

## Passover and Jewish Greatness

We Jews have always done things a little differently. We even start our history as a nation differently to most other nations, particularly nations of the ancient world. A look at most national creation stories uncovers a clear pattern – the ancestors of the nation almost invariably come from great nobility, sometimes even descended from the gods themselves, and the nation was usually formed in a blaze of heroic glory. And what about us? We start as slaves, oppressed by one of these other great ancient nations.

It cannot be stressed how different this makes us in the annals of the history of nations and how we conceive of our greatness as a people. For nations like the Egypt of ancient times, their greatness was inherent. Born of gods, Egyptians were great because it was their due and because the gods decreed it. Greatness was an entitlement of history and birth, an inheritance for all time. And yet that greatness, the glories of ancient Egypt, have faded into the desert sand while we, born of slavery and oppression, are still here.

Perhaps this is because our Jewish concept of greatness starts from rock bottom. From where we started we could only go up! And thus for Jews greatness is born of humility and striving. Unlike other ancient peoples we are well aware of our own shortcomings, put in sharp relief by our humble origins. We do not see ourselves as naturally entitled to greatness. Our ancestors were slaves not gods. Rather we understand that greatness must be earned. That is why, despite all our history since the Exodus, so much of our liturgy and thought harks back to that central narrative. We understand that to attain greatness from our lowly roots we have had to strive for it. And, as a people, and as individuals we have often succeeded at greatness despite so many obstacles in our way.

As Jews today, as we prepare for Passover, we also understand the nature of the greatness that must be earned. As Jews we do not frown on wealth and status, but these are not our measures of greatness. Rather we remember our slavery and redemption and strive towards greatness in morality and ethics, in truth and justice, in kindness and compassion. While Egypt and all the other great empires we have outlived sought greatness in how much of the world they could conquer and own for their glory, we seek greatness in fixing the world for the benefit of all humanity.

Rabbi Emanuel