

CELEBRATING PASSOVER AS A DEEPLY PERSONAL SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

by: Rabbi Stan Levy

“Each day a person should make their own journey out of their personal Mitzrayim” (The Maggid of Koznitz).

A number of years ago, Reb David Zeller (may our memories of him be a blessing) offered our B’nai Horin-Children of Freedom Community a Passover teaching based upon this Hasidic teaching.

He invited each person to say what state they lived in. He explained that he did not mean a geographic or political state, but rather the emotional state where we lived most of our life.

Some people said they lived mostly in a state of anxiety, worry, fear, insecurity, anguish, pain, sorrow, guilt, disappointment, loneliness or despair.

Some people said they lived mostly in a state of joy, pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, fulfillment, gratitude, bliss, blessing.

Reb David then invited us to view our state through the lens of the Biblical Passover story.

He called the “negative” states the state of Mitzrayim, the word that the Torah uses to describe Egypt but the word actually means “the place where you are trapped or stuck” He called the “positive” states the Promised Land.

There is some voice inside us which tells us we are destined to live in a state of Mitzrayim. That voice is called Pharaoh.

There is another voice inside us, a quiet voice which tells us we are promised we can live in a Promised Land. It is up to us to choose our destiny and decide which state we want to live in, and whether we are willing to journey out of our Mitzrayim, journey through the swamp called the Sea of Reeds, a tributary of the Red Sea, and through the wilderness in order to get to our Promised Land.

In our Hasidic tradition the phrase “children of freedom” means not just leaving Egypt 3300 years ago, it means exercising our free will now and deciding how and where we want to live. Which state, Mitzrayim or Promised Land.

A few years ago the renowned neurobiologist Antonio Damasio wrote a book entitled “Looking for Spinoza Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain”

In this most remarkable book professor Damasio speaks of “maps for the mental state we call joy and its variants such as pleasure, and maps for the mental state we call sorrow and its variants including anguish, fear, guilt, and despair and pain. The maps associated with joy signify states of equilibrium for the organism. Those states may actually be happening or as if they were happening. Joyous states signify optimal physiological coordination and smooth running of the operations of life.”

“They are not only conducive to survival but to survival with wellbeing. The states of joy also are defined by a greater ease in the capacity to act.”

“Spinoza’s perception and understanding of God is “God within, God is therapeutic in the sense that it restores the homeodynamic balance lost as a result of anguish.”

‘For many of us, much of the time, our awareness of our predicament is the cause of profound sorrow. Regardless of how effectively we try to manage the impasse of our lives and pull out of our darkness, there is a tragic dimension to our situation and it is entirely human. The situation is the result of having feelings and of having consciousness and memory. When we face each new moment of life as conscious being, we bring to bear on that moment the circumstances surrounding our past joys and sorrows, along with the imaginary circumstances of our anticipated future, those circumstances that are presumed to bring on more joys or more sorrows.’”

“Were it not for this high level of human consciousness there would be not remarkable anguish to speak of, now or at the dawn of humanity.”

(In the story of Adam and Eve, when they leave the garden of paradise, a Hasidic Rabbi’s translation of the Torah calls the place where they live the rest of their lives a state of “anguish.”)

If we have the gift of consciousness but were deprived of memory, there would be no anguish. What we do know, in the present, but are unable to place in the context of our personal history, could only hurt us in the present. It is the two gifts combined, consciousness and memory, along with their abundance, that result in the human drama and confer upon that drama a tragic status, then and now. Fortunately, the same two gifts also are at the source of unbounded enjoyment, sheer human glory. Leading a life examined also brings a privilege and not just a curse. From this perspective, any project for human salvation—any project capable of turning a life examined into a life contented—must include ways to resist the anguish conjured up by suffering and death, cancel it and substitute joy instead.”

“The neurobiology of emotion and feeling tells us in suggestive terms that joy and its variants are preferable to sorrow and related affects, and more conducive to health, and other creative flourishing of our beings. We should seek joy, by reasoned decree, regardless of how foolish and unrealistic the quest may look.”

“Many human beings require something that involves some sort of clarity about the meaning of one’s life, a yearning to know where we come from and where we are going. What purpose greater than our immediate existence could life possibly have?”

“Along with the yearning there comes a response, in sharp focus or soft, and some purpose is either gleaned or desired. That yearning is a deep trait of the human mind.”

“Spinoza asks the individual to attempt a break between stimuli that trigger negative emotions, and substitute stimuli that trigger positive and nourishing emotions.”

“Spinoza asks the individual to reflect on life, guided by knowledge and reason, in the perspective of eternity-of God or Nature-rather than in the perspective of the individual’s immortality.”

“It is up to the individual to live in such a manner that the perfection of joy can be achieved frequently and thus render life worth living.”

“Because the process is grounded in nature, Spinoza’s solution is immediately compatible with the view of the universe that science has been constructing for four hundred years.”

“What is a life of the spirit?”

“Spiritual experiences, religious or otherwise are mental processes.”

“The spiritual is an intense experience of harmony, to the sense that the organism is functioning with greatest possible perfection, with the desire to act towards others with kindness and generosity..”

“To have a spiritual experience is to hold sustained feelings of a particular kind dominated by some variant of joy, however serene.”

“Spiritual experiences such as sheer beauty, peace and loving affections can reverberate and become self sustaining for periods of time, for a life that is well-balanced, well-tempered and well-intended.”

“The spiritual is a partial revelation of the ongoing impulse behind life in some state of perfection.”

“Spiritual experiences are humanly nourishing.”

“Joy and its variants lead to greater functioning perfection.”

“Joy should be actively sought because it contributes to flourishing. Sorrow and related affects should be avoided because they are unhealthy.”

“We have the power to evoke spiritual experiences. Prayer and ritual in the context of a

religious narrative are meant to produce spiritual experiences, but there are other sources. The contemplation of nature, reflection of scientific discovery and the experience of great art, can be effective competent stimuli behind the spiritual.

“This is an opportunity to generate positive emotions where negative emotions would otherwise arise.

“The spiritual is a particular state of the human organism, a delicate combination of certain body configurations and certain mental configurations. The spiritual experience is connected to the neurobiology of feelings.

“Accounting for the physiological process behind the spiritual does not explain the mystery of the life process to which that particular feeling is connected. It reveals the connection to the mystery but not the mystery itself.

“We should never feel “alone” as long as our concern is the well being of others.

“Knowing about emotion, feeling and their workings does matter to how we live.

“Much as it may sound naive and utopian, especially after reading the morning newspaper or watching the evening news, there simply is no alternative to believing we can make a difference.”

“The new (neurobiological scientific) knowledge may change the human playing field and that is why, in the middle of much sorrow and some joy, we can have hope.”

“If we do not exist under oppression or in famine, and yet cannot convince ourselves how lucky we are to be alive, perhaps we are not trying hard enough.”

May this Passover 5773, 2013 - the 45th anniversary of the founding of B'nai Horin-Children of Freedom - be a time when all of us move out of our states of sorrow and into our states of joy. That is our Promised Land, that is our divine destiny, that is our birthright, that is our heritage, that is our ancestors' legacy to us. We have the right, and indeed the obligation, to fulfill our lives in the Promised Land of joy. Let's make the journey, and in the near future become B'nai Horin-Children of Freedom.

Rabbi Stan and Rabbi Laura