

Hakeret Hatov:

A Foundation Stone of Our Nationhood

Rabbi Benjamin Hecht

In the annals of any nation, themes emerge from the events that formed the nation that can be recognized as reflecting the essential values upon which the nation is built. These values can be defined as the fundamental principles upon which the nation continues to stand. In attempting to discover these “foundation stones” of the Jewish nation, the challenge is to correctly identify these foundations of our existence, for it is only thereby that we can fully understand our essence as a nation.

In regard to the Jewish People, one of the difficulties that may emerge in defining these fundamental principles that define our essence may be in the fact that there are actually two creative points in our existence. Did our nation, in this spirit, begin with Avraham Avinu or are we to understand *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt, as the defining moment of our definition as a nation? Perhaps it is both thus further informing us that Jewish Peoplehood is a complex amalgamation of differing fundamentals that come together in the unique hybrid of this nation. The challenge is not solely in the identification of the fundamental principles that flow from both episodes in our history but to also understand the connection between these two defining events.

Even more than the discovery of the One God by Avraham Avinu, in viewing the life of our first forefather we must identify his overriding demonstration of devotion to this One God as his defining characteristic. This is indicated by Avraham’s commitment to not just personally worship the One God but to teach others about this One God and bring them under the *kanfei HaShechina*, the wings of Heaven. (See, for example, **Rashi, Bereishit 12:5.**) It is also marked by Avraham’s departure from his home to go to the Land of Canaan simply in response to God’s command. And, of course, it is further obvious from *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the Binding of Isaac.

Yet in viewing Avraham’s life to find a defining essence to Jewish nationhood, should we also not consider Avraham’s powerful trait of *chesed*, loving-kindness? **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 10:2** in fact states that one can question the

Jewishness of a person that is cruel. See, also, **T.B. Yevamot 79a** to the effect that the mark of a Jew includes caring for others. Thus from a review of the life of Avraham, we can define two fundamental principles to Jewishness. What is the voice of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* within this context?

In contemplating the connection of the *Avot*, our Forefathers, to *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, an understandable assumption would be that the conceptual basis found within the one is solidified in the other. While the stories of our Forefathers concerned them as individuals, it would be understandable to think that the role of the Exodus in solidifying the principles of Jewishness would be in bringing these values from the individual and the personal to the realm of the communal and the national. A review of the essential themes of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* does not really seem to lead to this conclusion. Avraham's life was about devotion and caring. These do not seem to be the themes within *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. The Exodus would seem to have its own pronouncements about the fundamental principles of Jewish nationhood that simply, it would seem, are to be added to the fundamentals we understand from the *Avot*.

Perhaps, though, in regard to the value of caring there does seem to be some expression of this fundamental within the context of the Exodus. It is not, though, specifically found within *Yetziat Mitzrayim* itself but in the greater context of this episode in our historical existence. Throughout the Torah text, we are often told to be sensitive to the downcast or the individual under duress for we were once slaves in Egypt. We are to be empathetic because our historical experience informs us what it means to be in negative circumstances. This indeed reinforces the caring that emerges within our national psyche from Avraham *Avinu* – yet there is a distinction between the two. Avraham's *chesed* could be described as emerging from nature; the lessons of the national experience in Egypt were a product of nurture. Perhaps, though, it is from this dual message about the essence of caring within our national identity that we discover how caring is fundamental to our Jewishness as both a result of the nature of our Jewish being and the nurture of our Jewish teachings.

Yet the other theme that emerges from *Yetziat Mitzrayim* would seem to be distinct and present a new concept to be added to the fundamentals established by Avraham. This is the value of *hakeret hatov*. This concept emerges from the Exodus itself and declares to

us that, as an essential aspect of our being, we are to have gratitude to God for freeing us from slavery. Yet the lesson that we are to learn and incorporate into our national identity is even more expansive than this. We are to recognize any good done to us and acknowledge it.

In this regard, the greater context of the Egypt story actually serves to indicate how broad this concept is to be. Numerous times we are told to treat the Egyptians in a positive matter for we were guests in Egypt. Even though eventually the Egyptians tormented and harmed us, even though the Egyptian kindness to us was self-motivated, we are still to recognize the good that was done to us. Yet to fully understand *hakeret hatov* it may be worthwhile to consider it in comparison to the caring personified by Avraham Avinu. Both *hakeret hatov* and caring reflect how we are to relate to others. Both declare that we are not to see ourselves as alone and not intertwined with the destiny of the other. Yet both reflect a different understanding of our relationship to the other and while both are important, a recognition of their differing natures also is significant.

Hakeret hatov is different than the motivation to help another that is motivated by caring. *Hakeret hatov* is in response to some good that was done to you. It is not a selfless act of assisting the other but rather is a thoughtful action based upon a recognition that another has done a good to you or for you. It is motivated by a sense of obligation. It is motivated by a sense of owing. In the case of caring – for example, when one gives *tzedakah*, charity – the feeling is that one is benefiting another. There is a sense that one is helping, that one recognizes his own good fortune and wishes to share this good. While this recognition of good fortune and its embodiment in helping another has some connection to the concept of *hakeret hatov*, the essence of this value is different. The feeling in *hakeret hatov* is not one of benefiting another but rather of recognizing that one has received benefit. The sense is not that one is helping but rather that one is acknowledging that he/she has been helped and, in this action motivated by this gratitude, one is simply trying to demonstrate that one recognizes his/her debt to the other. In an act of *chesed* one is simply trying to go beyond the dictates of justice, to benefit the other. In an act of *hakeret hatov*, one is simply trying to recreate again the balance of justice. (On this broad theme, see also my The Evil of Chesed at <http://www.nishma.org/articles/update/update5757-1-chesed.htm>.)

Again, though, we may find that in *Yetziat Mitzrayim* we find the necessary concept to compliment the initial national fundamental taught to us by Avraham Avinu. We clearly are to be caring individuals yet caring cannot be the only value to be applied in forming a nation. To create a communal bonding, we must care. We cannot simply consider our needs but must feel the needs of others and attempt to help the other, to some extent, as we would help ourselves. But that is only one side of the dynamic of nationhood. How are we to respond when we have received benefit? We are not only to give and assist when we can feel a sense of empowerment with our ability to assist. We must also cultivate within ourselves a different emotion that also forms a basis in our relationships with others. We must develop a sense of gratitude. We must develop a sense of our own needs and recognize when another has assisted us in meeting these needs. We must develop a sense of humility in our relationships with others as we recognize that our existence is dependent, to some extent, on others. There is a value in developing a sense of caring. There is another value that must be marked within our essence - to develop the proper emotion in response to being cared for. This is *hakeret hatov*. And sometimes the practice of this value is even more difficult than caring.

This is a unique foundation stone to Jewish existence that is to emerge in our contemplation of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. We recognize caring as a mark of our Jewish identity. We are also to recognize how we are to properly mark being cared for as a mark of our Jewish identity. They actually go hand-in-hand for they together define our relationship with another. Our connections as a society and nation can never be one-sided. We are not either always the giver or always the taker. Within the reality of human relating, there is a constant stream of giving and taking. Fundamental to Jewishness is the proper expression of both. This is the true basis of community. As Jews, we are to know from the actions of our Forefather Avraham -- a *Ba'al Chesed*, a truly caring individual -- how to give. From *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, though, we are to recognize what must be the other side of our Jewish essence -- knowing how to receive, acknowledging it and responding to it. This is the somber thrust and the emotion of gratitude.