



Get Up and Go: Avraham and Pesach

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Pesach is above all a celebration of a journey-- in particular, the beginning of a journey. Not only that, but the journey itself seems far more important in many ways than its end: the description of the journey covers four books of the Torah, while the end – the arrival in the land of Israel – isn't even recorded in the Torah itself, which leaves the people of Israel in the plains of Moav.

In contrast to the journey, the arrival is described in much more muted terms in Sefer Yehoshua. There's a small-scale replay of the highlights of the Exodus – the crossing of the Red Sea is paralleled by the crossing of the Jordan; Moshe's encounter at the burning bush is mirrored by Yehoshua's brief meeting with the leader of the heavenly army; and finally three brief verses record that Pesach is celebrated for the first time in the new land, followed by the cessation of the manna, the quintessential travel food. End of journey in five chapters, rather than four books – and in some ways, end of story.

But the 40-year journey was the exciting part – that's where we coalesce as a nation, encounter God at Mount Sinai, receive the Torah, make drastic mistakes with drastic consequences. In the limbo of the desert, the empty landscape through which we travel, there are no distractions from the people's central task: learning how to live as God's people, digesting the rules and testing the rules, becoming a holy people rather than a rabble of runaway slaves. It's also a time of intense relationship with God – when the prophet Jeremiah [2: 2] speaks of this journey, he tells us that God remembers it as a love story: 'I remember your youthful devotion, the love of your bridal days, how you followed Me through the wilderness through a land unsown'— a metaphor that was taken up and woven into an exquisite sequence in the midrash on both Shemot and Shir Hashirim.

Journeys isolate you from the mundane, take you away from what is familiar, stimulate you with new experiences, confront you with unexpected challenges, and, inevitably, throw you together with your travelling companions, deepening and strengthening your relationship. The Exodus is such a journey, but it's not the only foundational journey in the Torah. In the only book that doesn't deal directly with *yetziat mitsrayim* – Bereshit – we have the traveller *par excellence* of the Torah: Avraham.

Avraham is described as an *ivri*, someone who is *over* – crossing over (dare I say 'passing over'?) from one place to another; in other words, journeying. He never comes to rest: even when he reaches the promised land, he continues to travel – all the way to Egypt and back again to the land of Canaan. What is more, he starts the journey himself: for reasons that the Torah does not record, he leaves his native city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia with his family and travels to Haran, now in Turkey – a distance of about 1,000 miles. It's only after he gets to Haran that God speaks to him, to tell him above all to continue the journey: *lekh lekha*

The Torah notes that Avraham was 75 when he started travelling again at God's command, inspiring the midrashic rabbis to speculate on his earlier life: Why on earth would God choose to speak to this

particular man, with no apparent credentials or spectacular exploits? Why did Avraham move from Ur to Haran in the first place? Why does God tell him to move again? A rich tapestry of midrashic traditions charts a parallel, spiritual journey that matches Avraham's physical travels: the Yemenite midrashic tradition imagines him moving through various philosophical positions until he discovers the one true God by the light of his intellect; *Bereshit Rabba* imagines him having to leave Ur in a hurry after revealing the emptiness and immorality of King Nimrod's cynical idolatry.

In all the accounts, Avraham is characterized by a deep *emunah*, an absolute trust in God, even though he has not yet experienced a direct encounter with God. Once he has proved himself, God spurs him on to the next stage, the journey that will perfect him and lead him to achieve his true potential. Rashi comments on the words *lekh lekha*: 'Go for your benefit and your good: there I will make you into a great nation, but here you will not merit to have children. And also so that I can make your nature known in the world.' Avraham's journey will benefit both him and the rest of the world, bringing universal blessing. And of course his story ends with another *lekh lekha* command from God, this time to travel to yet another unknown destination, a mountain in the land of Moriah, with his son Yitshak.

There are several points of similarity between Avraham's career and the Pesach story, as indeed the Hagadah notes: we start the story twice, first with our life as slaves in Egypt (at *avadim hayinu*), and then reaching back to Avraham at *mitechilah ovdei avodah zarah hayu avotenu*. *Bereshit Rabba* notes that Avraham's journey to Egypt, impelled by a famine in Canaan, parallels the migration of Jacob and his sons to Egypt, also spurred by famine, and that Avraham's return, enriched by gifts from Pharaoh to compensate for taking Sarah, parallels the triumphal exit of the Israelites in *yetziat mitzrayim*, when they depart laden with gold and silver from the Egyptians.

The link is at its most intense in the episode of the *berit bein habetarim*, the covenant between the pieces: not only does God tell Avraham of the future sufferings and deliverance of his descendants from Egypt, but the strange vision of a burning light passing between the matched pieces of the offerings is reminiscent both of the crossing of the Red Sea and the pillar of fire that leads the Israelites on their journey. Avraham is the pioneer, the model traveller whose journeys are replicated and echoed in the Exodus.

Time to turn back to Pesach, and to think how we can integrate the example of Avraham in our own Pesach journeys. I think that we need many of his qualities if we are to make a true crossing over of our own at Pesach, escaping from the slavery of familiar routine into a new stage in our self-transformation, from complacent slaves to free people who serve God. Avraham was prepared to leave all familiarities behind and venture into the unknown in order to walk before God; he was quick to rescue those in trouble, like his kidnapped nephew Lot, or to stand up and argue with God on behalf of complete strangers, like the people of Sodom. He didn't ignore the people among whom he travelled but showed them hospitality, even though he was the traveller, foreshadowing the blessing that God told him would come to the world through him and his descendants. Do we really take that part of the journey as seriously as we might? Do we tend to see Pesach as a commemoration of the past rather than as a challenge to move onwards and change things?

In this context, we might also remember that Nisan, the month of Pesach, is a serious contender for New Year. In the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 10b), Rabbi Eliezer argues for Tishrei, but Rabbi Yehoshua favours Nisan. The two new years have different flavours: while Tishrei is a time for



spiritual introspection and inner striving for improvement, Nisan is a time of action and making a difference in the world around us. Perhaps this Pesach we can keep Avraham's qualities in mind, and resolve to start this new year, this new journey, by daring to move into unfamiliar territory, striving to bring justice, hope, and freedom to all those who need them, and building on our own national experience to spread blessing in its most concrete form to the entire world.

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