemingly late stage in the history of our origin story.

And what is it we want to be? We want to be the people who purposefully left Pharaonic oppression not simply to be "free," but to be free to be *Israel the God-wrestling People*, and to be headed always toward the *Land* of Israel, i.e., toward the manifestation and concretization

of our collective identity. We know full well *what* that identity should ideally be, ethically speaking. We know that we cannot hope to achieve it fully or all the time. But we also know that we need to keep trying.

That is why we hand the broken matzah down the line of the table, asking each and every Jew to join the story: Do you know who you are? Do you know where you came from? Do you know where you are going? When we can answer 'yes' to all three questions, we will be well on our way to the greatness that our history expects of us.

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