

Parasha & Herzl: Passover as Jewish particularity

The challenge of the Exodus from Egypt was not merely a physical separation; it was the first step in a long journey of peoplehood, culminating in the fulfilment of Herzl's vision

By GOL KALEV

An astonishing 93% of Israeli Jews are estimated to observe the Passover Seder. This generation of Jews has a unique advantage that previous generations did not – the ability to understand the DNA of an exodus. The 20th century's mass exodus of the Jews to Israel from Europe and from other countries in the Middle East, makes Passover more relatable.

Passover, however, does not mark only the Exodus from slavery to freedom, it also marks the beginning of the first phase of Judaism – Biblical Judaism (Judaism 1.0). Within a year of leaving Egypt, the Tabernacle was inaugurated, later to become the Temple. Whether a Jew actually came to worship or not, the Temple served as Judaism's point of orientation. Biblical Judaism – anchored in the Temple, the worship of sacrifices in it, the centrality of Jerusalem and the physical presence in Judea – was Judaism's organizing principle.

When the Romans destroyed the Temple and exiled the Jews, Judaism lost its organizing principle. This would normally lead to extinction as a distinct group – as was the fate of other nations of that time that lost their anchor. But instead of evaporation, the Jewish nation went through a historical transformation. It acquired a new organizing principle: Rabbinical Judaism (Judaism 2.0). This was anchored in the canonization of the Oral Torah, Halacha (Jewish law), rituals, learning and the yearning to return home.

In the last decade of the 19th century, a man heeded the call to turn this yearning into reality. Theodor Herzl planted the seeds for the third era of Judaism, in whose early stages we are living. Once again, the organizing principle that held the Jewish nation together for 2,000 years – the religious aspect of Judaism (Rabbinical Judaism) – is eroding. The 20th century saw mass secularization and the outer walls that kept Jews insular have continuously crumbled. Yet, at the same time, the Jewish state has been re-established, and a new organizing principle of Judaism emerged: Zionism.

HERZL CREATED a new anchor for Judaism, having concluded that the primary malaise of 2,000 years of exile was not the persecution, but rather the lack of unified Jewish political leadership.

"This is why we have inwardly gone to rack and ruin," he said.

As he was setting the conditions for a contemporary exodus, Herzl was fully aware of the complexity



▲ Representation of Joshua and Caleb carrying a grapevine, used as the cover for Herzl's *Altneuland*.
[Maurycy Lillien/Wikimedia Commons]

of immigration – the mental, emotional and transformational aspects.

"My moving from Vienna to Paris and back was historically necessary," he wrote, "so that I might learn what emigration is."

And with that, Herzl was set to lead the Children of Israel into the Promised Land.

Herzl had a daring suggestion expressed in his utopian novel *AltNeuLand*, which described life in the Jewish state once established. The Passover Seder would have a new addition: "First we shall finish our Seder after the manner of our forefathers, and then we shall let the new era tell you how it was born. Once more there was Egypt, and again a happy Exodus."

The Seder is a powerful tool to convey a core principle of Judaism: Do not go back to Egypt – either physically or mentally. Herzl knew that once the Jewish State was established, there would be those who would long for the "fleshpot of Europe" – those "dancers around the golden calf," as he called



them. Hence, the Seder can be a useful tool not only to defend from the threat to Judaism 1.0 – returning to Egypt – but also from the threat to Judaism 3.0: returning to Europe!

Moses was an Egyptophile, just as Herzl was a Europhile. The Exodus from Egypt was not against Egypt per se. Egypt is certainly not Amalek. King Solomon even married the Egyptian king's daughter and relationships with Egypt were good. The Exodus was about Jewish particularity. Nothing could be more nullifying to Moses's Judaism than the re-Egyptianizing of the Jews.

SIMILARLY TODAY, Israel and Europe are close allies and there is a solid bond of deep personal friendships. But nothing could negate Herzl's Zionism more than the re-Europeanization of the Jews.

"The proximity to Europe is bad," Herzl wrote, "because in the first 25 years of our existence we need, for our development, some rest from Europe, its wars and social complications."

Regrettably, Europe never gave the Jews any rest; not when they were free at home, nor when they were enslaved in Europe. The last 300 years of the first phase of Judaism, were marked by Greek and



▲ Exodus from Egypt. [Edward Poynter/Wikimedia Commons]

Roman attempts to Europeanize – or Hellenize – the Jews. The Jews’ refusal led to destruction and to the second phase of Judaism: the exile.

Today, in the third phase of Judaism, once again there are attempts to Europeanize the Jews (right along with their neighbors, just like last time). This includes forcing European frameworks and terms to artificially define the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. This is expressed for example in aggressive European attempts to sabotage Palestinian employment and mentorship in Jewish-owned businesses in the West Bank. But it also has deeper and more dangerous aspects. For some, Zionism – the national expression of Judaism – is antithetical to the European ethos of post-nationalism and universalism.

Like the American Revolution before it, the Zionist revolution was a conceptual exodus from Europe and negation of prevailing European dogmas. There are those in Europe, therefore, who naturally seek to erode Zionism.

And here lies an existential threat to Judaism. Some Jews today, just like during Greek and Roman times, might argue that we should succumb to

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such European ethos, end the Zionist project, accept European frameworks and mentally go back to Europe!

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Just like there was an internal threat of negating the Moses-led Exodus during the decades that followed, there is also an internal threat today of negating the Herzl-led exodus (“Post-Zionism”). Both exoduses were not just about immigration, but about a Jewish transformation, and both were a manifesta-

tion of Jewish particularity.

And so, the 93% of Israeli Jews who observe the Seder might want to consider adapting Herzl’s Seder suggestion in one form or another: To also celebrate our contemporary happy exodus as well as the new Jewish era that was born and is still in its infancy. ♦

The writer is chairman of the AIFL Think Tank and author of upcoming book *Judaism 3.0*. Visit: JewishTransformation.com. For comments: comments@JewishTransformation.com. For more of the writer’s Parasha & Herzl articles visit: ParashaandHerzl.com, for more of his analysis articles on Europe: EuropeandJerusalem.com.