

## **Passover: Memory of Freedom, a Pedagogy of Responsibility**

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A singular aura surrounds *Pessah*, the festival of Passover. It commemorates a foundational event: the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. Recalled sixty times in the Pentateuch, this episode serves as the matrix of a demanding ethical vision, particularly in relation to the stranger. More than once, it is emphasized: “*you were strangers in Egypt*” (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:19). The festival of Passover (Exodus 12–14; 13:10) unfolds through precise rituals—foremost among them the Seder evening—and extends over seven days with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, marked by the consumption of unleavened bread (Exodus 23:15).

### **The Foundational Narrative**

Following the enigmatic episode of the burning bush, Moses receives his mission from the One whose name is “*I will be what I will be*” (Exodus 3:14): to appear before Pharaoh and demand the release of the Hebrews, who had been settled in Egypt for several generations. What follows are the ten plagues—some of which may be interpreted as natural phenomena—a hasty departure in the middle of the night marked by the paschal sacrifice, and then the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. The people then embark upon a long wandering in the Sinai desert, at the end of which they receive the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–13), a prelude to their entry into the Promised Land.

### **Between History and Enigma**

The dating of the Exodus, the duration of the stay in Egypt, and the route of the desert journey have given rise to a multitude of hypotheses. However refined they may be, they do not lead to certainties. Yet the biblical text abounds in precise indications of places, periods, and customs (*The Bible Taken at the Cradle*, Volume 3). As if challenging the researcher, it seems to suggest that its essential truth cannot be confined to historical verification alone, but unfolds in the experience it calls us to relive.

Nevertheless, if one adopts the hypothesis of an Exodus at the end of the 13th century BCE, it would coincide with the great migrations of the “Sea Peoples,” who possessed advanced mastery of iron metallurgy. Their incursions led to the devastation of prestigious cities such as Mycenae and Ugarit, the disappearance of the Hittite Empire, and a lasting weakening of Egyptian power.

The biblical text also mentions a multitude of groups who joined the Hebrews. It is plausible that these populations were largely composed of prisoners of war of Hittite, Asiatic, Nubian, and Libyan origin. Thus, an aggregation of diverse peoples may have rallied to the Hebrews, contributing to the formation of the people of Israel (Exodus 12:38).

### **An Ethics Rooted in Memory**

The Exodus is invoked at the very opening of the Ten Commandments: “*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*” (Exodus 20:1). This introduction is decisive: it grounds moral obligation not in abstraction, but in lived memory—that of a people set free.

The commandments address each individual (“*you shall not murder,*” “*you shall not steal*”), affirming personal responsibility and the irreducible dignity of every human being. Yet this individual address unfolds within a collective dynamic: it is as a liberated people that Israel receives the Law, and it is within society that the Law must be embodied.

Thus, the memory of the Exodus becomes a shared imperative. It establishes a particular concern for the most vulnerable—the stranger, the widow, and the orphan (Exodus 22:21–22)—and institutes a morality of historical responsibility.

### **The Seder: A Living Pedagogy**

The heart of the festival lies in the Seder, during which the *Haggadah* is read and discussed collectively throughout the evening. Narratives, explanations, songs, and symbols intertwine in a living liturgy, in which the participation of children holds a central place.

The *Haggadah* insists on the personal appropriation of the narrative: “*We were slaves in Egypt...*” (Deuteronomy 6:21); “*each person must regard himself as if he personally had come out of Egypt*” (*Haggadah*). This identification transforms memory into inner experience and strengthens the sense of belonging.

Already in Deuteronomy, transmission was framed as an intergenerational dialogue: “*When your child asks you... you shall say to him: **We** were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt...*”

### **Questioning, Transmission, Interpretation**

The *Haggadah* presents four types of children—the wise, the rebellious, the simple, and the one who does not know how to ask—illustrating as many possible relationships to tradition. Each calls for a specific response: in-depth teaching, confrontation, simplification, or initiation.

Elie Wiesel suggested that these may also be read historically: four successive generations, from fidelity to oblivion, passing through rebellion and ignorance. The first lives the tradition; the second distances itself in defiance; the third questions; the fourth drifts so far away that it no longer even formulates questions. Thus, commenting on the *Haggadah* becomes an essential act: it keeps memory alive and preserves the unbroken thread of collective remembrance.

### **A Universal Reach**

As a foundational narrative of liberation, the Exodus has exerted a profound and lasting influence far beyond Judaism: in Christian and Muslim traditions, in literature, the arts, political philosophy,

and struggles for emancipation. It has become the universal archetype of the passage from servitude to freedom.

### **Conclusion**

Passover is neither merely a remembrance nor a ritual: it is a mobilization of memory. By calling upon each person to see themselves as having come out of Egypt, it transforms an ancient event into a present demand. Freedom is not granted once and for all; it must be won, transmitted, and reflected upon in every generation. Its normative expression and its limits are articulated in the promulgation of the Ten Commandments.

*“In every generation, each person must regard himself as if he personally had come out of Egypt.”  
(Passover Haggadah)*