

Rabbi David Ebstein
The Redemptive Self

Listen carefully to the following and see if you can tell me when you've heard it before. "My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt..."
Where have you heard this before? Correct...the Haggadah. It marks the beginning of the Maggid section, the section that tells the story of Passover, the story that we tell to our children, to the next generation. But in fact, it originally appears in Deuteronomy as part of the liturgical declaration made by farmers bringing their first fruits to the temple. Parshat Ki Tavo.

Note how this journey of the Israelite farmer, is about someone who could be coming from Tzipori, or Tiberias, Usha or Shefaram, Beersheva...cities far away from Jerusalem. And it is denoting an **actual journey**, *aliya l'regel*, a pilgrimage, that required weeks of preparation..... Today we often use the phrase 'journey' in a metaphorical sense; spiritual journeys, professional journeys, and even journeys to understand ourselves better.

But this is a physical journey that took weeks. When **we** travel to Israel we hop on a plane, and in half a day, we are there. Because of the length of the trip, ancient pilgrims had ample time to reflect upon their lives.

Imagine the excitement they felt when they arrived in Jerusalem after trudging 800 meters uphill, to the top of Moriah, to the center of their religious universe. They would present the first fruits to the priest, and make the liturgical declaration.

For just a moment, let's listen carefully to the whole quote, that the Israelite pilgrim recites upon bringing the first fruits to the priest. Ask someone to read it from the pews, having given it to them ahead of time. "My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey....."

The central feature of this story, according to Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, is the "contrast between its beginning and end..." First we are wanderers seeking a place to settle, and we "end up as settlers in the Promised Land that " flows with milk and honey." We begin history alone, wandering and searching for a home, and our tale ends with a partnership...between the pilgrim and God as he enters the land. This is the God who frees us from Egypt "with a strong hand and an outstretched arm." From alone, lonely and vulnerable, to a partnership with a God, land and redemption. From despair to hope...defeat to victory...what a great story...I love it!!

A number of years ago, in 2002, towards the beginning of the second intifada, the worst time I can remember from my 22 years...the Park Hotel in Netanya was bombed. That was the turning point from the perspective of the average Israeli. The bombing was horrific...scores of people killed. *You may remember that it took place on Erev Pesach, just before the Seder. People were streaming into the dining hall to tell the story of the exodus from Egypt* when a suicide bomber detonated himself, killing scores. The day after Pesach the newspapers described the horror, the carnage. One paper had a headline that appropriately quoted the haggada...*Omdim aleinu l'chaloteinu...*(they are) "rising up against us to destroy us".

When I read that headline it hit me....**this** is our national narrative, this is our story, this is how we live our lives. Buses were blowing up weekly... At that point, we held a family meeting. At the time, our kids were 6-14. Two of my kids said we should stay, two said we should go. My oldest wanted to know why we didn't go to live with Saba and Savta in HP, in Chicago. And then the dagger..."If you really loved us you wouldn't have moved us to a place where we can get killed everyday.

Omdim aleinu l'chaloteinu...we have terrible enemies. I remember sharing what my kids had to say with my cousin, an old, wizened moshavnik, a farmer. He listened to what I had to say about my kids...and then he heard me say in my thickly accented American Hebrew...*Omdim aleinu l'chaloteinu*. He immediately quoted the next line of the haggada which is "*V'hakadosh baruch hu, matzileinu miyadam. And the Holy and blessed one saved us from them.*

Apparently, he didn't agree with my interpretation of the national narrative. He was trying to reassure me. His narrative was that although they want to destroy us, although they are trying to drive us out from our land... they will fail, for God will save us. I was struck by the deep contrast between the headline and my very secular cousin's narrative.

For some reason, the bombing of the Park Hotel in Netanya was the turning point in the intifada. The result wasn't despair or fear...it was the opposite. The Israeli psyche doubled down...people said dayyenu with the despair. We will prevail. And we did, and will continue to.

