

WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE CELEBRATING HERE?

Obviously, we are celebrating our Exodus from Egypt and the dramatic demonstration of signs and wonders preceding that earth-shaking event. The Haggadah states clearly:

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but HaShem our God took us out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... The more one recounts the Exodus, the more praiseworthy s/he is.

This is clear! Yet coinciding with this momentous redemption are other equally significant milestones that we traversed as a people.

The Birthday of Keneset Yisrael (the Mystical Body of Israel)

The Jewish people have two birthdays, at least according to the Ari's interpretation of the Talmudic debate concerning when to celebrate our New Year.

R. Eliezer says the world was created in the month of Tishrei [on Rosh HaShana]. **R. Yoshua disagrees. He says the world was created in the month of Nissan** [the month of Pesach] (TB RH 11a). **The Ari resolves the dispute by clarifying that in Tishrei the *thought* of creation arose in the mind of God while on Nissan it was embodied as a physical entity** [Ari, *Shaar HaKavvanot*, RH *drush* 1; see Afikoman teaching in Appendix from Pesach 2013].

The Ari asserts that the first Seder night marked the conception of Keneset Yisrael, and then, seven days later, the parted sea served as our birth canal. The waters “broke,” we passed through and were born as a people on the other side.

Yet that seems like an impossibly short gestation period with only one week between conception and birth. The explanation is that if we define conception as the point when a soul first contacts a body, then there are actually several “conceptions” in every pregnancy. According to Kabbalah, the initial conception takes place when the *nefesh* enters

the zygote, the fertilized egg, and it ignites with life. Then forty days later the second conception occurs when the embryo becomes a fetus and the *ruach* enters. Finally, the *neshama* enters when the child's head first appears in the birth canal (called crowning). This last conception (the *neshama* conception) is what occurred for us on Pesach (as a people).

The Nation of Israel was (metaphorically) conceived by Avraham and Sarah, floated through the fallopian tube with Yitzchak and Rivka, implanted in the womb of *Egypt* when Yaakov descended there with his seventy souls, and gestated for 210 years until our birth pangs began with the first plague (in Tammuz). The contractions lasted ten months and, finally, our *neshama* integrated at midnight when we “crowned” on Pesach eve (with the tenth plague, the death of the firstborns, corresponding to the *sefrah* of *keter*/crown). But the next day we receded back into the womb and were only finally delivered six days later, on the seventh night of Pesach, at midnight, when we passed through the parted sea.

As below so above. A child is born with a soul that contains all the consciousness it is going to absorb in the course of its days. Yet only the lowest edge actually integrates then. The newborn's body and personality are too small to hold the *neshama*'s vast profusion of lights. And so it was for Knesset Yisrael on that first Pesach eve. Our collective *neshama* touched ground that fateful night, and every subsequent year on our birthday, the next increment of this *neshama* comes down and begins to actualize. This applies both to our collective self and to each of us individually. (See diagram on p. 13 above)

According to Kabbalah, the parent's intention at the time of union exerts a profound impact on the vital/animal soul of the child then conceived. The *nefesh chiyunit* (vital/animal soul) is the contact point for the *neshama*, and a child's quality of life will depend (to a large extent) on the compatibility between these two layers of soul, a feature affected by the parents' *kavanot* at conception. And so it goes, on a mini-scale, year after year. The intentions we bring to our Pesach Seder will affect the ease with which our new increment of *neshama*

will integrate its lights and wisdoms into our life this coming year. The entire Seder maximizes our positive impact in this matter.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah of Adam HaRishon

Kabbalah informs us that until Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the lowest level of reality was the mental plane, which means that the creatures of *Gan Eden* were more like thought forms or, in the language of Kabbalah, light-bodies. Opacity only appeared in the aftermath of their sin. In this light, the Talmud informs us that the Adam of *Gan Eden* a term indicating both Adam *and* Chava—spanned from heaven to earth and from one end of the world to the other. This first *Adam* (called Adam HaRishon) contained the entire universe within his/her/its bounds. When Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, reality shattered into a myriad of pieces, each of which became the soul of one of us. Yet, really, there is still only one Adam, and we are all just cells—soul-cells—in that universe-encompassing expanse. But because our souls collapsed in the upheaval, our minds narrowed so we cannot see the forest for the trees anymore.

