

A Night of Story

PENIMI
MY ESSENCE MY KNOWLEDGE MY STRENGTH



Scrubbing's done, potatoes peeled, eggs cracked, special recipes used once again, ten crumbs hidden, found, then burned and finally, it's upon us, the night of transformation, Seder night. The night when an enslaved nation turned into Klall Yisrael, **the night when we too are transformed. Into what? Storytellers!**



And You Shall Tell Your Children

It's the mitzvah that drives seder night: telling over the story of yetzias Mitzrayim. But as soon as we begin Maggid, we're thrust into a lengthy debate that seems **far from any genre of story we may recognize**. Together, the chachamim debate the parameters of the mitzvah: who needs to tell the story. How? What time of day? In what format should the story be told?

And then, confusion. For **where, exactly, does the story begin?** Does it start with the slow, insidious descent to slavery? Or with the death of Yosef Hatzaddik? We may trace it back to Yaakov's descent to Egypt. But the Haggadah takes us back even further, to Terach's idol worship, and recounts, too, Lavan's wily plans against our nation. What is the significance of all of this?

And how does it turn us all into storytellers?

Storytelling Basics

What, exactly, is a story?

A story is comprised of three basic elements: **setting, protagonist, conflict - and resolution**.

So far, so simple.

Setting: Ancient Egypt.

Protagonist: The Jewish people.

Conflict: Enslavement and the quest for freedom, spiritual and physical.

But the Haggadah presents us with an additional challenge, says the Sefas Emes. And that's **to find another story within this tale: the story of he or she who is doing the telling**.

Setting: America, Europe, Eretz Yisrael.

Protagonist: You, me, all of us.

Conflict: The constraints that imprison each of us, in our individual way, and our personal quest for spiritual and emotional freedom.

Let's look closer at the very structure of a story.

The word for story, *sipur*, shares a root with the word for number, and to count: *lispur*. This hints at the function, the secret, and the wonder of a story.

What happens when we tell a story? We take a jumble of events, of happenings, of actions and reactions **and we arrange them in a meaningful sequence**. A happened because of B. This found its roots in this. This gave me strength to make that choice, but that failure held me back, and then that person woke me up to the possibility of something different. The courage I needed for this was rooted in an experience that took place long before; and that person gave me inspiration and guidance when I most needed it.

Without stories, our lives are a jumbled collection of triumphs and failures; our significant moments can fade into oblivion and life can appear chaotic and random. Stories shed light on our roots. On the cycles of our lives. On our growth and failures, and how they led us to where we are today. On the challenges and also the triumphs. They are the frame within which we can understand the complexity of our days. Ultimately, **a story is our belief that life has meaning**. That it can be ordered and arranged in a way that makes sense and that takes us on a journey of increasing depth and self-expansion.

As well, **a story, by definition is a sifting process**. What do we leave in, and what do we discard? What events are important to us, and

what can we leave behind? A million things happen to us each day, but we only incorporate the things which matter to us into the narrative that is the tale of our lives. We have many, many different stories, in each area of our lives—as women, wives, mothers, coworkers, daughters of Hashem—but like the concentric circles formed in a pool of water, they ripple, touch, sway, merge, and layer one on top of the other.

Stories, then, are not just a dramatic retelling of our lives. They form our identity, both as a nation and as individuals. No wonder that the beginning of our nation, our identity, **is bound up with the mitzvah of sipur yetzias Mitzrayim**, telling over the story of how we moved from despair to triumph; from wallowing in a society that was both immoral and pagan, to embracing our role as Hashem's ambassadors in this world.

Making It Real

"It is the act of telling the story that **transforms Yetzias Mitzrayim from something that stays in the world of potential to something real**," the Sefas Emes writes. So much so, that he compares it to the connection between the Written and Oral Torah. It's the Torah she'baal Peh that animates, giving life and meaning to the words written in a *sefer Torah*. He continues: "This is the strength of the mouth, because it is by articulating matters, that we discover their hidden significance."

By its very nature, speech is a creative force; it is the instrument Hashem used in the creation of the world. **And even our speech today holds**

a secret: we can ruminate long and hard, but it's talking things out that gives us perspective, understanding. It's by talking things out that we begin to recognize the contours of our lives, the themes that recur, and the significance of our struggles and autobiography.

