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The most vivid and warm memories I have of growing up were my Pesach Seders (Sedarim). The most memorable ones were the more intimate Sedarim I had with only my family present. This year’s Pesach will be a little like that, as we are obligated to be in our homes and only conduct Sedarim with our immediate family. For some this may be challenging and difficult to be alone or to celebrate as a couple, but for others this could be a real opportunity for a more intimate and close-knit family experience.

In fact, the essence of Pesach is about being at home, the foundation of the values and ethics we pass on to our children. I believe the timing of this pandemic is no coincidence and the message of being at home – the way to combat it at this present moment – is really the essence of Pesach.

The Talmud (Pesachim 109a) recounts how the great sage Rabbi Akiva, renowned for his unrelenting commitment to Torah study, would uncharacteristically close his Beit Midrash (study hall) early on Erev Pesach. (The only other time he did this was Erev Yom Kippur in order to feed the children before the fast). The Gemara tells us that he did this in order to keep the children awake throughout the Seder. Rashi explains that he would close the doors of the Beit Midrash in order to go home and make sure the kids would sleep during the day, so they could be awake for the night! And what would this great Sage do during the Seder? We would expect him to share only his Torah insights with the children. No, he gave them corn and nuts to pique their interest in the Seder and help them stay up throughout the night.

The Torah itself formulates the commandment of retelling the story of the Exodus with the child as the focal point: VeHigadeta LeVincha – “And you shall tell your son.”

Why is Pesach chosen as the chag where our children become the focus? Why on this night, that holds so much potential for reaching the loftiest intellectual and spiritual heights, do we focus on entertaining our children?

To answer this question, we need to understand the symbolism behind Pesach. The Exodus from Egypt was the birth of our freedom. G-d took us out on a physical and spiritual journey to receive the Torah and to become His nation. The Torah is our path for life – a life dedicated to service of G-d, paved with the morals and ethics which have been, and still are, the backbone of our existence as the Jewish people.

How do we ensure the continuity of our precious ideals and values? By safely passing the chain of tradition to the next generation. The world we live in poses many challenges when it comes to raising children. The responsibility rests on us, as parents, to be their primary educators and continue to be partners with G-d in creating the future of the Jewish people.

There is no more suitable time to start this process of education than on Pesach. And especially this year, when we are constrained to having a smaller Seder just with our immediate family. On Pesach, as the birth of our nationhood comes to the fore, we realize that we were born with a purpose. Our purpose is to live according to the ideals of the Torah and to bring them into the world around us.

By focussing all our energy on our children at the Seder table, we are not only remembering our history but we are creating our future. As John F. Kennedy said, “Children are the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future.” Our children are indeed our future, let us invest in them and secure the future existence of the Jewish people and all that we stand for.

Rabbi Daniel Kaplan is Executive Director of Mizrachi South Africa
The following story is a personal one, our family story. One that my grandfather of blessed memory would tell us time and time again. It was about his lucky escape from Lithuania as a 17-year-old boy with his family on one of the last boats out of Europe before the outbreak of World War Two.

Louis Gecelter was a young man from Kovno, a keen sportsman who participated regularly in Maccabi sporting events. In the summer of 1937, he represented Maccabi Kovno at a regional sports festival for young Jews from across Europe. Here he met young German Jewish boys his age for the first time. While talking to them, he was shocked by the stories he was hearing – the yellow star, public discrimination and disgrace at all levels of German society.

He immediately sensed he must tell his mother to come and hear these terrible stories for herself. Although the sports grounds were miles away – and he would only be coming home after the festival had ended – he found a creative solution. He wrote a note to his mother and asked the captain of one of the steam ships on the river next to the grounds to deliver the note to the lady who runs the kiosk further upstream. Thankfully, the note made it to his mother, my great-grandmother Sonia, and its message was clear: “Come now on the very next boat and hear what’s happening to the Jews in Germany!”

And she came indeed, listening very intently to the young German boys and girls. The moment my grandfather returned home, she gathered the family together, and – in my grandfather’s words – she declared to the family in Yiddish, “Mir muzech packen, dir kinder zogen dem emes” – we must pack, the children speak the truth.

Thank G-d, my great-grandmother had the wisdom and insight to decide it was time to leave and within months they had gone. They wanted to go to Palestine but the gates were closed due to British immigration restrictions, so they made their way to South Africa.

Tragically, all extended family who stayed behind perished in the Holocaust.

My grandfather arrived in South Africa and married my grandmother (a marriage that lasted 75 years!), built a family, became a Jewish community leader, and they made aliyah when he was 59. All his direct descendants subsequently followed suit and live in Israel today. He passed away peacefully a few years ago at the age of 97. He would always say how he owed his life to that fortuitous meeting at the sports festival and his mother’s great wisdom and foresight.

From potential destruction to ultimate deliverance. From clouds of darkness to radiant light, and from the brink of despair to a bright and hopeful future.

Like myriads of other Jewish family stories, I believe our family story reflects the essence of Jewish history as told in the Haggadah and provides a pertinent perspective as we combat the global corona crisis.

After all, no festival shapes our collective identity more than Pesach. It is the time we engage in national storytelling. We sit together as a family and attempt to crystallize the meaning of our people’s very existence – our birth, our suffering and our salvation. We aim to tell our children what it means to be a part of the Jewish people.

We tell our collective family’s story.

Indeed, the stories we tell ourselves are critical to our collective identity. According to Harvard History Professor, Jill Lepore, this is the crisis facing America today. She argues that Americans have forgotten how
to tell their national story with clarity. She suggests the reason for this is that over the last 50 years, much of academia has shunned any discussion of nationalism, seeing it as something negative and dangerous. By doing so, others step into the vacuum and create stories which don’t necessarily reflect the true American story.

Lepore says a country must have a national story, otherwise it risks losing its way. Yes, writing national history creates plenty of problems. But not writing it creates more.

Our Prophets and Sages understood this well and created our national narrative at the very dawn of Jewish history. They defined what our collective identity and destiny are all about. This is the story of Pesach and this of course is our Haggadah.

So what is the essence of our story? What is the foundational idea at the core of the Haggadah?

Our Sages posit that the quintessential theme of the whole story can be captured in four words – מַתְחִיל בִּגְנוּת וּמְסַיֵּם בְּשֶׁבַח – begin with shame, end with praise. This short and sharp insight not only captures the primary plot of the Exodus but reveals an underlying pattern in all of Jewish history.

Life comes with difficulties and challenges. But it is in no way defined by them.

Whether the challenges are physical or spiritual, one thing is clear. It is the beginning of the story and not the story itself. The story may begin with darkness, pain and suffering but somehow always ends with light, hope and redemption.

The Jewish story contains tragedy but is never tragic.

Life has bitterness, lots of it, but it is fundamentally sweet.

There is evil in the world, but good will eventually prevail.

As these lines are being written, Covid-19 has caused the most unimaginable and drastic consequences all over the globe. We are living through chaotic, daunting and uncertain times.

Our challenges – just like in Egypt – are both physical and spiritual.

Physically, tens of thousands have died, hundreds of thousands more are ill and we are experiencing an unprecedented spread of the virus to almost every country in the world in such a short time. Israel is approaching a full national lockdown as are many countries around the world causing unprecedented physical isolation and social distancing. The financial ramifications for so many individuals and countries are staggering.

Spiritually, a host of religious and halachic challenges, such as the shutting down of all synagogue services, public Torah classes and shiurim and many regular chessed services, to mention but a few. Instead of the natural scenario of grandparents sitting with grandchildren on Seder Night, countless families will be separated, many for the first time ever.

However, thankfully, the Pesach Haggadah grants us a unique paradigm through which to view these events.

Although the future remains uncertain and none of us know how things will unfold, we believe and know that they will end, and somehow for the better. We know from our collective family story that pain, suffering and uncertainty will transform into a better and brighter future. Perhaps even to a more mindful and balanced world, more humble and appreciative societies demonstrating more creativity and interconnectedness. Perhaps a better world somehow strengthened with new purpose and vigor, better equipped and resolved to face life’s great challenges and opportunities ahead.

Please G-d, let it be soon!

Chag Sameach!

1 Foreign Affairs Periodical, March/April 2019, p. 10.
2 Mishna Pesachim, 10:4.
3 With respect to the Haggadah’s theme of מַתְחִיל בִּגְנוּת וּמְסַיֵּם בְּשֶׁבַח, the Talmud (Pesa-chim 116a) mentions two opinions. Rav says it’s referring to the spiritual realm, the journey from idolatry to belief in G-d, and Shmuel says it’s referring to our physical survival – from suffering and servitude to freedom and redemption. Rav Yitzchak Alfassi rules that both opinions are accepted in practice and both appear in the Haggadah.

Rabbi Doron Perez is the Chief Executive of World Mizrachi.
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Moshe is on the way back to Egypt to demand that Pharaoh free the Jewish people. Suddenly, Hashem adds an ultimatum, informing Moshe that Pharaoh will refuse to free the Jews and that Moshe is to threaten Pharaoh and Egypt with the death of all of their firstborn – makat bechorot. The Jews are Hashem's firstborn children. If Egypt refuses to free them, the penalty will be the death of their own.

Though Moshe is told about the bechorot ultimatum before his return, he issues it only after nine other plagues. If Hashem intended for Moshe to issue the ultimatum only after the nine plagues, why did He tell Moshe about it at the beginning of the story as if it needed to be issued right away?

I believe that makat bechorot was meant to occur at the very beginning. It was only Bnei Yisrael's lack of faith that required the nine preceding plagues.

Returning to the beginning of the story, Hashem gives Moshe a dual directive at the burning bush, by sending him to both Pharaoh and Bnei Yisrael. He is to ask Pharaoh for emancipation and the Jews to show they are worthy of redemption by standing with him in a show of faith and identifying themselves as Hashem’s ‘firstborn’ nation.

Initially, the Jews rise to the occasion and show faith. When Pharaoh rejects Moshe’s request and intensifies their slavery, the people lose hope and express their frustration to Moshe. The Exodus is at an impasse – Hashem wants to free the Jewish people and can use makat bechorot to do so, but the Jewish people are not yet ready.

Hashem attempted to reinspire the Jewish people through the five lesha-not of Geula. Unfortunately, the Jews are too pressurized by their slavery and unable to rise to the occasion. At this point, the Exodus detours through the nine plagues. Their stated goal is to convince the Egyptians of Hashem’s hegemony but their real intention was to inspire the Jews who live amongst the Egyptians.

Finally, after nine plagues, the Jews are ready and it is time for makat bechorot. Before the plague can occur and for it to single out the Jews as Hashem’s first born, the Jews have to identify themselves by sacrificing the Korban Pesach and marking their doorposts with its blood. Hashem knows which homes are Jewish and needs no sign; it is the Jews who need to self-identify.

