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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Passover, which began on Saturday night, April 12th, continues this week. Presuming you survived a Seder or two with your extended family, now is the time to focus on the rest of the holiday.

As we shall see, it is also a time to focus and repair relationships. Even couples who have been married for a long time tend to find the weeks leading up to Passover stressful – often leading to conflict and feelings of being unappreciated. Apologizing for one's behavior under duress is a must and learning to say, "I am sorry for what I did" goes a long way (though saying "I am sorry…I married you" doesn't).

Passover is unique in that it consists of two holy days – "yom tov" in Hebrew – the first day and the last day. In other words, the first day is a yom tov, followed by five intermediate days (which have a lesser level of holiness), and then the seventh day is another yom tov (outside of Israel they are observed as the first two days and the last two days of the holiday, with eight days in total). Why are there two separate holy days?

On the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Nissan, the Children of Israel left Egypt, where they had served as slaves for hundreds of years. Despite his original stubborn refusal, after ten debilitating plagues Pharaoh relented and allowed the Children of Israel to leave Egypt for a three-day spiritual retreat in the desert.

When the Israelites failed to return after those initial three days Pharaoh realized that they were gone for good. Unsurprisingly, this did not sit well with Pharaoh. He marshaled his entire force of chariots and his fierce army to pursue his former slaves and return them to Egypt. The Egyptian army caught up with the Israelites at the banks of the Red Sea. The Israelites were trapped between one of the most feared armies in the world and the sea.

As usual, the Israelites met this challenge with equanimity and a calm demeanor. Just kidding! In what was to become a familiar pattern over the next four decades, the Children of Israel began to complain bitterly; "Are there not enough graves in Egypt that you took us out to die here in the wilderness? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt? Didn't we tell you to leave us alone and let us serve as slaves in Egypt?" (Exodus 14:10-12).

Of course, Moses was not-so-thrilled with the reaction of the Israelites and their sudden pining for the "good old days" as slaves in Egypt. He urged them to stand fast and turned to pray to the Almighty for salvation. God answered Moses in a most remarkable way: "Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them travel forward!" Sometimes you have to stop talking and just take action.

As one might imagine, the Israelites were less than thrilled by the prospect of marching into the Red Sea. According to the Midrash, Nachshon the son of Aminadav, who was the head of the tribe of Judah (as well as the brother-in-law of Moses' brother Aaron) took the initiative and marched into the raging sea and was followed by his tribe. The royal line of Jewish kings and the eventual messiah are the descendants of Nachshon.

As the water surged up to their necks, Moses raised his staff and the wind began to blow. Miraculously, the sea began to recede and split in half allowing the Israelites to comfortably cross on dry land. When the Egyptians attempted to follow them across, the sea came crashing down on them. Chariots, riders and horses all perished in the churning sea.

The miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea happened on the seventh day of Passover. It is for this reason that there are separate "holy days" on Passover; the beginning of Passover celebrates the freedom from slavery and the end celebrates the miraculous escape through the splitting of the Red Sea.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, Moses led the Israelites in singing the Song of the Sea. Miriam, Moses' sister, led the women in an additional song of thanks, accompanied by tambourines and drums.

Because the holiday extends through the upcoming Shabbat, the Torah reading for this Shabbat is not part of the regular cycle of Torah portions. Instead, we read the story of the splitting of the Red Sea and the Song of the Sea.

In addition, for millennia synagogues in every Jewish community around the world have had the custom of reading Shir HaShirim – Song of Songs – on the Shabbat of Passover.

What is Song of Songs and why is it read on Passover?

Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs, is one of the five Megillot, or Sacred Scrolls, that are part of the Hebrew Bible. According to Jewish tradition, it was penned by King Solomon and is a timeless allegory of the relationship between the Almighty and the Jewish

people, as described in terms of the love between a man and a woman.

This love is deeply expressed in the most beautiful and poetic terms. Song of Songs is written in an unabashedly sensuous manner and is quite a paean to the intensity of longing for a beloved. It is an intensely beautiful tribute to love.

Given the sensuous and sometime explicit nature of Song of Songs, its inclusion in the biblical canon was a matter of some controversy. In fact, it likely would have been excluded from the Bible altogether, if not for a powerful champion. As the Sages debated which books were to be included in the Scriptures, the famous sage of the first century, Rabbi Akiva – perhaps the most respected sage of his era – argued that "while all of the sacred writings are holy, Song of Songs is the holy of holies!" (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5).

