Spiritual Bondage: Thoughts for Parashat Va'era

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Va'era

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Although the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt occurred over 3000 years ago, the story continues to be central to Judaism. Many of our religious observances are described as being *zekher litsiat mitsrayim*, reminders of our exodus from Egypt. The Pessah Haggada teaches that in each generation we are obligated to feel that we ourselves went out of Egypt.

Why does this ancient story retain its hold on us? Why are we expected to identify personally with such a remote episode in history?

One answer is that the story of our slavery and redemption is a prototype: we were subjected to servitude and things seemed hopeless; but God miraculously redeemed us. Just as God performed miracles for us then, God can—and will—perform wonders in leading us to ultimate redemption in Messianic times. The story reminds us that no matter how difficult our situation may be, redemption will come.

But we might also view the story from a different perspective. *Mitsrayim*—the Hebrew name for Egypt—is related to the Hebrew word *tsar*—narrowness—and to *metsarim*—straits. Slavery in Egypt constricted us. Not only were we limited physically, but we were confined to narrow straits psychologically. We came to see ourselves as victims, as pitiful slaves without elementary freedom to think beyond our daily sufferings. *Yetsiat Mitsrayim* is the miracle of leaving a state of constriction to a state of freedom. We celebrate not only our escape from physical bondage, but our newfound self-respect as people who can make independent decisions, who can dream and aspire, who can look to the future with hope.

Yetsiat Mitsrayim is not only an event that occurred to our ancestors thousands of years ago. It is an ongoing process that confronts us constantly. We face pressures that strive to limit our freedom—anti-Semites who wish to harm us, anti-Zionists who threaten us, extremists on the right and left who seek to intimidate us. We also must deal with ideologies that undermine our religious way of life, that seek to narrow our intellectual and spiritual options.

Yetsiat Mitsrayim teaches us to assert our freedom and our dignity. We will drive out the *mitsrayim* —the constrictions on our lives—and live freely and openly as proud Jews committed to our Torah, our traditions and our Peoplehood.

The Haggada teaches that in each generation we are obligated to feel that we ourselves went out of Egypt. We can add to this directive: in each generation we are obligated to break the chains of *mitsrayim* that seek to keep us in psychological and spiritual bondage. We will be free