Though the actual Exodus occurred in the morning, the geula began the night before with makat bechorot. Hence we have our Pesach Seder at night and not during the day. We are meant to commemorate not only the Exodus, but makat bechorot too. Not only what Hashem did for us, but also what we had to do to deserve it.

The night when this all occurred – both that year and in future years – is called leil shimurim, for both Hashem and the Jewish people. Rashi explains that the shemira refers to Hashem’s waiting and looking forward to the moment He could redeem the Jewish people. Ramban explains that Hashem was waiting for the time the Jewish people would be worthy of redemption by sacrificing the Korban Pesach.

Shemira means to watch and protect and refers to Hashem’s protecting the Jewish homes during makat bechorot. The Jewish people’s shemira of the mitzvah of Korban Pesach merited Hashem’s shemira during makat bechorot.

The Ibn Ezra explains that we are shomer the mitzvah of Korban Pesach in future generations to show our appreciation of Hashem’s shemira on that original night in Mitzrayim. The Talmud teaches that Hashem continues being shomer over us on the night of the 14th of Nissan for all generations.

Additionally, the Seforno explains that just as Hashem waited and longed for the moment when the Jews would be deserving of geula from Mitzrayim, He waits for the time we will be ready for the final Geula as well. The Rema adds that we open the door when we recite וְשָׁפְךָ חֲמָתְךָ at the Seder to show our faith in Hashem’s shemira of us and that this merit will indeed bring our own geula.

May we continue to be shomer the mitzvot of Pesach in a way that merits us the shemira of the ultimate Geula!

1. This explains why Chapter 6 reintroduces Moshe and Aharon (6: 14-27). It is introducing a new ‘version’ of the story.
2. See Rashi 7:3. This explains why Hashem had to harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he would continue to resist wanting to free the Jewish people. Pharaoh may have been convinced, but the Jews were not yet ready.
3. See Mechilta (Bo 6), which emphasizes that the sign was on the inside of the door because it was aimed at the Jews living in the home.
4. See Berachot 4b.
5. See Shemot 13, which focuses our commemoration of Yetziat Mitzrayim on makat bechorot and on korban Pesach which merited our redemption (See Machzor Vitri on the Haggadah DH Be’arav).
6. This explains the significance of Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya’s opinion (Berachot 9a), that the Korban Pesach needed to be eaten before chatzot, the time makat bechorot occurred.
7. Orach Chaim 480.

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Even if we were all wise... all Sages and well learned in the Torah, it would still be our duty to tell the story of the departure from Egypt. And the more one elaborates upon the story of the departure from Egypt, the more one is to be praised."

Immediately after teaching the above imperative, the Ba’alei haHaggadah recount the narrative of the Five “Star” Sages in Bnei Brak, who fulfilled the above: “Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon were telling of the departure from Egypt all night until their disciples came and said to them: Our masters, the time for the recitation of the morning Shema has arrived.”

This was an odd phenomenon – firstly, at least three of the four Sages mentioned – Rabbi Eliezer (from Lod), Rabbi Yehoshua (from Peki’in) and Rabbi Tarfon were Rabbi Akiva’s masters and teachers! Why were they spending Seder Night with their student (from Bnei Brak)? After all, students generally visit their teachers on festivals.

Secondly, Rabbi Eliezer in particular taught that one is required to celebrate yom tov in one’s home, based on the pasuk, “You shall rejoice, you and your household,” which he contradicts through spending Pesach night in Rabbi Akiva’s home.

The Aruch HaShulchan suggests that the Seder in Bnei Brak took place after the destruction of the Second Beit Hamikdash, most probably during the harsh Hadrianic persecutions following the failed Bar Kochba rebellion. This was one of the most tragic and despairing eras in Jewish history as Jewish leaders were being tortured to death and a harsh Roman exile was yet to follow.

How could Pesach – the holiday of freedom and redemption – be celebrated that year in the midst of terror and persecution? Who could inspire the leaders to retain their faith and optimism? All agreed that Rabbi Akiva, who could laugh upon hearing the rejoicing of Roman officers and seeing foxes/jackals (or Roman officers) emerging from the Kodesh Kodashim, confident in the fulfillment of the prophecies of consolation, could offer them the inspiration they needed!

Rabbi Akiva debated with Rabbi Tarfon regarding the proper conclusion to Maggid: “Rabbi Tarfon said, ‘Blessed art Thou, O G-d... Who has redeemed us and has redeemed our forebears [past tense] from Egypt’ – and did not seal [the blessing]. Rabbi Akiva continued and concluded Rabbi Tarfon’s blessing: ‘...So shall our G-d and the G-d of our forebears [past tense] bring to us other festivals and celebrations for peace, rejoicing in the rebuilding of Your city and reveling in Your service; and we shall eat therefrom the paschal lamb and the sacrifices... Blessed art Thou, Who has redeemed Israel.’”

Rabbi Akiva’s beracha of thanksgiving for past and future redemptions would be recited that year (even in the presence of Rabbi Tarfon) as he hosted this monumental Seder as one of the five-“star” leaders of his generation. For though he may have been the student, that year and onward, he would teach and inspire generations to maintain faith in G-d and the destiny of Am Yisrael. He would live and die with the words Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeynu Hashem Echad on his lips – constantly engaged in Kabbalat Ol Malchut Shamayim (accepting the yoke of Heaven) however dire his circumstances.

Under quarantine and danger, Rabbi Akiva teaches us messages of redemption every Seder; the secret is not only to retain optimism and recount the redemption of the past as a prelude to the future, but simultaneously to strengthen oneself in religious commitment. It is no surprise that Rabbi Akiva’s own students had to come to announce – “Our masters, the time for the recitation of the morning Shema has arrived.” The Rabbis were well aware of the ideal time to recite Kriyat Shema; in fact they had been engaged in reciting Rabbi Akiva’s Kriyat Shema all night as they rekindled their faith in redemption, in martyrdom and in acceptance of Ol Malchut Shamayim.

The students had yet to partake in such a Seder; otherwise they would have known that the dawn heralding the redemption had already risen hours earlier, as the Pesach story was retold throughout the night in Bnei Brak.

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1 Sukkah 27b.
2 Devarim 14:26.
3 Rabbi Yechezkel Michel Epstein, 1829-1908 in his commentary on the Haggadah, “Leil Shimurim.”
4 Makkot 24b.
5 Pesachim 116b.

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A recent study came out that doesn’t seem very shocking: children are more likely to ask Google a question than ask a parent. The survey was conducted by Birmingham Science City, whose Director, Dr. Pam Waddell, commented, “this isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It shows just how commonplace digital technology is for children today and how comfortable they are with using it.”

I think most will agree with her assertion that there is nothing wrong with looking up a word in an online dictionary as opposed to a physical dictionary. What is more concerning is the notion that the technology is being used as the authoritative place to go for information, not only to look up the meaning of trivia words, but for all types of information a child might have asked a parent. It is difficult to sift out real information from pseudo-information and this certainly applies to children.

Moreover, there is an additional concern about children consulting Google instead of their parents. The learning experience, certainly when it comes to Torah, is not just about getting information. There is something valuable about the interaction between two or more people discussing something of interest to them. Google is not going to help children make sure they understand the information they just read. Google is not going to help make the message personal.

The festival of Pesach is unique in that its many facets and details revolve around a central discussion in which communication, questions and answers are a necessity to the fulfillment of the Seder.

Questions and answers are integral to the Seder, and are most apparent in the dialogue of the Four Sons.

We are all aware that these four characters depict different understandings of and approaches to human behavior.

The Torah tells us, “And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come saying: ‘what is this? You shall say to him, with a strong hand G-d has brought us out of Egypt.’” (Shemot 13:14)

Rashi attributes this question to the she’eino yodeah lishol, the son who is not even able to ask. Yet this answer is given to the wicked son in the Haggadah! What relationship is there between one who does not know how to ask and one who is wicked? There certainly must be a relationship as the Haggadah connects the two!

We may suggest that in Torah chinuch (education), there is no room for compromise. If one receives the wrong education it is tantamount to receiving no education. One who is devoid of Torah will ultimately be satisfied with misleading ideas and thoughts.

The foundation of the pedagogic process is the ability to motivate the student to question, to initiate ideas. Questioning is an innately human trait. One should seek to understand by delving deeper into the profundities of the Torah. There are certain limitations though. One must know what to ask, when to ask, and whom to ask. The ability to ask the appropriate questions indicates comprehension of the subject matter, as well as a sincere desire to understand the fundamentals of the material.

The type of question one asks and its presentation reflects the character of the questioner. Knowing when to speak and when to remain silent also indicates one’s motivation in asking the question. Is one truly seeking an answer or is he merely making a statement to voice his own opinion? Whom one asks is equally critical. Some individuals only ask questions to those who will offer them an anticipated desirable response. They will not ask if they expect they won’t like the answer.

There are a number of reasons why people do not ask questions. Complacency, ignorance, apathy, self-consciousness and insecurity seem to be superficially valid reasons. Perhaps the most destructive reason for failure to question, however, is one’s refusal to accept the answer. The individual with this trait does not desire to develop intellectually. He may even fear the truth of the answer. This individual reflects intolerance and egotism. Ultimately, his refusal to accept another’s answers will harm only one person... himself!

The Seder is about asking questions to find the truth. To hear the truth, we must learn to listen.

Wishing you and your families and Chag Kasher VeSameach!

Rabbi Alon Friedman is Rabbi of big shul minyan of the Yeshiva Mizrachi community
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Seder Night is a festival of faith. It is a time when we want our whole family to undergo a process of growth. We want the whole family to be free. Here are a few suggestions on the idea of freedom you can share and discuss around your Pesach table.

We suggest that the week beforehand, you ask each member of the family to ponder the question: “What does freedom mean to me?”

Maggid begins with Ha Lachma Anya: the Lechem Oni – the poor man’s bread our forefathers ate in Egypt, and ends with HaShata Hacha – LeShana HaBa’a Be’Ara DeYisrael; HaShata Avdei – LeShana HaBa’a Bnei Chorin – “This year we are here – next year in Eretz Yisrael; this year we are slaves – next year free men.”

This is the goal of Seder Night – to go free! Let us go on a journey through the Haggadah that will enlighten us as to what true freedom means in our times.

The ability to ask questions is also the ability to open our hearts to change, to an understanding that we can be better. Asking the Ma Nishtana gives us the opportunity to grow, challenge, change and improve.

Why is it important to remember that we were once slaves?

The Torah begins the first set of mitzvot after Har Sinai precisely with the laws of a Jewish slave. From this we can learn an essential point in our covenant with G-d.

The foundation of the entire Torah is faith and belief in G-d. “I am the L-rd your G-d” is the first of the Ten Commandments. Our basis for faith in G-d does not begin with ‘I am G-d who created the world’ but rather “I am G-d Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” Going from slavery to freedom is what enables a person to fully connect and communicate with G-d, and freedom is the basis for all of the mitzvot. Only then, after we have left slavery and become free, can we receive the Torah. A person who is enslaved to another cannot be a full servant of G-d – not only technically, in that his master disrupts his ability to keep the mitzvot, but also psychologically and spiritually. He cannot feel his full dependence on G-d alone while he is beholden to his master.

