



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Shmot 5771

By Rachel Travis

December 25, 2010

“In every generation one is obligated to view him [or her] self as though s/he personally came out of Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> Though we recite these words at the Pesach seder each year, I find them difficult to practice. So too, as I studied *Parshat Shmot* and read about the descent of the Children of Israel into slavery and their immense suffering under Pharaoh, I struggled to envision myself in their place. As an American Jew, blessed to live in comfort and security and having never experienced true oppression, try as I might, I could not genuinely imagine what it would feel like to be a slave.

I was troubled by this realization, because personally relating to the Exodus from Egypt is a core tenet of Judaism, as well as a foundation for the assertion that social justice is an inherently Jewish value. The Torah reminds us dozens of times that we have the moral obligation to help others because we were slaves in Egypt. We are commanded to love the stranger precisely because we were strangers in Egypt. We are directed to aid the oppressed because we, as a people, understand what it means to suffer.<sup>2</sup> The Torah seems to imply that understanding suffering is a prerequisite for remedying it.

But can we satisfy the Torah’s commandments to aid the oppressed if we ourselves cannot relate to their suffering? Moreover, can we still find a meaningful social justice message in the Exodus story if we cannot identify with the experiences of our ancestors?

I believe we can. But to do so, we need to broaden our reading of the Exodus narrative. The book of Shmot opens with a band of seventy family members forced to immigrate to Egypt during a severe famine in Canaan. Over the years, their numbers increase, and the native Egyptians—threatened by this foreign presence—enslave them. Tortured and yearning for freedom, the Israelites cry out to God, who, hearing their wails, redeems them from their physical bondage.<sup>3</sup>

This is the section of the Exodus narrative that we tend to focus on, but it is only part of the story. For the generation of the Exodus, removing the bonds of physical slavery was only the first crucial step in a larger process. The true *raison d’être* of the Exodus was to reach Sinai and to receive the Torah, thereby forming a nation with responsibilities toward God and toward each other—a nation bound no longer by slavery, but obligated by the *mitzvot* to create a just society.

Like the Israelites, many of our grandparents and great grandparents left generations of hardship and oppression behind. Most American Jews today are reaping the benefits of this modern Exodus, living in relative equality and comfort in a democratic, free society. But like the biblical Exodus, we must remember that this freedom is not the culmination of the process, but rather, the beginning: the immense opportunity of America comes with great

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Pesachim 10:5.

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous sources for this injunction including, Deuteronomy 24:17-18, Exodus 22:20-23 and Exodus 23:9.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 1-2.

responsibility, for each other and for the world. We learn from the Exodus story that freedom is not an end in and of itself but a gift that must lead to action.

Perhaps then, our contemporary social justice lesson is this: Because we are free, as the Israelites were once freed from Egypt, we are obligated to help the oppressed. Because we do *not* know what it feels like to be a stranger, we must love the stranger. In many ways, this is a more challenging imperative than the one culled from the traditional reading of the text. It requires that we continuously infuse our freedom with meaning through action.

In the words of Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel: “On the night of the festival [of Pesach] we are filled with redemption, filled with a higher freedom. This freedom releases our spirit, and the spirit of the entire universe, revealing the joy that is hidden within us.”<sup>4</sup> As we read this week’s *parshah*, let us take a moment to acknowledge the wonders of the freedom we enjoy and ask ourselves how the Exodus can serve for each of us as a personal rallying cry for doing good and pursuing justice. By doing so, we will be one step closer to fulfilling the full intent of the imperative we invoke at the seder—to envision ourselves as personally having left Egypt in order to actualize our potential as a free people.



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<sup>4</sup> Igrot HaRa'ayah, Volume III, Letter 767.

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