

It was on this very day that all the legions of Hashem left the land of Egypt. (12:41)

Yetzias Mitzrayim, the exodus from Egypt, was the seminal event that commenced our journey toward nationhood, with its conclusion at *Har Sinai*, where we accepted the Torah and became Hashem's People. The Torah is the contract that binds us to the Almighty, but it all started with *yetzias Mitzrayim*. Had we not been liberated, then we could never have achieved nationhood. Indeed, *zechiras Yetzias Mitzrayim*, remembering the Exodus, is part and parcel of Jewish tradition. Our national motif is included within the heritage of every Jewish Festival, as a constant reminder that the event we are presently celebrating would not have been possible without the experience of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. How does one remember that which he did not personally experience? It was our ancestors who were there and who left *Mitzrayim*. While we believe in the transmission of our heritage throughout the generations, a certain emotion must accompany this belief which, regrettably, for the most part is not present today.

This question has always bothered me. I recently came across a story which I think can be extrapolated in some way to illuminate our dilemma. There are circumstances in which the only way to relate to the "big picture" is through a much smaller picture. If we take an isolated event out from the greater experience, we can somehow relate to the greater experience through it. For instance, many years ago there appeared an op-ed in the New York Times in which the writer wrote that he simply could not relate to the Holocaust. The sheer size of the number six million befuddled his mind. The number was just too great. It is an absolutely overwhelming number – six million Jews slaughtered in one of the most cataclysmic tragedies of all time. How does one even begin to fathom such a magnitude? The author did, however, come across a story which took place during the Holocaust. Through this story, he was able to relate to the much larger systematic murder of six million Jews. He told about a little boy, no more than two and a half years old, who could not climb up the steps to the gas chamber. The guard was "kind" enough to lift him up, so that the child could keep pace with the doomed adults who were walking to their deaths. It was this repulsive act of "kindness" on the part of the Nazi that he was able to apply as a cognate for relating to the mass murder which occurred during the Holocaust. When he thought of this incident, he was able to grasp to some extent the tragedies of the millions more.

I would like to attempt to apply a similar approach towards remembering *yetzias Mitzrayim*. It is not an "Egypt" story, but it is a remarkable lesson concerning *hakoras hatov*, gratitude, which I found in Rabbi Yechiel Spero's, *Touched by a Seder*. A middle-aged fellow, whom we will call Reuven, entered one of the *sefarim*, book stores in Meah Shearim. One can easily get lost in the vast array of books, relating to every area of Jewish erudition, to be found in these stores. It is not an experience that one wants to rush through. Reuven selected a volume and began to peruse its contents, to determine whether it was a *sefer* he wanted to add to his collection at home. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a man, whom we will call Shimon, standing at the rear of the store staring at him. Now Shimon was not just staring, his eyes were boring through him. Reuven began

to feel uncomfortable. Shimon appeared to be a normal Jew, dressed in average clothes. There seemed to be nothing unusual about him – outside of the fact that he just kept on staring at him.

Reuven continued looking at the *sefer* until, a few moments later, he felt a sharp tug at his sleeve and a hand firmly planted on his shoulder. Shimon had left his perch at the rear of the store, and he was now standing before him. This time, Shimon appeared to be looking straight at him, as he tapped his shoulder and asked, “Sir, are you planning on purchasing this *sefer*?”

Reuven was taken slightly aback and retorted, “Yes. Do you have a problem with it?”

“Please forgive me,” Shimon replied. “I do not mean to be nosey. I am just curious if you are buying this *sefer*. If you are, I would like to pay for it.”

Reuven was blown away. This was a surprise to end all surprises. It was the last thing that he expected to hear from this man, but he noted a sincere ring to his request. He really wanted to help him, but he was not in any serious need of support. He could easily pay for the *sefer*. He told this to Shimon.

“Please, sir” Shimon began, “I really would like to pay for the *sefer*. It would mean so much to me if you accept my gift.”

Finally, Reuven said, “OK, you may pay for it, but why are you doing this?”

Shimon’s stare was now focused elsewhere. He seemed to be looking away, staring into space, as he said, “You see, I am blind...” Hearing these words, Reuven almost keeled over. “I will never be able to see again, to study Torah from the *sefarim* that had once meant so much to me. This is why I want to pay for the *sefer*, so that you will learn from it as much as possible. When the time comes, and you become weary and want to close the *sefer*, think of me, and keep it open a little longer.”

Reuven’s eyes began to moisten, as tears formed and slowly made their way down his face. The storekeeper confirmed that this was a constant occurrence. Many times a week, Shimon would visit the store and ask to pay for a *sefer*. This was his manner of learning Torah. Reuven would not put down that *sefer*- lightly. When he tired, he would regenerate himself and continue learning. He owed it to Shimon. After a while, this attitude spread to his other *sefarim*. The value of learning from a *sefer* was now so different.

This idea applies to remembering the Exodus. We must think of where we would be and how we would look had Hashem not taken us out of Egypt. We need only to look at contemporary society and its effect on those of our People who are still in Egypt, who refuse to leave, in order to realize for how much we must be thankful. We cannot remember Egypt because we were not there, but, if we open our eyes, we can see Egypt all around us.

Following the Holocaust, the surviving Jews had choices before them. Would they return to the way of life they had led in their *shtetl*, to a life of commitment and observance, or would America be different? It was a time to forget the past. Remembering the past brought sadness and pain. Looking forward to the future inspired hope. The past was then – the future is now. This was their motto.

No one can blame anyone who chose to reject his past. We have no idea of the indescribable pain and misery which they endured with the loss of their entire families. Yet, sadly, today, seventy years later, those who are still alive look around at their assimilated families and realize that they lost everything. I recently attended the *bar mitzvah* of the son of a close student of mine. My student's grandparents were Holocaust survivors who had lost everything. They came to this country and, with unwavering commitment and resolute dedication, persevered scorn from within and without – and prevailed. Four generations later, they are today in *Gan Eden* reaping their just reward, as they peer down to see their many descendants who are growing in Torah and commitment to *Klal Yisrael*. They remembered; they refused to forget. They understood the meaning of leaving *Mitzrayim*, and each day of their lives they kept remembering, by imbuing this memory into the psyche of their family. Just as "Reuven" had developed a new perspective on learning, they acknowledged where they would be now, had they forgotten their past.