

The Covenant of Common Destiny: The Leap of Solidarity

■ by Rabbi David Hartman

On Passover Jews say, "We were slaves." We were objects exploited by Pharaoh; and there is talk about a common suffering, a shared pain. We had no Law, no Torah in the first Passover; there was only a common suffering. Joseph Soloveitchik called that kind of suffering "*brit goral*," the **covenant of destiny**. This constitutes a bold statement concerning what Passover may mean.

Some might imagine faith to mean an inner transformation; a leap into God. Judaism, however, does not begin with a leap of faith, nor even with a leap of commitment to mitzvah. Rather than with a spiritual transformation of personal identity, Judaism commences with a leap of solidarity, an unmediated empathy with our history.

I cannot emphasize too much how essential this is in order to clarify so much of Western civilization's misunderstanding of Judaism. Judaism begins with an identification with a singular community that has a particular history. It is to say, "I am prepared to go into Egypt and suffer with this people." It is the free and lordly prince Moses saying to slaves, "You are my brothers." It is lining up with the Jews. Whether the line is in Buchenwald, or Egypt, or any other place in history; it is saying, "Your destiny is mine. I share whatever life will give to you. It is my reality. I see no way of being safe if you are threatened." Rejecting the option of trying to save one's own life, Esther came forward. Revealing his Jewish identity to the Egyptians and his family, Joseph remembered his brothers and reentered their lives. The Moses story, the Esther story, and the Joseph story present

individuals who in some way might have been safe alone, but who for some mysterious reason make this choice to be visible as a Jew. "Your history is my history," they tell their family.

What does this have to do with religion? If religion is doctrine, Judaism is not a religion. Jews, without knowing precisely how to define themselves, are a people saying, "For some reason, I cannot be other than with this *mishpacha* (family). Why, I don't know. It is not a family defined by blood; I become part of this people through choice. I share what history and life will give, feeling that there is no option to be outside their struggles."

The sense of being claimed by this people's history is reflected in Maimonides' claim that one who fulfills all the mitzvot but does not share in Israel's joys and sufferings has no share in immortality. (Cf. *MISHNEH TORAH, HILKHOT TESHUVAH III 11*) **Peoplehood is our cathedral**. This is the strange category that makes Jews lonely in Western civilization. We look tribal. We look ethnic. But it is not just that: rather, peoplehood mediates the living God of Israel. One has to be in Egypt first before one can stand at Sinai. Judaism begins neither with the Ten Commandments, nor with a pledge of faith. Rather than with the covenantal experience at Sinai, Judaism begins with the story of slaves in Egypt. I was a slave and God brought me out. I was there. Unless that suffering is my suffering, I have not begun to understand Judaism. That is why a Jew must eat the maror, the bitter herb. It symbolizes this pain of mine.

This is the mystical experience in Judaism. The Jew becomes a mystic not by becoming one with God, but by absorbing the historical drama of this community. **We leap into peoplehood**. This was the most difficult thing to teach to people who came to me to convert to Judaism. To expound about God, Torah, mitzvah, was easy, but the challenge was to help them understand that they have to be like Ruth. "Wherever the Jews go, you go. You are not free. You're totally claimed by Israel's history. I am claimed by these people's dream. I feel I must keep these dreams alive."

My grandparent has to live in what I do. Perhaps this explicates the deep meaning of the resurrection of the dead. I have to fashion a society where my grandparents' dreams have a place. It is not enough to build Israel on the basis of my own dreams. I have to construct in the light of all my zeda's and bubbe's dreams.