**PASSOVER**

**JEWISH FLIGHTS TO FREEDOM, RECENT & ANCIENT, AND TO RECOVERED JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY, DIGNITY IN OUR LAND**

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**PASSOVER'S ENDURING MESSAGE OF FREEDOM**

**Ruth R. Wisse**


On Monday, millions of children will ask their parents: Why is tonight different from all other nights of the year? Children asking this question in Jewish homes around the world will be told that the Passover festival commemorates the liberation of their people from enslavement in Egypt and celebrates the civilization that emerged from that breakout into independence. Families gathered at an orchestrated...
meal—the Seder—will begin the story by tasting the bitterness of subjection, make their way through debates over interpretations of the event, and culminate in joyful and occasionally (after the designated four cups of wine) raucous song.

Nor will the ironies of liberation be lost on households that have laboriously prepared for its re-enactment: No one who observes the exacting requirements of Passover can doubt the disciplining challenges involved in attaining freedom.

Our family celebrates Passover with personal as well as historical freight. In the summer of 1940, my parents executed our flight from a fate worse than slavery at the hands of the Soviets and the Nazis who took turns subjugating the Romanian city we escaped, Czernowitz. Every successful getaway like ours was studded with improbabilities that some call miracles.

In his recital of the Passover Haggadah (the text that guides the Seder meal), my father put special emphasis on the phrase: "And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt—not by the hands of an angel, and not by the hands of a seraph, and not by the hands of a messenger, but the Holy One, blessed be he, himself, in his own glory and in his own person." My father said we should likewise carry out life's toughest tasks ourselves rather than entrust them to agents. He may have had in mind his own rescue of us and his failure to save members of his family who were murdered.

We were never to forget that our timely exit from Europe coincided with the loss of several million others like us. Every year, we include in our family reading of the Haggadah a postwar insert circulated by the Canadian Jewish Congress honouring both those who perished at the hands of the Nazis and those who went down fighting:

"On the first day of Passover the remnants in the Ghetto of Warsaw rose up against the adversary, even as in the days of Judah the Maccabee. 'They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided' [2 Samuel 1:23], and they brought redemption to the name of Israel through all the world."

This tribute concludes with one of Maimonides's 13 principles of faith: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah—and though he tarry, yet I believe." Participants in our Seder traditionally differ in how deeply they linger over the tarrying and how fervently over the belief. Passover is the first of the Jewish holidays to have broken through ethnic boundaries—at least in America—to become regarded as a paradigm of the freedom story. President Obama has hosted Seders at the White House. An annual cascade of new Haggadahs demonstrates the multiple ways that the festival is nowadays observed and understood.

But the most inspiring incarnation of the exodus has been the one that reversed it: the recovery of the Jewish homeland from foreign occupiers after millennia of exile. Not by the hands of an angel and not by the hands of a messenger, but by the self-reliance that their ancestors had practiced for centuries, and by keeping faith with their vow to return to Jerusalem, the settlers of Israel accomplished one of the greatest national feats in history.

Jews reclaimed their political independence in the land of Israel in the same decade that witnessed the genocidal slaughter of one-third of their people. They did so not only by mobilizing skills honed through centuries of adaptation to foreign rule but by reactivating powers that were dormant for centuries. Can the legendary crossing of the Red Sea compare with the marvel of several million Jewish migrants and refugees from lands as disparate as Ethiopia and Latvia forging a common, democratic Jewish state? Are the plagues that persuaded Pharaoh to "let my people go" or the miracles in the desert as stunning as Israel's ability to withstand the preposterously asymmetrical Arab aggression against it? The revival of Hebrew from sacral high status into national vernacular is an unparalleled linguistic feat. Entrepreneurship in Israel has won it the title of "start-up nation."
The traditional Passover Seder concludes with the pledge, "Next year in Jerusalem," which the British poet William Blake nationalized in the vow not to rest "Till we have built Jerusalem / In England's green & pleasant Land." Yet modern Israel represents an immense human accomplishment that may even go beyond the prophetic vision. Passover today includes a story of national liberation at least the equal of the one in the Book of Exodus that served as its inspiration.

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THE JEWISH EXODUS FROM ARAB LANDS
Rachel Avraham
United With Israel, Mar. 25, 2013

As Jews around the world celebrate Passover and remember their ancestors’ exodus from Egypt, it is also important to remember the modern day Jewish exodus from Arab lands. In 1945, around one million Jews lived in Jewish communities residing in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria and Yemen. Many of these communities predated Islam. Jews in Arab states greatly contributed towards their societies. Sasson Heskel, a Baghdadi Jew, was an Iraqi Finance Minister in the 19th century, while an Egyptian Jew named Murad Bey helped draft the Egyptian Constitution in the 1930’s and Layla Murad, also an Egyptian Jew, was the great diva of Arabic music during the mid 1900’s. However, in the days leading up to Israel’s independence in 1948, many Arab states grew oppressive towards their Jewish citizens, who had lived beside Arabs since antiquity.