For Am Yisrael there is no such concept as slavery for life, as it says: “They are My servants” – all of Am Yisrael is subservient to G-d. Therefore, they cannot be enslaved to humans, for the

The ability to ask questions is also the ability to open our hearts to change, to an understanding that we can be better. Asking the Ma Nishtana gives us the opportunity to grow, challenge, change and improve.

Why is this night different from all other nights?

What is the purpose of the four questions?

Clearly, the main point of asking questions is to receive answers. However, there is an additional goal here. The Gemara states that if a person has no children, someone else asks him the four questions; and if he is all alone, he must ask himself. What does this mean?

A slave does not question things. Only a free person is independent and strong enough to ask and challenge. This is even true regarding questions of faith. A free person connected to G-d and to his faith is not afraid to ask questions. Questions will not undermine his or her world of faith.

Concern for others takes us out of slavery.

Rav Soloveitchik explains: “The essence of freedom is the inclusion of the ‘other.’ The slave thinks only about himself, but a proud, free person thinks about and includes others. Seder Night symbolizes the birth of a ‘Chesed (Giving) Community’ – a community in which the slaves who were just now redeemed from slavery, leave their isolation and total involvement in themselves, and join a kind and giving community.”

A slave is constantly thinking about how to survive, so he can only think about himself. A free person, full of power and vigor, is able to remove himself from his self-centeredness – to think about others and how to help them. Thinking about others is the thought process of a free person!

Before all else, leaving slavery for freedom teaches us that it is forbidden to control others. In the next stage, the Torah commands us to act with kindness towards others – to live in a world of giving, the world of free people. Our goal at the Seder is to go free; to be able to see the other, to transform ourselves into people who positively influence and give to others as people truly free.

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Before all else, leaving slavery for freedom teaches us that it is forbidden to control others. In the next stage, the Torah commands us to act with kindness towards others – to live in a world of giving, the world of free people. Our goal at the Seder is to go free; to be able to see the other, to transform ourselves into people who positively influence and give to others as people truly free.
IDEAS FOR LEARNING TOGETHER AT THE SEDER

basis of serving G-d is that every man and woman must be free to serve Him.

Slavery damages the concept of “I am the L-rd your G-d” in two ways, for both sides – the slave and the master:

1. Slavery prevents the slave from the freedom to serve G-d alone.
2. Slavery causes the master to feel superiority, which prevents him from feeling subservience to G-d. The fact he allows himself to enslave another human being shows that not only is he not keeping this mitzvah, he is also lacking in his belief in and subservience to G-d.

If so, Avadim Hayinu – We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and G-d took us out – it was this Exodus which enabled us to become servants of G-d. However, our control over other people also blocks us from our ability to be true servants of G-d. On Seder Night, let us emphasize our slavery in Egypt so that we will never try to oppress and control others; so that we may understand that doing so prevents us from being true servants of G-d. Problematic control is not only found in slavery in the classic sense, but can occur in many other relationships where one side takes advantage of their strength or position to control and dominate the other side, such as a boss/employee; husband/wife, parent/child, etc.

Why is it so important for us to know that G-d took us out of Egypt?

Firstly, it leads us to trust and have faith in G-d, as the Torah states in several places: “And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be your G-d, and you will know that I am the L-rd your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”

However, there is an additional point here. If we had left the slavery of Egypt through a national struggle, it is safe to assume that we would not have become servants of G-d; a people who would subjugate themselves to doing G-d’s Will in this world. “Slavery” to a spiritual and moral world, to a world of ethics, principles and good character traits, turns a human into a free person by virtue of the fact that the spirit is what rules him, and not his body or his physical desires.

Rav Kook teaches us that “The difference between a slave and a free person is not just a question of social standing, whereby one happens to be enslaved and the other is not. We can find an intelligent slave whose spirit is free, and the opposite, a free man with the mentality of a slave. The nature of true freedom is that uplifted spirit through which the individual, and the entire nation, is uplifted and inspired to remain faithful to their inner essence – the mental and spiritual attribute of the Divine image that lies within them.”

Let us remember, and be grateful, that G-d took us out of Egypt with a strong Hand and an outstretched Arm.
We start the Haggadah talking about the lowly state in which we found ourselves at the beginning of the process of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Why do we say עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה and not the more concise עַבְדֵי פַּרְעֹה we were Pharaoh’s slaves? After all, in Tehillim, we are called Ṣvdei Hashem, so the parallel would be Ṣvdei Paroh. Is there a major difference between the two phrases?

If we continue moving backward in history, the real beginning of the geula was the moment G-d appeared to Moshe by the sneh, the burning bush, where He told him to return to Egypt and lead the Jews out.

The question is asked why the sneh was deemed the most appropriate vehicle for this initial conversation? A lowly burning bush doesn’t seem to be the glamorous mechanism we would have envisioned.

Rav Soloveichik suggests that there is a fundamental difference between עַבְדֵי פַּרְעֹה and עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרָיִם. Hayinu leParoh, we were to Pharaoh, means a social reality, an external physical state in which we found ourselves. We were subjugated to servitude, but it didn’t go to our core. Avdei Paroh, servants of Pharaoh, on the other hand, would have meant an identification, an internal connection between us and Pharaoh, between us and his ideals and values. That was not the case. As the Midrash tells us, we didn’t change our names, clothing, etc. On the outside, it might not have been noticeable but G-d knew we were Avadim leParoh and not Avdei Paroh.

What was the sneh? A bush on fire yet its inside stayed whole. It was not consumed. It was only burning externally. Moshe had his doubts about the Jewish people. Did they really deserve to be saved? What merits did they have? G-d appears to Moshe in the form of the sneh, as if to say these people are pure and perfect on the inside. It’s just the outside that’s on fire. Go redeem My people.

When we finally did leave Mitzrayim, we became Ṣvdei Hashem, not just avadim hayinu leHashem. We identified with His values, became shaped by His mitzvot, and matured through His dictates. Let us continue to allow the Torah to define who we are, to inspire our core inner self, and may we all be zoche to a true holiday of geula veYeshua – redemption and salvation.

Rabbi Shalom Rosner is a Rebbe at Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh and Rabbi of the Nofei HaShemesh community.
WHY IS THIS HAGGADA DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER HAGGADOT?
Dr. Daniel Rose explains the new Koren Magerman Youth Haggada

"ABOUT TO GAIN THEIR FREEDOM, THE ISRAELITES WERE TOLD THAT THEY WERE TO BECOME A NATION OF EDUCATORS... FREEDOM IS WON NOT ON THE BATTLEFIELD NOR IN THE POLITICAL ARENA BUT IN THE HUMAN IMAGINATION AND WILL. TO DEFEND A LAND YOU NEED AN ARMY, BUT TO DEFEND FREEDOM YOU NEED EDUCATION. YOU NEED PARENTS, FAMILIES AND HOMES AND A CONSTANT CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS. ABOVE ALL YOU NEED MEMORY – THE KIND OF MEMORY THAT NEVER FORGETS THE BREAD OF AFFLICTION AND THE BITTER HERBS OF SLAVERY."

(The Jonathan Sacks Haggada)

Rabbi Sacks exquisitely encapsulates the essence of Seder Night. In perhaps the widest celebrated ritual service across the Jewish world, we ensure future generations are socialized into our national narrative, identity, and values. At the seder table, there are two central actors, the Parent-Educator (an archetype Jewish personality in Jewish civilization) and the child.

Rabbi Sacks also hints at the pedagogy utilized by the Parent-Educator with the help of the haggada: memory. National memories are transmitted through ritual and storytelling, and Seder night combines these two magnificently. What do ritual and storytelling have in common? They are both experiential. They facilitate the experiencing of values and narrative in a way that other more cerebral modes cannot. To quote Rabbi Sacks once again: "Tell the story while you are doing the deed, because values are caught not taught. They are communicated by what we do more than by what we say." It aims to transmit our national and religious heritage in a way that children can comprehend by using experiential education techniques and activities that draw inspiration from the rituals of the evening itself.

Each page asks the reader a question, suggests an activity (suitable for all present around the table) that highlights the themes addressed on that particular page, features a quote or story connected to the ideas on the page, and shows a beautiful illustration that can be approached as a commentary in itself on the text.

All of the tools and resources in the Koren Magerman Youth Haggada, together with the explanatory Parent-Educator Companion (available free with purchase from www.korenpub.com) give parents and educators everything they need to ensure the Seder will revolve around the children at the table, and make Seder Night a magical evening of impactful, engaging, and fun, experiential education.

Daniel Rose is the editor of the Koren Magerman Educational Siddur series and developed the Koren Magerman Youth Haggada.

1 The Jonathan Sacks Haggada
2 Talmud Bavli Pesachim 116b
3 Laws of Chametz and Matza, 7:6
Rabbi Doron Chitiz

Making Your Seder More Meaningful

Seder Night holds the key to our personal Jewish identities. It is a night for each one of us to reflect on who we are as Jews and where our priorities lie as G-d’s nation. Traditionally, the Seder is thought of as a night focused on the children – by encouraging them to ask questions and share ideas. While this is of utmost importance, it is crucial to keep in mind that the Seder is an important experience for all of us, regardless of age.

The actual mitzvah of the evening is to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. This is meant to serve as an inspiring journey to last all year round. How do we turn the Seder from merely a recitation of passages in the Haggadah to a meaningful and powerful experience for everyone around the table?

Here are some discussion topics you may want to include in your Seder:

SLAVERY

We speak about our slavery in Egypt which happened over 3,000 years ago. How many of us truly relate to the physical slavery as depicted in the Torah?

Does slavery exist in our lives today? We are all enslaved to some degree – socially, technologically, financially, etc.

How many of us allow our smartphones to dictate how or when we use them? Do we automatically answer our ringing phone even when we are in conversation with someone else, or do we let it go to voicemail? Do our phones serve us or do we serve our phones?

How many of us feel free to always say and do what we believe is right?

THE FOUR SONS

How do we educate our children?

“Educate the child according to his way” (Proverbs 22:6). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch expounds on this verse, stating that every child is unique, with different personality traits and qualities, and therefore should be educated differently. When it comes to education, there is no “one size fits all.” Two children could ask the same question but should receive different answers tailored to his or her character. How do we see this idea manifested in this section of the Haggadah? Are these the answers we would have given these sons?

The Haggadah classifies the sons for us, labeling them wise, wicked, simple and “one who cannot ask.” How may these preconceived notions play into the answers given? How would they play into the answers we would have given the sons?

Many Haggadot include illustrations of the four sons. How is each son depicted in your Haggadah? How would you describe or illustrate these sons?