(Pause) How we tell our stories, our history as a people is critical. But please note, so far I've been talking about the community, our nation, our people. The Israelite who brings his first fruits enters the land of his people. He is part of a communal narrative. How we understand reality and overcome challenges as a **people**.

This is important, but what about the individual? Where does he or she get a chance to talk about themselves, tell their personal tale? The pilgrim on his way to Jerusalem has a family, children, crops to tend...but this national ritual doesn't allow him to talk about himself.

In fact, quite surprisingly, our ancient sources, in this case the Mishnah (Middot 2:2), describe the journey of one person, who happens to be a mourner. When

he ascends the Southern steps of the Temple, instead of entering from the right as is the custom, he enters the Temple Mount from the left, as was the law at that time. Essentially, he is going against traffic. Someone stops and ask him why he is entering from the left, and not, like everyone else, from the right. What ensues is a private moment in which this person shares his grief with a complete stranger. He tells him that he is in mourning; he has suffered the loss of a close relative. He tells this stranger how much he misses his beloved spouse, parent or God forbid...child. The stranger listens and prays that “may the One who Dwells in this house, comfort you.”

Suddenly, the pilgrim becomes an individual. Not someone about to recite a national narrative...but an individual, like you and me, with needs, goals, a vision for life, pain, suffering, and successes.

- A number of years ago Steve Cohen and Arnold Eisen published a book about the sovereign self...a person who is not bound by any societal convention. These are “Jews who take their journeys very seriously and regard Judaism as an intrinsic part of their identity, but maintain the option to journey from Judaism, and to leave it behind”. (The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America, by Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen). They have the final word about what is good for themselves, not the community, not the rabbi.
- Before, the sovereign self, we had the model of what Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik thought was the highest rung of religious achievement, halakhik man. A person whose every moment, every step was guided by halacha.
- And today, we have another model for young women to aspire to...Wonder Woman. Not only does she have superpowers...but she is Jewish and lights shabbes candles!

Today, I want speak about the ‘**redemptive self**’ and ways in which we redeem ourselves from suffering and make good. I want to talk about ordinary people who overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles...people who are granted the greatest gift we could receive...a second chance. Let me explain.

Professor Dan McAdams, a Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University, is a personality psychologist who studies how people talk about themselves. It is called the narrative study of lives. In his book, “The Redemptive Self ”, after reviewing all kinds of adults and their traits, he zeroes in on generative adults.

“Generative adults...are those who score highly on tests measuring civic-mindedness, and who are likely to be energetic and involved. “They tend to see many of the events in their life in the opposite order. They were laid low by divorce, but now are dating a wonderful person; flunked out of college during their first year, but made honor roll next year, went on to get a masters/PhD.” They opened a business, it went bankrupt, tried another and soon it will be bought out for millions.

Generative adults, according to McAdams, and others (like Jonathan Adler), tend to tell stories of emancipation, atonement, epiphanies, and second chances. They tell stories of personal battles that ended in victory, or that will end in victory. And what is victory? Promoting the welfare of future generations....redeeming not just the present, but creating meaningful future.

Generativity, a term coined by the psychologist, Erik Erikson, is the adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the welfare and development of future generations.

We do this by:

1. Caring for our children
2. Teaching, mentoring
3. Demonstrating leadership
4. Highly generative adults work to promote the well-being of future generations. They have a positive sense of self as someone with gifts, someone who has overcome challenges and helps future generations.

People who are generative live meaningful lives. They don't dwell on their setbacks, they search for solutions and move forward.

- Take Bill Russell for example. He played on the Boston Celtics, helped them to win 11 championships...and is considered one of the greatest NBA players of all time. A number of years ago he was interviewed by rookie NBA players who asked him about being forced to endure taunts from racist hometown fans. He explained that he didn't relate to it. The most important thing is how you think about yourself and your responsibility to your family. He didn't ignore the racist remarks...he transcended them. Russell had an emotional gift that allowed him to overcome hardships. When he was passing on wisdom to a bunch of rookies, his redemptive self allowed him to empower the next generation with a positive way to look at life. The way he told his story focused on the overcoming, and not the obstacles.

