



Rabbi Sacks' Lessons from the Haggadah

The piece opposite was originally published in 2013 in the Credo column of *The Times*. I would like to highlight a few of the core and recurring themes in Rabbi Sacks' thought that appear here in connection with Pesach.

First and foremost, Pesach and Seder Night in particular, is the quintessential expression of the central value of education in Judaism. In *Radical Then, Radical Now*, Rabbi Sacks explains that on the eve of the original Pesach, at the genesis of the Jewish nation, we find out what it means to be a Jew: "About to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told that they had to become a nation of educators."¹ In a year when Jewish parents around the world have had to take a more direct role in their children's daily education, it is important to remember that this is a defining characteristic of what it means to be a Jew.

I am sure many of us have had moments of frustration and despair this year as we have faced up to this monumental task. But Rabbi Sacks shows us how the Haggadah can be a manual for best practice in Jewish education. Through engaging and experiential rituals, we turn 'history' into 'memory' by reenacting and reliving the narrative of the Exodus. History, Rabbi Sacks writes in his Haggadah, is "his story – an event that happened sometime else to someone else." Memory, however, is "my story – something that happened to me and is part of who I am."² On the first night of Pesach we create identity from history.

In Rabbi Sacks' article, inspired by the paradoxical nature of *matzah* as the bread of 'affliction' and at the same time the bread of 'freedom,' he wrote that "Sharing food is the first act through which slaves become free human beings." As he writes in his Haggadah: "Freedom means more than losing your chains. It involves developing the capacity to think, feel and act for the benefit of others."³ The act of sharing food is an act of "fellowship and faith" (faith that there will be enough food tomorrow to share scarce provisions today), and restores not just freedom to the redeemed slave, but also dignity. This explains why we begin our Seder with an act of hospitality and sharing (הָא לְחֶמְתָּא עִנְיָא), demonstrating our freedom and dignity.

Freedom and dignity of the human being are supreme values in Judaism according to Rabbi Sacks, and the values on which society must be built: "Of all the great religions, Judaism has the strongest conception of the freedom and dignity of the individual, beginning with the principle that the human person as such is the one bearer of the image of G-d."⁴ As we relive the experience of slavery and redemption on the night of Pesach, these values are transmitted from generation to generation, and thereby become absorbed into our national DNA.

Rabbi Sacks concludes by describing the poignancy of this message in our society today, one he argues is the "most individualistic society in history." Freedom, he argues, is not the right to personal

choice and liberty, but rather a truly free society is one that has a "sense of solidarity that leads those who have more than they need to share with those who have less." This is the theme of the last book Rabbi Sacks wrote before his passing, *Morality*, where he argues with urgency that we must move from an 'I' to a 'We' society.

This message, a year into a global pandemic that challenges us every day to consider our individual rights vs. our responsibilities to others, feels more relevant than ever. He concludes the book with a hopeful message: "Societies have moved from 'I' to 'We' in the past. They did so in the nineteenth century. They did so in the twentieth century. They can do so in the future. And it begins with us."⁵ Pesach and the lessons of the Haggadah can be our inspiration to achieve this.

1 Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 32.

2 *History and Memory*, The Jonathan Sacks Haggada, p. 38.

3 *The Omer and the Politics of Torah*, The Jonathan Sacks Haggada p. 91.

4 Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 147.

5 *Morality*, p. 336.

Dr. Daniel Rose is the educational consultant and content developer for the Office of Rabbi Sacks.