A Powerful Lesson From the Maror

Rabban Gamliel indicates that “Maror” is one of the three central concepts we should pass on to our children in the Seder, along with Matsa and the Pesach sacrifice. The Maror, the bitter vegetables we eat in the Seder, reminds us of how the Egyptians demonized us, enslaved us, and made us suffer. But why is it so important to transmit this “painful” lesson to the next generation on the night of the Seder? Should we not focus exclusively on “celebrating” our freedom? There are several reasons why we should remember tonight the meaning of the Maror.

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First, when debating the order in which the story of the exodus should be told, our Sages understood that we have to mention the bad things that happened to us and that these bad memories should be mentioned first. Why? Because in this way, we will better appreciate the good things that happened to us. The better we realize the horrors of slavery, the better we will appreciate the gift of freedom.

Second, hatred towards the Jewish people symbolized in the Maror, is not something of the past. Somehow our children must know that our destiny as a chosen people involves being exposed to demonization and persecution. It is an integral part of the package of belonging to the People of God.

And thirdly, I think there is an additional, very important reason to preserve the memory of our suffering. The Tora teaches us to positively channel the memories of the pain we suffered in Egypt. How? By doing everything possible to ensure other people do not suffer. To me, this idea and its timing represent a revolution in human thinking. Here’s why.

In the past, a particular pattern always repeated itself. Civilizations that were oppressed and enslaved fought for their freedom, and then, upon triumph, their first “need” was revenge: to make their persecutors endure what they had suffered. However, the story did not end there. Once the formerly oppressed people became stronger and more powerful, they dedicated themselves to capturing other peoples, enslaving them, and making them suffer as they had. This sadistic behavior is a well-known psychological phenomenon. Statistics show a very high rate of “abusive” people (in every sense) who have been abused in the past.

The Tora introduces a moral revolution—a 180-degree shift in perspective.

What is the Mitzva mentioned in the Tora more than any other commandment? “And you shall love [= care about, take care of] the stranger [= the poor, the needy, the people most exposed to abuse], because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” In a counter-intuitive, almost supernatural way, the Tora teaches us to transform the memory of our suffering into virtue. Instead of nurturing or justifying a subconscious thirst for revenge and abuse, we, the people of God, should become extra kind to those in need. The Tora tells us: You know what suffering means; therefore, do not let other people suffer. Why? Because you are better qualified than those who did not suffer to understand what humiliation, poverty, and oppression mean.

We, Jews, teach our children from a young age to preserve the memory of our affliction and process it to do whatever we can to prevent others from suffering.

I know many very good and generous people. But, honestly, the most generous, kind, compassionate, and angelic people I have met are Holocaust survivors. Among them, for example, Rabbanit Esther Jungreis z”l, who dedicated her life to inspiring others to do kindness. Or Yehuda Lindenblatt, from Manhattan Beach, a first responder in Hatzalah, a man dedicated to saving lives. Over the years, I have met many Holocaust survivors and have been shocked by their kindness and altruism. These elders suffered the inconceivable. Their families were destroyed. Following the common pattern of “abused” becoming “abusers”, Shoah survivors should have become the most abusive people on the planet. But in fact, quite the opposite is true! And I think all the credit goes to our Tora. This incredible idea that the Tora instilled in our minds from an early age: TAKE CARE OF THOSE WHO SUFFER, BECAUSE YOU PERSONALLY KNOW WHAT SUFFERING MEANS. This idea, counter-intuitive in terms of human psychology, is nothing but Divine—one that, Seder after Seder, became part of our character and DNA.

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Rambam (Maimonides), Laws of Slaves, Chapter 1, Law 6

It is forbidden to work a Hebrew slave with rigor. What is considered rigorous work? Work that has no set limit and work that is not necessary but is intended only to keep the slave busy so that he is not idle. From this, the Sages said that one should not say to the slave, “Tie up the vines until I come back,” for he has not given him a limit. Instead, he should say, “Tie up the vines until this specific time” or “Until this specific place.”

Similarly, he should not say to him, “Dig in this place,” when it is not needed. Even heating a cup of hot water or cooling it down when it is not needed is forbidden, and it is a violation of a negative commandment, as it says, “You shall not work him with rigor.” This means that he only does a defined task that is necessary for him. Also, for a non-Jew who bought a Hebrew slave, Israelites are commanded to prevent it if he works him with rigor. If they allow it, they transgress a negative commandment, as it says, “He shall not work with rigor in your sight.”

NEVER SPEAK IN ANGER

by Rabbanit Esther Jungreis z”l


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