The commentaries suggest that Rabbi Akiva's affinity for the Song of Songs stems from his metaphorical understanding of its contents, reading Song of Songs as King Solomon intended, an extended allegory to the loving relationship between God and Israel. Indeed, the tradition of understanding Song of Songs as a metaphor for the divine love, rather than the human, is found in both Jewish law and Jewish mysticism.

Maimonides, the great medieval sage and philosopher and perhaps the greatest codifier of Jewish Law, writes, "What is the proper form of the love of God? It is that he should love the Almighty with a great, overpowering, fierce love as if he were love-sick for a woman and dwells on this constantly […] And it is to this that Solomon refers allegorically when he says: 'For I am love-sick' (Song of Songs 2:5) for the whole of Song is a parable on this theme" (Hilchos Teshuvah 10:3).

Still, what does all of this have to do with Passover? Why did the rabbis establish that Song of Songs should be read on Passover?

Did you ever wonder why so many Jewish rituals mention the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt? Jewish tradition is rife with constant reminders of this. As an example, the sanctification of Shabbat over wine (kiddush) on Friday night includes the line, "(Shabbat) is first of the holy days and a remembrance to the Exodus from Egypt." What does that even mean?

When the Jewish people were standing at Mount Sinai and the Almighty introduced Himself to them at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, He said: "I am the Lord your God that took you out of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2). This seems very odd. A much better description of the Almighty would seem to be that He is the Creator of the world and everything in it. In fact, this would be a much stronger reason to owe Him fealty. Why did the Almighty limit Himself to the One who took them out of Egypt?

The answer is that God is informing us that the basis of our relationship is love. God took us out of Egypt because He cares about us and desires a relationship with us. The Almighty opens the Ten Commandments with this sentiment because He is informing the nascent Jewish nation that the entire Torah is being given to them out of love. The Torah, among other things, is a guidebook for maximizing the amount of good in one's life.

Now we understand why reading the Song of Songs is so appropriate for Passover. God's love for His people, as expressed by freeing us from slavery in Egypt and making us His own, is truly a love relationship. This is so eloquently expressed in King Solomon's sublime paean to love and most appropriate for the holiday of Passover.

True love is about the connectivity of two entities merging into a greater whole. The Hebrew language is both ancient and holy; it is the language by which the world was created ("And God said…"). The Hebrew alphabet also has a number system assigned to it. In its most basic form, the first letter (aleph) has the numerical equivalent of one, the second letter (beis) is the number 2, etc.

The numerical value of "ahava – love" is 13 and the numerical value for "echad – one" is 13, further expressing the relationship between the two concepts. In addition, in Hebrew the word for song is "shir," which is the root of the word "sharsheres," which is an interlocking chain – because a song connects one to another, just as love is about connectivity.

It is for this reason that we constantly remind ourselves of the Exodus. It's like hearing the words "I love you" from someone who you care for deeply. As we know, hearing someone tell you that they love you never gets old. Now apply that lesson to your own life and let those in your life know how deeply you care for them as well. Happy Passover!

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And G-d led the nation around by way of the wilderness at the Reed Sea, and the children of Israel went up armed out of the land of Egypt." (Vayikra 13:18) The previous posuk tells us that when Pharaoh sent the Jews out, Hashem did not allow them to go the straightest way to get to Israel, which would take them past the Philistine lands. He knew that if the Jews encountered enemies and war, they would turn back to Egypt in fright.

In a continuation of that concept, our verse tells us that Hashem guided them in a roundabout way, towards land that was uninhabited. However, it finishes by stating that the Jews left Egypt armed with weapons. Though some commentaries say this is mentioned now so we should not be surprised later that they are able to fight Amalek and others, the fact that it is connected to the previous idea seems strange.

On the contrary, if they were armed, why should

they be afraid of the enemies? They had Hashem on their side, and they had the tools to fight with. Why would they be turned back by that? There must be something more than meets the eye here.

The Torah conveys to us that there is a disconnect between the ability to handle a challenge, and the self-confidence to use that ability. Just because someone has the tools to fight a battle, doesn't mean they are ready to do it. When the Jews first left Egypt, they knew Hashem had taken them out, but they weren't confident in their complete salvation. That would only come later, when the Egyptians were drowned in the sea. Then they knew their tormentors couldn't hurt them anymore.

