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FREEING OURSELVES FROM SLAVERY


BY RABBI GREG ALEXANDER, CAPE TOWN PROGRESSIVE JEWISH CONGREGATION, AND NETZER SOUTH AFRICA BOGER (GRADUATE)



This Shabbat is called Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat that precedes Pesach. It reminds us that we have one week to go before we gather to sit at our seders and retell the greatest story ever told – the Exodus from Egypt. But more than that, it gives us a one-week countdown to be ready, just as the Israelites needed to be ready. “What? Are we leaving Egypt?” I hear you ask. “But I live in [insert suburb in Cape Town] and I am not a slave.






Is that really true? Are we all free? As the Haggadah reminds us, “in every generation we are called upon to see ourselves as if we left Egypt”. That means that each of us has the choice whether to leave or stay in Egypt, Mitzrayim, the “narrow place” of slavery.

That seems like a no-brainer! Who wants to be a slave, right? But we can only leave if we do the preparation. And I am not just referring to running down the breakfast cereals and clearing out the bread bin. I’m referring to the spiritual preparations. You see, Pesach is our annual opportunity to free ourselves from whatever it is that enslaves us – from our modern Pharaohs, whether they be our fears, our bad habits, our jobs, our joblessness, our failed relationships or our addictions.



I sat with a group of teens at Netzer Mini-Machaneh last Shabbat and we tried to wrap our heads around what it meant to “go out of Egypt” today. Some of them spoke about cellphones, some of them about bullying, many about feeling stuck in places in their lives or in relationships with family members. What was clear was that Mitzrayim is alive and well and sometimes it is actually ourselves that is the Pharaoh.

This Shabbat may we give ourselves the time to plan and prepare for Pesach, to decide what we need to “clean out” of the cupboards of our lives and to plan how to do that. Shabbat Shalom and may we all have a liberating Pesach.






"NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM" ON DREAMING OF AND BUILDING CHANGE



**BY RABBI LEA MÜHLSTEIN, NORTHWOOD & PINNER LIBERAL
SYNAGOGUE, UK, PRESIDENT ARZENU AND NETZER GERMANY
BOGERET (GRADUATE)**



No matter where in the world Jews gather for Pesach, the vast majority will conclude their seder with the words “לשנה הבאה בירושלים – next year in Jerusalem!” Through much of Jewish history these words expressed an almost messianic longing of a people wandering the globe. But Jerusalem and Zion meant much more than a place. It was also a symbol of the yearning of Jews for a time when they would have the freedom of being equal citizens and having sovereignty over their own affairs rather than being vulnerable to the whims of more or less hostile rulers.

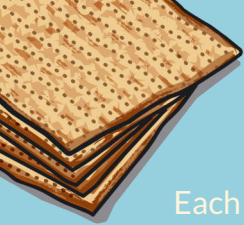


So the meaning of this short prayer has been and still is far from simple, because it isn't just about a geographical yearning. We learn this clearly from the fact that even if we celebrate the seder in Jerusalem we still recite the words “next year in Jerusalem” at the conclusion. But there is an important addition that we are commanded to observe in Jerusalem. We add one word to our prayer, saying ‘Next year in the rebuilt Jerusalem!’

It has long been my tradition, wherever in the world I happen to find myself celebrating the seder, to add the word “rebuilt” to my prayer as well. As a Liberal Jew I do so not because I believe in the rebuilding of ancient Jerusalem and the Temple but because the final words of the seder (the same words which we, not coincidentally, also recite at the end of Yom Kippur) must be a rallying call as we embrace our freedom: a call to accept that with freedom comes responsibility, that the fact that we are empowered to act places a duty on us to help shape a better tomorrow.

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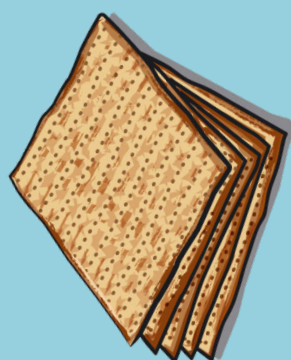




Each time I recite the words “לשנה הבאה בירושלים הבנויה” at the end of Yom Kippur and at the end of the seder, I am reminded of my obligation to celebrate the fulfilment of many of the Zionist dreams of my ancestors and to embrace my role in helping to fulfill those hopes that still reside in our dreams today.



As Pirkei Avot puts it: לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין להיבטל ממנה. Even if we may not be able to bring all the dreams to fulfillment by ourselves, we must never think that we will not be able to make a difference but must do our bit whether big or small. So as you conclude your seder this year, I invite all of you to share your dreams for a rebuilt Jerusalem and think what you might be able to do in the next year to help make the dreams come true.

Chag Sameach!





"FREEDOM IS A STATE OF BEING RATHER THAN PHYSICAL. YOU CHOOSE WHETHER YOU ARE FREE. THERE ARE ALWAYS LAWS AND SOCIAL NORMS – THERE IS A LIMIT TO FREEDOM, BUT THIS IS NOT A BAD THING. IF YOU ARE HAPPY AND COMFORTABLE, YOU HAVE ENOUGH FREEDOM"

Sophie Hasenson, RSY Netzer, UK, Shnat Aleh

"YOU CAN BE FREE WITHOUT FREEDOM. TO BE FREE IS A STATE OF MIND; 'FREEDOM' IS SOMETHING OBJECTIVE."

Itamar Cohen-Gadol, Noar Telem ShinShin (year of service), Israel

"FREEDOM IS GOOD IN MODERATION. TOO MUCH FREEDOM CAN BE DETRIMENTAL. IT IS NOT ONLY A POSITIVE, AND SO IT IS IMPORTANT NOT TO MAKE FREEDOM AN ULTIMATE GOAL".

