

# Echoes of Eden

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### The Dignity of Mitzvot

The time for redemption had arrived. The Jews would be leaving Egypt at last – whether because the pre-ordained period of enslavement had come to an end, or because their situation had become so intolerable that God felt they could not remain in exile any longer. For one reason or the other, God decreed that the time had come to fulfill His covenant with Avraham. The time for the Exodus had arrived.

At this critical juncture, before the Children of Israel begin the next chapter in their history, something transpires that seems, to modern eyes, commonplace or self-evident, yet at this point in history is quite rare: God gives the Israelites commandments, mitzvot. In time, mitzvot will become a major aspect of the relationship between God and man, but up until this point in history, God has not dictated specific behaviors to mankind, with only a few very notable exceptions. The commandments, as a corpus of law, will be given at Mount Sinai months later - forging a new relationship between the Jewish People and God based on a covenant of observance. Why, then, does God deem it necessary to issue commandments prior to the Exodus, prior to the Revelation at Sinai? Why the urgency to take time and attention away from the busy events of the plagues and give Moshe and Aharon commandments to share with the people, commandments to be performed on the very eve of the Exodus?

The Passover Haggadah quotes a verse from the Book of Yechezkel (Ezekiel 16:7) in which the Jewish People at the time of the Exodus is compared to a young woman who is “fully developed” but completely naked. The meaning

of this image is often lost on readers from societies that are either puritanical or over-sexed – or , like our own society, both. This verse is not about sex or the female body per se; it is an expression of self-conscious humiliation. The verse describes a young woman who has come of age and begins to experience the self-awareness of her own body, only to find herself exposed, publicly humiliated by her own nakedness.

What is the Haggadah trying to teach us? At the point of the Exodus, the Jews were coming of age as a nation, but at the same time they became acutely aware of their spiritual nakedness. They felt unworthy of redemption. They maintained the collective memory of the covenant with Avraham and the promise of their great destiny, but at the same time they felt that they were undeserving beneficiaries of God's

contractual obligation to their ancestors. In Egypt, the Jews had failed to live up to Avraham's legacy. They had not effectively spread monotheism. In fact, rabbinic tradition tells us that they had neglected the covenant between God and Avraham by failing to circumcise their sons. Even worse, as they morphed from an extended family into a distinct nation, the niche they had carved out was not based upon their singular beliefs or practices, nor upon their unique moral stance in the face of the corruption of Egypt, but rather as a people who could not be trusted, the quintessential outsiders who survived by exploiting the host society. How had they earned this distasteful reputation? Was it their business practices, or did the Egyptians cultivate the Israelites' "other-ness" for their own purposes, resorting to the same accusations that have been wielded against the Jews throughout history as justification to exploit and abuse them?

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Whatever the reasons for their sense of humiliation, the imagery used by the Hagaddah communicates an almost crippling sense of vulnerability and self-loathing. And at that very moment of crushing self-awareness, God steps in and performs an act of kindness: He gives the Israelites commandments. He engages them, makes a gesture that will allow them to express their desire for spirituality and for self-actualization. He gives them the means to regain their dignity, and to make them feel worthy of redemption. The commandments are to serve as a proverbial cloak with which God helps them cover their nakedness. By giving them commandments, God performs an act of love and respect, and allows them to respond in kind.

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The purpose of mitzvot – all the commandments, and not only those given to the nation of slaves struggling to find their identity - is to give man dignity, to give us an active role in defining our personal and communal identity and destiny, to give purpose and worth to our lives and to help us feel worthy of our relationship with God. The commandments do the impossible: They allow limited, finite man to have a relationship with an infinite God.

God's gesture of kindness and compassion lies at the heart of our relationship with Him, as well as our interpersonal relationships: The underlying principle of our treatment of others is the compassion we learn from God Himself. This tenet of our faith may be most clearly discerned in the laws of charity (tzedakah). We are taught that the highest level of tzedakah is to give a person in need a job. The real gift of tzedakah is not dollars and cents; it is the restoration of self-worth, the rehabilitation of our fellow man to a place of dignity. This, we are taught, is true hesed; this is how we emulate God.

As the Children of Israel stood on the cusp of redemption, they lacked critical elements of freedom: self-awareness and dignity. To be truly free, they had to move past the feeling that they were unworthy of redemption. To return to Yechezkel's metaphor, God offered this maiden, now fully-grown, beautiful, regal clothing; in an act of love and respect, God extended lavish adornments to help her overcome her humiliating nakedness, and at the same time expressed a special intimacy. He helped her see herself as worthy of His love, before carrying her off into the desert to begin their new life together. In a gesture of kindness and generosity, God gave us mitzvot to clothe us and adorn us, to make us feel special, beautiful - and worthy of His love. This is why some commentators see the root of the word mitzvah not in the word tzivuy, "command", but rather in tzavta – "togetherness." This is the sentiment expressed in the subsequent verses of Yechezkel's metaphor: After describing the maiden's humiliation, the verses continue: "I came to you and saw you, and behold, it was your time, the time for love. I spread the hem of my cloak over you and covered your nakedness; I made a promise to you and entered into a covenant with you, [by the] word of the Almighty God - and you became Mine."

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/12/audio-and-essays-parashat-bo.html>