

As If We Were There

**Readings for
a Transformative
Passover Experience**

RABBI GIDON ROTHSTEIN



KODESH PRESS

Rosh Chodesh Nisan

Introduction: The Challenge and the Way to Meet It

Just about at the end of our telling the story on Seder night, we find out that there has been an agenda to the evening we might have missed up until that point. After all the telling we've done, we quote Mishnah *Pesachim* 10:5, that in every generation we are to see ourselves as if we left Egypt. As Deut. 6:21-25 reports the story, we are to tell our children when they ask about the commandments of Seder night, verse 23 has us saying "and us He took out of there," which Rava in *Pesachim* 116b sees as an obligation.

It's not enough to retell the events, to bring our children into the circle of those who know a long-ago story; when each of us says to our children (as Exod.13:14 commands us) that it was for this service that God took *me* out of Egypt, we are supposed to mean that as close to literally as we can get.

The goal is to *relive* the events, to walk away from our Seder having rejuvenated our sense of the Exodus as a personal experience, not a piece of history. A completely successful Seder night would bring its participants to the *Hallel*, the Psalms of praise recited both before and after

the meal, and to the meal itself, as jubilant as those who physically experienced the Exodus itself.

That's a tall order, and I cannot say I know how to achieve it. I do believe that this book will help us get closer to that goal, in two parts. The first part comes in 21 pieces, one for each day from the first of Nisan through the end of Pesach. I believe that if you join me in reading those, one entry a day, you will feel that we have made good progress on this one narrow goal: having our Seder turn the past into the present, enabling us to say, meaning it almost literally, "and us He took from there."

The second part of this book comes in sixteen pieces; it can be read in conjunction with this part, also suitable for one-a-day reading from the beginning of Nisan through the first days of the holiday, or before. It is a memoir of my father's Seder, which I hope offers a model to build our own Sedarim. But more on that when we get to it.

Putting Ourselves Back in Egypt

I start with the recognition that for all that we talk as if we tell the story of leaving Egypt Seder night, we don't do that much of it. We offer several concise versions, the longest of which is four verses, whose key terms we then explain at length.

We could have spent the night on the first chapters of the book of Exodus, guided by the voluminous commentarial literature, which turns the Exodus from a cardboard cartoon into a textured drama, populated by relatable human beings. Except that that's a lot to read, let alone discuss or analyze.

It's also my personal experience that the flow of the Seder doesn't really allow for study of lengthy comments printed underneath the text of the Haggadah.

It's not clear we could do it even if we tried—those are rich chapters, and we have perhaps two hours of storytelling time at our Seder. It's one reason that preparation will help, a bit each day of this month of Nisan, until we reach the Seder.

Asking you to join me in a chapter by chapter review of the book of Exodus might not be so tempting, however—it's long, and it feels sort of familiar, since many of us have learned it before, or have heard it read. We want an approach that stimulates openness, so we can renew and relive the Exodus.

My attempt here is to adapt a technique some museums use to bring their stories alive. By focusing on the characters in the story, asking how they did, how we might have hoped to do better, we can begin to see ourselves in the story, to picture ourselves in Egypt. And then see ourselves leaving.

The key is realizing that some participants in the events leading up to the Exodus did better, some worse. The first step to that is brushing aside the pretense that Hashem controlled the events fully, with humans playing preordained and unchangeable roles. Traditional commentators—here, I use some of my personal favorites: R. Baruch haLevi Epstein's selections of Rabbinic literature in his *Torah Temimah*, Rashi, Ramban, R. Obadiah Sforno of sixteenth-century Italy, and *Kli Yakar* (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz of the late 16th century/early 17th century Poland)—often frame the story so as to emphasize where humans did well or could have done better.

Join me, then, in two weeks of preparation for the Seder. Not the technicalities, important as those are, or even of reading the Haggadah, important as that is. Join me instead in a gradual immersion back in that time, so we can hit the end of the storytelling part of Seder night fully sincere in saying those crucial words, “and us He took from there.”

**Pesach All Year: *Mitzvot* that
Keep Us in Mind of the Exodus**

Once we reach the Seder, our work will not yet be done. Too often, we allow our retelling, or re-experiencing, to stop there. We go back to the rest of the year, limiting our encounters with the Exodus to the twice-daily mentions in the Shema, as well as Shabbat and the major holidays. It might seem that a Jew’s regular life need not be continually engaged with the memory of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt. Perhaps it is enough to bring it up occasionally, but not mention it with the frequency that we do.

Many Biblical commandments show that that’s untrue, that the Exodus and Egypt are supposed to be part of the everyday fabric of ordinary Jewish lives. Once our daily readings have taken us through the Exodus story, we’ll shift our attention to those commandments. Daily readings through the end of the holiday will review those commandments the Torah explicitly linked to our memory of the Exodus, enhancing our awareness of just how frequently Jews are supposed to relate their actions to their historical memory.

I focus on Biblical commandments because people too often dismiss Rabbinic rules as an external imposition of

those rabbis' personal values on the Torah's "original" system. I reject that characterization, intellectually and viscerally, but by using Biblical ones, I can avoid the issue—the *mitzvot* we will study are all *Torah law*, part of the Torah's "original" intent for how Jews should live.

We are the people who left Egypt, a truth meant to inform many moments of each day. The memory of leaving Egypt is one of the aids the Torah gave us to bring that to fruition. Join me for the next three weeks, and I hope and believe we will find ourselves farther down the road to making that a reality.

We'll start tomorrow, asking ourselves whether we'd have understood what was happening as it unfolded.