

Passover: A Holiday of Nostalgia

Rabbi Schatz - Pesach VII 2025

Nostalgia is the amalgam of two Greek words, nostos, which means going home, and algos, which means pain. Thought often as a love for the past, but in fact, it is much more insidious. Turning backwards is itself a traumatic process.¹

Exodus 13:17 Beshalah

וַיְהִי בְשַׁלַּח פַּרְעֹה אֶת־הָעָם וְלֹא־נָחַם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פִּלְשְׁתִּים כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא כִּי אָמַר
אֱלֹהִים כֹּן־יִנָּחֵם הָעָם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִמָּה:

Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt."

Nostalgia pulls us backward. It is emotionally satisfying and perhaps even at times uplifting. But it is also a drug that quickly becomes toxic. Why? Because we mistakenly believe that the past is known and the future uncertain.

Exodus 16:3 (not in Shabbat reading)

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי־יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד־יְהוָה בָּאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבְתֵּנוּ עַל־סִיר הַבָּשָׂר בְּאֶמְלֵנוּ
לֶחֶם לְשֹׁבַע כִּי־הוֹצֵאתָם אֶתְנוּ אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְהָמִית אֶת־כָּל־הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה בָּרָעָב:

The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of יהוה in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death."

Nostalgia always involves pain. It is possible to yearn for the past, but one can never hope for it. Hope is reserved for what will be, that bright light shining forth, guiding our way into tomorrow.

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<https://www.rabbimarckatz.com/blog/2017/7/14/the-problem-with-nostalgia-parashat-pinchas>

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Excerpts from Haggadah

וְהָיָא שְׁעֻמְדָּה לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ. שְׁלֹא אֶחָד בְּלִבָּד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, אֲלָא שְׁבָכֵל דּוֹר וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקְדּוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מֵיָדָם.

And this [promise] is what has stood by our ancestors and us; for it was not only one person who rose up to destroy us: in every single generation people rise up to destroy us – But The Holy One, saves us from their hands

שְׁנֵאמַר, לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת יוֹם צֵאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ. יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ הַיָּמִים. כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ הַלֵּילוֹת. וְחֻכָּמִים אוֹמְרִים יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ לְהָבִיא לִיְמוֹת הַמָּשִׁיחַ:

It is written, “SO THAT YOU REMEMBER THE DAY OF YOUR EXODUS FROM EGYPT ALL THE DAYS OF YOUR LIFE.” “The days of your life” would mean in the days; “all the days of your life” includes the nights. But the sages say, “The days of your life” would mean only in this world; “all the days of your life” brings in the time of the Messiah.

Nostalgic for a time that felt free and yet we sit in a world of imagining we are slaves

הָרִי אָנוּ וּבְנֵינוּ וּבְנֵי בְנֵינוּ מְשַׁעֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם. וְאַפִּילוּ כָּלֵנוּ חֻכָּמִים כָּלֵנוּ גִבּוֹרִים כָּלֵנוּ זִקְנִים כָּלֵנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מְצוּהָ עָלֵינוּ לִסְפֹּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם. וְכָל הַמִּרְבֵּה לִסְפֹּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם הָרִי זֶה מְשַׁבַּח.

עַבְדִּים הָיִינוּ: then we, and our children, and the children of our children, would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. And even were we all wise, all intelligent, all aged and all knowledgeable in the Torah, still the command would be upon us to tell of the coming out of Egypt; and the more one tells of the coming out of Egypt, the more admirable it is.

Shared Memories

Reconnecting with Identity

Finding Meaning in Change