But, they still wouldn't know how far this protection would go. They would have been fearful of facing an enemy and fled. Therefore, Hashem took them in a circuitous route, one where not only would he drown the Egyptians, but also provide for them miraculously in uninhabited areas.

Over time, we would find ourselves confident in the fact that Hashem would fight for us, and we would succeed in our battles. The Jew doesn't rely on military prowess or technological advantage. We rely on our Master, Who will stand for us against all comers. However, this took some time, so though the Jews did leave Egypt armed, they were not quite ready.

Hashem doesn't send us challenges we can't handle, and we have within us the power to conquer whatever we need to. The bigger challenge is realizing this and having as much faith in Hashem, as He has in us. That's why the Torah combines these two concepts. Had we been fully confident that Hashem wants to protect us and be with us, we would not have had to take a roundabout way, because we had sufficient firepower from the beginning.

A man complained to G-d that his "peckel," [literally his "pack,"] his burden of troubles in life, was too great. He felt others had easier lives. G-d said, "I understand, but everyone has a "pack" that he must carry. But, I'll let you trade your burden for someone else's. Does that sound reasonable?" The man was overjoyed at the prospect of getting some relief and readily agreed. G-d took him to a large auditorium and told him, "Put down your pack of troubles." The man did so. "Now," He continued, "go through this room and find one you prefer."

The fellow got right to it, examining each pack and weighing the difficulties each presented. Some included more money, some less. Some had illness, while others had disharmony. There were a range of different packs mixing so many benefits and challenges. It took the man many days until he finally settled on one he felt he could handle and be happy with.

"I've chosen," he announced to G-d. "That's wonderful," replied the Al-mighty. Please show Me what you have picked." As the man opened the pack to do so, it dawned on him:

He had picked up his own pack; the one he had discarded, thinking it was too much for him. He now realized that indeed, it was the most perfectly suited to him -- and he to it. © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

The literal approach to the Haggadah's four children is straightforward. On four different occasions, the Torah describes questions asked by children about Passover. Based on the language of the question, the author of the Haggadah labels each of them. One questioner is described as wise, the second rebellious, the third simple, and the fourth not even knowing how to ask. And the Haggadah, basing itself on the Torah text, offers answers to suit the specific educational needs of each child. But if we go beyond the literal approach, hidden messages emerge.

While this section of the Haggadah is associated with youngsters, is it not possible that the children referred to here include adults of all ages? After all, no matter how old we are, we are all children-children of our parents and children of G-d. From this perspective, the message of the four children is that every Jew has his or her place in Judaism. The challenge is to have different types of Jews seated around the Seder table in open respectful dialogue, each contributing to the Seder discussion, each exhibiting love for the other. It also reminds us that we have much to learn from everyone -- this realization is what truly makes us wise. In the words of Ben Zoma, who is mentioned just before this section in the Hagaddah: Who is wise? One who learns from each person." (Pirkei Avot 4:1) *© 2011 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

With no Shabbos Chol haMoed this year, we will be reading the Megillah of Shir haShirim on the 7th day of Pesach (Passover), as it is also Shabbos. While the connection between Megillas Esther and Purim is obvious, as well as that between Megillas Eichah and Tisha beAv, the reading of Megillas Shir haShirim on Pesach is much less obvious.

As the "love" portrayed in this "Song of Songs" is an analogy for the relationship between G-d and the Nation of Israel, many understand the connection to simply be that the "inaugurating experience" that made the "Children of Israel" into the "Nation of Israel" was the Exodus from Egypt. It would therefore seem appropriate to read the Megillah that poetically describes this relationship during our celebration of the beginning of this relationship.

At one point in Shir haShirim (3:11), Shelomo refers to "the day of His wedding" and "the day of His heart's happiness." Our sages have given numerous

explanations for which "days" Shelomo is referring to. The Talmud (Taanis 26b) says that the "wedding" is the giving of the Torah and the "happiness" refers to the Temple being consecrated. The midrashim (e.g. Shemos Rabbah 52:5) add additional possibilities, such as Sinai/Jerusalem (which may refer to the same things as the Talmud), the sea/the Tent of Meeting, and the Mishkan/the Temple. Other combinations are also given (see Vayikra Rabbah 20:10 and Bamidbar Rabbah 2:26 and 12:8), where Sinai is alternatively paired with the Tent of Meeting, with the giving of the Torah (which is interesting in that it makes "Sinai" an occasion in and of itself - besides receiving the Torah there), and with "Words of Torah" (which may be the same as the "giving" of the Torah, but may refer to teaching and learning Torah - that G-d's "day of happiness" is any and every day that we learn His Torah). None of these are comparing the exodus from Egypt to either the "wedding day" or to the "day of happiness" though. Nevertheless, the exodus can be considered the "day of engagement," and it would therefore be appropriate to read about the "love story" on the "anniversary" of the "engagement." However, with the splitting of the sea occurring on the 7th day of Passover, and the Mishkan being consecrated in Nissan - and both of these being compared to either the "wedding day" or the "day of happiness" - these milestones in the relationship may also be part of the reason why we read Shir haShirim on Passover.

