

Jewish Identity Doesn't Mean Being Religious

Category: Bo, Shemos

The Jews in Egypt were, on one hand, idolaters, and on the other hand, staunchly Jewish in their identity. How did those two identities exist in tandem?

A Strange Choice of a Name

Passover may be a long way off, but the story of the Exodus is the topic of this week's Torah portion. Why is Passover called Passover?

The most appropriate name for this holiday would be 'The Festival of Redemption' because it commemorates the redemption of our forefathers from Egypt. Maybe another possible name, one used in the Passover prayers, is 'the Festival of Matzahs.' But why call it Passover? The name Passover only reminds us about one small detail of the Exodus from Egypt, that when G-d was about to kill all the Egyptian firstborn boys, He passed over the houses where there was blood on the doorposts. This seems just a technical detail, so why was the holiday named after this event?

Why was it so important for G-d that blood be put on the doorposts. Did G-d need a sign to know which were the Jewish houses?

Jewish Identity in Idolaters?

Every boy in Sunday school learns the Midrash that the Jews were redeemed from Egypt in the merit of the fact that they didn't change their names, their language, or their dress. That means that the Jews in Egypt had the same names which they had when they came to Egypt; they kept calling their children the same names, "Reuben and Simon when they arrived and Reuben and Simon when they left." They continued to speak Hebrew and they continued to dress as Jews, maybe with a shtreimel, or something like that.

But the Rebbe questions this statement (2 Iyar 5710). If the Jews were so

observant that they didn't change their language, name or clothing, then why do we find in our parsha that the Jews were not in a good position spiritually. They were steeped in idolatry and did not have any Mitzvos to deserve the redemption. So much so that G-d gave them two commandments, the blood of the Pascal offering and the blood of circumcision - just to deserve to be redeemed.

From this Rashi, and even more from other lengthy sources, we find that the Jewish people in Egypt were far from keeping the Mitzvot. In fact, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, they didn't even keep the one commandment that they had been given, that of circumcision. They stopped circumcising their children after the passing of the last of Jacob's children, Levi. In addition to this, as a natural progression, they started to assimilate, to emulate their Egyptian neighbors, and they learned how to worship the Egyptian idols. Rashi says they were even "steeped in idol worship." The situation was such that Satan attempted to prosecute the Jewish people by saying, "These are idol worshipers and these are idol worshippers," meaning that there was no difference between the Jews and the Egyptians! There were even Jews who did not believe in the redemption and didn't want to leave Egypt!

Chassidism teaches that the Jewish people had sunk to the 49th level of impurity. This is the lowest level to which it is possible to sink without it being permanent. This means that if G-d had not taken the Jewish people out of Egypt at that precise moment, there would no longer have been anyone to take out, as the Jews would have refused to leave Egypt.

The Jewish Crazyies

I found the answer to the above dilemma in a 'Living Torah' interview. On the video was an interview with a Jew who studied in a non-Chassidic yeshiva in Manhattan in the sixties. All the other students in his yeshiva were clean shaven, but because he had a connection to Lubavitch he wanted to grow a beard. His parents and teachers were against him growing a beard because they felt that he would be seen as a hippie, which was very present in Manhattan. He decided to ask the Rebbe what to do. At that time, it was still possible to have a private audience with the Rebbe. It was around the 10th of Shevat, when we read about the redemption from Egypt, just like in this week.

The Rebbe said to him, “Surely you are familiar with the statement that the Jews didn’t change their names, language, or dress. On the other hand, there is another statement that the Jews were idol worshippers. How can we reconcile these two opposite comments?” The Rebbe then went on to say, “Let us take for example, the hippies. Their leader is Abe Hoffman. Before them, the beatniks were led by Allen Ginsburg and other people with Jewish names. They didn’t change their names. As to their mode of dress, they don’t dress like regular people, so that anyone can tell at a distance that they are hippies. Even in their language: although they speak English, they use a jargon which they have developed. They are different from all other non-Jewish Americans in name, language and dress.”

The Rebbe continued and said that in the thirties if someone was a socialist, then everyone said he was a Jew; in the forties if someone was a communist, then everyone said he was surely a Jew; in the sixties if you said hippies, people would immediately say that the Jews created this problem, therefore, even hippies are worthy of being redeemed with the congregation of Israel. Why? Because they separate themselves from the rest of the population and everyone knows that they are Jews.

Make Yourself Different

From this story I learned that Jewish identity is not about a person walking around with his Tzitzis out or a shtreimel on his head. In fact, even if a person does something crazy which separates him from the general population and everyone knows that he is a Jew then that in itself is a Jewish identity. This is what our first statement means. The Jews in Egypt worshipped idols and didn’t circumcise their children, but they dressed differently from the Egyptians. They did it not necessarily wear the style of clothes which their grandfather Jacob wore when he came down to Egypt, but their clothes were such that everyone knew that they were Jews.

This is one of the reasons why G-d insisted that the Jewish people paint the doorposts with blood. At that moment in time, it was a statement in Jewish identity.

Today we should also not be embarrassed to, figuratively paint the blood onto our

doorposts, to show our identity in public. What is expected from a Jew is not necessarily to wear a black hat, but that he do something which identifies him as a Jew, be it a Star of David, or a Chai on a chain, or sitting and eating gefilte fish or matzo ball soup in a restaurant. Anyone passing by will identify him as a Jew.

Maybe it is speaking Hebrew or using Jewish expressions in public or any other way.

There are many ways to accomplish this, each Jew in his own unique style.

Here we are not speaking about a religious identity, but about a Jewish identity, and therefore the holiday is called Passover. The fact that the Jews in Egypt were never embarrassed about their Jewish identity was very dear to G-d and that's what merited the redemption.