DAYEINU

Many commentators wonder: what would have been the point of our standing adjacent to Har Sinai without receiving the Torah? Wasn’t receiving the Torah the goal of standing at Har Sinai? One of the answers famously given is taken from Rashi’s commentary on Exodus 19:2, that the Jewish nation was camped at Har Sinai “as one man, with one heart.” The Jewish unity felt at the foot of the mountain was unparalleled. Therefore, the composer of Dayeinu says that it would have been enough to just experience this unity and thank G-d for it.

Progress rather than perfection.

Do we take the time to notice the small experiences, people, and circumstances in our lives and thank G-d for them?

Take a moment to think of something that you are thankful to G-d for, that you hadn’t previously taken notice of.

Let us take the opportunity to go around the table and each person shares something he or she is thankful for.

VEHI SHE’AMDA

“In every generation arises those who would destroy us, but the Holy One saves us from their hands.”

What do you think is the key to Jewish survival and continuity (both physical and spiritual)? What can we do to ensure this continuity?

I hope the discussion topics above will enhance your Seder experience, trigger some interesting discussion and make your evening more relevant and meaningful. And keep in mind, if they don’t work the first time, there’s always the second Seder!

Pesach kasher veSameach!

Rabbi Doron Chitiz is the Shaliach for Yeshiva College and Mizrachi South Africa
Many of us are familiar with the line “Let my people go” from the song “Go Down Moses.” This line has become a widespread catchphrase referring to the Exodus from Egypt, especially around Pesach time.

The words are a translation from the Hebrew “shalach et ami,” and originate from Exodus 7:26, when G-d instructs Moshe to approach Pharaoh and demand that he allow the Jewish nation to leave Egypt. However, this is only part of the message. “Let my people go” omits the crucial last word in the verse – veya’avduni – “and they shall worship Me.” Although this last word leaves the phrase considerably less catchy, it is essential to both the Exodus narrative and to our understanding of freedom.

The definition of freedom in Judaism differs significantly from the accepted notion of freedom prevalent in Western society. The phrase “serve no master but yourself” implies that to be truly free one must rid oneself of every master, every obligation to another, and any form of higher power. Total, absolute freedom is about being able to act upon your every whim and desire, at any time.

However, the Jewish concept of freedom subscribes to an entirely different notion. Freedom carries a duty, one which calls the individual to be responsible for his or her actions, at any time.

According to Rav Soloveichik, one of the intrinsic definitions of a free man is his ability to experience time, and to be in control of his own time. This explains the reason behind the first commandment the Jewish nation received during the Exodus from Egypt – the commandment to sanctify the months. This was intended to help them transform their lives of slavery into the life of a free nation.

Rav Kook states that the difference between a slave and a free person is not merely a matter of social position. We can find an enlightened slave whose spirit is free, and a free man with the mentality of a slave. True freedom is that uplifted spirit by which the individual – as well as the nation as a whole – is inspired to remain faithful to his inner essence, to the spiritual attribute of the Divine image within him. It is that quality which enables us to feel that our life has value and meaning.

Hence, the definition of true freedom is that by focusing on our inner Divine spark, through the worship and emulation of G-d, we give our life purpose and meaning.

True freedom means emulating G-d, therefore through serving Him we exercise our ultimate freedom. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot 6:2 (Ethics of Our Fathers) states: “There is no free individual, except for he who occupies himself with the study of Torah.” What is so freeing about the study of Torah?

The Maharal of Prague, in his commentary on Pirkei Avot, explains that Man is composed of physical animalistic matter and a spiritual mind. One who does not elevate himself through the study and internalization of Torah remains tied only to his physical nature. The study of Torah distinguishes one’s mind from his physical self and transforms him into a free creature, one who is not ruled solely by his instincts and urges.

Freedom is a moral right for all of humanity, but is accompanied by obligations. As free beings we are expected to utilize our time responsibly, emulate G-d and His virtues, and channel our impulses and instinctual desires for Divine worship and the betterment of society.

The essence of freedom was perfectly characterized by South Africa’s symbol of freedom, Nelson Mandela, “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Pesach serves as our annual reminder of what it means to be a free nation. However, we have an obligation to take these messages and apply them to our own lives. Pesach is an opportunity for each of us to evaluate this idea of freedom and ensure we are living up not only to the rights but also to the responsibilities.

Gila Chitiz is the Shlichah for Yeshiva College and Mizrachi South Africa
When we notice narratives in the Torah, which have no connection to the commandments, we are inclined to think they are entirely superfluous, or too lengthy… but this is only because we did not see these incidents with our own eyes… For miracles are only convincing to those who witnessed them; whilst for coming generations, who know them only from the account given by others, they become a story that might be denied. It is inconceivable that miracles would continue and last permanently for all generations. The greatest of the miracles described is the stay of the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years… But G-d knew that in the future people might doubt the accuracy of the account of these miracles, in the same manner they doubt the accuracy of other narratives. They might think the Israelites stayed in the wilderness in a place not far from inhabited land… or that manna came down in those places naturally… To remove all these doubts and to firmly establish the accuracy of these miracles, Scripture enumerates all the stations, so that coming generations may see them, and learn the greatness of the miracles… For this very reason, Joshua cursed anyone who would ever build up Jericho… the effect of the miracle was to remain forever so anyone who would see the wall sunk in the ground would understand that it sank through a miracle.”

The problem the Rambam presents is very familiar. The initial astounding experience becomes a story, a tale to be repeated. And a story is an endangered species: it fades, it changes, it is forgotten and denied. Documentation and preservation doesn’t necessarily work. The billions of details, artifacts and names collected in places like Yad Vashem don’t prevent Holocaust deniers from persisting with their lies. The building that carries the verse from Isaiah (2:4) that comes immediately after “From Zion will the Torah come forth and the word of G-d from Jerusalem” (2:3), passed a resolution denying the historical connection between the Jews and Jerusalem.

Stories are vulnerable. Indeed, this is often a problem in courts: a testimony repeated and challenged can constantly change and lose credibility. Nevertheless, a serious problem for the judicial system might be the solution for us.

Let me explain. Here’s a story I heard from the Jewish educator Avraham Infeld. As a young man, Infeld came to the Hebrew University to study Physics, which was a family tradition. He spent two days at the Physics lab and on the third day he looked out of the window and saw a beautiful young lady going to the Jewish History department. “And so,” he says, “I got my BA in Jewish History instead of Physics.” The young lady eventually became the mother of his children, but at that point he needed to explain it to his very dominant father. He wrote a long aerogram2 and nervously awaited the response. When it finally arrived, he realized his father was very angry. Not at him though. His father was furious at the Hebrew University. He said: “Jews don’t have a history, Jews have a memory!”

I’m not sure the young Infeld understood this at the time. History might be a book on the shelf, Memory is the dynamic identity one deals with on a daily basis – identifying, debating, shaping who one is. (Infeld later said that his atheistic father used to say: “I’m not sure there is a G-d, I don’t know if we ever really were in Egypt, but the one thing I do remember clearly is that He took us out of there.”)

Remembering and retelling the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim is not only about telling the history. It’s about creating an identity. An identity that is dynamic and constantly relevant. “El Motziam miMitzrayim”3 is not in the past tense, ‘the G-d who redeemed them from Egypt;’ it is an ongoing present tense:4 the G-d who is continually redeeming them from Egypt. Every time we tell the story, it changes somewhat, integrating into our here and now, creating our current memory, shaping who we are.

1 Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed Part 3, 50.
2 A sheet of light paper folded and sealed to form a letter for sending by airmail.
3 Bamidbar 23:22.
4 Or HaChaim HaKadosh, Bamidbar 23:22.

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It remains one of the most counter-intuitive passages in all of religious literature. Moshe is addressing the Israelites just days before their release. They have been exiles for 210 years. After an initial period of affluence and ease, they have been oppressed, enslaved, and their male children killed in an act of slow genocide. Now, after signs and wonders and a series of plagues that have brought the greatest empire of the ancient world to its knees, they are about to go free.

Yet Moshe does not talk about freedom, or the land flowing with milk and honey, or the journey they will have to undertake through the desert. Instead, three times, he turns to the distant future, when the journey is complete and the people – free at last – are in their own land. And what he talks about is not the land itself, or the society they will have to build or even the demands and responsibilities of freedom. Instead, he talks about education, specifically about the duty of parents to their children. He speaks about the questions children may ask when the epic events that are about to happen are, at best, a distant memory. He tells the Israelites to do what Jews have done from then to now. Tell your children the story. Do it in a maximally effective way. Re-enact the drama of exile and exodus, slavery and freedom. Get your children to ask questions. Make sure that you tell the story as your own, not as some dry account of history. Say that the way you live and the ceremonies you observe are “because of what G-d did for me” – not my ancestors but me. Make it vivid, make it personal, and make it live.

He says this not once but three times:

“It shall be that when you come to the Land which G-d will give you as He said, and you observe this ceremony, and your children say to you, ‘What does this service mean to you?’ you shall say, ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the L-rd, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and spared our homes.’”

“On that day you shall tell your child, ‘It is because of what the L-rd did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”

“In the future, when your child asks you, ‘What is this?’ you shall tell him, ‘With a mighty hand, the L-rd brought us out from Egypt, from the land of slavery.’”

Why was this the most important thing he could do in this intense moment of redemption? Because freedom is the work of a nation, nations need an identity, identity needs memory, and memory is encoded in the stories we tell. Without narrative, there is no memory, and without memory, we have no identity. The most powerful link between the generations is the tale of those who came before us – a tale that becomes ours, and that we hand on as a sacred heritage to those who will come after us. We are the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, and identity begins in the story parents tell their children.

That narrative provides the answer to the three fundamental questions every reflective individual must ask at some stage in their lives: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live? There are many answers to these questions, but the Jewish ones are: I am a member of the people whom G-d rescued from slavery to freedom. I am here to build a society that honors the freedom of others, not just my own. And I must live in conscious
knowledge that freedom is the gift of G-d, honored by keeping His covenant of law and love.

Twice in the history of the West this fact was forgotten, or ignored, or rebelled against. In the 17th and 18th century, there was a determined effort to create a world without identities. This was the project called the Enlightenment. It was a noble dream. To it we owe many developments whose value is beyond question and that we must strive to preserve. However, one aspect of it failed and was bound to fail: the attempt to live without identity.

The argument went like this. Identity throughout the Middle Ages was based on religion. But religion had for centuries led to war between Christians and Muslims. Then, following the Reformation, it led to war between Christian and Christian, Protestant and Catholic. Therefore, to abolish war one had to move beyond identity. Identities are particular. Therefore, let us worship only the things that are universal: reason and observation, philosophy and science. Let us have systems, not stories. Then we will become one humanity, like the world before Babel. As Schiller put it and Beethoven set to music in the last movement of the Ninth Symphony: Alle Menschen werden Brüder, “All men will be brothers.”