Tosfos says that the reason we read Shir haShirim on Pesach is because it has 117 verses, corresponding to the 117 times that the exodus from Egypt is mentioned in the Torah, and the 117 years from the time that Levi died - when the oppression started - until they left Egypt.

In his introduction to Shir haShirim, Rashi says that "Shelomo, through divine inspiration, saw that Israel would eventually experience exile after exile, destruction after destruction. In this exile, they would mourn for their original honor and remember the earlier affection when they were [G-d's] treasured nation. They would [then] say 'I will go and return to my first husband (i.e. G-d) for things were better than they are now,' and they will remember His kindness [to them] and how they had acted treacherously towards Him, and [remember] all of the good things that He had promised to give them at the end of time."

Rashi continues by saying that this "love story" has a happy ending, as the husband (G-d) still loves the bride even after she was sent away (i.e. suffers in exile), and was awaiting her return to him (i.e. Him, through repentance) when they would resume their relationship.

In this context, it is rather easy to understand why Shir haShirim is read on Pesach. After spending the first night(s) reliving the exodus, and discussing - at length - all of the miracles that G-d performed to personally (not through a messenger) take us out of Egypt and under his wings, we are hit with the cold reality that we don't enjoy that relationship anymore. The contrast is much more stark than any other time of the year, so our sages told us to read Shir haShirim in order to console us, to help us realize that even if G-d is only watching us from a distance (see 2:9), the relationship still has hope. We may no longer enjoy the same relationship we once had - and relived just a few nights ago - but we can, and we will.

Just as Koheles is read on Succos after the completion of the harvest season to remind us that physical plenty has no intrinsic value (if it is not used for a higher purpose), Shir haShirim is read on Pesach to counter the possible despondency of realizing how far our relationship (as a nation) with G-d has fallen.

As this month of Nissan comes to a close, let's hope - and pray - that the ultimate redemption is close at hand, and try to do everything we can to restore our relationship to its former glory.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

A central part of the Passover Seder is the study of four sentences found in Deuteronomy. They prescribe the ritual that is to accompany the presentation of the first fruits at the sanctuary in Jerusalem. A beautiful prayer is recited. It deals with the Jews settling in Egypt; their being enslaved by Pharaoh; their crying out to God for help; and finally their being freed. (Deuteronomy 26:5-8)

One wonders: why should verses from Deuteronomy be recited at the seder table rather than sections of the Book of Exodus in which the story unfolded? Several answers come to mind.

The portion of the first fruits instructs the native Israeli to thank God for his bounty by bringing the first of his produce to the Holy Temple. Although not enslaved in Egypt he recalls the Egyptian experience in the first person as if he were there. Hence, this text is read on Passover night, as it is our challenge then, not only to "retell" the story of the Exodus but to "reenact" the event as if we, living thousands of years later, were in Egypt. "Only through this total identification as a Jewish people," writes Rabbi Shlomo Riskin in his Passover Haggadah, "can we ensure the historical continuity of Judaism and Jewry."

Rabbi David Silber of Drisha offers an alternative approach. Paradoxically, he argues, only the people who were not in Egypt can fully understand that bondage. In fact, the slaves who left wanted to return—as they never fully comprehended what it meant to leave Egypt. Only a free people could attain the proper perspective to recognize that the experience in Egypt may not have been a punishment but a covenantal opportunity.

In a similar vein, the generations after the Holocaust, not having been there, have the potential to understand the Shoah in ways that even survivors may

not

A final idea comes to mind. The Psalmist writes, it is not enough to “leave evil,” it is crucial to take it to the next step and “do good.” (Psalms 34:15) Hence, the text chosen to be analyzed on the Seder night deals with Israel to teach that leaving slavery only has meaning if it is followed by entry into the Jewish land. Interwoven into the message of the Passover holiday is the centrality of Israel. *Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale*

RABBI YAAKOV HABER

The Pain of Being Special

The Pesach Haggada, in recounting the history of the Jewish people, talks about the children of Isaac: "And I gave to Isaac Jacob and Esau; and I gave Esau Mount Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down into Egypt."

