

דבר תורה for Passover
4/26/05
"Became a Nation"

As we read through the Haggadah, we have a tendency to gloss over things. After all, it's a long night. So, we'll read things without thinking about what they mean, or about what they are trying to say to us.

As I read through the Haggadah this year, one line really caught my eye. It's part of the section of the Haggadah that comments on Deuteronomy 26:5-8. These verses were the verses that a person would read when they brought their first fruits to the Temple. They tell a brief history of the Jewish people, from the times of Abraham, to their slavery in Egypt, and their being saved from Egypt. Since they were said by every Jew bringing first fruits, they were familiar verses, so that Rabbis chose these verses to use when telling the Passover story. Verse 5 talks about how the Israelites came down to Egypt "וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי" *and there they became a nation.*" On these words, the Haggadah comments: "שָׁם מְלַמֵּד שֶׁהֵיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מְצֻיָּנִים שָׁם" *this teaches that they (the Israelites) were distinct there.*" What is this verse telling us about the Israelite experience in Egypt?

With their commentary on the Haggadah, the Rabbis, who themselves were trying to keep Judaism alive under the influence of foreign captors, were telling their people that there was one thing that was vital to the continuation of Judaism - that Jews needed to be a distinct people. There are many midrashim (Rabbinic lore) that demonstrate the importance of being distinct. One famous Midrash attributes the Israelite's redemption from Egypt at least in part to the fact that while in Egypt the Israelites did not change their names or their language (Vayikra Rabbah 32:5; Mekhilta on Exodus 12:6 (Bo, par. 5); some variants add that they did not change their clothing, see Midrash Lekach Tov on Exodus 6:6; Torah Shelema, vol. 8 addenda ch. 3 p. 239).

The Rabbis taught that the Israelites survived in Egypt because they remained distinct. They meant for this lesson to be applied to all situations where Jews lived amongst others. They teach us that even though we may be in a foreign land, we, as a people, must remain distinct.

I think that this lesson is quite applicable to our lives as American Jews. We are fortunate to live in a country that has afforded us great opportunities. We are proud to participate in American society. However, our survival as a people depends on our ability to be distinct.

We've all heard of America being referred to as the great "melting pot." The image is clear. You take a great many peoples, with different nationalities, religions, and races. You put them in a big pot and let them melt down until you can no longer tell the difference between any of them. Justice Brandeis had a different model. He explained that in order to be a good American, you don't have to lose the sense of your own ethnic and religious identity. Instead, he said that the greatness of America was the ability of its diverse citizenship to retain their own identity, while becoming part of the fabric of America. For Justice Brandeis, being an active part of the Jewish community was part of what being a good American was all about. Justice Brandeis said: "America has believed that each race had something of peculiar value which it can contribute....America has always believed that in differentiation, not in uniformity, lies the path of progress."

For Justice Brandeis, America was not a melting pot, but a salad bowl - where the uniqueness of each group of people would create a medley which was the true American identity. As commentator Carl N. Degler said, "The metaphor of the melting pot is unfortunate and misleading. A more accurate analogy would be a salad bowl, for, though the salad is an entity, the lettuce can still be distinguished from the chicory, the tomatoes from the cabbage."

"וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי - מִלְּמַד שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מְצַיְנִים שָׁם" *and there they became a nation - this teaches that they (the Israelites) were distinct there.* As it did for our forbearers, the survival of the Jewish people requires us to remain a distinct people within the American culture. By learning Torah, by and by fulfilling mitzvot (good deeds). By educating our children and by honoring the memories of those we have left behind, we keep ourselves as a people alive and well, as we become מְצַיְנִים - a distinct and proud people in America.