It cannot be done, at least as humanity is presently constituted. The reaction, when it came, was fierce and disastrous. The 19th century saw the return of the repressed. Identity came back with a vengeance, this time based not on religion, but on one of three substitutes for it: the nation state, the (Aryan) race, and the (working) class. In the 20th century, the nation state led to two world wars. Race led to the Holocaust. The class struggle led to Stalin, the Gulag and the KGB. A hundred million people were killed in the name of three false gods.

For the past 50 years, the West has been embarked on a second attempt to abolish identity, this time in the opposite direction. What the secular West now worships is not the universal but the individual: the self, the “Me,” the “I.” Morality – the thick code of shared values binding society together for the sake of the common good – has been dissolved into the right of each individual to do or be anything he or she chooses, so long as they do not directly harm others. Identities have become mere masks we wear temporarily and without commitment. For large sections of society, marriage is an anachronism, parenthood delayed or declined, and community a faceless crowd. We still have stories, from Harry Potter to Lord of the Rings to Star Wars, but they are films, fictions, fantasies – a mode not of engagement but of escapism. Such a world is supremely tolerant, until it meets views not to its liking, when it quickly becomes brutishly intolerant, and eventually degenerates into the politics of the mob. This is populism, the prelude to tyranny.

Today’s hyper-individualism will not last. We are social animals. We cannot live without identities, families, communities and collective responsibility. Which means we cannot live without the stories that connect us to a past, a future and a larger group whose history and destiny we share. The biblical insight still stands. To create and sustain a free society, you have to teach your children the story of how we achieved freedom and what its absence tastes like: the unleavened bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery. Lose the story and eventually you lose your freedom. That is what happens when you forget who you are and why.

The greatest gift we can give our children is not money or possessions but a story – a real story, not a fantasy, one that connects them to us and to a rich heritage of high ideals. We are not particles of dust blown this way or that by the passing winds of fad and fashion. We are heirs to a story that inspired a hundred generations of our ancestors and eventually transformed the Western world. What you forget, you lose. The West is forgetting its story. We must never forget ours.

With the hindsight of 33 centuries we can see how right Moshe was. A story told across the generations is the gift of an identity, and when you know who you are and why, you can navigate the wilderness of time with courage and confidence. That is a life-changing idea.

1 That, of course, is the primary theme of Devarim.
2 Shemot 12:25-27.
3 Shemot 13:8.
4 Shemot 13:14.

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Pesach
THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

Pesach has three divisions of time. The beginning of Pesach is highlighted by the story of our Exodus from Egypt – the Pesach Seder. In its unique fashion, it outlines the path of the Jewish people throughout the ages. The Seder symbolizes the tenacity of Jewish faith – faith in our G-d and in our future, in our history and in our ancestors.

In effect, the Seder reinforces within us the core Jewish belief that our grandfathers were not liars and that the tradition of the ages from Egypt and Sinai is true, valid, relevant and vital in all places and times. The timelessness of the words and rituals of the Seder further strengthens our inner beliefs. It provides us with optimism and hope for our future in spite of all of the current dangers and problems.

We have the innate belief that the young ones who sit today at our Seder table will, in good time, conduct their own Seder and thereby guarantee the survival and continuity of the Jewish people. Merely bringing Jewish children into this world at birth is already a declaration of faith in our future and confidence in the eternity of the Jewish people.

Moreover, the living memory of an event that occurred to our people thousands of years ago strengthens that confidence and deepens our determination to continue and succeed no matter what. This above all else is the gift that the Seder table and Pesach night grant us.

The intermediate days of Pesach – Chol HaMoed – represent the ability of Jews and of the Torah to treat the mundane activities of life and the world with holiness and a special reverence. I remember when one of my daughters worked as an actuary in the offices of a large American insurance company. The company graciously allowed her to be absent on the Jewish holidays. However, she was never able to satisfactorily explain to them why on Chol HaMoed she was able to come in to the office and accomplish the work to be done that day.

The world understands that there can be holy days and less than holy days. It finds it difficult to comprehend how a day can be holy and somehow less than completely holy at one and the same time. Pesach teaches us that we are to sanctify the mundane and the unholy regular activities of everyday life.

The trips, tours, meals and outings during the days of Chol HaMoed are different in kind and spirit than those we enjoy during the rest of the year. The fact we are still eating matzah only reinforces this uniqueness. It reminds us of the reason for our Exodus from Egypt and the purpose of our state of freedom – to be a special people, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

The final day of Pesach commemorates our miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh and his army at Yam Suf. The times the Jewish people have been seemingly on the brink of annihilation are too numerous to count. We have suffered partial annihilation, grievous losses but never total defeat and destruction.

From Pharaoh through Amalek, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Latin Christians, Moslems, Germans, Soviets, Arabs, some present-day NGOs and many others have tried to destroy the Jewish people. We are resented for our particularism and when we assimilate we are resented even more. Yet every time it appears that history’s curtain is ready to fall on us, something unforeseen occurs and Jewish resilience drives us to survival and renewal.

The drama of Jewish survival at Yam Suf repeats itself in different forms throughout the history of civilization. Though many have wondered about this strange and exceptional phenomenon, no logical or completely rational answer has ever been advanced. The L-rd has split many seas for us over the past three millennia of our existence.

Pesach reminds us of this inexplicable historical truism. Somehow, merely knowing this fact of history is alone sufficient to enable us to continue to build and achieve no matter what our enemies say and do.
Although we were redeemed from Mitzrayim on the first day of Pesach, the geula was not complete until the seventh day, when G-d drowned the Egyptians in Yam Suf. The Sefero explains that until then we were still like slaves running away from their master. But when our “masters” drowned in Yam Suf, we became fully free.

Perhaps we can extend this idea further. The ultimate conclusion of the Exodus occurred when we entered Eretz Yisrael and built the Beit HaMikdash, as we conclude the 15 stages of the geula in the Haggadah with “VeHichnisanu l’Eretz Yisrael ubana lanu et Beit HaBechira” – And He brought us in to Eretz Yisrael and built the Temple for us. Until that point, we were still running away from Egypt – physically, mentally and spiritually. The 40 years in the desert were needed to extricate Egypt and all that it represented from within us. Once we entered Eretz Yisrael, we were fully redeemed people, ready to utilize our freedom and direct it towards drawing nearer to G-d and His will. We created a society in Eretz Yisrael which was the antithesis of all that Egypt represented – one of holiness, purity, and total dependence on G-d and His Torah.

We were then able to build the Beit HaMikdash and spread the Torah’s ideals across the world.

As individuals, we too must all go through these stages of geula, extricating ourselves from our personal Mitzrayim and fully freeing ourselves from them. We must then utilize this freedom to sanctify ourselves by creating an environment of holiness and purity for ourselves and our families, ideally in the holiness and purity of Eretz Yisrael. Finally, we must build a Mikdash to spread holiness to all around us.

As in the days when we left Egypt, may G-d continue to show us miracles with the coming of the Mashiach speedily in our days.
Chad Gadya (One Kid) is a playful cumulative song in Aramaic and Hebrew, sung at the end of the Seder. The traditional melody may have its roots in Medieval German folk music. It first appeared in a Haggadah printed in Prague in 1590, which makes it the most recent inclusion in the Seder liturgy.
The Vilna Gaon explained that each verse alludes to a person or an event in Jewish history. Hence he interprets the symbolic meaning of this sequence of people, animals and objects, as follows:

**KID** – the birthright, mentioned in Bereishit 25. This is the right to take the baton passed from Avraham to Yitzchak; to continue Avraham’s mission to build a world full of loving-kindness and monotheism and devoid of idolatry, child sacrifice and other evils.

**FATHER** – Ya’akov Avinu, who bought the birthright from his twin brother Esav, who had been born first.

**TWO ZUZIM** – the bread and stew with which Ya’akov paid Esav for the birthright.

**CAT** – Ya’akov’s sons’ envy toward their brother Yosef, leading them to sell him into slavery in Egypt.

**DOG** – Egypt, where Yosef became Viceroy, and where eventually Ya’akov’s entire clan and the subsequent Israelite nation lived, were enslaved and finally redeemed.

**STICK** – Moshe’s staff, used to summon various plagues and to part the waters of the Sea for the Israelites to cross.

**FIRE** – the Israelites’ thirst for idolatry. This was a persistent bane for over 800 years, from the year they left Egypt until the destruction of the First Temple.

**WATER** – the Sages who eradicated idolatry.

**OX** – Rome (Esav’s descendants), who destroyed the Second Temple.

**BUTCHER** – Mashiach Ben-Yosef, who will restore full Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel.

**ANGEL OF DEATH** – the death of Mashiach Ben-Yosef.

**THE HOLY ONE BLESSED BE HE**, of course, needs no introduction; here He arrives with Mashiach Ben-David.

The repetition in each stanza underscores the ebb and flow of Jewish history – sometimes we’re down, but then we rise up. While most of the song looks back, it ends with an optimistic view of the future, a fitting conclusion to the Seder.
What we pray for is a good indication of how important things are to us. We pray for long life, good health, parnassa, and nachat from our children. The intensity of our prayers reflects the degree of their importance. Nothing equals the intensity of our prayers for life and health, because without these, whatever else we have pales in comparison.

In the more comprehensive sidurim, there is an introductory prayer attributed to Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk, one of the foremost Chassidic masters.

As in other prayers, we pray for forgiveness of our sins, for Divine guidance, for good judgment, and for freedom from the enticement of the yetzer hara, the inclination to indulge in animalistic behavior. But there is one request not found anywhere else, to the best of my knowledge. We ask G-d to “help us to see the merits in our fellow humans and not their faults.”

It is not uncommon for some people to be critical of others, but is far less common to praise others. Seeing faults in other people is likely to be defensive. It is a way to bolster one’s own sagging self-esteem.

The Talmud says that the faults we see in others are actually our own faults. The Baal Shem Tov once happened to see a Jew violating Shabbat. True to his own belief, he felt that he must himself be guilty of having violated Shabbat, else he would not have noticed it. When a thorough soul-searching failed to reveal where he had violated Shabbat, he prayed for Divine enlightenment. It was revealed to him that he had once heard the defamation of a Torah scholar. Inasmuch as the Zohar says that a Torah scholar has the kedusha of Shabbat, this was tantamount to a violation of Shabbat.

Before being critical of another person’s behavior, think of your own defects. The Baal Shem Tov said that the world is a mirror. As we are generally blind to our own shortcomings, G-d arranges that we should see them in others, and we should realize that we must correct our own faults.

The next time you wish to say something negative about someone, pause and think. You might be revealing your own shortcomings.

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While these are some of the most common associations of Pesach, it is also a time for personal introspection. We also have many philosophical questions – why are we so careful to get rid of every last chametz crumb in our homes? What’s the true meaning and symbolism of chametz? Is there more to this holiday than just an intensive spring cleaning?

