



Telling the Story: Beginning and the End

Rabbi Jeffrey Fox

Rosh HaYeshiva, Maharat

The Rabbis describe the narrative arc of the seder as, “מתחיל בגנות ומסיום בשבח” - we begin [the telling of the story] with degradation and we conclude [the telling of the story] with praises” (Mishna, Pesachim 10:4). As any good storyteller knows, your opening line, or the hook, draw in the listener. What is the beginning of the story? What is the low point - of Jewish history?

The Talmud (Bavli, Pesachim 116a) debates this very question:

What is the shame? Rav said, “Our ancestors were idolaters (Joshua 24). Shmuel said, “We were slaves to Pharaoh (Deut 6:21).

מאי בגנות? רב אמר: מתחלה עובדי עבודה זרה.
היו אבותינו. ושמאל אמר: עבדים היו.

This disagreement between Rav and Shmuel has practical implications for how we conduct the Seder every year. When telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, do we start from the book of Shemot or from the book of Bereishit? While this debate might be read on its surface as simply about Seder night, I would like to argue that a much deeper debate occurs at the same time. At some level, Rav and Shmuel can be understood to debate where Jewish history “really” begins. Does our story begin as a nation in Egypt or as a family in Israel?

If we start the story with Avraham leaving his idolatrous home and seeking God in the world, then the narrative we tell is about ethical monotheism. If the story begins with an oppressed people in the crucible of Egypt who were delivered by the “strong arm and the outstretched hand” of God, we frame the narrative as one of the divine redemption of an enslaved nation. Both of those stories are true. However, which version we choose to tell on Seder night and to pass down to the next generation is not a simple matter. Is Judaism ultimately about cultivating theological purity leading to refined moral behavior that was workshopped within the framework of a family - Bereishit? Or perhaps Judaism is really a call for redemption by an Omnipotent creator who gifts a nation with a complex tapestry of laws - Shemot.

The Haggadah requires us to recite both paragraphs but privileges Shmuel’s answer by putting it first. How we choose to tell the story of our People reflects our ideal image of the People. When we tell a story of redemption from slavery, we are offering a model to the world of what redemption might look like. A story that moves from idolatry to monotheism reflects a more inward direction about our view of the Jewish People

How we each choose to tell our own personal story also reflects how we want to be perceived in the world. When you first meet someone, do you share your family makeup before or after your professional commitments? Are you a doctor who lives with your two children or a mother of two who practices medicine? Of course our identities are always multi-faceted and which piece we choose to foreground might change in different scenarios.

The debate between Rav and Shmuel is mirrored by another, much earlier, debate between Isaiah and Ezekiel. These two prophets deeply disagree about what the end of history will look like. If the Talmud debates the beginning of the story of the Jewish People, the Navi debates the eschaton, or the end of Jewish history. Both Isaiah and Ezekiel outline visions for a time known as “אַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים - the end of days” (See Isaiah 2:2 and Ezekiel 38:16). However, these two prophecies represent the “end of days” in opposing ways.

In Isaiah’s vision, the nations of the world come up to the “Mountain of God” to encounter the Divine presence at the Temple in Jerusalem. At that moment “Torah will proceed forth from Zion.”

ישעיהו פרק ב

א הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר חָזָה יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ בֶן אָמוֹץ עַל יְהוּדָה וְיִירוּשָׁלַם. ב וְהָיָה בְאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים יָכֹן יְהוָה הָרַב בֵּית יְהוָה בְּרֹאשׁ הַהָרִים וְנִשָּׂא מִגְבָּעוֹת וְנִהְרֹוּ אֵלָיו כָּל הַגּוֹיִם. ג וְהָלְכוּ עַמִּים רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ לֵכּוּ וְנַעֲלֶה אֶל הָרַב יְהוָה אֶל בֵּית אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וְיִרְנֹוּ מִדְּרָכָיו וְנִלְכָּה בְּאַרְחֹתָיו כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וְדָבַר יְהוָה מִיִּירוּשָׁלַם. ד וְשָׁפַט בֵּין הַגּוֹיִם וְהוֹכִיחַ לַעַמִּים רַבִּים וְכָתַתּוּ חֲרָבוֹתָם לְאַתִּים וְחֲנִיתוֹתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמָרוֹת לֹא יִשָּׂא גּוֹי אֶל גּוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה.

Isaiah Chapter 2

1 The word that Isaiah the son of Amotz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. **2** And it shall come to pass in the **end of days**, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. **3** And many peoples shall go and say: 'Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and God will teach us of God’s ways, and we will walk in God’s paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. **4** And God shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah’s vision is quite inspiring: something that we can all daven for in hopes that one day truly nations will no longer learn war anymore. We recount this prayer every time the Torah is taken out of the Aron in shul. Ezekiel’s vision for the end of days, however, is much less peaceful. He describes the end of days as a war of nations. That Gog from Magog will march on the Jewish People, killing many of us, only to ultimately be thwarted by Divine might.