I recently read, in the writings of of prophet Malachi, G-d quoted as saying: "I loved Jacob and hated Esau." These are strong words! (Granted that Esau had some personality problems.) Anyway, how did G-d treat these two? He gave Esau Mount Seir, which is between Eilat and Beersheba. Think of that: Esau getting some good real estate, and being able to relax in the sun all day. And Jacob? He gets sent down to Egypt, where his descendants were enslaved! What sort of divine appreciation is this?

I shall try to explain this with a story. Imagine a well-to-do businessman with two sons, one of whom he loves, and the other of whom (G-d forbid) he hates. How does he deal with them? On the son he hates, he settles a quarter of a million dollars, and says, "Now go, live off this, and leave me alone." But as for the son he loves, he wants to bring into the business. So he gives him a job in the stockroom at the standard wage, with the understanding that the boy will work his way up, on his own merit, to become eventually a partner.

So it was with the Jewish people, the descendants of Jacob. As G-d's beloved, they had to go through hardship in Egypt to prepare themselves for their role in world history. And every step in our advance, as a nation or as individuals, requires hardship. We cannot get something for nothing. As the saying goes: "No pain, no gain."

R' Chaim Volozhin, the most distinguished student of the Gra (Vilna Gaon), wrote that the Gra was once visited by Elijah the Prophet, who promised to reveal to him the most hidden parts of the Torah. His response was "No!" He would certainly have loved to know these secrets, but only by his own unaided toil. Otherwise such knowledge would be worthless.

One more point in this connection: The Gemara (Sotah 2a) says: "It is as difficult to find one's marriage partner as it was for the Red Sea to part." Now one may ask: "But what's difficult about the Red Sea parting? G-d just sent an east wind, and that was that!" But it did not happen just like that. Before the sea parted, according to the Midrash, Nachshon ben Aminadav walked into the sea, deeper and deeper, and it was only when the water reached his nostrils that the sea parted. So even here, the parting of the sea required the self sacrifice of Nachshon's effort.

It is my prayer that for those of you who have been toiling with your problems, and feel the water rising to your nostrils, G-d will finally part the sea, and solve your problems.

RABBI RAFAEL SALASNIK

Daf Hashavua

by Rabbi Jason Kleiman, Clayhall Synagogue

"You don't bring me flowers anymore" is the title of a popular song in which two people, who used to express their love for each other, now bemoan the breakdown of their relationship. The failure of many marriages can often be traced to the deterioration in communication between husband and wife. Likewise, many a family broygez is the result of relatives failing to communicate effectively with each other. How do such problems develop?

One factor is the lack of articulated appreciation as in the case of the husband who never complimented his wife on her cooking, even though her culinary skills were excellent. When asked why he never said a good word to his wife about her meals, the husband replied, "It's supposed to be good. When it's bad, then I tell her!"

The assumption that our everyday responsibilities towards our loved ones should be carried out as a matter of course, without receiving any expression of love or appreciation from those closest to us, can cause us to feel neglected and taken for granted. We all need to feel loved, and even though we may fulfil our commitments to our families regardless, it does mean a lot when our nearest and dearest relatives make us feel special.

It is this message that explains the reading of Shir HaShirim on Shabbat Chol Hamoed Pesach.

Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs written by King Solomon, conveys the tremendous love that exists between G-d and the Jewish people. Judaism portrays our relationship with G-d through the metaphor of marriage, which is the prevalent motif of Shir HaShirim. Hence, we welcome the onset of Shabbat in the language of a groom greeting his bride and the Jew adorned with Tefillin relates to G-d as a marriage partner when reciting the words: "I will betroth you to me forever".

Even though the Seder nights have passed, and we have retold the story of the Exodus in the Haggada, we maintain our expressions of love for G-d to indicate a growing relationship that is to be continually cherished. The Sfat Emet explains that the word Pesach is a

combination of the words peh and sach, meaning "the mouth that talks", to indicate the newly found capacity of the Jewish people to articulate their praise of G-d that had been suppressed during the years of Egyptian servitude.

