

BO (EXODUS 10:1-13:16)

Lox, Cream Cheese, and ... UNLEAVENED BAGELS??!!!

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

You don't have to be religious to feel Jewish.

Manhattan's Lower East Side still has a bit of a Jewish flavor. (At least those sections that have not become part of Chinatown!) There are still a number of synagogues, yeshivas, and bakeries, and restaurants where you can get yourself a delicious pastrami on rye. There are still a few businesses where the African-American employees speak Yiddish better than I do. Go down to the Lower East Side any Sunday and you will see Jewish tourists coming back for a refresher course in the Jewish Culture they remember from their grandparents' house.

Jewish Culture is a powerful force. In fact, it is only due to Jewish Culture that we managed to survive Egypt. Our Sages tell us that there are fifty levels of impurity. (Don't ask me to explain what that means; I don't know!) During our stay in Egypt, our People sunk to Level #49. We were, in many ways, no different than our Egyptian neighbors. However, we didn't assimilate totally. The reason that G-d found us worthy of being taken out of Egypt is that we held onto three expressions of Jewish identity. In the 190 years that our People spent in Egypt, we maintained our Hebrew language, Hebrew names, and our distinctly Hebrew mode of dress. We were not ashamed to be instantly recognized as Hebrews. We looked and spoke the part. In those three ways, we showed ourselves to be different. And that difference made all the difference in the world.

It was a tough night for the Egyptians. Moses predicted a night of death for the Egyptian Firstborn, and G-d fulfilled that prophecy. Pharaoh had defied G-d one time too many. This plague was the most devastating of all. "... *there was no house where there was not a corpse.*" (Exodus, 12:30)

Pharaoh no longer refused to let the Israelites leave. Not only did he permit them to leave, he **INSISTED** that they leave. Immediately!

We had to leave so quickly that there was no time to prepare provisions: "*They baked the dough ...into cakes of Matzah because they were driven out of Egypt for they could not delay...*" (Verse 39)

On a simple level, it seems that reason that they couldn't delay was due to Egyptian pressure to leave. However, many commentaries explain that there was another reason. We had already learned too much corruption from the Egyptians. We were at the forty-ninth level of impurity. Had we sunk any further, into Level #50, it would have been too late. We would have been beyond hope. We would have been unredeemable.

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin points out that we have been in exile for close to two thousand years. (Rabbi Sorotzkin wrote this before the establishment of the State of Israel. However, with our Holy Temple lying in ruins, and our enemies exploiting every opportunity to try to destroy us, it is safe to describe ourselves as still being in exile.) How is it that our ancestors would not have been able to withstand a moment more than 190 years of exile, while we continue to exist into our third millennium?

Rabbi Sorotzkin points out that there is a very big difference between our generation and that generation. The generation of the Exodus consisted of people who knew who they were. They were proud of their heritage. They were descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were Hebrews. They dressed like Hebrews and spoke like Hebrews. But these superficial expressions of identity were not strong enough to help them withstand the onslaught of Egyptian influences. They were being dragged down. They needed to be pulled out.

Our generation has something that they didn't have. We have Torah! We have a guidebook that tells us how to live our lives. We have laws that guide and direct literally every moment of our existence. As difficult as our exile has been, we have had the ability to strengthen our commitment to G-d through Torah study and Mitzvah observance. It has been said that more than the fact that Israel has kept the Sabbath is the fact that the Sabbath has kept Israel.

Secular Zionism is a failed experiment. Early Zionist leaders felt that a Jewish homeland, in and of itself, would be the salvation of the Jewish Nation and the end of all its problems. Nationalism, they said, is much more important than Torah. Theodore Herzl's own children were not Jewish, and Golda Meier declined the White House's offer of Kosher food.

Queens and Brooklyn are filled with non-observant Israelis who prefer the American Dream over the Zionist one. Many Israeli youth today, to a great extent, do not happily identify as Jews. Go to every dysfunctional cult and enclave in the world and you will find disillusioned Israelis searching for meaning. (Ironically, a few fortunate ones have found their way back into Judaism via the unlikely address of the Dalai Lama!) The only groups that are making Aliyah in any significant numbers are religious Jews. So much for Zionism without Torah.

Previous generations thought that Judaism would flourish through Yiddish culture. The Yiddish theater and Yiddish literature had little respect for Torah values. Yiddish culture today, for all intents and purposes, is dead. A few universities have vast libraries of inherited Yiddish books that nobody wants. Ironically, Yiddish thrives today only within the Chassidic and Yeshiva world. So much for Yiddish culture without Torah!

“Jewish foods” engender a feeling of familiarity. They remind us of simpler days and the warmth of home. The hot vapors of chicken soup enter our nostrils and fill our minds with memories of Bubbie and Zaidie. Bagels and lox remind us of Cousin Irving’s Bris and of a time and place that live on in “Nostalgia Land.”

The problem is that these outer trappings of Jewish identity are superficial. Eating lasagna doesn’t make you Italian, and speaking Hebrew or Yiddish doesn’t mean you’re a committed Jew.

The fact that Egyptian Jews used Hebrew names is admirable. It is significantly better than nothing. But there are Jews-for-Jesus with names like “Moishe” who are fluent in Hebrew. A “Kosher Style” restaurant is no more Kosher than “Red Lobster.”

It is good to wear a Star of David and say words like “Kvetch” and “Shlepper.” Kishke and chopped liver taste and feel Jewish. But the aftertaste doesn’t last very long.

We have survived thousands of years of persecutions because we have a direct line from Mount Sinai. And that’s a lot more nourishing than a hot pastrami sandwich.

Have a great Shabbos.

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