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By Jeremy Burton

As the telling of the ten plagues nears completion, the narrative takes a new direction in Exodus Chapter 12, with G-d laying out the first commandments (*mitzvoth*) that are directed to the people of Israel (as opposed to earlier commandments given to the forefathers individually to be passed on). These charges - to establish the months, make the Passover sacrificial offering and to celebrate the holiday with its precepts (no leavened bread, the recounting of the Exodus at the Seder meal) amongst others are the first directives to a people on the cusp of freedom and redemption.

Passover is a central component of our Jewish national identity. Every year we memorialize the Exodus by making a Seder, remembering that we were once slaves in Egypt. The torah reading of these collective first *mitzvoth*, as much as the Exodus itself, is perceived as the foundational moment in the forging of our national identity, the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham to redeem his children and make them into a nation. In the nuance of these *mitzvoth* can be found some concepts relevant to understanding the nature of the ties and responsibilities that bind us with community.

The first precept of our reading is the establishment of the calendar. Much has been written about the nature of the Jewish lunar calendar - its representation of our ongoing and cyclical spiritual renewal both individually and as a community. And yet for something so important to the spirituality of a nation and our reconnection with G-d, the power to declare the months is neither held by the Almighty nor placed on the individual but rather on the Sanhedrin, the high court of the nation that will be established. And even as power rests with the court, it must rely on the testimony of eyewitnesses to the new moon. In essence, G-d's first act is to give to us the power to set the cycles of our spiritual growth, but in order to fulfill this charge, we must establish and utilize a clearly understood and respected system of courts and legal due process.

The next precept is the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb and the related observances of Passover. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the 19th century founder of German Modern Orthodoxy, teaches that this commandment is inherent to the creation of the concept and structure of a Jewish people. The commandment begins by establishing ownership of personal property amongst the Hebrew slaves (the animals to be sacrificed), but also the principle of equality in law in that anyone can represent and act on behalf of any other in bringing it (with their permission) - legally representing and acting on behalf of the other. This concept is laid out as the concept that "the messenger is as the individual themselves" (Talmud Kidushin 41). In Hirsch's interpretation this precept is foundational to the understanding of the rights of the individual in Judaism. The charge establishes the rights of individual first and from here builds upward into families.

Anyone who has participated in a Seder is probably familiar with the notion that this an occasion for family to be in the home, but not understood strictly as a family of birth and blood relatives. We open our doors, invite in neighbors and friends to complete the circle

for participation in the Mitzvah. Since no portion of the sacrifice may be left over till morning the Torah tells us, we must find others to participate with us if we have too much for our own needs. The Torah as Hirsch explains, is telling us that the bonds of family are entirely free-willed, of homes forming based on their own needs (verse 4).

Hirsch writes:

“The right which each Man has to independence, to equality, to freedom and property, the bonds of blood and the free choice which gathers together and separates them into homes, this is the basis of G-d’s state. But these rights tend to individualize... What (is) the medium that attaches one home to another and makes society emerge from the family in the Jewish state?”

It is in the law of this sacrifice that he evinces an answer. Noting that the reading commands that if one’s home is “too small for the blessing that G-d lends” (the lamb) then “let him seek out a neighbor who can supply him with people to whom his overflow can be of use.” He concludes:

“G-d can look after the poor without the rich. But the rich man can NOT (emphasis his) carry out the task of his life without the poor. It is not necessity, but *the consciousness of duty* (Mitzvah) which, in this Jewish state, is to join house to house to form a national community.”

In these ideas lies the foundation of the Jewish idea. Before we can even get to the actual observance of the Seder – and remind ourselves that we were once slaves – we are to establish courts and judicial process, to recognize individual liberty entwined with obligations towards others, and know that even in the service of G-d we cannot act without the incorporation of the poor around us.

In our own time it does us well to remember that it is not enough to retell our own exile story but to remember that a civil society is rooted in our principles - the rights of the individual, the need for just and open courts, the obligation to others and our interdependency upon our fellow human beings. It is through such principles that we are directed and become a “K’hal Edah Yisrael,” the assemblies (K’hal) or communities to govern and act justly and wisely, the individuals with liberty and responsibility (Edah) and the nation (Yisrael) a spiritually renewing people carrying the message of the Exodus and our Seder story from generation to generation.

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