And this does not just apply to the story of Klall Yisrael long ago. Continues the Sefas Emes:

*And so it is for each and every one of us. **We also need to tell our own stories, following the pattern of the Seder and beginning with our failures and hardships and concluding with praise.** For when a person thinks about everything that has happened to him, from when he was an unborn baby, his birth—which is a micro yetzias Mitzrayim, growing and our intellect developing, certainly, we will find Hashem.*

Beautiful words, but for so many of us, it doesn't seem so simple. For most of us are **still in the middle of the book of our lives**, with many chapters ahead of us. How often do we wish we could flip to the end, just for a minute or two, and get a snapshot of a beautiful, triumphant ending? But we're stuck in the middle of the conflict, not knowing how things are going to work out. We may be confused, alone.

How do we shape a story, when we're still very much in the middle?

Text and Subtext

Literature 101: every story has both text and subtext. There's the surface story and **the story**

that shimmers just below the surface: deeper, more delicate, closer to essence.

And this is the reason for the double opening of the Haggadah. Yes, it is a story about slavery and freedom. A physical story that unfolds in Egypt. But it goes deeper. "At the beginning our forefathers were idol-worshippers." It is a story **about how we look at the world, and the extent to which we are open and ready** to recognize Hashem's guiding hand—and become His people.

And this is why seder night is a night of Emunah.

Emunah is commonly translated as a belief, faith, or conviction. But in the Torah, the word Emunah is used very differently. **We first encounter the word when klal Yisrael battled Amalek.** While Yehoshua led the nation into the battlefield, Moshe, Aharon and Chur went up to the top of the hill. Moshe held up his hands, inspired to look to the heavens for help, and the battle went well. But then Moshe's hands grew heavy, the *pasuk* tells us (Shemos 17:12), and then Amalek advanced and klal Yisrael were in danger of losing the battle.

וְיָדֵי מֹשֶׁה כְּבִדִּים וַיִּקְחוּ אֲבָן וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ תַּחְתֵּי יָדָיו וַיְהִי כִּי רָאָה אֱמֹנָה עֹדֵבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ:
ואהרן וחור תמכו בידיו מזה אחד ומזה אחד ויהי ידיו

But Moshe's hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aharon and Chur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set.

His hands were steady—*veyehi yadav emunah*.

Eemunah, as we see from this context, means steadfastness. Loyalty. Faithfulness. When do we need Eemunah? In a situation when we don't always see the truth. When Hashem's hand is hidden, when we feel like we're stuck in a never-ending story—we use the power of our Eemunah to seek Hashem, look for Hashem's hand, find the moments of hashgacha, and draw on our conviction that all of this has a plan, and that plan is the ultimate good.

In fact, it is all of this that we recall each leil Shabbos when we light the Shabbos candles. **By raising our hands, and waving them over the flames** we recall Moshe's raised hands, steadfastly pointing to the heavens.

Amalek's Message

Fascinatingly, this mention of Eemunah is in the context of a battle with Amalek.

Amalek's narrative about the world—and Hashem's involvement in it - is the antithesis of our own. Amalek's story is *asher karchah ba'derech—who chanced upon you on the road*. There is no **higher intention to events**; no deeper meaning; no spiritual journey exquisitely geared to our individual strengths and weaknesses.

Instead, things just happen. There are chance meetings. Nature has its own power. Events are haphazard. Life is not a narrative but a random series of events we must somehow survive. No wonder that Amalek is the heir of Eisav. Eisav sees the world through the lens of harshness and cruelty. Through such a worldview, bad things, difficult challenges have no ultimate

purpose. Meaning-making is futile; cynicism is the only thing that makes sense.

No, says klal Yisrael. We are a people of Eemunah—the conviction that Hashem created us in an act of kindness and directs our lives so that, though there are bumps in the road, we ultimately tread towards Him, the source of all life, light, and joy. Life is not accidental. Life is a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end; **with a design and a journey that takes us towards a deeper connection with who we are and what we live for.**

And this is why, explains the Sefas Emes (Vayikra, Pesach 5:4), telling the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim is a *tikkun* for this *galus* of absence. It rewrites the tale of emptiness and nihilism that is Amalek's essence—and which suffuses secular society today. No wonder that Pesach opens with *leil haseder*, the night of “order.” We make *seder*, imposing sequence and significance on the events that took place long ago—**and which echo through our own lives**. Yes, generation after generation lived in Egypt, enslaved, never seeing the end of the story, never witness to the finale. But all those years culminated in a *leil shimurim*: and with hindsight we see how even through the years of slavery we were guarded, our cries were heard, we found strength in the midst of despair, until ultimately, cruelty and evil found their retribution. And so was bequeathed to us the **Eemunah to find Hashem's hand even in the middle of the story**: to celebrate our own *leil shimurim*. We find His love for us, and His guiding hand through the twists and turns of our journey.