This new appreciation of reacting to G-d had to be sustained beyond the experience of the miracles of the Exodus. Indeed, the Sages explain a great deal of Shir HaShirim as the story of the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Exodus, the time that is recalled in the Book of Jeremiah as Israel's "bridal days", when they followed G-d "in an unsown land" (Jeremiah 2:2).

It was Shakespeare who said, "They do not love that do not show their love." Both Pesach and Shir HaShirim convey the message that the most important of relationships have to be nurtured by telling those who are most precious to us of our love for them on an ongoing basis.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Someone remarked to me recently that he did not see or feel how anything new could be discussed at his Seder table – everything that could have been said and analyzed had been said over all of the past decades of his commemorating Pesach. I told him that I thought he had too narrow a view concerning the commemoration of Pesach.

The broad human and particularly Jewish issues of bondage, freedom, individual and national purpose and destiny, renew themselves in our lives on an almost daily basis. Our great young associate Rabbi, Itiel Goldvicht, had a discussion with me about the enslavement of the present younger generation to texting and to their smart phones. He pointed out to me that in spite of all bans, filters and other methods meant to free one from the grip and thrall of these devices, their constant use has become almost impulsive and obsessive, certainly amongst the student generation here in Israel. And, I am certain that this is true as well regarding the student population in the rest of the current Western world.

Slavery takes on different forms and disguises. There is a great difference between slavery and work. Slavery is a state of compulsion and obsession that stunts the creativity of the human mind and soul and leads to disenchantment, boredom and eventual physical, moral, physical and mental deterioration.

One of the great attributes of the holiday of Pesach is that it allows us a new and fresh view of things. By cleaning out the chametz of our homes and souls we open ourselves up to new vistas and fresh challenges that can inspire us and deliver us to a higher level of purpose and accomplishment.

The Seder allows for a family discussion of issues, since the Haggadah itself raises almost all possible human issues – family, tradition, Torah, the land of Israel, the purpose of Jewish life and of an individual's existence, the recognition and understanding of evil, and the ultimate human necessity for reliance on faith in the Creator.

These issues are extremely relevant in today's world and affect every family and home. For most of the year we have little time or inclination to dwell on these matters for the distractions and obligations of life are many and omnipresent. But on this night of the Seder there is time, mental capacity and psychological freedom to engage with these issues. My wife, of blessed memory, told me that when she was ten or eleven years old a great rabbi was a guest for the Pesach Seder at her home.

The great rabbi talked to her, taught her melodies to sing, gave her advice for life and instilled in her an appreciation for the depth of Jewish tradition. She often told me that this Seder experience influenced her greatly and was a defining moment in her life. She did not attend a Jewish school and was a lonely Orthodox, Sabbath-observing child in the midst of a completely non-observant Jewish group of friends and fellow public-school students.

She told me that the Pesach Seder experience that year fortified her for the rest of her years in high school and college and gave her an enormous gift of self-confidence, identity and Jewish pride. I think that that is exactly what the Pesach Seder should accomplish for all of us.

The rabbis of old enjoined us that the more we speak about the Exodus from Egypt, the more praiseworthy we become. This is in line with the further statement in the Haggadah that: ”in every generation one must be able to see one's own self present and participating in the Exodus from Egypt.”

The Seder is meant to make the Exodus from Egypt relevant to everyone sitting at the Seder table, even today more than three thousand years later. It transports us back in time, as the very same rituals bring the past to bear upon our current situations and challenges. The Exodus from Egypt is an ongoing story and not merely a one-time commemoration of a past event. That is the secret of the strength of the Seder experience and of its fresh new quality year in and year out.

There is always something new to be said and expressed at the Seder table. And it is this constant renewal of ideas and traditions that gives Pesach its unique ability to represent true freedom and psychological, spiritual and mental liberty. Those ancient rituals provide the tools for dealing with the relevant and seemingly modern problems that face us. The Seder night should be treasured, appreciated and loved.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

While the Passover Seder is still freshly on our minds and taste buds, allow me to suggest an important lesson that we are likely to overlook. Fascinatingly, alongside Moshe who is not really mentioned by the Haggadah, there is another great Biblical personality who plays a major role in the Haggadah, but who is likewise overlooked. This personality is Joseph, first born of Rachel, favored son of Jacob-Israel and Grand Vizier of Egypt.

