

THE FESTIVAL OF PESACH

A Pledge of Allegiance

There's something about the Passover Seder which touches the hearts of all Jews, no matter their level of observance. Statistics show that only 55% of American Jews attend a synagogue on Yom Kippur, yet over 70% celebrate the Passover Seder. How can this be explained? Why would Jews who are totally removed from traditional Jewish observance gather faithfully every year to commemorate the release of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage some three thousand years ago?

Perhaps we can find a clue to this puzzle in the very first of the Ten Commandments. "I am Hashem your Lord, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt," Hashem declared from the smoldering peak of Mount Sinai as He called upon the Jewish to have faith in Him. Clearly, the awesome divinity revealed during the Exodus from Egypt was to inspire faith in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people. But the commentators are perplexed. Surely, the creation of heaven and earth was a far more awesome display of divinity than the Exodus. Why then didn't Hashem expect the Jewish people to have faith in Him because of creation?

The commentators offer a number of solutions. Some suggest that although the creation of the world was certainly the most awesome manifestation of the divine power it there were no mortal eyewitnesses to the occasion. Someday, heretics and apostates might choose to deny that it ever happened, and therefore, the creation is not sufficient grounds for perfect faith in Hashem. The Exodus, however, was a great historical event witnessed by millions of people, an event that could not be denied in its own time nor for many years after. The Exodus, therefore, became rooted in the national memory as an incontrovertible fact, and as such, it forms a solid basis for faith in Hashem.

Other commentators take a different approach. Faith, they explain, is more than an intellectual acknowledgment of the power of the Almighty and an abiding belief in His mastery of the world. Faith is a very personal feeling, a spiritual and emotional experience that is the foundation of our personal relationship with our Creator. Faith is the understanding that Hashem holds the entire world in His loving embrace, that He is the Source of absolute benevolence, radiating goodness and kindness upon us regardless of whether or not we have earned it. Once we root these beliefs deep in our hearts, we will be

carried on the wings of our faith to the most transcendent levels of connection to Him.

This then is why the Torah connects the commandment of faith to the memory of the Exodus. The Jewish people in Egypt had slipped into the basest idolatry and corruption, but Hashem's divine gaze penetrated to the core of goodness implanted in them by their holy forefathers. And He lovingly gathered them in and brought them forth from bondage. This is the memory that forms the foundation of faith in Jewish hearts, filling us with assurance that our loving Father in Heaven will never forget or abandon us.

Over the years and the centuries, this feeling has become deeply ingrained in the national Jewish consciousness, and for all generations, the story of the Exodus has become a source of solace and encouragement for the Jewish people. And thus, the Passover Seder is celebrated by nearly all Jews, regardless of their level of observance.

A country was invaded by an aggressor, who was routing the defenders on all fronts. The situation was exceedingly desperate, and the people looked to their king to save them from being conquered. The king rallied his demoralized troops and counterattacked against the enemy. With brilliant strategies and extraordinary courage, he dashed from one battlefield to the other, gallantly leading the troops into battle and driving the enemy away from his beleaguered people. After months of intense fighting, the enemy was finally driven out, and the borders were once again secure.

The people greeted the returning soldiers greeted enthusiastically. They eagerly asked for details of the campaign, especially for stories about the gallantry of their king.

"Do you know what impressed me most about our king?" one soldier said. "We came into a city that had been besieged for a long time. The devastation was terrible. The wounded and starving lay in the street among the dead. The king wept at this sight, and he lifted one of the wounded in his own arms and carried him to the hospital. This is the king to whom I pledge my allegiance forever!"

In our own lives, as we celebrate the Passover Seder and lift our glasses of wine to commemorate our liberation from bondage, let us remember that in all times and all places our loving Father in Heaven is watching over us. No matter how dark the future may seem, we are never forgotten. Let us only resolve to face all our trials and tribulations with an abiding faith in divine providence, and we will discover profound harmony and tranquility in every moment of our existence.