

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



The Exodus Story



*“Commemorate
this day, the day
you came out of
Egypt, out of the
land of slavery,
because the LORD
brought you
out of it with a
mighty hand.”*

— Exodus 13:3

The story of the Exodus, the central focus of the Passover holiday, recalls the birth of the Jewish nation, Israel. In addition, we glean from the lessons learned and themes woven into this timeless story the most basic and fundamental principles of Judaism. The suffering of the children of Israel and their deliverance from slavery reaffirms our faith that God cares about His people, that He hears our prayers, and most importantly, that He intervenes in human history to bring about justice and salvation so that we may serve and worship Him.

These core values – faith, prayer, love, freedom, and justice – are so foundational that God commanded us to remember the Exodus story every year for seven days during the Passover celebration (eight days, outside of Israel). In addition, we remember the Exodus story every week on Sabbath, as God commanded us in Deuteronomy 5:15, *“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”* As we rest and worship God on the Sabbath, we are reminded that we can do so only because we are free.

The story of the Exodus is featured prominently in our daily prayer service as well, fulfilling the commandment, *“...all the days of your life you may remember the time of your departure from Egypt”* (Deuteronomy 16:3). Indeed, the story of the Exodus is the rock upon which Judaism stands. If Judaism serves as the roots of Christianity, then it is Passover and the Exodus that nourish the roots of us all. As the apostle Paul so eloquently put it in Romans 11:17, *“You {Gentiles}, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root...”*

From the time of Moses through today, even during the horrors of the Holocaust, Jews around the world have gathered to celebrate God's miraculous deliverance through this ancient observance. We know that Jesus celebrated Passover with his disciples. (See Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:16-25; Luke 22:1-22; John 13:1-5.) Today, many Christians participate in this time-

honoured tradition, as they, too, reaffirm the values and lessons from the Exodus story.

The Bible includes numerous directives to tell the Exodus story *“that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD”* (Exodus 10:2). Remembering our past and passing on our legacy to future generations are essential elements of the Passover celebration.

In fact, a two-word homophone for the word *Pesach* is the Hebrew words *peh* and *sach*, which mean, “the mouth speaks.” Speaking and telling our story is an integral part of *Pesach*. It helps us relive the story, renew our relationship with God, and integrate the lessons of the Exodus story into our lives.

Traditionally, we tell the Passover story at a *seder*, the ritual Passover meal, using a *haggadah*, the book that serves as our guide for the night. It sets the stage for the night by outlining 15 steps in a specific order that takes us through the Passover story and helps us understand the Passover messages through various Scriptures, prayers, and rituals. As we recount the Exodus story during the *seder*, we confirm as a people where we came from, who we are, and what we believe. We reaffirm our national identity and our shared mission.

More than that, the Exodus story provides an important message for the entire world, namely that there is a God and that He is loving, all-powerful, and just. These ideas must be remembered and understood in every generation.

The Exodus is more than a story that happened 3,000 years ago; it contains meaningful insights and inspiration for us today. Join me in this month's *Limmud* as we delve deeper into the fundamental truths for both Christians and Jews that are interwoven in this most important story, which still hold transformative power for us today.

Rabbi Eckstein

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Celebrating God's Love

God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

— Exodus 2:24-25

When God gave Israel the Ten Commandments, He didn't introduce Himself as Creator of the world or the Sustainer of Life. Instead, He said, "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery*" (Exodus 20:2). Why would God associate Himself with the Exodus story?

I believe it is because God wants us to understand that He is a present and involved God – One who hears us and saves us, just as He did thousands of years ago when He delivered His children out of Egypt.

One of the fundamental tenets demonstrated in the Exodus story is that our God is a loving God. This was a radical idea in a world dominated by a pantheon of idols and earthly rulers who governed capriciously and ruthlessly. People went to great lengths to appease both their gods and their rulers in order to gain favour and avoid their wrath, despite the fact that neither idols nor despots heard or cared about them.

In contrast, "*God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant...God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them*" (Exodus 2:24-25). Did you catch that? God not only *heard* the cries, the groanings, of His people, but more importantly, He was *concerned* about His people. He *cared* about them.

This verse underscores the core truth for both Christians and Jews that God is not simply a Creator who left the world to its own devices. Rather, He is constantly involved in the world – lovingly sustaining us, assisting us, and intervening on our behalf.

Certainly, this principle is underscored in the Christian Bible as well. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught of God's care for His creation and His children (Matthew 6:25-26). He constantly reminded the people of God's great care and love for them. (See Matthew 10:29-31; 12:12.)