Let us start at the very beginning of the Seder. After we raise the first cup of wine and recite Kiddush, we wash our hands without a blessing before eating a vegetable, usually parsley, and we make the blessing to God "Creator of the fruit of the earth". The usual explanation for this is that karpas is the Greek word for vegetation, and Greco-Roman meals would generally begin with the vegetable hors-d'oeuvre together with a 'dip'. The seder is a reclining meal reminiscent of a Graeco-Roman feast and so we begin the seder evening with this vegetable hors-d'oeuvre /dip. For us, the vegetable is also a symbol of spring, Passover is called the Festival of the Spring – and the dip is generally salt water reminiscent of the tears of the Hebrew slaves.

There is, however, an entirely different interpretation of the karpas suggested by Rashi in his commentary on the verse which mentions the coat of many colors (k'tonet passim Gen37:3). Rashi links this source to the verse in the Scroll of Esther which describes the rich embroidery of the palace of King Achashverosh: "There were hangings of white fine linen (karpas, Esther 1:6), thereby identifying with the Persian word karpas which describes an expensive material or garment; the second syllable pas means stripe in Hebrew and evidently refers to an expensive material with stripes of many colors. The karpas would therefore refer to Joseph's coat of many colors, the gift he received from his father elevating him over his siblings and singling him out as the bechor (firstborn). Interestingly enough, there is a custom in many Yemenite communities to dip the karpas vegetable into the charoset, a mixture of wine, nuts and sometimes dates, which the Jerusalem Talmud says is reminiscent of blood. Hence, just as the brothers dipped Joseph's cloak of many colors into the blood of the goat claiming to their father that Joseph had been torn apart by a wild beast; we dip our karpas into the charoset.

What does this have to do with Passover? The Babylonian Talmud (B.T. Shabbat 10b) teaches in the name of Rav: "One should never favor one child over the other children in a family. It was because of an expensive garment bought for two sela'im that Jacob gave to Joseph – more expensive than anything he had given to any of his other children – he was envied by his brothers and the issue 'snowballed' until our forefathers were enslaved in Egypt." Hence, the seder begins by warning every leader of the family to learn from the Joseph story the importance of showing equal affection and treatment to all of one's children so as not to engender causeless hatred and strife.

The seder's theme of the Joseph story continues with the cups of wine. Although the Babylonian Talmud (Pesachim 99b) links the four cups with the four (or five) expressions of redemption in the Book of Exodus (6:6-7), the Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 10:1) connects the cups of wine to the four or five times the word kos – cup appears in the butler's dream in the book of Genesis (40:9-13, 21). And of course Joseph's interpretation of the butler's dream is that he would be freed from his prison enslavement and would be able to once again serve his master. Since this source deals with freedom from slavery in Egypt and actually uses the word kos, it is certainly legitimate to see it as a source for the cups of wine that we drink in remembrance of our exodus from Egypt.

Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, (known as the Vilna Gaon, 1720-1797) identifies a reference to Joseph at the very end of the seder as well, with the Had Gadya song. He masterfully interprets the little goat bought for two zuzim as the goat whose blood was used to soil Joseph's coat of many colors: Jacob' acquired' the shock that he received upon seeing the bloodied cloak by virtue of the two sela'im he had spent on the expensive cloak which engendered the causeless hatred of the other brothers – a hatred unto death.

In a fascinating and parallel symbolic manner, the Jewish people are also the blameless goat whom our Father in Heaven bought unto Himself with the Two Tablets of Stone, the Decalogue He gave them at Sinai. Because of that gift, and the status of the Jewish people as the chosen people, we have been hated throughout the generations and persecuted unto death by cruel tyrant after cruel tyrant. And despite the causeless hatred against us, each of our attackers will be destroyed in turn until eventually even the angel of death will be destroyed by our Father in Heaven. At that time, Israel and the world will be redeemed and death will be destroyed forever.

May it be speedily and in our days.

JEWISH WORLD REVIEW

The Illusion of Freedom

by Rabbi Yonason Goldson

After generations of slavery and oppression, amidst miracles unprecedented and unrepeated, the Children of Israel marched forth out of Egypt and into the wilderness as a free people for the first time in their collective memory. Fifty days later they stood together at Sinai to receive the Torah - the code of 613 commandments that would define every aspect of their

lives.

What happened to freedom? What happened to the promise of redemption when all that really happened was the trading of one master for another?

