

A Muse: Bo

“This day shall be to you one of remembrance; you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution throughout the ages. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses...you shall observe the feast of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time.”(Exodus: 14-17)

This week’s portion presents the defining moment in Jewish history, the Exodus from Egypt. Commemorating the Passover we were commanded to sacrifice a kid, or lamb, becoming the Paschal sacrifice, the blood to be spread on the lintel of their houses. In actuality there are two Pesachs: the Pesach of Egypt, the night between the 14th and 15th of Nissan, and the “forever” Pesach, as Y. Leibowitz noted.

The Pesach of Egypt was a singular moment in time, the night between the 14th and 15th of the first month of Nissan, never to be repeated again. The “forever” Pesach, the one we are commanded to “observe throughout the ages as an institution for all time” is the second Pesach; the one we reenact annually, in an attempt to reinforce that what has been integrated into the national Jewish psyche from that very first Nissan, when we left Egypt as a free people.

Our rabbis troubled with the difficulty of this task urged us to tell the Exodus story as if “we ourselves were the generation who left Egypt.” The urgency of the rabbis is profound but nevertheless difficult to understand without considering Freidrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche’s two basic assumptions (that the world we live in is finite but that time is infinite) led him to the concept of Eternal Recurrence. The principal of Eternal Recurrence maintains that the life we live will be repeated innumerable times through eternity. Accordingly, there really is nothing new and that all the pain and joy experienced by us will be repeated again and again as a result of Eternal recurrence. (In a

sense this gives meaning and a new twist to the declaration made in Ecclesiastes that ein chadash tachat hashemesh-nothing is new under the sun).

Nietzsche's principal of Eternal Recurrence seems to fit in with some of the classical teachings of our sages and rabbis. The aphorism taught by our sages that ma'ase avot siman libanim, that the deeds of the fathers are signposts for the sons echo the reasoning of Nietzsche. Lurianic kabbalah as taught by Rabbi Chaim Vital in his sefer Shaar Ruach Hakodesh believes that there is an eternal spiritual repetition of what we have done in this world.

Our sages, including the masters of kabbalah as well as Nietzsche's principal refer to the life of the individual. But what about the collective life of a nation? What about our collective history. Is there such a thing as Eternal Recurrence for the collective memory of a nation? On a certain level it could be exalting – if it were applicable, after all, the Jewish people have indeed reached remarkable heights of spiritual accomplishments. However so much of our history is pockmarked by suffering, perhaps more suffering than joy and spiritual exaltation. To be destined to repeat these under the principal of Eternal Recurrence would appear to be daunt and frightening!