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Assurance of Future: What else can explain continuity of identity?

Purim and Passover are Judaism's most popular holidays.

And I am loathe to believe that this is so because of their JL taste appeal - because of the "hamantaschen" and "kneidlach." It is rather because these festivals deal with themes that are easily fathomed and appreciated by everyone.

Purim deals with anti-Semitism of which Jews can never be un-aware. Hardly a time or a place has ever been without it. Passover deals with release from oppression and suffering. Of this too Jews have always had a full measure. Both holidays make one feel se-cure that the Hamans inevitably fall, and the oppressed do emerge to freedom. One need not be a philosopher to respond favorably to the hopes that are thus inspired. And that is why Purim and Passover are celebrated by so many Jews while festivals with sub-tier messages are neglected.

Yet even Purim and Passover warrant intensive study. They have much to tell us beyond their simplest significances.

For example, Purim, like Chanukah, pertains to problems of religious freedom. Was it proper for Mordecai to resist the order of a king which required only a trivial act of idolatry toward Haman? Should Esther not have resisted her selection for marriage to a non-Jew, even if he was the ruler of the empire?

Passover, of course, has many more themes and for this year I select one that is especially relevant.

How did the Jews in Egypt manage to retain their identity for centuries? The Black slaves bought from Africa to the United States did not remember their origins. No one would have expected that they would. But the Hebrew slaves did.

The Rabbis in the Midrash offer one explanation. They suggest that the Hebrews did not change their names, their dress, or their

language. (*Pesikta Zutrita Parshat Ki Tauo* ) All three are important factors in ethnic identity. Chassidim today derive from this point their own resolve to retain their distinctive attire and they are the largest group of Jews wholly committed to the preservation of the Yiddish language. But one has reason to question whether as slaves the Hebrews wore anything other than rags. And as for language, even if they spoke both Hebrew and Egyptian, how extensive could the vocabularies of illiterate, impoverished, masses possibly be that their ancestral tongue should have so impressed their psyches with the uniqueness of their heritage! Yet though the rabbis of the Midrash may have been right, their answer is not very helpful to acculturated Jews of today who dress as non-Jews, and speak neither Yiddish nor Hebrew. Do the rabbis have any other suggestion as to how the Hebrews remembered who and what they were - a suggestion that might be meaningful to us now?

Another Midrash does suggest that the Hebrew slaves remembered the covenant between God and Abraham and the promise God had made that after centuries of bondage He would redeem them. The Midrash says that they had scrolls which contained a report of God's encounter with Abraham and every Sabbath eve in Egypt they would comfort themselves with God's assurance that one day they would march to freedom - and even take wealth with them. (*Shmos Rabbah 5:18*) In other words, the memory of a promise was powerful enough to sustain their ethnic identity and help them to recognize - though not immediately - that Moses' appearance was the fulfillment of that promise. If they did not feel that way, it is difficult to understand what kind of idiocy would have prompted them to follow Moses into the unknown - the dry and deadly desert.

How powerful is a lover's promise to return and redeem! God, of course, is the lover of His people and it is He who assured the ultimate redemption of His beloved people not only from Egyptian domination, but also from one exile after another. Many were the nations who taunted the Jews throughout the millennia asking whether the promise would ever be fulfilled. But the beloved had faith in the lover and waited. It was a long wait but the beloved always knew that the lover would return. And He did. And faith in

the promise kept loyalty and identity ever present in the hearts of those who shared the faith.

When the Jews were exiled to Babylonia in 586 B.C.E. it might have been expected that that would have been the end of the Jewish people. Historians try to explain the mystery - why it did not happen. Professor Jacob Talmon of the Hebrew University suggests that the Jewish psyche received a traumatic twist when their belief in their own chosenness sustained the terrible shock of national disaster and exile. This shock may have made them impervious to the assimilating influences of their conquerors. But why resort to psychoanalytic explanations when there is a simpler one available? Jews had a promise - a promise set forth in a Bible which recorded not only their covenant with God but every detail of their past and future. That blueprint of their destiny influenced them and made their future what it in fact became. It was conscious commitment to a Book, and its Source, that made the difference - not subconscious sublimation of a trauma.

And that is the power of a promise by God. It conserved Jewish identity for thousands of years. And is not that promise still the best way to preserve Jewish identity when a combination of assimilatory influences and world-wide hostility to Jews threaten to bring an end to the eternal people?

It is the role of that promise in Jewish survival that I shall ponder this Passover. In the face of all that now menaces the Jewish people in Israel, in the Soviet Union, even in the United States, I have need to reread the Book - the Book that contains the promise - and deepen my faith that the Promisor will redeem, and though He tarries, His beloved continue to wait.