

“ויהי שם לגוי” - And There They Became a Nation”

This week we begin the Book of Redemption, *Sefer Shmos*, which recounts our exile in Egypt, our suffering there and the process of our extraction. It continues on to describe our return to our ancestors' great spiritual stature through the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai and the revelation of *Hashem's* presence in the *Mishkan* - Tabernacle. This series of events is summarized in *Sefer Devarim*. When it speaks of our sojourn in Egypt, it identifies the period in Egypt as the one in which we became a nation. Last week, when we concluded the life story of *Yaakov Avinu* and his sons, it closed the period in which we were regarded as a family. In Egypt, we achieved the status of a nation. This seems rather unusual if we consider nationhood in its conventional definition. Nationhood is usually defined as a specific group of people attached to a particular territory and sometimes it includes cultural elements as well. What was it that gave us nationhood in Egypt? It wasn't our homeland and it wasn't our religion since neither *Eretz Yisroel* nor the *Torah* was given to us in Egypt.

In the *Pesach Haggada*, we quote the *Sifri's* interpretation of this verse, “And there they became a nation; this teaches us that the Israelites were distinct there.” This is understood to refer to the fact that Jews in Egypt were distinct in name, dress and language. These seem to be cultural markers and it would seem remarkable to say that this is the sole basis of our nationhood. Would a group of people who adapt a mode of dress and language be identified as a nation or as a subculture of the host nation? There has to be something more behind this distinctiveness that would forge us into a nation.

Our sages speak of our ancestors' faith in *Hashem* and their belief that they would be released from their exile by Him. The *Midrash* speaks of our ancestors gathering on *Shabbos* in Egypt. The Levites, who were exempted from the backbreaking work, would strengthen their spirits by reading to them scrolls handed down from the previous generation which contained the tradition of belief in *Hashem* and His promise of redemption. This infused the Jews with the fortitude to endure and persevere through the horror of the Egyptian cruelty and oppression. It gave them a vision of a future and a different perception of themselves, in opposition to the identity of a lowly caste of subhuman slaves that the Egyptians were constantly imposing on them. In the bleakest periods, they had the ability to see themselves as nobility in a soon-to-end exile, keeping the faith that their true identity would suddenly emerge and be validated by the whole world. This kind of exceptionalism, the ability to define themselves by their potential and destiny, rather than their current misery was expressed through their names, language and dress. They used these to tell themselves and those around them that they are a people of a glorious future and a special role which they would yet play in the world.

Today we have a *Torah* and a land to help maintain our national identity, but we still need this exceptionalism to be the core of our identity. We must believe that we have a special mission and a special future that is much more glorious than anything we have encountered yet. This is why the belief in *Mashiach* and our role in a perfect world are so central to our creed. It should inform all of our national life and our individual lives as well. May we soon merit to experience the wonders of our glorious destiny with the coming of *Mashiach*. Amen!