The process of preparing bread (the quintessential chametz), mixing seeds of grain with water and yeast is a highly creative one. According to Rabbi David Fohrman, the bread-maker himself becomes G-d-like, through ruling over the ingredients and molding them to suit his or her creative needs. However, Pesach is a unique time when the Jewish people are commanded to embody a different spirit – namely, to stop baking bread in a normal manner, to stop wielding that awesome G-d-like power for seven days, and to step back from the creative mindset that, when unchecked, often leads one to a sense of misplaced arrogance. Therefore, when we limit our bread making to unleavened bread, without the yeast rising, we are pulling back from this creative process. The holiday of Pesach, our annual disposal of chametz, serves as a stark reminder that only G-d is truly in charge of the world and all that occurs in it.

The Maharsha points out that yeast rising within the dough is symbolic of an inflation of our ego and the temptation to pursue all of our physical desires. Some behavioral scientists posit that arrogance is often a front for internal fears. Hence, if chametz symbolizes arrogance, which sometimes masks our fears, this will impact our existing relationships and our ability to develop new relationships. Only once we rid ourselves of our emotional chametz – arrogance and fears – will we succeed in our relationships and gain internal freedom.

This is the time we pay attention to our ego. We take a long hard look in the mirror and focus on our lives and for some, the way we date. According to Ted Leonhardt, feelings of pride and arrogance often serve as defense mechanisms. They are a method for hiding and/or compensating for our insecurities. We may reject others before being rejected by others. Some people are always looking at a potential relationship and searching for reasons why it just won’t work for them, instead of why it may work. Perhaps the other person went to the wrong school or is too tall or too short.

In her book “Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway,” Susan Jeffers states that to succeed in a relationship you must face your fears. A person must acknowledge the roots of their fears. This is never easy, as most people do not naturally possess this level of self-awareness. Most people cannot realize they are sabotaging their own relationships vis-a-vis their own arrogance and insecurities. Furthermore, we must recognize that we are often trying to avoid rejection or a negative emotional outcome. We need to take a long hard look and acknowledge that we can handle rejection or failure, and still stand tall. Fear can be managed best when it is recognized and confronted.

Most people will say they are not afraid. But are we truly being honest with ourselves? Everyone who is human experiences fear at some point in their lives. Fear has a unique hold on us. Many of us are stuck in our ways and afraid to admit we do not want to change.

However, fear also leads to growth.

When one realizes that growth means facing fears, challenging comfort zones, one will own any areas requiring self-reflection and change and move forward. This is achieving real freedom; freedom from assumptions about the very specific type of person we need to be with, freedom from worrying we cannot handle the pain of rejection, freedom from fear and insecurities. We need to erase expectations of rejection and be more open to prospective matches and relationships. We need to broaden our horizons and date more wisely, with a greater level of self-awareness and self-esteem. This flexibility allows us to foster relationships and see if potential exists for a deep emotional connection.

Let us take the time to thoroughly self-introspect and remove the chametz in our lives. And, in doing so, we will overcome any arrogance and fears. May this freedom in examining our relationships bring personal happiness and fulfillment. Dayeinu!

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1. Rabbi David Fohrman, Alephbeta.org, Parashat Emor.
2. Maharsha, Berachot 17a.
3. Ted Leonhardt, “How To Be a Success At Everything.”

Mrs. Mindy Eisenman, MSW, is a Staff Connector at YUConnects and a Dating Coach.
Several years ago, my wife and I were hiking in a state park near our home when we heard the music of children’s laughter off in the distance. We veered off the path to follow the source of the sounds and found a 30-something man wading waist-deep in the stream along with his three preteen children – all of them fully clothed. Not wanting to intrude on their privacy, my wife and I watched them splashing, cavorting and giggling, before moving on.

It was simply the most beautiful “Kodak Moment” one could imagine. (For those raised with digital cameras, Kodak is a company that makes film, and they ran ads for many years in which photographed treasured times in one’s life were “Kodak Moments.” Film is what old people used to put in their cameras before taking pictures.)

I very strongly urge you to do everything in your power to spend quality time with your children and help each of them create their own album of “Kodak Moments.” Parents often make the mistake of thinking they need to take their children on exotic vacations or to an expensive amusement park for them to enjoy themselves. That is just not so. They don’t need your money; they need you. That fellow I saw in the park didn’t spend a dime on the outing with his kids, but the memories they will carry of their impulsive plunge into the stream together with their father will remain etched in their minds for life.

One of the great ironies of life is that when our children grow through their teenage years and beyond, it is so challenging to get them to spend time with us. However, when they are younger and craving for our attention, we often are too busy, too preoccupied, too distracted and too unaware of how important our time with them is to their emotional health.

When our oldest was eight years old, I taught myself – and later each of our children – to ski and golf because I felt those two activities would allow me to spend huge blocks of time with them in their adolescent years. (Where else other than a chairlift can you get your teenager to spend 10 minutes with you, 20 times in one day?) And when the realization hit me years ago that between learning with our sons and taking them to shul, I was spending far more time with them than I was with our daughters, I decided to create a yearly NBA (No Boys Allowed) vacation with our two eldest daughters, when I would spend two-three days with them alone – without my wife or sons. They are both married but to this day, I was spending far more time with them than I was with our daughters, I decided to create a yearly NBA (No Boys Allowed) vacation with our two eldest daughters, when I would spend two-three days with them alone – without my wife or sons. They are both married, but to this day, they regularly mention our NBA vacations and talk about how much they looked forward to them all year long.

When our youngest daughter, Sara, was 10 years old, she and I were planning our NBA vacation. I told her I would take her shopping for the trip the night before and asked her if there was anything special she wanted me to purchase. With a straight face, she asked me to get her a cell phone battery. Perplexed, I asked her why she needed a battery for a cell phone she didn’t have.

“No, Tatty,” Sara responded with a twinkle in her eyes, “for this trip, I want you to take the battery out of your cell phone and give it to me.”

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To help prepare for the Seder, HaMizrachi presents you with *divrei Torah* about the foods found on your Seder table: *matzah*, wine, *maror*, karpas, charoset, zeroa and beitzah.
The Mystery of Matzah

At the beginning of the Pesach Seder we hold up the matzah and say, “This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt.” During our time in Egypt we were so rushed and pressed by the Egyptians, there was no time to enjoy a meal. The pressure of time forced us to get the calories into our bloodstream as quickly as possible and get back to work. The Egyptian taskmasters would have opted for IVs if they had the technology. So matzah represents our slavery.

But later in the Seder, we hold up the matzah another time and ask, “Why matzah? Because G-d took us out of Egypt so quickly that we didn’t have time to let the dough rise.” That means matzah represents freedom!

Which one is it: slavery or freedom? How can one thing symbolize two opposite concepts?

Imagine being in Egypt the night before the Exodus took place. After hundreds of years of slavery, of being bossed around, we finally get to be free people! To make our own decisions, shape our own destiny, use our time the way we want to! Pharaoh opens the gates and we exuberantly run out of Egypt, thinking, “Ahh, now’s my chance to get a Jacuzzi, a smorgasbord at the local deli, or take that long nap I’ve been waiting 210 years for.”

But before we know it, G-d arranges for us to be rushed out of Egypt so quickly that we grab our food and supplies and run to our first resting stop in the desert, the city of Sukkot.

“The Egyptians were also urging the people to hurry and leave the land... the people took their dough before it could rise.”

And when we finally stop and open our luggage, what do we find? Matzah! No dough to make bagels, pizza, focaccia, not even a lousy pancake! We’ve been liberated from Egypt but we’re still not free! Now we’re stuck having to follow G-d’s directions.

The Torah emphasizes this anomaly when G-d tells us, “The Jewish people are my servants because I took them out of the land of Egypt.” It sounds like we just changed taskmasters! Before it was Pharaoh making us build cities and now it’s G-d making us pray, give charity, keep Shabbat, honor our parents, etc.

Did we really become free on Pesach or just exchange whom we’re serving?

The answer is that limits engender freedoms. If you want to achieve anything in life, you need to make choices and limit other options, implement those choices and not just dream about success, and stick with your goals even when things get tough. Olympic athletic hopefuls have to put a lot of limits on themselves — training, diet, daily hours on the track, letting their lives be controlled by a demanding coach. It’s those very limits that allow them to really achieve their goal of winning the gold. They are a lot more free than the others who may have that same potential, but watch the Olympics from their couch saying, “Maybe one day...”

Freedom is not hours of mindless web surfing, indulging in a smorgasbord, or hanging out on the beaches of Hawaii. That’s serving your body instead of serving your higher self, your aspirations for greatness. Animals aren’t free; they’re stuck being animals, living according to their instincts. Fashion divas aren’t free; they’re serving popularity and public image. Party animals aren’t free; they constantly need the next thing to keep the high going.

As Bob Dylan so eloquently wrote, “You gotta serve somebody.” And as Rabbi Noah Weinberg defined, “Freedom is being able to pursue what you really want to do (your higher goals), not what you feel like doing (your momentary impulses).”

So matzah represents both freedom and slavery, because they’re not opposites. “Enslaving” yourself, pushing yourself and committing yourself to a higher purpose in life is challenging, but it’s the only way to taste that real freedom of breaking your own barriers and reaching greatness.

As we eat the matzah on Pesach night, let’s remember that we want to leave our personal Egypt, get to our own Mount Sinai experience and bring out our full potential. Striving for real meaning and growth in life is hard. And that’s what makes it so delicious when you get there.

1 Shemot 12:33-34.
2 Vayikra 25:55.

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Why Wine?

Seder Night is an evening of many distinct practices with the common thread of helping relate the story of our Exodus from Egypt. We tell the story, lean as free people, eat matzah and maror (and ideally korban Pesach), dip in charoset, and more. The Seder is our guide to reenacting what our ancestors experienced more than 3,300 years ago.

However, there is another central practice that seems ostensibly unconnected: drinking wine. The Mishnah states that a person should drink no fewer than four cups of wine at the Seder. And indeed, moments of drinking wine are woven through the evening at the beginning, middle and end. Why? How does drinking four cups of wine foster the recall of yetziat Mitzrayim?

Who has the obligation to drink wine? According to the Ba’alei HaTosafot, only the head of the household. One could suggest that for Tosafot, the cups of wine serve as an anchor and manifestation of the other verbal mitzvot of the Seder. One has the obligation of kiddush and makes it over a cup of wine like all other Shabbatot and holidays. One has the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus, and thus has a filled cup present throughout Maggid, drinking it at the conclusion of that step. Birkat HaMazon is recited over a cup after the holiday meal as at other times, and the final cup is linked to reciting Hallel in thanks for having been saved by G-d. According to this approach, drinking the four cups is not inherently an expression of going free from slavery, so much as the vehicle that bears the declarations of celebration and freedom contained in the Seder.