This means that—although we are unaware of it—the entire Exodus odyssey is happening *inside* the psyche of this universe-encompassing *Adam* of whom we are a part. This whole action-packed story—where HaShem (via Moshe) confronts Pharaoh and demands that he let the Children of Israel go, the plagues that ensue, and eventually the mass Exodus—is actually the bar/bat mitzvah of this universe-encompassing *Adam*. This is the point when humanity acquires enough impulse control to uphold a code of ethics.

Before the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah a child's frontal lobe is not sufficiently developed to resist the powerful drives emanating from the brainstem urging him or her toward immediate gratification. It is the Bar/Bat Mitzvah that marks a quantum shift in the psyche's balance of power. Until then the ego rules and decisions always prioritize its hankering for creature comforts. The *neshama* matures slowly. Only at Bar/Bat Mitzvah does it muster the strength to challenge the ego and incorporate more God-centered values into our choices.

This is precisely what happened on a cosmic scale at the Exodus, with Pharaoh representing the ego and Moshe representing the *neshama's* coming of age and contesting the ego's repressive regime. As below (within an individual) so above (with Pharaoh representing humanity's collective ego)- the *neshama's* goal is not to liquidate the ego but to subdue it, enlighten it, and eventually incorporate its valued perspective within the steering committee.¹⁴

The whole point of the plagues was to burn into the ego's nerve net the deep knowing that crime doesn't pay, and that resisting spiritual law *always* hurts more than it achieves. The repetition of defiance and plague, defiance and plague, eventually sunk in.⁶

All this happened *inside* the psyche of our cosmic *Adam* when Moshe overpowered Pharaoh, *Adam's* conscience (or Divine soul) surpassed his ego (or vital/animal soul) instigating the shift called Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The world could now receive the Torah (which it did fifty days later on Shavuot), for it possessed the strength of character (embodied as the Nation of Israel) to fulfill the Torah's commands despite the ego's resistance to being told what to do. The Jewish people, as the inner soul core of this cosmic *Adam*, accepted the Torah along with its global mission to bring the principles of ethical monotheism to the world. Just as we, from the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, gradually integrate our higher ideals into our vital/animal soul until, over time, our instinctive response to the world coincides with spiritual law, so is this true for the cosmic *Adam*, whose vital/animal soul includes all the peoples and creatures of the world, and whose life span includes the last 6,000 years of history.

This describes the intra-psychoic shift, where the cortex can now override the brainstem. Kabbalistically, this is what it means to "cross the river," which is the literal definition of *Ivri* (Hebrew), for HaShem identified Avraham, the first Jew, as the one who "crossed the river."

Your fathers used to live on the other side of the river...And I took your father Avraham across the river, and I led him through the whole land of Canaan. (Joshua 24:3)

וַאֲקַח אֶת אֲבִיכֶם אֶת אַבְרָהָם מֵעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר וְאוֹלַךְ אוֹתוֹ בְּכָל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

On one side of the river is *Mitzrayim* (literally, narrow straits) where the ego subjugates the divine soul. On the other side of the river is the land of the *Ivrim* (the river-crossers) who possess the maturity to constrain their primal drives, enabling them to uphold a moral code. This is what it means to be free.

And so, when we say *Kiddush* tonight, as we do on every Shabbat and festival, we say: *zecher l'yetziyat Mitzrayim* “in remembrance of our exodus from Egypt” because our whole system of ritual, morality, and obligation rests on the assumption that we can constrain our ego-driven impulses and choose instead to do the ethical thing.