יחזקאל פרק לח

יֵד לְכֹן הַנִּבָּא בֶן אָדָם וְאָמַרְתָּ לְגוֹג כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנִי יְהוָה הֲלוֹא בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה בְּשָׁבַת עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַטֵּחַ תִּדְעֵה. יו וּבָאתָ מִמִּקְוֶמְךָ מִיַּרְכְּתִי צָפוֹן אֶתְּהָ וְעַמִּים רַבִּים אֶתְּךָ רֹכְבֵי סוּסִים כָּלֵם קָהָל גָּדוֹל וְחִיל רַב. יז וְעָלִיתָ עַל עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּעֵנָן לְכַסּוֹת הָאָרֶץ בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים תִּהְיֶה וְהַבְּאוֹתֶיךָ עַל־אֶרֶץ לְמַעַן דַּעַת הַגּוֹיִם אֶתִּי בְּהַקְדִּשִׁי בְּךָ לְעֵינֵיהֶם גּוֹג... יח וְהָיָה בַיּוֹם הַהוּא בַיּוֹם בּוֹא גּוֹג עַל אֶדְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל נָאֻם אֲדֹנִי יְהוָה תַּעֲלֶה חֲמַתִּי בְּאַפִּי. יט וּבִקְנֹאתִי בְּאֵשׁ עֲבָרְתִּי דִּבַּרְתִּי אִם לֹא בַיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה רַעַשׁ גָּדוֹל עַל אֶדְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל. כ וְרַעַשׁוּ מִפְּנֵי דְגֵי הַיָּם וְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְחַיֵּית הַשָּׂדֶה וְכָל הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׁ עַל הָאֲדָמָה וְכָל הָאֲדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וְנִהְרְסוּ הַהָרִים וְנִפְּלוּ הַמִּדְבָּרוֹת וְכָל חוֹמָה לְאָרֶץ תִּפּוֹל. כא וְקִרְאתִי עָלָיו לְכָל הָרִי חֶרֶב נָאֻם אֲדֹנִי יְהוָה חֶרֶב אִישׁ בְּאֶחָיו תִּהְיֶה. כב וְנִשְׁפָּטְתִּי אֹתוֹ בְּדֶבֶר וּבָדָם וּגְשָׁם שׁוֹטֵף וְאֲבִי אֶלְגָּבִישׁ אֵשׁ וּגְפָרִית אֲמִטִּיר עָלָיו וְעַל אֶגְפָּיו וְעַל עַמִּים רַבִּים אֲשֶׁר אֹתוֹ. כג וְהִתְגַּדַּלְתִּי וְהִתְקַדַּשְׁתִּי וְנִודַעְתִּי לְעֵינֵי גּוֹיִם רַבִּים וְיָדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה.

Ezekiel Chapter 38

Pesach Companion 2019

Maharat is the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy.
www.yeshivatmaharat.org 718-796-0590



14 Therefore, son of man, prophesy, and say unto Gog: Thus saith the Lord God: In that day when My people Israel dwells safely, shalt thou not know it? **15** And thou shalt come from thy place out of the uttermost parts of the north, you, and many peoples with thee, all of them riding upon horses, a great company and a mighty army; **16** and thou shalt come up against My people Israel, as a cloud to cover the land; it shall be in the **end of days**, and I will bring thee against My land, that the nations may know Me, when I shall be sanctified through thee, O Gog, before their eyes...**18** And it shall come to pass in that day, when Gog shall come against the land of Israel, saith the Lord God, that My fury shall arise up in My nostrils. **19** For in My jealousy and in the fire of My wrath have I spoken: Surely in that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel; **20** so that the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the field and all creeping things that creep upon the ground, and all the men that are upon the face of the earth, shall shake at My presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground. **21** And I will call for a sword against him throughout all my mountains, saith the Lord GOD; every man's sword shall be against his brother. **22** And I will plead against him with pestilence and with blood; and I will cause to rain upon him, and upon his bands, and upon the many peoples that are with him, an overflowing shower, and great hailstones, fire, and brimstone. **23** Thus will I magnify Myself, and sanctify Myself, and I will make Myself known in the eyes of many nations; and they shall know that I am the Lord.

The two competing prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel can be understood as echoing the debate of Rav and Shmuel. If the story begins with Avraham in the idolatrous home of his father Terach (Rav), then it ends with Isaiah's vision of Torah coming forth from Jerusalem. If our collective narrative begins as an oppressed people suffering at the hands of the wicked Egyptians who must be punished for their behavior (Shmuel), then the conclusion is a war to end all wars.

The beauty of the Tanach and the Hagadda is that the answer is both/and instead of either/or. We don't often think of the Tanach as a pluralistic work, but there are occasions in which this divine work codifies multiple competing ideas. The pluralism of the Tanach and the Haggada reminds us to pray for Isaiah's vision and also prepare for Ezekiel's eventuality.

What are the implications for our Sedarim? One of the most effective tools for the transmission of values from one generation to the next is the family dinner table. The Rabbis understood the power of sharing the family's story while sitting around a table that has been set in advance and has snacks and enough food for everyone. The core Mitzvah on Seder night is "וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ" - and you shall teach your children."

The Hagadda, like the Tanach, codifies both starting points of the story. We are never really forced to make a decision between Rav and Shmuel, Bereshit and Shemot, or Slaves and Idolaters. Instead, the Rabbis stitched the two stories together to force us to grapple with both narratives. If you are blessed to have two, three or even four generations at your Seder this year, I encourage you to ask the following question to each generation: How would you tell your own Jewish story?

Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, Rosh HaYeshiva of Maharat, has served as a congregational rabbi and faculty member of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Florence Melton Adult Education School, Drisha Institute, and Hadar. Rabbi Fox is a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute. Visit www.roshyeshivatmaharat.org to read his latest shiurim.