In contrast, the Rambam indicates that each individual participating in the Seder should drink their own four cups of wine, and that it is an expression of going free. In what way might the four cups directly represent the experience of liberation? One connection made by the Talmud Yerushalmi is that Pharaoh’s cup is mentioned four times in the story of Yosef when he interpreted the dream of the wine steward. Still, why would we engage in symbolic gestures about the unrelated earlier story of Yosef?

One could suggest a twofold linkage here. First, that Yosef’s interpretation of the butler’s dream is his first step towards the palace. Once he explained the dream, he was positioned to be remembered for his interpretive gifts and brought to Pharaoh when needed later. That led to his elevation to be the royal Vizier. In time he would welcome his father and brothers and their families to Egypt to settle, and ultimately they were forced into slavery. Hence the wine cups in Pharaoh’s dream were the first step in Bnei Yisrael’s slavery. When we celebrate our freedom, we pause to remember the seemingly insignificant first steps that led us down this painful path.

Secondly, Yosef himself was imprisoned at the time he interpreted the butler’s dream. After he explained what they represented, he was set free. This is the story of an individual who was trapped and then given back his own life and ability for self-direction. The Rambam notes that each person should see himself or herself personally as if leaving Egypt. Yosef serves to remind us that the Seder is an experience of personal emancipation as well. It is quite easy to get lost in the national perspective of the birth of our people, so the cups of wine remind us of Yosef’s experience as an individual yearning for and realizing redemption.

1 Pesachim 10:1.
2 Pesachim 99b (lo yifchchitu).
4 On Mishnah Pesachim 10:1.
5 Bereishit 40:11-13.

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Chag Sameach to all our Jewish customers.
An interesting pattern in the Jewish calendar leads to Seder Night always falling out on the same weekday as another profound evening: Tisha B’Av. Sure enough, this year’s first Seder is on Wednesday night (April 8) and Tisha B’Av falls out on a Wednesday night (July 29) as well.

It’s strange because these two nights are so different! On Tisha B’Av we refrain from all food and drink while at the Seder we enjoy a huge meal and four cups of wine. On Tisha B’Av, we sit on the floor in mourning, chanting Eicha and Kinnot in hushed tones, and at the Seder we recline in luxury, singing Hallel with great joy.

While for the most part, Tisha B’Av and Leil HaSeder are polar opposites, there is one moment at the Seder where the connection makes perfect sense. When we eat maror, we recall the pain and torture of our slavery in Egypt. “What is the significance of maror?” we ask in the Haggadah. “Because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt.” Maror represents the pain and suffering of slavery in Egypt and is, therefore, the symbolic bridge between Pesach and Tisha B’Av, the day representing all Jewish suffering.

Maror has another dimension with an even stronger link to Tisha B’Av and Rabbi Akiva’s laughter. Let us taste the sweetness of the charoset and sing “LeShana Haba BiYerushalayim HaBenuya” and let us look forward to Mashiach, who was born on the 9th of Av and whose imminent arrival will surely come soon!

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1 See Orach Chaim 428:3, Rama 476:3.  
2 Makkot 24b.  
3 Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 2:4.  
4 Rosh Hashanah 11a.
Why do we eat karpas? And why do we call this vegetable – be it potato, parsley or celery – by this unusual name?

Our Sages teach that we eat this vegetable simply to pique the curiosity of our children. It is unusual for us to eat a lone vegetable at this stage of the meal, and this shifts our children into a question-asking mode. Nevertheless, while this may be effective, there must be a reason why we use this specific custom to generate questions from our children, so let’s explore the deeper meaning behind karpas.

The vegetable could represent the lushness of Egypt. The Torah describes this land, which received its sustenance from the Nile, as a “garden of G-d.” The Jews became comfortable there and enjoyed all that Egypt had to offer. In fact, when they were in the desert the Jews longed for the vegetables they had eaten in Egypt.

We take that vegetable, symbolizing materialism, and dip it into salt water, which symbolizes tears. This could suggest that the very comforts indicating all was well for the Jews in Egypt actually served as the catalyst for the tears that flowed during the harsh persecution and slavery. Our comforts in Egypt enabled us to become successful and to be influenced negatively by Egyptian culture. Those successes led to Pharaoh’s fears about the power of the Jews, and those negative influences led to spiritual decline. The combination of our spiritual failures and the king’s fears led to our servitude. Hence, the symbolism of the vegetable and the saltwater.

Perhaps we call the vegetable karpas to conjure up an image from the one time the word appears in Tanach – at Achashveirosh’s feast at the beginning of Megillat Esther (1:6). That feast was the height of physical indulgence, and the Jewish participation in it demonstrated the material comfort and spiritual disconnection the Jews felt during their exile – with the continuation of the story being the king’s decree to annihilate them.

There is another explanation of the word karpas that works beautifully with our approach. The Maharil teaches that the word karpas spelled backward is the letter samech followed by the word perach. The samech alludes to its numerical value of 60, which represents the 600,000 Jews who were enslaved in Egypt. Perach can mean one of two things. It literally means “hard work,” thereby representing the Jews’ slave labor. The word can also be divided into two words, peh and rach, which means “soft mouth.” This alludes to Pharaoh’s approach of first speaking to the Jews kindly and softly, and only gradually shifting them into slave mode. This connects to the process of the Jews feeling comfortable in Egypt and being talked into doing whatever the king kindly asked them to do, which then led to the suffering of slavery.

Modern exile consists of many luxuries for the Jewish people. We live with a general abundance of material wealth and with greater security and success than ever before. The message of the karpas has never been more relevant and critical for us. We must recognize that all this comfort and success outside of Israel will eventually end in tears. It might not happen in the very near future, but history has taught us that no matter how unrealistic it may seem at the moment, that dreaded time of persecution in exile will come.

Of course, the hope should be that this recognition leads many to explore aliyah. But we must also focus on those who plan to remain in the Diaspora and the importance of internalizing the spiritual dangers of where those material blessings and comfort within a host culture can lead. Perhaps this focus on spiritual growth and focusing on avoiding a spiritual decline will protect us from experiencing painful persecution in our times.

The karpas provides us with the perfect opportunity to discuss these issues at our Seder table and convey these important messages to our children.

1 See Rashi and Rashbam to Pesachim 114a and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 473.
3 See Bamidbar 11:5.

Don’t Pass Over the Karpas

Rabbi Dov Lipman is a former MK and the author of seven books about Judaism and Israel
The Charoset Mindset

Of all the symbols on Seder Night, perhaps charoset is the most difficult to understand. On Seder Night, we see something quite unusual, in that we are commanded to cite the reasons for the mitzvah as part of the mitzvah itself. One who does not explain why he is eating “Pesach, Matzah and Maror” has not fulfilled his obligation. Not only that, but Halacha also determines the official explanation for each of these mitzvot on Seder Night. One cannot suggest one’s own reason, but must state the ‘official’ reason. This is a very special halacha, because in general Halacha does not involve itself with the reasons the mitzvot were given, but only the actions we have to perform. Moreover, even when dealing with reasons, there is a broad spectrum of possibilities, and Jewish philosophers throughout the ages have offered many explanations for every mitzvah, while here there is one formal ruling of the reason for these mitzvot.

Against this backdrop, charoset stands out. We do not know the source or the reason. It doesn’t explicitly appear in the Torah and it’s not clear why we are obliged to eat it, or even if we are obliged to eat it, according to the Torah. In the Mishna (Pesachim 10:3), there is a Tannaic debate on this question, in which the basic position is “charoset is not mandatory.” However, “Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Zadok says it is mandatory.” The very fact there is a debate on whether there is a Torah obligation to eat charoset just adds to the mystery.

Based on this debate, there are two types of explanation. According to the first opinion in the Mishna, charoset is perceived as part of the gastronomic directives to soften the sharpness of the maror; however, according to Rabbi Elazar, the charoset is not just an accessory to eating the maror but expresses something in itself, only that the Mishna did not tell us what this something is.

The Gemara and the Midrash offer two explanations: one deals with the texture of the charoset, reminding us of the mud our forefathers were forced to use in their slavery in Egypt. The second deals with the ingredients of the charoset, particularly the apple, claiming it reminds us of the apple trees under which the women comforted their husbands after a rough and tough day at work, and where they gave birth to their babies.

Of course, the fact that charoset does not carry an ‘official’ explanation opens the door for much exegesis, creativity, and personal interpretation. So, when we examine the range of theories, we find a widespread theme dealing with the charoset’s special sweetness, and with the contrast between the bitterness of the maror and the sweetness of the charoset. In fact, the juxtaposition of sweetness and bitterness already appears in the Seven Species. The last two species are “olive oil and honey.”

Chazal refer to the olive as an expression of something bitter, for example, “The dove said before the Holy One Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, let my food be bitter as an olive but given into Your hand, and let it not be sweet as honey but dependent on flesh and blood” (Eruvin 18b). In contrast, the Biblical “honey” refers to the date, which symbolizes sweetness.

Therefore, one of the ways to characterize our bond with our history, and with the G-d who manages that history, is the dialectic transition between bitterness and sweetness. This is not simply stating that sometimes we had good times and sometimes bad, because we eat both on Seder Night, and both are connected to the same event – the Exodus from Egypt. The bitterness and the sweetness – according to our weltanschauung – occur at one and the same time. The period itself was terrible, and so we eat maror. But it also engendered things we couldn’t have engendered without Egypt and its challenges, and so we also give thanks for that, by dipping the maror in charoset.

And this is a very fundamental mindset we teach ourselves on Seder Night: even during the most bitter times, a certain sweetness is created, sweetness that could not have been created without the challenges. Even at a time when G-d hides His face from us, so to speak, “Though I walk through the valley of darkness, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”

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As we prepare for Chag HaPesach, the time of our freedom, we recall the Korban Pesach offered when the Beit HaMikdash stood. In our times, in its stead, we place the zeroa – the roasted shank bone – on our Seder table; a paltry reminder of the glorious Temple service.

What is the significance of this korban, which represents our freedom as a nation reborn, and through which we were redeemed from slavery?

Rav Soloveitchik writes: “...אָבֹת-שֶׂה לְבֵית שֶׂה לַבָּיִת – a lamb for each home, a lamb for each household – interestingly, the symbol of redemption in the Torah is the Korban Pesach, which is a very strange sacrifice. The concept of chaburah, community, is completely nonexistent in regard to other offerings... Pesach has been linked by the Torah with chaburah to such an extent that one Sage is of the opinion that an individual cannot offer the Korban Pesach; only a group may do so. The Pesach sacrifice differs from all other sacrifices because it is a symbol of cherut, freedom. The Torah refers to the Korban Pesach as ‘a lamb for each household’ because freedom expresses itself in the realm of bayit, of community, of being together. Bayit is a new category revealed to the Jews as they gained their freedom.”

Rav Hirsch writes that there would come a time when the nation, oppressed and tortured by Pharaoh, would lie on the ground, seemingly easy prey for the vultures of history. But then, at G-d’s call, the nation would rise up again to eternal life.

