

Temple Aliyah
Shavuot 2016 Sermon Slam
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Spending quite a bit of time lately in shul provides me with many opportunities to listen and read our Chumash, Etz Hayim. I am struck by how often Adonai refers to the liberation of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. Why is this necessary – would the Israelites possibly have forgotten their journey out of Egypt – the spectacle of hundreds of thousands of people walking at once leaving Egypt – think about what that would look like and how long it would take (it takes 1.5 hours for approximately 30,000 runners to cross the starting line at the Boston Marathon, so if there were indeed close to 2,000,000 people leaving Egypt– the torah suggests 600,000 men which would translate into close to 2,000,000 people – your talking over 4 days (100 hours to be precise) to get out of Egypt at a marathon pace, everyone is running, everyone is a trained athlete and there are no children and oldsters, no one carrying a thing – that matzah can really slow you down! This is simply not an event one would expect to forget. Were the people feeble minded, not paying attention?

One explanation might be that the generation leaving Egypt will never make it to the Promised Land, new generations are being born all the time during the 40 year sojourn in the desert who were not themselves liberated from Egypt, who might therefor not know about this event and who had to be told.

I think that the placement of the phrase is significant and may provide an explanation for its frequent use-

Exodus 20:2 Deuteronomy 5:6– At the beginning of the ten commandments there is this phrase - I am the lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. The Ten Commandments lead off with the reminder of the freedom that Adonai bestowed on the Israelites. So, the commandments - the bedrock rules of right and wrong – are coupled with the reminder of what Adonai has done for the Israelites. Remember what I have done for you – now this is the code that you will follow.

Leviticus 11:45 – For I the Lord am he who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God: you shall be holy for I am holy. According to commentary in Etz Hayim, achieving holiness is the highest level of human behavior. One of the most important attributes that Jews should strive for is

coupled with the reminder of what Adonai has done for the Israelites.
Remember what I have done for you- now this is how you should behave

Leviticus 19:36-37 – I the lord am your God who freed you from the land of Egypt. You shall faithfully observe and obey all of my rules. This sentence appears at the end of Chapter 19 of K'Doshim after Adonai has announced a myriad of rules that form a moral code of conduct for the new nation to live by. This code of conduct is coupled with the reminder of what Adonai has done for the Israelites. Remember what I have done for you- now this is how you will conduct yourselves.

Leviticus 26:13 – I the Lord am your god who brought you out for the land of the Egyptians to be slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. Adonai describes a lengthy list of positive things that will happen to the people if his laws are observed, concluding the list by reminding the people of their freedom from Egypt by the hand of Adonai and then launching into a parade of horrors if these laws are not followed.

Many – some might say all - of the most important rules of conduct for the Israelites– how the people are to comport themselves as a new nation - are coupled with the reminder that Adonai brought them out from Egypt.

In Egypt, the Israelites were compelled to do whatever pharaoh required, had no free will and received nothing in return for their efforts save the most basic of necessities. Freed from bondage after 400 years and what happens - Adonai imposes all kinds of restrictions and codes and requirements on behavior. Why would the people be willing to accept all these rules and restrictions having just been freed from bondage? Might they not reasonably conclude that they have simply exchanged one form of bondage for another? Moreover, unlike Pharaoh, a living breathing person that you see every day, threatening and imposing his will upon you , Adonai is not physically visible and is based on faith, so why bother following all these new rules on faith? Hence the reminder - Adonai brought you out of Egypt, out of bondage where you had suffered for 400 years and provided you with freedom, freedom that was provided initially without rules or requirements. Adonai first proved his commitment to the people. The people were then asked to make commitments in return but in order to persuade them to do so, Adonai had to first remind them of the most important event in their then brief history which was the foundation of everything that was to come – that Adonai was not pharaoh compelling

behavior and imposing his will but was instead part of a reciprocal relationship
– I freely do for you and you for me.