

Parshas Bo 5762

In 1776, when the thirteen colonies stood poised to declare their independence from England, they thought it necessary to issue a declaration, which would lay out before the world the causes of the separation, and define the principles that would define the new state and guide it in the future. They spoke, in that declaration of independence, about equality; about the self-evident truth that all men are created equal. They spoke about the dignity of the individual, who is entitled, by right of having been born into the shared patrimony of humanity, to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness. They spoke eloquently and passionately, and their words still define the essential nature of America today.

Today we read about another declaration of independence, declaimed by Moshe Rabbeinu, as the twelve tribes of Israel declared their independence from Egypt. It is far older than the American Declaration of Independence; this Pesach it will 3,314 years old. And yet it continues to define the essence of the Jewish people, to this very day.

What did Moshe speak about on that momentous occasion?

He might have spoken of our grievances against Egypt, about Egyptian ingratitude and barbarism, which impelled us to separation.

Or, perhaps, he might have spoken of individual liberty; of the right of individual to chart his own destiny, to see his own happiness.

Or, perhaps, he might have spoken about national liberation; about the right of self-determination. He might have spoken of the shackled greatness of the Jewish people, which once freed would be able to flower.

He might have spoken about his aspirations for the future, about the kind of society we were going to build in the land of Israel, about how different it would be from the cruel despotism of Egypt that we were leaving behind.

He might have spoken about any, or all of these things. But he did not.

Rather, what Moshe said, in that first declaration on our first day of a people, was – that we should tell a story to our children.

Ve'higadta lebincha bayom hahu leimor ...

Vehaya ki yishalcha bincha leimor mah zos... ve'amarta eilav ...

Moshe said that we have to convey the story of *yetzias mitzrayim* – to future generations. He said that we should make a seder each year, on which to tell that story. Each year the father will tell the story to his son. And when his son

grows up he, in turn, will tell the story to his son. And so the story will live, and be remembered.

Our history begins with a commandment to tell a story.

And that is as it should be. Because our identity as a people – which began that day in Egypt – is defined by a story.

You know, many thinkers have wondered over the years exactly what defines the Jewish people. What makes a Jew – a Jew. It can't simply be belief or observance, because we know that *yisroel, af al pi she'chata yisroel hu*, even a sinner and a heretic is still defined as a Jew, although he may not be a good or even a professing Jew. It can't be ethnicity, or a specific genetic profile, since Jews come in all shapes and colors. It certainly can't be a particular idea or philosophy, since no two Jews can ever agree on anything. So what exactly is a Jew?

Of course, we know *who* is a Jew; a Jew is someone born of a Jewish mother or converted according to halachah. But that still doesn't tell us *what* is a Jew. What is it that all Jews have in common, that defines us as Jews?

Jews have been pondering this question for a long time, at least since the time of R' Saadiah Gaon. R' Saadiah Gaon himself asks the question, and the answer that he gives, in essence, is that we are defined by the *beris*, by the covenant that hakadosh baruch hu made with us.

This is a very profound answer. But it is also somewhat abstract; a *covenant*, to our mind, is something of an abstraction. But we can translate this abstraction, by saying that what defines the Jewish people is a story. What we all have in common is that we are participants in a single, coherent story.

It's a long story, and the first few chapters are glorious. The last chapter, which we haven't come to yet, is also glorious. In between there are a great many chapters, of different temper; some happy, some comic, some sad, some that we tremble to read. There are many different characters in this story; great heroes, some, and others great villains, and the whole gamut of humanity in between. The story takes many turns, and is full of surprises, both pleasant and unpleasant.

Essentially it is a love story, and tells of the love between hakadosh baruch hu and a small people who left Egypt and followed Him into the desert. It is the story, also, of how the people later betrayed that love, although never fully; how they forgot it, but never completely. It is, for all its difficult passages, a beautiful story, full of wonders that pierce the soul.

And each of us plays a role in that story. Whether we are born into the story or are introduced into it as adults, our names are there. So long as we are Jews, it is our story; and because we share this story, we share a single identity as Jews.

And so on that first day of our freedom, in that first declaration, Moshe stood before a people who could not be defined by a country, for they would live in many countries; who could not be defined by a language, for they would speak many languages; who could not be defined by an idea, for they would entertain many different ideas. Rather, they would be defined by a covenant, played out over history; in others words, by a story. And so he taught that our first duty as a people is to preserve that story, to teach it to ourselves and our children and our children's children. To make the story live, from generation to generation. Because as long as it lives, we live in it.

And that is the great challenge of our generation. So many of our people, have given up on this story, out of despair. So many of our young people are grown indifferent to it, out of ignorance. And so they have stopped telling this story. And that is tragic; because their parents' and grandparents' lives are written into its chapters.

And looking closer to home, there is also a challenge. Looking at our young people today, in our own frum community, I sometimes feel that they perceive Yiddishkeit as simply a set of rules, with a final exam at the end, and that they look at other Jews only to consider how well they're observing the rules. There are rules, of course, and they infuse *kedushah* into our lives. But Yiddishkeit is not only about following rules. It's also about the privilege of being part of a people whose story begins at the gates of Egypt, a people that has been the font of all human progress since then; a people unique in that its saints and its geniuses have been one and the same; a people who have, after being brought to the very edge of extinction, gone on to reclaim a land they had not forgotten after almost 2,000 years, despite every obstacle; a people whose history is a journey; so that each Jew is a shipmate. It is about being part of an *am nora min hu v'halah*, an awe-inspiring people, whose redemption is the redemption of the world.

Being a Jew means being part of a very special story. And that should fill us with awe, with wonder and with great joy.