The Other Story of Passover

by Joel M. Margolis (March 2023)

Making Matzah, A. Raymond Katz, 1927

Everyone familiar with the story of Passover knows its importance to Judaism. But some may underestimate the significance of those events to the Jewish people as a nation. According to historians, the Jews emerged in the Bronze Age and survived to modern times as a religious community, an ethnicity, and a political body. The following recaps the

evolution:

The first people who called themselves “Israelites” —meaning followers of the legendary patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—appeared in and around present-day Israel, perhaps as early as 1,800 B.C.E. They came from various nomadic tribes that crisscrossed the Middle East. What brought these ethnically diverse travelers together, as explained by master historian Salo Baron, was the belief in one god. They reasoned that the universe was designed and run by a single higher intelligence applying a single set of laws. The idea was revolutionary. At the time, most people viewed the cosmos as an inscrutable mix of good and evil spirits.

The theory of an orderly universe transformed Israelite existence by inspiring a desire to learn the universal rules. Baron said those who joined the monotheist collective promoted widespread literacy and devoted unprecedented efforts to empirical pursuits. Unlike members of other faiths, the “chosen people” literally chose to devise a rational world where, through study and hard work, humanity could make progress. Their rules-based approach worked well. Through the centuries, according to Baron, many of them rose to the middle class and beyond as administrators, traders, merchants, artisans, and professionals. The logically derived rules meanwhile matured into a unique form of government.

Along the way, the Israelites suffered calamitous setbacks. The Egyptian Empire invaded and captured hundreds of thousands of the people they derisively called “Habirus.” The archeologist Philippe Bohstrom and other scholars believe the period of Hebrew slavery occurred in a 200-plus year period somewhere between 1,500 to 1,200 B.C.E. Bohstrom agrees with Professor Colin Humphreys and other experts that the number of Hebrews who found freedom at the end of the ordeal was about 20,000. They made their escape amidst the anarchy of the empire’s decline. The survivors returned to their native land, then known as Canaan, and joined the Hebrews who had managed

to evade capture.

By 1,000 B.C.E., the descendants of the Exodus formed the Kingdom of Israel, making Jerusalem their capital. The multiethnic group thereby merged into "Yihudim," the Jews. Each year they celebrated their liberation from Egypt and repossession of their territory with a reenactment featuring a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. One of history's triumphs was this renaissance of the Near Eastern people who overcame slavery, recovered their birthplace, and built their own empire. The achievement endured as an emblem of national pride.

Ironically, even after the Jewish kingdom's demise—the northern half succumbed to an Assyrian invasion in the eighth century B.C.E. and the southern half fell to the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C.E. —Jewish nationalism grew stronger. Jewish institutions regionwide continued to function autonomously. As a result, the Jews who remained in "Eretz Yisrael," the Land of Israel, along with their brethren in present-day Iraq and Egypt, all obeyed the same laws and maintained their economic ties.

The borderless nation lived by the Mosaic Code, which was eventually reduced to writing in the 4th century B.C.E. Journalist/historian Paul Johnson described how the Code regulated all religious, civil, and criminal aspects of life. It emphasized the principle of equal rights. Not even kings were considered above the law. In Jewish communities, anyone could become a lawmaker because the appointments were made by public acclamation, not divine right, birthright, wealth, or lottery. The Code also required fair trials and protected free speech. For example, there was no penalty for denouncing political leaders. British professor John Hutchison and American academic Mordecai Roshwald argued that these norms of equality and freedom influenced an Athenian invention, which Greeks pronounced de-ma-**cray**-sha.

For two millennia after Egypt's hegemony, many other foreign

powers ruled the Land of Israel. Yet somehow, despite each convulsive invasion, slaughter, and/or exile, pockets of the indigenous people defiantly remained. Many of the deported families filtered back in later generations. Professor Mark Tessler found that groups of Jews began returning to their colonized country as soon as 48 years after the Babylonian conquest. Additional waves of return followed, primarily: in the 15th century, when England, France, and Spain expelled their Jewish populations; in the 19th century, when Jewish nationalists in Russia pioneered a continent-wide flight from European persecution; in the 20th century, when Nazi Germany and its allies subjected the Jews to a decimating genocide; and soon after, when several Arab regimes unleashed violent crackdowns on their Jewish populations. In sum, Jews responded to the succession of foreign assaults by reclaiming their ancient ground.

For Jews who remained in the diaspora, various forms of oppression brought crushing poverty. Nevertheless, as author Kenneth Levin observed, from the medieval period to the modern age, many of them rose to prominent positions and made key contributions to society.

The Jewish people finally regained their stolen sovereignty after World War I, when the Turkish Ottoman Empire collapsed, and the international community decolonized the empire's eastern Mediterranean possessions. The landmark San Remo Treaty of 1920 reserved most of the newly freed land for Arab rule. But the pact also saved a corner for the Jewish people to reconstitute their "national home" in their ancestral homeland. The recognized borders of "Mandatory Palestine," after a large, British-imposed contraction, encompassed present-day Israel, Gaza, Judea, and Samaria. (The latter two zones were renamed "West Bank" by Jordan during its military occupation of the land from 1948 to 1967.) A 1922 League of Nations vote approved the pro-Jewish remapping plan

unanimously. On that lawful basis, Israel was subsequently reborn.

Israeli Jews resemble their ancestors. They embrace the same religion, pray at the same holy sites, observe the same holidays on the same lunar calendar, legislate in the same capital city, share the same values of equality and freewheeling debate, display their patriotism with the same Star of David, speak the same language, exchange the same currency, uphold the same commitment to education, exhibit the same strong work ethic, grow many of the same crops, and defend against similar foes.

Also like their forefathers, Israelis excel. In 2018, when Israel was just 70 years old, the US News and World Report's "Best Country" report ranked the tiny Jewish democracy the eighth most powerful nation in the world for the third year in a row, based on measures of political, military, economic, and cultural influence. In 2022, the UN-sponsored World Happiness Index rated Israel the ninth happiest country in the world based on surveys of personal wellbeing and social cohesion.

The Passover service ends with the phrase "Next year in Jerusalem." It is the traditional prayer of return to Israel. Diaspora Jews never know how long they'll remain welcome in their host countries. Levin taught that Jews have never found full acceptance through assimilation in other societies. Therefore, they stay vigilant, knowing they can always retreat to their small sovereign refuge.

Passover does more than repeat a stirring tale of redemption. It documents the origin of the Jews. It recalls their first national resurgence among many after repeated attacks. It explains why the irrepressible minority has blossomed, even in hostile terrain. It confirms the historic justification for the State of Israel. And it warns of ever-present anti-Semitic threats. All told, Passover is the first chapter in the story of Zionism.

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