We have an example like him in the Talmud. When Honi the circle maker meets a man planting carob trees that will only bear fruit in the next generation, he is astounded. Honi said to the man: "Is it clear to you that you will live another seventy years?" The man replied to Honi: "This man (that is, me) found a world containing full grown carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted those trees for me, knowing that they themselves would never live to see them fully grown, so I too plant them for my children." B. Taanit 23a

This anonymous man, planting carob trees whose fruit he'll never enjoy, never flinches from his goal. Honi challenges him and his answer is clear. This nameless planter is a generative adult. His story is very simple, yet laser focused, I plant for the future.

What can we do to become more like this planter, a man who plants things that only his children will be able to reap and enjoy?

We can start by asking ourselves hard questions:

Will our life, our actions help to perpetuate Judaism, or just ourselves? Do we focus on short or long term goals?

1. Do our children see us building synagogues, Hebrew schools? Do they see us building Sukkot? Do they see us helping others, or simply ourselves? Do we renovate just our homes and fix our personal things that are broken, or do we find one small corner of the world, and try to fix it for everyone?
2. Are we a generative synagogue? Are we planting for the future of the Natick/Boston Jewish community, or just for ourselves?
3. I respect the sovereign self, I want that inner self within you, your autonomous, existential being, to make the decision to give not only to yourself, but to others, and to future generations. To your spouses, your siblings, your parents, to the children of this synagogue.

In some ways, the redemptive, generative Jew is the Jew who looks at himself/herself and asks:

- Who is this person who has asked his spouse for forgiveness, and then changed his/her behavior?
- Who is this person who has learned from his parents' mistakes in order to become a better parent to his/her children?
- Who is this person who has received a terrible diagnosis and decided to live each moment with joy?
- Who is this person who never thought they could finish their degree, and ended up making an important contribution to the people of the world?
- Who is this person who was enslaved within the narrow straits of self – destructive behavior and then broke free of his/her bonds?

Who is this person? I hope and pray that it is you, that it is me.

The redemptive mode of living requires giving to others and a firm belief that we can change and make a difference. It would be naive to think that we can overcome all problems thrown our way in life. That is simply not possible. The stories of redemption that we tell about ourselves must reflect reality. Some lives are not redemptive, they are tragic. Some of us live neat lives; others are messy, complex and hard to make sense of. But the key is that through the telling of our lives, the sefer hachayim...the story/book of our life, we make sense of the chaos of the world we inhabit.

McAdams, our Professor friend that I mentioned earlier, writes that “people create stories to make sense of their lives. These evolving stories provide our lives with some semblance of meaning, unity and purpose.” This idea is inherent in the prayer U’NeTane Tokef. Towards the end of this prayer, we say: **בּוֹ אֲדָם כָּל יָד וְחוֹתָם**. “and the seal of every person’s hand is on it.” Not only do we decide how to live our lives, we decide how to tell it, and we write the script that will be played out on the stage of life. And you are the protagonist. Our **חוֹתָם** seal/signature is our story.

Facts are facts, and we can’t argue with them...we all have a reality of our lives that we live in and can’t escape. It is what it is. The point I’m trying to emphasize today is that how we **narrate** our lives determines how we live them. It gets

translated into how we **talk** about ourselves, our family, our people. How we present the facts may lead to a positive direction that we can follow.

After your lunch, or dinner, tell the story of your life to those around you. Narrate your script of how you have suffered and failed...we all have....and then tell those around the table how it was followed by coping, repentance and success. For a moment...stop being the protagonist...be the narrator. Listen to how you tell the story of your life. If you don't like what you hear...change the script.

Narrate the script of your life..and then go out and live generative lives of meaning. You will find that you can bring order out of chaos. You will find that as you give back to society, in gratitude for the blessings of your life..., your investment will pay off for future generations. That is your mission...that is your task.

Now go out there and Do Your Job. Let your redemptive self flower and grow. And if we all do our jobs...who knows, we might just redeem a portion of the world.

Gmar chatima tovah!! May you inscribe yourself well
in the Book of life.