As we sit around the Seder table, we place the roasted bone on our Seder plate. While it is a paltry and sad reminder of all we lost when the Temples were destroyed, it is nevertheless a glorious reminder of the people we are, the ideals we live by, the community we have built and share, and the essence of our existence.

A lamb for each household; a lamb for the father’s house; a lamb for each man and his neighbor who is close to his house.

My brother told me the following true story:

A family was making a bar mitzvah and needed homes to put up their guests. Their neighbors would be away that Shabbat, and they offered the family the use of their home.

The alarm in the home went off on Shabbat. The police showed up.

They asked the guests if this was their house.

“No officer,” they replied.

“Do you know the code for the alarm?”

“No officer.”

“Do you know the names of the family who live here?”

“No, officer.”

“Then what are you doing here?!”

As we were poised to march from slavery to freedom, the command to offer the Korban Pesach taught us what it means to be a free Jew. We live not only for ourselves but for our homes, our father’s house, for our neighbors and friends, for those who live near and those who live far. The truest mark of our freedom is the ability to reach outward, to knock on the door of another, to invite him to our table. Finally free, we are able to say: we have too much for ourselves, please join us. Let’s share.

Mrs. Michal Horowitz teaches Judaic Studies classes to adults of all ages.

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1. Pesachim 91a.
2. Chumash Masoret HaRav, Shemot, p.86-87.

Mrs. Michal Horowitz
Why is there a beitzah - an egg - on the Seder plate? It seems the least clear of all the items. We put it on the plate before the Seder begins, yet unlike the other items, it has no set role in the upcoming ceremony. The maror (either in horseradish and/or lettuce form) is connected to the commandment to remember the suffering in Egypt by eating bitter herbs. The karpas is used as the first dipping of the night and is the basis of one of the four questions. The z'roa's name clearly reminds us of G-d’s outstretched hand, and its appearance, certainly for those who use a lamb shank, reminds us of the korban Pesach. The z'roa is not eaten at the Seder because it reminds of the sacrifice we cannot bring at this time unfortunately. But what about the egg? Even for those who have the custom to start off the Seder meal with the egg in saltwater, it comes with no accompanying ceremony, blessing or statement.

There are two reasons generally given. One is that it represents the korban chagigah, the sacrifice brought prior to the korban Pesach so that the latter could be eaten on a full stomach. If the Seder plate contains a reminder of the korban Pesach (the z'roa), it is appropriate to have another food to represent the korban chagigah. This explains the presence of another item on the plate but provides no explanation as to why specifically an egg.

The egg as a symbolic food appears in another tradition, as part of the first food fed to a mourner after the funeral. The custom was originally to use lentils, because they were round, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life. Now the custom is eggs. Hence the second reason for the egg on the Seder plate is as a sign of mourning for the Beit HaMikdash, the absence of which precludes bringing both the korban chagigah and the korban Pesach.

Another reason that round, smooth foods are appropriate to serve to a mourner is that they have no “mouth” and thus represent the speechless state of one who has suffered a loss. This provides a striking note to the Seder table. In general, the entire Seder is focused around talking. The main mitzvah of the night is retelling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, something done primarily with words. The Haggadah relates that one who “does extra” in telling the story is to be praised. Many of the actions of the Seder, such as removing the Seder plate, are specifically done to encourage the children to ask questions, once again to use speech. And yet we have one item on the Seder plate that represents silence.

Perhaps this is meant to be a gentle reminder that even at times where speech is the order of the day, we need to be careful in what we say and how we say it. In the context of an extended family meal, this is particularly true. Can the story I am about to relate to enhance the Exodus story make someone uncomfortable? Can asking a question of someone who does not know the answer embarrass them? Am I making a comment that could hurt the feelings of those who worked hard to make the night a reality?

Let us look at the egg for a moment before we begin the Seder, to make sure that what we say on this night is always for the good.

1 Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 35.

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“This is how you must eat [the Passover offering]: with your waist belted, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand. You must eat it with chipazon — in haste.”

The word chipazon is uncommon. It appears only three times in the entire Bible. Twice it is used to describe the Israelites’ haste when they fled Egypt. Why did they need to be ready to depart at a moment’s notice?

According to the Midrash, there were in fact three parties in a rush for the Israelites to leave Egypt. The Egyptians, afraid of further plagues and catastrophes, wanted the Hebrew slaves to clear out as quickly as possible. The Israelites were in a hurry lest Pharaoh change his mind yet again, and there was a third party in a state of urgency. The Midrash speaks of the chipazon of the Shechina. Why was G-d in a hurry?

A HASTY REDEMPTION

The redemption from Egypt needed to be fast, like the swift release of an arrow from a bow. Here was a group of slaves who had almost completely forgotten the greatness of their souls, a treasured inheritance from their ancestors who were widely respected as holy princes. With a decisive wave of G-d’s hand, a nation brimming with courage and nobility of spirit, unlike any people the world had ever seen, was formed. This was the dramatic birth “of a nation from the midst of another nation” on the stage of human history.

A meteoric Exodus from Egypt with wonders and miracles was critical to protect this fledgling nation from the dark confusion of universal paganism. The Jewish people needed to be quickly extracted from the idolatrous Egyptian milieu in which they had lived for centuries so they would be free to raise the banner of pure faith and enlightened ideals.

THE FUTURE REDEMPTION

The third time the word chipazon appears in the Bible is in Isaiah’s breathtaking description of the future redemption. Unlike the Exodus from Egypt, “You will not leave with haste — chipazon — or go in flight. For the Eternal will go before you, and your rear guard will be the G-d of Israel.”

Unlike the miraculous upheaval that brought about the dramatic launch of the Jewish people, the future redemption will be a gradual process, advancing step by step. Why will the future redemption be so different from the redemption from Egypt?

In Egypt, the Hebrew slaves had adopted their neighbors’ idolatrous culture. Their redemption required supernatural intervention, a Divine rescue from above. But the future redemption will take place within the laws of nature. It will emanate from the stirring of the human heart, itaruta deletata — an awakening from below. The Jewish people will rise from their exilic slumber, return to their homeland, regain their independence, reclaim their forests and cities, defend themselves from enemies who seek to destroy them, recreate their academies of Torah, and reestablish their spiritual center in Jerusalem. Step by step, without overriding the laws of nature, so that even the Ba’al HaNess, the beneficiary of the miracle, is unaware of the great miracle unfolding.

Unlike the dramatic Exodus from Egypt, the future redemption is not an escape from the world and its influences. Over the centuries, the Jewish people have succeeded in illuminating many dark aspects of the world. Our influence has refined the world on many levels. The impact of our Torah and lifestyle, which we observed with dedication and self-sacrifice throughout the exile, served as a beacon of light for many nations.

We must draw upon the heritage of our redemption from Egypt and our miraculous birth as the people of Israel. The current process of redemption, manifest in the revitalization of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, must not be detached from our national mission as a light unto the nations. Then our future redemption will be not in haste, but will advance steadily, like the ever-spreading light of daybreak.

1 Shemot 12:11.
2 Isaiah 52:12.

Adapted from Sapphire from the Land of Israel

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ISRAEL’S ROLE IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ANTISEMITISM

“...every generation, the nations of the world seek to destroy the Jewish people, but G-d saves us” – from the Pesach Haggadah.

Raw antisemitism around the world has risen and morphed into virulent anti-Israel sentiment – making the two phenomena almost indistinguishable. Consequently, the State of Israel has moved from indifference to active involvement in the struggle against such hate.

For the first 25 years of Israel’s existence, Israeli leaders did not view the struggle against antisemitism as their fight. The unspoken attitude in Jerusalem was that “if Jews abroad have a problem with antisemites they can always migrate to Israel,” and “Antisemitism is a Diaspora problem for Diaspora Jews and their host countries; it is not Israel’s problem.”

This began to change after the Yom Kippur War when a campaign of political delegitimization against Israel was launched by Arab countries, involving an avalanche of propaganda that blended antisemitism with anti-Zionism, and which led to the infamous 1975 “Zionism is Racism” resolution at the UN.

Response to antisemitism found a concrete place on Israel’s national agenda after the 1980 Rue Copernic synagogue bombing in Paris and other terror attacks. Then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin took the decision to have Israeli intelligence officials begin advising Jewish communities abroad on security measures.

In 1988, then-cabinet secretary Elyakim Rubinstein established an “Inter-Ministerial Forum for Monitoring Antisemitism,” and expanded it to include Diaspora Jewish representatives and academic experts. The Forum compiled reports on antisemitism around the world and eventually won a place on the Israeli cabinet’s agenda, reporting once a year.

Nevertheless, back then some American Jewish leaders felt that global antisemitism wasn’t Israel’s fight; that the struggle to educate and legislate against antisemitism should be left to them. They resisted Israeli attempts to lead or coordinate anti-antisemitism activity.

The watershed moment that changed this was the 2001 World Conference against Racism against Racism (under UN auspices), known as Durban I. That conference turned into one of the greatest displays of organized anti-Jewish and anti-Israel hate ever, with the two maladies becoming a blended noxious potion.

Shortly afterward, in 2003, then-Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs, Natan Sharansky, founded the Global Forum against Antisemitism. (I was Sharansky’s senior advisor and coordinator of the forum). This brought together Jewish leaders and intellectuals from the Diaspora with all relevant Israeli agencies. Sharansky’s intellectual leadership brought discipline and focus to global Jewish community activity against antisemitism. His Global Forum drew attention to the mass production of violently antisemitic and genocidal propaganda in the Arab and Islamic worlds, with Egypt and Iran at the center of the spreading poison. The Forum also highlighted the dangers of cyberhate.

Most importantly, Sharanskyinnovated a critically important effort to expose antisemitism cloaked as “mere opposition” to Israel and Zionism. He showed how anti-Zionism often employsthe same tactics of demonization, discrimination and double standards against Israel that antisemites historically (and still today) use against Jews; and with the same aim – to strip Jews and/or Israel of rights or power.

He then introduced a benchmark – the “3D Test” – for distinguishing legitimate criticism of Israel from antisemitism, by scrutinizing criticism of Israel for demonization, double standards and delegitimization. He argued that use of these tactics mark the devolution of commentary about Israel into the dark zone of antisemitic expression and intent.

In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) adopted a working definition of antisemitism based on Sharansky’s work. The IHRA definition explicitly recognizes that anti-Zionism – the delegitimization and demonization of the Jewish State – is a clear and unequivocal expression of antisemitism. Almost all Israeli leaders today believe that the Jewish State must play a role in highlighting and trying to combat both the “old” antisemitism and the “new” toxic blend of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. The convening in January of the Fifth World Holocaust Forum by Israeli President Reuven Rivlin was part of this effort.

But note: Israel expects world leaders not only to memorialize Holocaust victims but to concretely fight current antisemitic expression and activity, in consonance with the IHRA definition of antisemitism. And to do so in a way that protects Israel’s place in the world at a time when the very legitimacy of the Jewish State is under assault.

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