Storying Life

While all of this sounds beautiful, when we start to story our lives, looking for theme and meaning and order, a lot can come up. There may be anger and pain and confusion, or even just a mass of unconnected events that doesn't seem to follow any pattern. **How can we make sense of our stories?**

We can start by asking questions. *Where did we start and where are we now? What have we become so far? Where did we find freedom despite our constraints? How did we find the courage to enter into our personal yam suf and when and how did we see it split? When and how did we find our voices, open our mouths and v'nitzak, cry out? When did we have the strength to admit our frailty? As we endured the plague of darkness, what light could be found b'bateihem, in the private domain? When and how did we find the courage, as did the Jews in the plague of Darkness, to enter the domain of the enemy—a person, a feeling, a place, an incident—and from that place, find treasures that we could take along with us? What was our Miriam's tambourine, that which sustained our hope? How did we find comfort in prayer, in giving, in a beautiful sunset, in friendship, in family, in the unexpected and tiny miracles that sustain our every day?*

Our biography nestles between the lines of the Haggadah, waiting for us to find it, shed a light on it. In reliving their slavery, we enact our own.

In experiencing our own freedom, we relive the freedom of our ancestors. In finding Hashem in our history and in our present, we illuminate our souls with the radiance of emunah.

From Darkness, Light

This idea sheds light on a puzzling debate that we read about in the beginning of Maggid. **Just when should the story be told**, the Chachamim debate. Just during the day? Or also at night?¹

Rebbi Elazar ben Azarya credits Ben Zoma with explaining to him that the obligation to tell the story includes the nighttime—as implied by the extra word *all, kol*, as in *kol yemei chayecha*.

The Sages, however, have a very different explanation: “The days of your life” refers to This World. “**All** the days of your life” doesn't refer to the nighttime, but includes the days of Mashiach.

Two explanations; worlds apart. The Beis Aharon (the first Rebbe of Karlin-Stolin) highlights the paradox:

When is our obligation to remember the story of the exodus, to tell over the greatness of Hakadosh Baruch Hu? Not only in the daylight, the good times when the sun shines and life is blessed. Ben Zoma proves that we do so also at night, in the darkness, when our carefully laid plans have disintegrated or imploded. When we are bitterly disappointed by opportunities that never ripened, by relationships that are

1. אמר רבי אלעזר בן עזריה הרי אני כבן שבעים שנה ולא זכיתי שתאמר יציאת מצרים בלילות עד שדרשה בן זומא, שנאמר, למען תזכר את יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חייך. ימי חייך הימים. כל ימי חייך הלילות. וחכמים אומרים ימי חייך העולם הזה. כל ימי חייך להביא לימות המשיח:

leavened, heavy, sour. **Then, too, is the time to look for Hashem's guiding hand, to make sense of events**, to see how they have led us on a particular path.

The *chachamim*'s interpretation doesn't contradict that of Ben Zoma. It shows us what happens when we **tell stories through the darkness of night**. *Kol yemei chayechah—lehavi yemos Hamashiach*. All the days of your life, to bring the days of Mashiach.

Through **searching for Hashem's guiding hand through the darkness**, we allow in the sparks of redemption. Through finding meaning in what seems like chaos and void, we usher in our deliverance. Through our narrative of Emunah, we find expansiveness, hope, comfort, *yeshua*.

From Onlooker to Narrator

On the night of transformation, we become storytellers. We throw off the role of onlooker and become narrator: for the story is not about others and it is not set in a bygone era. It is our story, the tale of our Emunah, of how we search for and find Hashem's hand and Hashem's love. The world around us may have

embraced the worldview of Amalek—of random meaninglessness, of emptiness and void. But we have the power of the story, the power of leil haseder, finding the structure and order and faith that pervades our history, as individuals and as a nation. **Our story is not only written on parchment, it is etched in our hearts**. And because it comes from deep within, we pass it on to our children. For this is a story that spans lifetimes and bonds generations, as each child in turn receives the story from his parents, and in time, will pass it on to his own children.

We are about to enter the night of Emunah. And it's a night of stories: of how my story meets with the story of my nation. **It's about the stories that we tell ourselves, the stories we live by, the stories that are bound up with our essence**, how identity and memory and story intersect in a night that spans the anguish of the abyss and awesome love, as we are raised up to become the children of Hashem.

This year, may we be zocheh to find our own story within the story of our nation. And as we do so, may we sing with hearts filled with joy and thanksgiving, **"Lo amus ki echyeh, v'asaper maaseh Kah—I will not die but live, and I will tell the story of the deeds of Hashem."**

Sincerely,
Mrs. Faigie Zelcer

