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The REAL reason Passover is important

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Preparing for Passover, Pesach, during which we mark the exodus from Egypt, is like any other observance on the Jewish calendar. It is labor-intensive, and purposely so, and in modern times it is also very expensive. Even before the Four Questions, then, we need to ask: “Why is it that the exodus is so important that we must run through hoops to prepare for it and to observe it?”

We do not celebrate Passover because God took us out of Egypt; we celebrate it because of why God did so. Everything we are supposed to be, everything we as God’s “kingdom of priests and holy nation” (see Exodus 19:6) are supposed to do in this world, is built around the exodus. This is made evident in so many places in the Torah, but perhaps nowhere in this more clear or direct than in Leviticus 19—the chapter that contains “most of the Torah’s essential components,” in the words of the sage Rabbi Chiyah. (See Leviticus Rabbah 24:5.).

That chapter opens with the admonition that we are to “be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy,” and ends with these words: “I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall observe all My laws and all My rules to do them: I am the Lord.” (See Leviticus 19:36-37.)

In between, Leviticus 19 sets out a series of laws that we must observe because God “brought [us] out of the land of Egypt.”

There is no distinction in this chapter between the sacred and the mundane, the “religious” and the “secular.” They are all the same. They are all equally required for us to achieve holiness in our lives. Reverence for parents in Leviticus 19 is followed by Shabbat observance (more on this below). This is followed by a ban on idol worship, which is followed by rules about a voluntary sacrifice.

These are followed by laws about what we owe to the poor and the stranger; and those laws are followed first by a rule against abusing God’s Name (more on this below, as well), and then by a prohibition against fraud.

We are told “to love your neighbor as yourself,” as Leviticus 19:18 is popularly translated, and to “love the stranger as if he [or she] was yourself” (verse 34). It always amazes me, by the way, how people quote “love your neighbor,” but forget the “love the stranger” part, especially considering that the Torah reiterates that command in various ways over 50 times.

This commandment also includes people who are fleeing from oppression and persecution, as were the Israelites fleeing from Egypt. This aspect is given added emphasis in Deuteronomy 23:16-17, which deals with the runaway slave. Someone fleeing from oppression and persecution is a slave in every sense of the word: “You shall not return to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master. He [or she] shall live with you in any place he [or she] may choose among the settlements in your midst...; you must not ill-treat him.”

To return to Leviticus 19, in practical terms, then, because “I, the Lord, am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” mistreating counter clerks, for example, is as much a violation of Torah law as biting into a pepperoni pizza.

Say the clerk gives us too much change. Verses 11 and 13 command us not to steal; or deal deceitfully with anyone, or defraud anyone. If we keep that money, not only are we stealing from the store, but we also are stealing from the clerk, who is responsible for shortages in the register. So verse 13 adds this—”The laborer’s wages shall not remain with you until morning.” This law also requires that we must be prompt in paying the people who do work for us. After all, they are working to put food on their tables, a roof over their heads, and clothes on their backs.

Verse 14, meanwhile, warns us against “insulting the deaf.” Most insults are delivered verbally. It follows that if we may not insult someone who cannot hear the insult, we may not insult someone who can hear it. Put another way, we may not speak rudely to the counter clerk. It follows, as well, that we may not embarrass anyone, either—to his or her face or behind his or her back.

It follows, too, that there is a lot in Chapter 19 about a counter clerk specifically and behavior in general. For we who are a kingdom of priests and holy nation, acting immorally and unethically also means violating what it means to be Jewish.

As we see further on in Leviticus 23:31-33, it also means that when we misbehave, when we act unethically and immorally—and especially when we do so in public—we defame God. That is because others may think “the God of the Jews” sanctions such behavior. Says the Torah. “You shall faithfully observe My commandments: I am the Lord. You shall not profane My holy name…, I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God….”

Our obligations to the poor and neglected is repeated often in the Torah, outside of Leviticus 19. For example, if “your kinsman,” being in straits,” needs financial help, “do not exact from him advance or accrued interest….Do not lend him your money at advance interest, or give him your food at accrued interest.” We may not do that because “I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt….” (See Leviticus 25:35-38.)

In Deuteronomy, the Exodus is specifically given as the basis for these laws:

* to respect everyone’s right to privacy (based on Deuteronomy 24:10);
* to not engage in unfair business practices (based on Deuteronomy 19:14);
* to not wantonly destroy anything that can be of use to anyone or anything—animal, vegetable, or mineral (based on Deuteronomy 20:19-20);
* to accept that all creatures have feelings, meaning we may not do anything to hurt those feelings (based on Deuteronomy 22:6-7).

It follows from this last law, that we must not mistreat our animals in any way. We may not even sit down to our own meal without first seeing to it that our animals are fed. (See the Babylonian Talmud tractate B’rachot 40a.)

Even if a specific Torah law does not specifically reference the Exodus, it nevertheless is based on it, as Leviticus 19:36-37 makes clear, and as we also see elsewhere. For example, we are commanded to put fringes (tzitzit) on our square-cornered garments—not because God wants us to walk around wearing strings at the hems of our clothing, but because we are to “look at [the tzitzit] and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them…[because] I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” (See Numbers 15: 39-41).

Both in the so-called Ten Commandments (which begin with “I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt”) and in Leviticus 19, we are warned against taking God’s Name in vain. In ancient times, invoking the name of a god was a form of “The Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.” What the Torah really means by this commandment is, “Do not use God’s Name to trick someone into believing a lie, to defraud someone.”

As for Shabbat, this commandment told us—and everyone else—that one day out of every seven, we must acknowledge that no one has any real control over anyone or anything else. Rich or poor, master or slave, man or woman, parent or child, human or animal—everyone has an equal right to the same day of rest each week, and no one has the right to take that away from them. People who own slaves have absolute control over those slaves. Slavery cannot exist without that absolute control. Deny the slave owner control over his slaves for one-seventh of the time, and you deny that such control exists at all.

What applied to slaves then applies to employees today. Nothing speaks louder about equality and social justice than the playing-field-leveling Shabbat commandment.

These are the reasons why we go through the rigorous preparations in the weeks before Passover, why we sit down to the seder with its strange rituals, and why we refrain from eating anything leavened for eight days (seven in Israel). Sadly, the traditional Haggadah we use at the seder does not focus on any of this, but we must or else there is no point to observing Passover. We need to remind ourselves that we are to “be holy,” because “the Lord, [our] God…brought [us] out of the land of Egypt…[to] observe all [His] laws and all [His] rules to do them.”

A chag haPesach kasher v’sameach to all.