Much of the modern world has built its understanding of freedom upon Thomas Jefferson's famous formulation of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But what would life be like in a society of unrestricted freedom? How many of us would chose to live in with no rules at all, where everyone was free to drive on either side of the road, to take whatever they desired regardless of rightful ownership, to indulge every whim and impulse without a thought of accountability? The absolute "freedom" of pure anarchy would provide no protection for the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Consequently, it would provide no freedom at all.

Intuitively, we understand that some freedoms have to be sacrificed in order to preserve order and ensure the common welfare. If so, we are forced to refine our concept of freedom. In contrast to ancient Egypt, in which our ancestors were coerced by the rod and the whip to bow before Pharaoh's will, the G-d of our redemption allows us the freedom from immediate retribution. By doing so, the Almighty empowers us with the freedom to make our own choices, to take responsibility of our own actions, and to transform ourselves from creatures of physical impulse into beings of spiritual refinement.

Ultimately, the freedom we possess is the freedom to choose our own master, to choose the leaders and system of laws that will best serve our collective interests in the long run.

Because we live in a society with others who also demand freedom, our choices will necessarily be limited by the conventions of society. More significantly, the values of the society in which we live will shape our own attitudes, influencing the ways we think that priorities we hold dear. From the moment we are born, our impressions are determined by others: our parents, our teachers, and our peers, as well as writers, celebrities, sports stars, and advertisers.

How often have we asked ourselves whether the ideas that govern our choices as spouses, as parents, and as community members are truly our own? How often do we stop to reflect whether we have acquired the values that guide us in our relationships and our careers through thoughtful contemplation or through cultural osmosis?

The illusion of freedom convinces us that our own gratification comes before our obligations to others, before even our obligations to ourselves. If we allow our desire for unrestricted freedom to steer our lives, we will find ourselves enslaved by our desires no less than a chain smoker is a slave to his cigarettes or an alcoholic is a slave to his gin. Convinced that freedom is a goal in itself, we will sacrifice everything of true value for the cruel master of self-indulgence. Deceived into believing that responsibility is the antithesis of freedom, we will invest ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, in philosophies like this one:

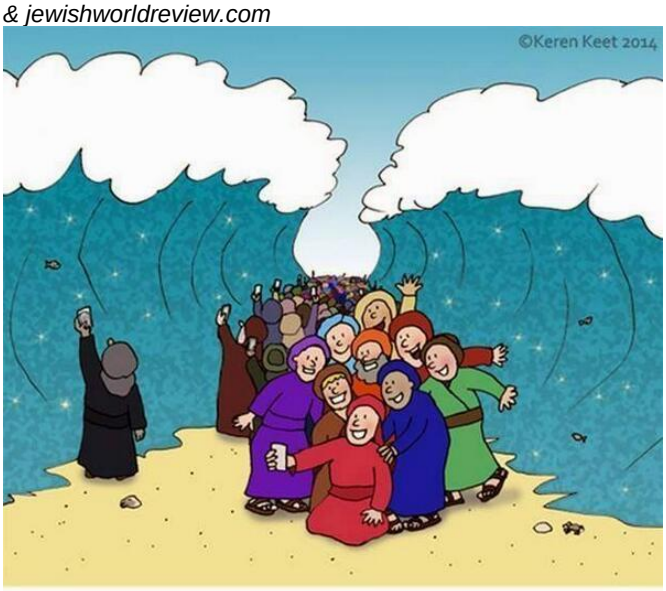
Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose, Nothing don't mean nothing honey if it ain't free, now now. And feeling good was easy, L-rd, when he sang the blues, You know feeling good was good enough for me, Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee.

These are the words that made Janice Joplin into a counterculture idol, before she died of a heroin overdose at the age of 27.

Less dramatic examples confront us every day. Politicians, movie icons, and athletes destroy their careers and their family lives for a few fleeting moments of pleasure. Parents allow their children to grow up without direction or discipline lest they quash their creativity or damage their egos by imposing structure and meaning upon their lives. A once-productive citizenry increasingly looks to receive support on the backs of others, whether through welfare, lawsuits, or pyramid schemes that leave countless victims footing the bill.

More than anything, Passover celebrates the freedom to think, to take stock of our lives and reassess our values, to take a fresh look at our own motivations and our own decisions, to acknowledge where we may have lost sight of truly meaningful goals and sincerely commit ourselves to striking out on a truer course.

Last year we were slaves to our inner masters; this year we have a chance to set ourselves free to seek the paths of truth and follow them toward the destination of enduring spiritual redemption.



If there were cellphones at the Red Sea

חג שמח וכשר!