God's love is a major theme of Passover. This is why Jewish communities read Song of Songs, the biblical story about the intimate love between a man and a woman, during Passover. According to Jewish tradition, Solomon's book is an allegory for the love affair between God and Israel. That relationship began in Egypt, continues today, and is celebrated each Passover at the *seder*, the traditional Passover meal, with psalms of praise.

Passover commemorates that time in human history when God expressed His love for Israel by redeeming them and delivering them from slavery. In turn, the people of Israel expressed their love for God when they chose to follow Him into the desert. As it says in Jeremiah 2:2, "*This is what the LORD says: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through*

the wilderness, through a land not sown." When the nation of Israel left Egypt and followed God into the desert, it was an act of loving devotion and faith.

This also explains the two main names for Passover. In the Bible, God introduces the holiday as "*the Festival of Unleavened Bread*" (Exodus 12:17, Leviticus 23:6), which refers to the Hebrew word, *matzo*. In so doing, God named the holiday according to the act of love that the children of Israel showed Him.

The *matzo* that we eat during Passover symbolizes the Israelites' response in following God. They left so quickly that they did not have time to allow their bread to rise, resulting in unleavened bread, or *matzo*. At the *seder* table, the *matzo* we are commanded to eat (Exodus 12:19-20) represents the love and devotion to God upon which the Israelites acted.

We, however, usually refer to the holiday as Passover, (*Pesach* in Hebrew), which represents the love God showed to His children. On the same night that the Israelites left Egypt, God carried out the tenth and final terrible plague – the death of the firstborn sons. But for those Israelites, who in faith obeyed God's instructions to sacrifice the Passover lamb and put its blood on their doorframes, God *passed over* them, like an infatuated lover, and only looked at their sign of faith in Him (Exodus 12:13). God spared the Israelites out of His love for them. God saw their faith and obedience and chose to save them, redeem them, and love them.

God's great love for His children is celebrated throughout Scripture. We read in Psalm 52:8, "*I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever,*" and the prophet Hosea reminded Israel of God's love for them, "*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son*" (Hosea 11:1). In the Christian Bible, John wrote, "*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God*" (1 John 4:7), and Jesus taught, "*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends*" (John 15:13).

think about it...

1. How does the story of the Israelites' suffering and deliverance encourage you today? What lessons does it teach you about the prayer?
2. Think of a time that you experienced God's great love for you. How did that make you feel?
3. Where have you seen God's power demonstrated in your life? When? Where has He intervened to help you get to where you are and to become who you are today?

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Celebrating God's Power

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD." — Exodus 10:1-2

A major part of the Passover story recounted during the *seder* is the ten plagues that God brought upon Egypt because they would not let the Israelites go.

In truth, the Exodus story could have been shorter and less complex if God had skipped the plagues altogether. If God's plan was to perform epic miracles, why couldn't He have miraculously transported the Israelites out of Egypt and directly to the Promised Land? Surely, God could have managed without the plagues and the parting of the sea if simply taking the Israelites out of Egypt was His sole purpose.

Certainly, there has to be an additional reason for the ten plagues.

Indeed, as Scripture tells us, God had a much grander agenda. We read, *"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh...so that I may perform these signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD'"* (Exodus 10:1-2).

From this, we glean that the purpose of the plagues was to teach the Israelites of that time – and all subsequent generations – about God so that they would know Him.

However, God's plan didn't stop with the nation of Israel. Just before the parting of the sea, God informed Moses that, *"The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen"* (Exodus 14:18). God also intended for the Egyptians to understand that He alone is God through His miraculous rescue of His children and the destruction of the mighty Egyptian army when they attempted to cross the parted Red Sea. The God of Israel's power was displayed for the entire world to see.

The wonders and miracles that God performed when He brought His people out of Egypt were a potent object lesson to Pharaoh and the entire world. Pharaoh, who had said, *"Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go"* (Exodus 5:2), learned firsthand that there is no one and nothing like the God of Israel – who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and the supreme master of the Universe.

It is a message repeated throughout the Scriptures. The psalmist wrote, *"Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens, you who have done great things. Who is like you, God?"* (Psalm 71:19), and *"Among the gods there is none like you, LORD; no deed can compare with yours"* (Psalm

86:8). The prophet Isaiah wrote, *"With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?"* (Isaiah 40:18). In the Christian Bible, the apostle Paul wrote, *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse"* (Romans 1:20).

As the nation of Israel was birthed, God made Himself known to Israel, to the superpower of the time (Egypt), and to the entire world. (See Exodus 23:27; Deuteronomy 2:25; Joshua 2:9-11; 5:1; 1 Samuel 4:7; Esther 8:17.) God's miracles proved His existence, His providence, and His omnipotence before the world.

For thousands of years, the Passover celebration has kept the Exodus story alive and ensured that each generation will also know that *"No one is like you, LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power"* (Jeremiah 10:6).

apply it...