Ben Krieser, Netzer Australia, Shnat Aleh



PLANTING SEEDS OF KINDNESS: KARPAS (PARSLEY)

**BY RABBI Yael SPLANSKY, HOLY BLOSSOM TEMPLE,
TORONTO, CANADA, AND NFTY BOGERET (GRADUATE)**

"Our acts of kindness are used by God as seeds for the planting of trees in the Garden of Eden. In this way, each of us, by our deeds, has the power to create our own paradise in this season of rebirth."

Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezrich, 18th century Poland

When it comes time for the Karpas (the parsley on the seder plate), ask the people around your seder table if they are involved in good work. What "seeds of kindness" should be celebrated in this season of rebirth? Are we involved in refugee sponsorship, affordable housing, mentoring, volunteering, and/or tzedakah?

How do these deeds emulate God's act of bringing us out of Egypt and how do these deeds of kindness "create our own paradise" in our own time?





THE SEDER AS A JOURNEY OF QUESTIONING, REFLECTION AND DISCOVERY

BY RABBI HAIM SHALOM, KEHILLAT MEVAKSHEI DERECH IN JERUSALEM, AND RSY NETZER BOGER (GRADUATE)

Perhaps the most famous part of the haggadah and the seder night – known to us all is the section usually called “the four questions” or known by the first two words in Hebrew: “מה נשתנה” – “Ma Nishtanah”. These four questions ask essentially – what’s going on? Why do we do all these weird and wacky rituals? Before the text of the haggadah gets round to answering the specifics of each question (Why Matzah? Why Bitter herbs? Why dip twice? Why lean?) it starts with a more general answer, namely:

עבדים היינו, לפרעה במצרים; ויוציאנו ה' אלוהינו משם, ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה. ואילו לא גאל הקדוש ברוך הוא את אבותינו ממצרים, עדיין אנו ובנינו ובני בנינו משועבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים. ואפילו כולנו חכמים, כולנו נבונים, כולנו יודעים את התורה--מצוה עלינו לספר ביציאת מצרים; וכל המאריך ביציאת מצרים, הרי זה משובח."

“Slaves we were to Pharoah in Egypt, and our Eternal G-d brought us out from their with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. And if The holy one, blessed be G-d, had not delivered our ancestors from Egypt, we and our children and our children’s children would still be enslaved to Pharoah in Egypt. And even if we were all wise, all knowledgeable, all knew the Torah, we are still commanded to retell the exodus from Egypt; and who ever elaborates on the exodus from Egypt – behold, Kudos to them.”

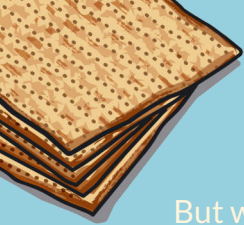
So what’s going on? Why is it so important to retell the exodus of Egypt (which is basically what we do on Seder night)? What’s the big deal about the Exodus from Egypt? Why is it so important? Just in case you didn’t understand its importance, the haggadah goes on to tell us:

"בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים"

“In every generation, an individual should see themselves as if they themselves left Egypt.”

(Cont'd)





But wait – that’s crazy – I never personally left Egypt (apart from when I have visited there obviously, but that’s not what’s meant here). I wasn’t a slave. What is going on that I should be talking all night about the Exodus and seeing myself as one of those who left slavery under Pharaoh? To understand the Seder night ritual is to understand one of the most fundamental teachings of Jewishness. To be Jewish is to be someone on a journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. We’re not talking geography (or politics) here – this isn’t about the land of Israel, but rather about the journey itself, and the freedom from oppression which begins that journey.

Seder is the symbolic release from captivity which must happen within all of us for us to be able to grow into our true selves. It is the beginning of a journey. A journey of discovery, of questions, of growth, of soul-searching and eventually of self-actualization (הגשמה – hagshama). When one is oppressed, one has no choices and without choices, life is essentially meaningless. When we free ourselves from the things which stop us asking questions, we free ourselves to grow and to discover new truths to find out who we truly are. The metaphor of journeying is the central metaphor of the Torah and all Jewish culture. Our story (the story of our first ancestors, Avram and Sarai) starts with a call to a journey (“לך לך – Go, surely go!”). The majority of the Torah is taken up with our journeying through the desert. In the Torah itself we never reach the Promised Land. That is because the Promised Land is not really a destination. The destination is to be on a journey. To free oneself from one’s usual surroundings and step into the unknown. To make ourselves a tiny bit vulnerable as we are in a place which is neither here nor there. Journeying makes us vulnerable and opens us up. That opening up is how we learn. This central lesson of Jewishness is also the primary thinking behind Netzer as a youth movement.

Netzer exists to take its members out of their comfort zones, often physically transporting them to a version of wilderness, but always, whether physically or metaphorically taking them on a journey forcing them to ask questions, making sure they are never too comfortable, being challenged repeatedly to redefine ourselves as we learn more and more from the ever changing settings we find ourselves in. This is why we go away to camp, plan trips to Israel, encourage people to spend a year away from “home”. So that, outside of home, outside of familiar, we can re-evaluate the world around us and the world within us. Jewishness and Netzer are a journey – an eternal Exodus from closed spaces to freedom, inquiry, and, we hope, to finding yourself (הגשמה – hagshama).

May we all see ourselves as forever leaving Egypt and may we always strive to bring the Promised Land of a more just world a little closer.





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