Nine year old Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday school. "Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved."

"Now, Joey, is that really what your teacher taught you?" His mother asked.

"Well, no, Mom. But if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!"

Sometimes it seems like all we do as Jews is talk about the Exodus. Passover is about the Exodus. Sukkot is about the Jews wandering through the desert after the Exodus. The Ten Commandments start with, “I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage…”

At least 50% of the Torah deals with the stories of the Exodus: how we ended up in Egypt, what happened there, how we got out of Egypt, and the years of wandering that followed.

Why is it such a big deal? Of course, national origins are important. But isn’t this a bit overdone?

The word Torah comes from the Hebrew word hora’ah – a lesson and directive, inspiring and guiding us and teaching us how to live our lives. How do the details of an event thousands of years ago play a role in our lives today?

Of course, there are many ways of looking at the relevant themes of the Exodus. Chassidic teaching emphasizes the theme of liberty and freedom as being at the core.

Egypt, after all, isn’t just Egypt. It’s not just a place our ancestors were once enslaved in. The Hebrew word for Egypt is Mitzrayim – which comes for the word meitzarim – boundaries and limitations. All of life is a struggle with enslavement in Egypt. Every one of us, at every moment in history, struggles with limitations and boundaries. We battle the limitations society places upon us; the boxes we put ourselves in and the boundaries inherent to the very nature of the human condition.

Judaism is about Yetziat Mitzrayim. It’s about leaving those limitations behind. It’s about fighting every day to rise above ourselves – above who we were yesterday – to be free. To be something more. To grow and to live in the most meaningful of ways.

On a personal scale, it’s about achieving the inner freedom and liberty of a life lived to the fullest of its potential. On the global scale, it’s about reaching redemption – breaking free from the enslavement of exile and tipping the world towards its true utopian purpose.

Quite a big deal, after all!
What’s even cooler, though, is that every detail of the story that we tell – again and again – at the Passover Seder, and every detail recorded in the Torah during these weeks when we read the book of Exodus, is actually a part of the Torah’s secret guidance to us – teaching us how to go through the process of liberating ourselves, and how to nudge the world towards a better future.

One example: The first two of the ten plagues, everybody has acted out the plagues at the Seder or in Hebrew school as a kid, what are the first two plagues?

The first plague was Blood; all water turned to blood. The second plague was Frogs; frogs were jumping all over the place – as the Torah specifies, even into the Egyptians food and ovens. Details just provided to make Hebrew school exciting, right? Not at all – these are the first steps necessary for any journey to personal freedom. They demonstrate the need for passion, for caring.

A guy turns to his friend and says: The biggest problems for our youth nowadays are ignorance and apathy. How do we fix it? The friend responds: I don’t know and I don’t care...

Think about water. It’s clear. It’s tasteless. Naturally, it’s cold. Blood is just the opposite – boiling, hot, passionate.

The first step, if we want to start down a path of redemption, a path freeing ourselves of all limitations, is to care. We cannot approach life like ‘water,’ with dispassionate calculation about the challenges we face. While there is a need for ‘water’, it will never get us engaged enough to rise above anything. It will just further entrench us within the obstacles life has set for us. We must change the water to blood; to care, to feel deeply, to imagine a completely good world, where every injustice is corrected and every wrong is righted. That is what stirs us to do something, to move, to change.

Optional Stories

In fact, even misplaced passion is better than apathy. Misplaced passion may lead to some mistakes, but apathy is death. Two stories with the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi – founder of Chabad, highlight this point:

Story 1

In the early days of the Chassidic movement there was much opposition to the new teachings and emphases promoted by the Chassidim.

Once, some students traveled around putting copies of the newly written Tanya in some of the surrounding synagogues. Afterwards, they reported to the Alter Rebbe about the reactions of two local scholars. One picked the booklet up, leafed through it, and when he realized it was a Chassidic tract he returned it to its place and moved on. The other, though, showed complete disrespect. When he realized it was a Chassidic work he was reading, he hurled it to the floor, stamped on it in disgust, and even spat as he walked away. “Ah!” said the Alter Rebbe. “This one will eventually become a Chassid.”
Story 2

There was a Chassid of the Alter Rebbe whose son was an “at-risk teen.” His rebellion was expressed primarily in his enjoyment of fast horses. Instead of the synagogue and the study hall, he was drawn to racing around on horseback with the children of the local noblemen.

His father tried to engage him however he could, but to no avail. Worried about his growing estrangement from Jewish values, he tried one last tactic: “Please come with me to meet the Rebbe. After that, I won’t bother you any longer.”

The boy recognized a good offer when he got one, so off they traveled to Liozna. When the boy’s turn came for his meeting with the Alter Rebbe, he entered the Rebbe’s office with bravado – he just had to put up with this last lecture, and then his parents would be off his case.

To his surprise, the Alter Rebbe didn’t chastise him. He expressed interest in the boy’s pursuits. He asked: “Explain to me please, what’s the benefit of a good horse?”

“What do you mean?” said the young man, “a good horse gets you where you need to go really fast.”

“But what if you’re going the wrong way?” asked the Alter Rebbe. “Won’t you go even further and faster astray?”

“Yes,” answered the boy, “but when you catch yourself, you can turn around that much quicker.”

“Aha!” said the Alter Rebbe, “when you catch yourself!” The Rebbe rested his head on his hands, and fell deep into thought. “When you catch yourself...” he murmured again and again.

Something struck a chord in the young man. Here was the lesson, misplaced passion is better than no passion at all, but it too needs to be examined and correctly focused. He left the office a changed man, and redirected his youthful passion to worthier and loftier pursuits.

The flip side is expressed in the next plague, the frogs. Frogs are cold-blooded amphibians; dispassionate and removed. The Torah emphasizes that they jumped into the ovens – into the fire. They cooled off the fire, the passions, of Egypt. The first step is to care enough to be passionate. But passion for passion’s sake isn’t enough. We have to make sure that we’re putting our energies into things that actually matter – directing them to good and positive agendas. We have to embody not just the turning of water into blood, but also the cooling off of the foreign fires with the frogs.

These two steps together started the process of wearing down mitzrayim; breaking the bondage of Egypt back then. It is these same two attributes in our own lives – caring and passion, focused on the right causes and directions – that help the process of breaking the bondage of Egypt everywhere and every day.