- 1. ASK AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE.** The Exodus story teaches that it is only after the Israelites "cried out" that God heard them. If we want God's help, we must ask Him for it. (Exodus 2:23-24; Matthew 7:7)
- 2. FORGIVE YOURSELF.** God will overlook our flaws and forgive us for our mistakes when we truly repent. We owe it to ourselves to do the same – forgive our past mistakes so that we can focus on creating a better future. (Psalm 32:1; Romans 4:7)
- 3. ENGAGE WITH MULTIPLE GENERATIONS.** The power of the Passover *seder* is that it brings young and old together to learn from one another. When generations learn from each other, everyone benefits. (Joel 1:2-3; Titus 2:1-7)
- 4. TRUST GOD'S JUSTICE.** In a world where it often seems that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, we need to reaffirm our belief that God will mete out justice even if we do not understand how or when. (Proverbs 20:22; Romans 12:19)
- 5. SPEAK ABOUT GOD.** If we don't speak about God's love, power, and justice, how will others know? Speaking to our children and friends about our God passes along the legacy of faith from one generation to the next. (Psalm 145:4; Acts 1:8)



Celebrating God's Justice

“Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’” — Exodus 6:6

Perhaps the most significant message of the Exodus story is that God is just and justice was ultimately served. The Egyptians were cruel and oppressed the Israelites, who suffered greatly under their rule. Egypt was the world's superpower of the time, and the Israelites were a ragtag group of slaves, not yet a nation. But through a series of events orchestrated by God, Egypt was broken, Pharaoh's mighty army was destroyed, and the Israelites were freed and became a nation.

The story of Passover teaches us that not only is God all-loving and all-powerful, but He is also just.

Hundreds of years before the Exodus, God had revealed to Abraham what would happen to his descendants. In Genesis 15:13-14, God told Abraham, *“Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.”*

Even though Abraham's descendants would suffer greatly, *“enslaved and mistreated,”* ultimately, God would punish the oppressors and reward the victim. Israel left Egypt with *“great possessions”* (Exodus 12:35-36). In other words, justice would be served. God, ever faithful and the keeper of His promises, did exactly what He had told Abraham.

Moreover, God had instructed Moses to confront Pharaoh, saying: *“This is what the LORD says: ‘Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, ‘Let my son go, so he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son’”* (Exodus 4:22-23). God was not vengeful when He afflicted Pharaoh and Egypt; He was just, punishing according to the crime as His divine knowledge deemed appropriate.

It was not by accident that the first plague was turning the Nile River into blood. Tradition teaches that when Pharaoh instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill every baby boy (Genesis 1:16), his plan was to throw every male Hebrew child into the Nile. Countless baby boys were drowned in the Nile by the Egyptians. Conveniently, the Nile covered their crimes. There were no signs of the mass murder committed by the Egyptians.

When God sent the first plague, the Nile exposed the killings – the water turned into blood, revealing the terrible atrocities committed by the Egyptians. The Nile reeked of death and *“Blood was everywhere in Egypt”* (Exodus 7:21), reminding all Egypt of their heinous crimes which could no longer be hidden.

Similarly, it was no coincidence that the final blow that destroyed Egypt was when Pharaoh's entire army drowned in the sea. Pharaoh tried to destroy Israel by drowning her future – the male heirs – in the Nile. God's justice destroyed Egypt's males in the sea, while the Israelites walked through on dry land.

God's justice extended to the innocent Egyptians as well. We read in Exodus 12:37-38 that when the Israelites left Egypt, *“There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. Many other people went up with them...”* Who were these *“other people”* that joined them? Tradition teaches that it was the Egyptians who had accepted the God of Israel and joined the Israelites. God spared them as well as they no longer deserved to be punished.

Justice was an important attribute of the new nation, Israel, and of modern Israel today. Justice was a prerequisite for entering the Promised Land, as we read, *“Do not pervert justice, or show partiality ... Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you”* (Deuteronomy 16:19-20). The psalmist wrote, *“For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; the upright will see his face”* (Psalm 11:7), and the prophet Micah in describing what God requires of His children, wrote, *“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”* (Micah 6:8).

When we tell the Exodus story during the Passover *seder*, we reaffirm our belief that our God is just – that He rewards good and punishes evil. We strengthen our faith that justice ultimately will be served and place our full trust in the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.

As Jesus taught in the Christian Bible, *“And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?”* (Luke 18:7). The lesson of the Exodus story teaches us that the answer is an unequivocal yes.

think about it...continued

4. Certainly in our world today, injustices exist. What does the Exodus story help us understand about these inequities? From Scripture, what role, if any, do we have in fighting injustice?
5. Which message from the Exodus story resonates most with you? How does that message manifest in your life?