

Pesach Drasha 5775- Storytelling and Freedom  
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The *Sefat Emet* (Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847–1905) says that when we call *matzah lehem oni* (להם עוני), the bread of affliction, it also means the bread which we respond to with many stories

(שעונין עליו הרבה). (p.106)

This equivalence between *lehem oni* and the bread that stimulates storytelling, fits into our understanding of the centrality of the mitzvah of telling the story of leaving Egypt. The Haggadah relates that the more one tells the story, the more praiseworthy one is.

We make sense of ourselves as individuals- and our various circles of family, tribal and national belonging- through the stories we tell. On Pesach we tell the story of our development as a people. Like all humans, we can tell stories that support life and move us forward and upward, towards possibility and opportunity. Or conversely, we can tell stories that keep us constrained and anxious, stories that create enmity and chasms within ourselves and between us and other people, in our nation and in other nations. We have responsibility for the effects of the stories we tell.

The *Sefat Emet* further explains that every mitzvah gives strength to the limbs and actions involved in that particular mitzvah. For example, we learn that whoever carried the Holy Ark, was in fact *carried by it*. In a similar way, the telling of a story transforms our speech. This healing is so profound, the *Sefat Emet* claims, that through the praiseworthy, superlative telling of the story of leaving Egypt, one's mouth in fact becomes an uncharacteristically overflowing well of unanticipated stories. Through the practice of telling the Exodus story we unleash stories we didn't know we knew, stories that transcend our habits and patterns, stories that give us new ways to see our lives and the world. Through telling stories we not only *tell* a new story, but we also *become* part of a new story. We *become* a new story.

Our individual and collective freedom is based on our capacity to experience wholeness. By integrating the shadow aspects of ourselves- those universal human aspects that we have not yet acknowledged- we move towards our freedom.

In their groundbreaking article "Education and the Dangerous Memories of Historical Trauma: Narratives of Pain, Narratives of Hope" Michalinos Zembylas and Zvi Bekerman argue that "dangerous memories", memories that could cause animosity and re-inscribe enmity between people can get rechanneled to serve as bridges between peoples and markers of a shared humanity. The key differential in rechanneling "dangerous memories" is our capacity to become witnesses to the suffering of the "other". Instead of positioning our own story in opposition to others, or trying to defend ourselves, we can listen to their story and open our heart to their suffering. We become witnesses of our own story and this honor in which we hold and respect our own story becomes the fertile ground in which we can hold others' stories.

When we tell the stories around our seder table, mixed inside the experience of every telling is the *witnessing* of the stories we are telling. And each witnessing gives birth to new stories.

Last Friday, at the Freedom Seder at Hulot Detention Center for Asylum Seekers in Southern Israel, a leader of the Darfuri people in Israel said that he believes in Jewish values and is grateful for what Israel did in the beginning to welcome him and his people. He is hopeful that Israel will change its policy on the Detention Center in accordance with Jewish values. He said he believes in Jewish values and has so much faith in the Jewish people, because it is our birthright to understand the plight of the stranger. While he was in Khartoum, many years ago, on Yom Hashoah he heard that Jews in Washington DC were the first to call what was happening in Darfur genocide. That recognition, that naming, changed his life. I saw in that moment what a difference we can make to each other. Our lives change when we witness the story of others. On the way home I was sure to repeat that story to my children and to remind them what a difference we can make to someone's life. I told them that they made a difference to someone's life simply by showing up. That's what people told us - it mattered to them that we were there, that we had travelled far to show they were not forgotten.

As the *Sefat Emet* says, as we keep speaking more and more about freedom and leaving Egypt, we become an overflowing well of new stories, making new connections and unforeseen healing and transformation. May it be Your Will!