Pesach in Israel

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A radio discussion this Monday morning in anticipation of Pesach: a woman suggested that Israelis are still enslaved because Tel Aviv University recently provided a platform for an Islamist to express strong anti-Zionist views. Had we been truly free we wouldn't allow him to speak.

A man disagreed: precisely because we're no longer slaves in Egypt but at home in our own country, we can afford to allow even extremists to express their views. We mustn't treat dissenters in the way the Egyptians treated us.

Let this little in itself unimportant exchange serve as an illustration of the differences in Israel and elsewhere in the Jewish world about how to relate to those who're against us. Though the exchange took place on Israeli radio, one could perhaps read into it a difference between attitudes in the diaspora and in Israel. .

Criticism thrives in Israel. Here, it seems, even very extreme views are being expressed in public and rarely are the speakers and writers accused of disloyalty or of endangering the existence of the Jewish state. Many, like the radio voice cited above, see it as evidence of freedom and sovereignty. Only in Israel can you be truly critical of it. .

Similar views distress most Jews in the diaspora. They fear that non-Jews will use the arguments to discredit the Jewish people and de-legitimize the Jewish state. Jews who express critical views are often in danger of being described as self-haters and renegades. You can hear this also in Israel, but it's a much more common discourse in the diaspora. .

So who's still a slave in Egypt? Those who tolerate, perhaps even encourage, dissent, or those who protect the honor and integrity of Judaism in general and Zionism in particular by making sure that only "legitimate" views are expressed? I believe it's the latter. Fear of criticism may suggest an inability to leave Egypt, despite the trappings of integration. On the other hand, those who, in Ben Gurion's oft-quoted phrase, don't care as much about what Gentiles *say* as about what Jews *do* seem to have been liberated. .

One of many ways in which the difference manifests itself is in the constant complaint in diaspora communities that Israel's PR is inadequate. If we could only explain to the world what Israel is about, it'll understand and appreciate us. It's ineptitude that causes us the problems. Israelis, on the other hand, often maintain that no amount of "explanation" is going to change the attitude of our enemies, because they really want us back in Egyptian slavery. Arguments won't dissuade them, self-confidence will. .

Hence the division in evaluating modern anti-Semitism. Many Jews, particularly in the diaspora,

tend to believe that with tact, discretion and explanation anti-Semitism can be eradicated; that Pharaoh, as it were, can be made to see the light and accept the Israelites as equals. Israelis, on the other hand, know that Pharaoh won't change and that the only way to defeat him is to get out of his clutches. When that happens, you can even allow his spokespeople have a say, however vile their words, because it won't affect us. .

One translation of the Hebrew for "Egypt," *Mitzraim*, is "the narrow place." Not being at home is to be in straits. Only there, what others think and say matters. Israel – *Yisrael* – has a biblical basis that understands it as "the one who struggles with God." It makes us into an argumentative people. But we need freedom and sovereignty, not only in relation to God but also in relation to each other. Pesach then, particularly in Israel, gains special significance: it celebrates freedom in homecoming. *Chag same'ach!* .

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