

D'var Torah
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A rabbi was once attending a party and people kept approaching her to ask her questions. "Excuse me Rabbi? What time are services Friday night?" "Excuse me Rabbi, but do the Jews believe in an afterlife?" "Rabbi, what's the Hebrew name for Morgan?" Frustrated that even here, the Rabbi did not have a minute's rest, the Rabbi turned to Dr. Miller and said, "You know people are always asking me professional questions. What do you do when people come to you at a cocktail party and ask medical questions?" "It's easy," said the doctor. I answer their question, and the next day I send them a bill." The following day, the Rabbi received a bill from Dr. Miller.

Judaism encourages us to ask questions; and we do not need to be clergy to receive questions, ponder the answers, and then ask even more questions. The Torah readings we read in *Sefer Shemot*, the Book of Exodus, beg the questions - why are we reading about Passover when it is not yet Passover? Why is there so much emphasis on the Exodus from Egypt? Why do we read these Torah readings when we reach this point in the cycle of reading, and again when we celebrate Passover?

The simple answer to these questions is that we begin reading the Torah from the beginning, in *Sefer Bereshit*, the book of Genesis, on Simchat Torah, and we do not delay the reading, or depart from the regular order of *parshiyot*, Torah readings. In fact, we go back and repeat these same chapters during the appropriate season. However, there is much more going on here than simply following the proper order of weekly Torah portions. The truth is, Passover and the story of the Exodus are at the heart and soul of our way of life, and we spend a great deal of time thinking about the Exodus, not just on Passover but throughout the year. The Exodus is part of the daily liturgy, the weekly *Kiddush* on Shabbat and it is recited as part of the third paragraph of the *Shema*, our most important affirmation of faith.

In *Parashat Bo* we read, "You shall tell it to your children on that day." "That day," is a reference to Passover, the day on which we not only recall the story of the Exodus but reenact the drama of the Exodus at the dinner table. Additionally, in Deuteronomy we are told to remember the Exodus, "that you may remember the day of your departure from Egypt all the days of your life." In the Haggadah, we are told that Ben Zoma interpreted this to mean that we should remember and make mention of the Exodus every morning and night. A day should not pass when we do not pause to recall the Exodus and think about the significance of this event. We are left with two questions: why do we have two separate commandments for remembering the Exodus? and why isn't it enough to recall the Exodus once a year at the season when it occurred? I believe the answer to these questions can be found in the rationale behind the importance of the Exodus. There are at least two reasons why we must remember the Exodus. First, the Exodus is a defining event in our identity as the Jewish people. Passover, in a sense, is our birthday. The first month of the year is not Tishrei, when Rosh Hashanah occurs, but actually Passover is our birthday, in the month of Nisan, which is the first month of the year, because the month of Nisan marks the beginning of our national self-consciousness. We are Israel; as Jews, we share a common narrative. Moreover, the Exodus does more than define identity. It also defines moral consciousness. We do not just recall the Exodus; we are challenged to integrate it into our lives. By recalling the Exodus we are reminded of God's demand for justice and the importance of helping those who are oppressed

and in distress. We are challenged to be not just good Jews, but caring and responsible citizens of the world, thereby incorporating the phrase, *kol yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh*, all of Israel are responsible for each other, into our daily lives - the very theme of our Torah Fund theme this year.

There are no less than 36 places in the Torah, where we are instructed to show kindness to the stranger because "You were strangers in the land of Egypt." The Exodus, then not only defines our identity, but it shapes our character, and our responsibility, *arevut*, for our fellow person. We can understand why the remembrance of the Exodus occurs in two different contexts in the Torah, and why we are commanded not only to reenact the Exodus on Passover, but to mention it every day. On Passover we celebrate the beginning of Jewish peoplehood. We relive the events of the Exodus so that we can become a people who share a common past. It is easy for history to become distant and for us to forget where we come from. The Exodus must be a measure of our character. We must live it and breathe it every day of our lives. It is not just about self-interest; it is how we relate to the world around us, remembering that we are responsible for each other. If Passover celebrates national identity, then the daily recollection of the Exodus is a reaffirmation of our humanity. By recalling God's redemptive acts we are challenged to emulate this quality by helping those in need, by creating a more humane society and by trying to live more justly.

Of course, the dichotomy between Passover and the daily mention of the Exodus is not quite so clear. There are moral lessons to be learned from our reenactment of the Exodus story at the Seder table, and when we remember the Exodus in the liturgy each day, we also affirm our identity, but as Jews we must carry both parts of our heritage with us: To remember who we are and to remember why that is so important. Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser wrote, "The story of the Exodus has entered the stream of world history to become a saga of the universal struggle against tyranny and the promise that freedom's cause is irresistible and is destined to prevail no matter how formidable the forces arrayed against it may be. We are always reminded of the moral implications of Judaism, to help others, and so it is very fitting that this year our Torah Fund theme is *arevut*, responsibility. Our entire community, especially members of Women's League for Conservative Judaism, live each day with the thought, *kol yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh*, we are all responsible for each other.

Thank you and *Yasher Kochechen* to all of our Women's League members for leading our Women's League Shabbat services this Shabbat. Shabbat Shalom!