From 1947 through 1948, Jews in the Arab Middle East were systematically persecuted, with anti-Jewish pogroms erupting and Jewish property being confiscated. The Iraqi government declared that Zionism was a capital offense; the Syrian government froze Jewish bank accounts; a bomb set off in the Jewish Quarter of Cairo resulted in the death of 70 Jews; and a pogrom in Aden led to the death of 80 Jews, as well as the destruction of countless Jewish homes. As a result of such persecutions, between 1948 and 1972, 820,000 Jews from Arabian countries would become refugees, with 200,000 settling in Europe and the United States, while an additional 586,000 moving to Israel. The descendants of the Jewish refugees from Arab states presently make up around half of the Israeli population.

A Haggadah the from the Forgotten Jewish Exodus website includes the following prayer on Passover, “As we hold the bread of affliction, we recall that more than 3,000 years ago our ancestors went forth from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land of Israel. Many never left the Middle East. Today, we remember not only the bitterness of that slavery, but also the forgotten exodus of one million Jews who fled the Middle East and North Africa in the 20th century. The Jewish people have been living in Egypt and throughout the Middle East for more than 3,000 years. As Jews, we take pride in being the Middle East’s oldest, existing ethnic group.”

Upon discussing Jewish contributions to Arab states and the oppression that Jews endured within Arab countries, which ultimately led to their exodus from these lands, it asserts, “We hold the bread of affliction and recall the 135,000 Jews of Iraq who once made up a plurality of the city of Baghdad; the 40,000 Jews of Libya, where today no Jews remain; and the 80,000 Jews of Egypt, many of whom in 1956 received government expulsion orders. Just as the Israelites did not have time to let their bread rise, these modern Egyptian Jewish refugees did not have time to pack their bags. And hundreds of thousands more.”

It concludes, “The scars of the past can heal. But justice can only be achieved when peoples and governments in the Middle East recognize the plight of the forgotten million refugees. This year, we pray for the day when justice will be achieved for the Jews of the Middle East and when all peoples of the
region will live together in peace and harmony. Amen.” As one Egyptian Jewish refugee, Joseph Abdel Wahed, asserted, “On Passover, it is a Jewish tradition that in retelling the Exodus story we should feel as if we, ourselves, experienced persecution and the Exodus from Egypt. I hope that this year we can also take a moment to experience the modern exodus of Middle Eastern Jews.”

**THE EXODUS ENIGMA**

**Stephen Gabriel Rosenberg**  

As Passover approaches it may be worth looking once more for extra-biblical evidence of the Exodus. Archeologists are reluctant to discuss the subject as there is absolutely no external evidence for it, they say. On the other hand the Hebrew Bible is so explicit, and the folk memory is so important to us as Jews, that archeologists prefer not to get involved. It is true that there is no direct evidence, but there is the possibility of approaching the subject obliquely.

The biblical record of the whole Exodus episode is one set of miracles after another, from the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea to the collapse of the walls of Jericho in Canaan. Moses is heavily involved but it is the hand of God that rules supreme, and attempts to explain the magic rod that cures scorpion bites, the blow that brings water from the rock, the manna that falls from heaven and so on, have all failed in terms of reality. They are all miracles and archaeologists cannot deal with miracles. However there remain a number of themes that can be re-examined in the light of Egyptian history.

First, the Children of Israel were in Egypt as slave-workers and specialists in producing and working in mud-brick, under harsh conditions. Secondly, they left Egypt as a scratch army under a scratch general, Moses. And thirdly, they constructed a shrine or tabernacle, the Mishkan, in glorious Technicolor and luxurious detail, all in the middle of a most barren wilderness. Now, there is one period of Egyptian history which can accommodate these three different scenarios.

Mud-brick in Egypt was not used for monuments, such as temples and pyramids, which were considered to be worthy of stonework. It was reserved for plain domestic houses, in a process that was both cheap and quick, and it would have been surprising to find great numbers of workers, such as the Israelites, engaged in such work, as domestic buildings were largely constructed by homeowners themselves.

But there was one enormous mud-brick project in Egypt that would have required large numbers of semi-skilled workers, and that was the city of Akhetaten (“Horizon of the Aten”). It was the brainchild of the heretic Pharaoh Akhenaten, who required a new city as the center of his religious revolution, and needed it quickly. Akhenaten had imposed on his people the new religion of the worship of the one god, the Aten, the disc of the Sun, to the exclusion of the other multifarious gods, and he wanted his new city to be away from the traditional religious centers of Memphis and Thebes so that he could quickly promote his revolutionary ideas without contamination from the old beliefs and their priests.

