



# TEXT:

## Collective History and Memory

In every generation, every person must see him (or her) self as if they themselves came out of Egypt.

– Pesach Haggadah



# Collective History and Memory

## Explanation of Text

This familiar text appears in the Pesach Haggadah and provides one of the more extraordinary statements about historical memory that appears in the Jewish tradition. It can be suggested that although couched in the specific language of the Pesach story and Exodus, it in fact represents a far wider instruction on how to a Jew should approach his or her historical tradition.

The fact that a historical consciousness is seen universally as one important aspect of national identity is clear. But this piece here goes far beyond the usual idea that individuals should remember their history as part of belonging to a people or a nation. Here the idea is that there is an action which goes way beyond remembering that is needed by members of the Jewish People.

There is an aspect of existential internalization that is demanded: Jews are not told merely to know what happened in Egypt but are told to see themselves “as if they themselves” were part of that historical event. And building on top of this of course, the Seder Pesach is constructed to reinforce that element of personal identification. Memory is not enough – you have to feel that it is about you no less than it is about the specific

participants of this historical (or pseudo-historical) event.

It is as if the Rabbis who constructed the Seder are saying – don’t just remember your history, but rather be your history, identify with your people’s experience and understand that your identity as a Jew living in whatever century (the 21st) is tied up with the experiences of your people. You cannot be a Jew without internalizing your people’s experiences as a part of who you yourself are. To be part of the Jewish people means to live that national experience, that collective heritage inside you. Part of you is so tied up with your collective experience that you have not got a full identity as a Jewish individual unless you have made this leap of imagination through an act of conscious will and arrived at a point of identification with the major stories and experiences of the Jewish People.

Their experience is part of who you are and you cannot define yourself as a Jew until you have affirmed that experience and done whatever you can to accept and embrace that aspect of yourself. Know your history, learn your history and live your history – and understand that this is not just a statement about this or that individual ancestor,

it is a statement about your personal relationship with the collective of your people.

Collective history is to be converted into personal memory! It is no less true for converts whose families were not historically Jewish: they too have a part in the Jewish collective and their memory has to try and make that leap as well.

One Jewish activist, Zeev Maghen, summed up this point a number of years ago when he wrote the following:

You have special eyes, eyes that can see for miles and miles. If you only will it – enough to work at it – you can extend your arms and touch the eons and the millennia, you can suck in the insights and bask in the glory and writhe in the pain and draw on the power emanating from every era and every episode and every experience of your indomitable, indestructible, obstinately everlasting people...

This is not an ability acquired solely through learning or reading ... it is first and foremost a function of connection, of belonging, of powerful love. If you reach out and grasp your people's hands – you were there. You participated in what they did, in all places, at all times, you fought their battles, felt their feelings and learned their lessons. (Zeev Maghen, *Imagine*, 1998)

Maghen, echoing the Rabbis is making a suggestion: history is there for you to be a part of. If you grasp it – through your imagination – and accept it, it will indeed be part of you.

But all of this raises another question: there are those who suggest that too close an association with our history can actually paralyze a people and prevent them from moving forward. You can become slaves to memory and try and duplicate the past.

Such an attitude can stop a people progressing. One person who raised this question was the Zionist activist and educator, Berl Katznelson who said the following in a speech in the pre state period:

Human beings are endowed with two faculties, memory and forgetfulness. We cannot live without both. Were only memory to exist, then we would be crushed under its burden. We would become slaves to our memories, to our ancestors...And were we ruled entirely by forgetfulness, what place would there be for culture [and] science?...

A renewing and creative generation does not throw the cultural heritage of ages into the dustbin. It examines and scrutinizes, accepts and rejects. At times it may keep and add to an existing tradition. At times it descends into ruined grottoes to excavate and remove the dust from that which had lain in forgetfulness, in order

to resuscitate old traditions which have the power to stimulate the spirit of the generation of renewal... (Berl Katznelson)

Perhaps a people can remember too much history?

## Educational Suggestions

Here are three suggestions for using this piece:

1. Suggest to the participants that the Pesach Haggadah is a great educational and pedagogic text, put together by the Rabbis in the Middle Ages in order to put forward a number of educational messages to the scattered world community of Jews. Divide the group up into small groups and give each group a few pages of the traditional Haggadah (you could give each group different pages, or the same to everyone). Ask each small group to identify educational messages in their pages and to present them to the whole group. What are the rabbis trying to teach us through the way that they have organized the Haggadah? Or alternatively do a “jigsaw exercise” in which a member of each of the small groups becomes a member of another small group in which all of the pieces in the Haggadah are represented. Try and identify which major messages the Rabbis are trying to give and why? What are they saying about the way that Jews should relate to their history? Why? What does that mean? Now listen to this film clip #3 (<http://www.5leggedtable.org/en/legpage/memory>) dealing with Jewish memory. In this very short (under a minute) piece we
2. Present the phrase from the Haggadah to the class. Discuss what it means, asking why the Rabbis did not tell us simply to remember the going out of Egypt? Suggest that according to the Rabbis, this is the Jewish approach to history. Ask whether this is realistic – in which ways yes and in which ways no? Put a line of tape on the floor with one end defined as positive and the other defined as negative and ask them to line up according to whether they like the approach of the Rabbis or not. In the resulting debate, you might like to bring the piece from Berl Katznelson in order to strengthen the negative side!
3. Present the Rabbinic approach encapsulated in this phrase. Is it a good approach in the eyes of the group? Why? Why not? Maybe bring the piece from Berl Katznelson to underline some potential problems that can arise when we try and remember too much on a national level? On the assumption that we cannot “remember” all of our history and internalize it, ask the group first individually and then in groups to choose three or four events in Jewish history that all Jews should remember and seek, according to the approach of the Rabbis, to internalize. Why should those things be remembered and internalized? Each group needs to explain and justify its choices.