With the help of slave laborers and the army, the main portion of the city was completed in two years, and the final works in another six years. It was the largest mud-brick construction known to us in the Egyptian world and it is probable that the Israelites were conscripted to carry out the work. They had to work hard and fast under insistent taskmasters in the burning heat of the site, later called El Amarna, on the east bank of the Nile, half-way between Thebes and Memphis, yet they had decent housing they were allowed to build for themselves and their families, just to the east of the new city, so they survived and multiplied in numbers.
Akhenaten had this city built to a well-ordered plan in record time, but his reforms were not popular, certainly not with the priests and not with the population, who were used to worshiping multiple gods and liked it that way. Thus, when Akhenaten died, only eight years after the city was completed, there was a general evacuation by the inhabitants, who went back to their old villages and took with them some of the wonderfully rich artifacts that the new town had produced. The city was left to the wind and the weather and the blowing sands that covered it until it was exposed by an early 20th-century German expedition that set out from Berlin, financed by the Jewish millionaire philanthropist James Simon.

As the population left, so did the workers, the army and the Israelites and, as compensation for their back-breaking work, they took with them precious materials and provisions for their long trek back to their ancient land of Canaan. To ready themselves for a dangerous journey through enemy territory, they formed themselves into an amateur army under the leadership of the amateur general Moses, who was one of theirs, but had been educated in Egyptian ways and had adopted the new religion of one God above all others. And what the Israelites needed on their journey was a shrine, a tabernacle, what their leader later called the Mishkan, where he could communicate with the one God.

Now, Akhenaten had been succeeded by one of his sons-in-law, the young Tutankhamun, whose duty it was to oversee the return to religious sanity after the death of his father-in-law, who had died without a son and heir. Tutankhamun was left to regulate the chaos that took place on the death of Akhenaten. But he was powerless to stop the population from leaving the city and, as we know, he himself left for Thebes where he died young, leaving a very rich set of royal treasures in his tomb, but there was no battle-shrine to be found.

Every Pharaoh had a battle-shrine, as we know from the case of Rameses II, whose own is shown on the walls of his temple at Abu Simbel, as erected for him at the battle of Kadesh. It is a two-room shrine within a large courtyard, and the inner room of the shrine had a central podium surmounted by two figures with outstretched wings protecting a single deity, which in this case is a non-representational tablet or cartouche.

This battle-shrine is uncannily like the biblical Mishkan described in Exodus 25, even up to the Ark with its two cherubim. From his tomb we know that the young Pharaoh Tutankhamun had a battle chariot, ready to go to war, so he would have had a battle-shrine to go with it.

WE MAY speculate that the shrine, which would have been of the finest materials, like all the rest of King Tut’s heirloom, was carried off by the Israelites in their escape from the city. In that way they had a ready-made tabernacle, and were able to have it adapted to their very own Mishkan, by Bezalel and Oholiab, the Israelite craftsmen, in the midst of that barren Wilderness where there were neither precious materials nor luxury furnishings to be found.

This scenario, of the Israelites building the mud-brick city of Akhetaten, escaping from it while impounding for their own use the battle-shrine of prince and Pharaoh Tutankhamun, could be equated with the account of the Exodus of the Children of Israel and the construction of the Mishkan, whose description takes up so many chapters of the biblical Book of Exodus.

And when would all that have taken place? Akhenaten died about the year 1334 BCE and Tutankhamun in 1325 BCE, so the period of the Exodus would have been between 1330 and 1320 BCE. That could correspond with the biblical date of 430 years after the Children of Israel entered Egypt (Exodus 12:40), which would then be about 1755 BCE, which is some hundred years before the Hyksos ruled Egypt, and it was with them, ancient Jewish historian Josephus claims, the Israelites came.

On the other hand it was a hundred years too late for the date of 480 years before the building of the Solomonic Temple (1 Kings 6:1). In other words, it was a hundred years too early for one, and a hundred years too late for the other, thus not a bad average to correspond with the two fixed biblical dates for the Exodus.
As for the army formed by the fleeing Israelites, this is clearly hinted at in the biblical record, which says that they left Egypt “armed in groups of fifty” (Exodus 13:18). They were counted as men of military age, from 20 years of age and upwards, and they protected the Mishkan by encamping around it in military order by their individual standards, “Degel mahane Yehudah...” flag of the camp of Judah (Numbers 2:3) and so on, tribe by tribe. They were only a scratch army and nearly lost the first war with Amalek but, after Jethro had advised Moses how to form a professional force with trusted chieftains over ranks of ten and fifty, and a hundred and a thousand (Exodus 18:21), they never, as a complete army, lost another battle in Sinai or Transjordan.

In conclusion, we can say there was one period in Egyptian history when an Exodus could have taken place. It was after the completion of an enormous mud-brick project, when an opportunity arose for the Israelites to escape, when there was a practical foundation for the elaborate Mishkan of the Sinai Desert, adapted from an Egyptian model, and when there was good reason for the Israelites to form an army and be counted in military ranks and numbers. And if that was indeed the period, then Akhenaten was the Pharaoh of the Oppression and Tutankhamun the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

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