

Passover 1 5784
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Chag Sameach.

Mah Nishtana Halaylah HazeH Mikol Haleylot? How different is this night from all other nights? So begins the Maggid section of the Haggadah. But I bet last night and tonight's Seders *were* different from any you remember, for they happened in the year of October 7th.

Almost always, we enter the Seder night from a place of freedom. We American Jews, thank G-d, are fully free in our homeland, so the challenge is *to imagine* what it means to be *not free*. But this year is different because of October 7th. This year all Jews feel less secure than a year ago. This year there are 134 Israelis who have been held hostage for the past 6 months. For the first time I can remember, it is frighteningly easy to feel *we are not* fully free. So long as the captives are being held in Gaza, none of us is fully free.

I think it's really important to talk about Israel and the lessons learned from its war tonight at the Seder. Not in a political sense, but a moral sense. Of course we start the night with the Haggadah, the script we know so well. It is there as a guide to the Seder steps, and as a backup to the conversation, in case a family cannot spark an organic conversation about freedom on its own. But optimally the conversation considers what slavery and freedom look like today. About who is not free today, and what we must do to liberate them fully. In the past, I always figured that it is other peoples who have not been fully free, not our own. But in this year of October 7th, we speak about our own nation.

Today I want to share with you six points in the Haggadah or the Passover story itself that are our openings to discussing the urgent topic of Israel today.

Rabbi David Golinkin wrote an article about exactly this, and I paraphrase three of his points before turning to another scholar and then my own thoughts.

First, it is obvious that we cannot rejoice at the Seder table this year, not during the year when 1200 Israelis were murdered on October 7th, 260 Israeli soldiers have been killed fighting in Gaza, and 134 people are still being held prisoner by Hamas. But the Passover Seder must go on, because at its core its theme of freedom still demands our attention, even when we are not in the mood to celebrate. It's actually more important now.

Rabbi Golinkin first notes the theme of hospitality: “At the very beginning of the Seder we declare: “Let all who are hungry, come and eat.” This sentence is based on the practice of Rav Huna, who declared whenever he broke bread: “Whoever is in need, let him come and eat” (Ta’anit 20b). Since October 7th, we have seen an incredible outpouring of hospitality in the State of Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis have welcomed strangers into their homes, baked and cooked food for huge numbers of soldiers, and brought food and clothing to the 250,000 evacuees from the north and south. This Pesach custom has now become a norm. We hope and pray that it continues.” I add, it is our great pride that 30 congregants from Beth El joined in this effort earlier this month and pitched in with their own hands.

The next lesson is that we cannot forget the 134 hostages in the midst of our joy. The Haggadah recalls the verse from Deuteronomy: “and we cried to the L-rd G-d of our ancestors, and the L-rd heard our voice and saw our affliction... and our oppression.” We hope and pray that G-d will hear the voices of the hostages, as well as Jews all over the world demanding “Bring them home now.” And we hope that G-d will release the hostages as G-d freed the enslaved Israelites.

A third lesson is that vengeance comes from G-d, not people. To quote Rabbi Golinkin: “After Birkat Hamazon (The Grace After Meals) and before the second half of Hallel, we open the door and recite a series of four verses: “Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You, upon the kingdoms which have not called upon Your name. For they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home (Psalms 79:6-7). Pour out Your wrath on them; may your blazing anger overtake them (Psalms 69:25). Pursue them with anger and destroy them from under the heavens of the L-rd (Lamentations 3:66).”

Many have suggested that these verses were added as a reaction to Blood Libels, which frequently occurred on Pesach. Beginning in 1144, Christians accused Jews of using the blood of Christian babies to bake matzot, which is, of course, utterly absurd. The Jews of France and Germany therefore asked G-d to “Pour out Your wrath” on those who persecute us.

Since October 7th, a small number of Israelis have said that we should kill all of the Hamas terrorists as an act of vengeance. However, as I have shown elsewhere, the word *nakam* or *nekama* appears 44 times in the Bible. Only three verses talk about human vengeance; in most cases, the Bible talks about vengeance that was taken or will be taken by G-d, not by human beings.

We are not fighting in Gaza as an act of vengeance. We are fighting there to free the hostages and to make sure that Hamas will never again repeat the bestial acts which it performed on October 7th.

That is why these verses say: “Pour out *Your* wrath” — *G-d’s* wrath, not ours.

A fourth opportunity comes not from a line in the Seder but a famous verse from the Torah. Moses demands of Pharaoh again and again: “let My people go.” Rabbi Avi Weiss of New York writes about how this is the core refrain for Jews today. He writes: “Today, that call resonates powerfully – demanding the hostages be freed. It is a far more fitting outcry than “Bring Them Home Now.” For better or worse, especially in Israel, that slogan has become political – a demand directed *at the Israeli government* to do more – some would say, at any cost. And while there are times for respectful disagreement about the actions of the Israeli government, “Let My People Go,” places clear and unequivocal culpability where it belongs – *at the hands and feet of the oppressors*, the Hamas butchers and their supporters.”

Now I wish to share two of my own. The first one is a well-known passage that begins *VHee SheAmdah* - “in every generation an enemy rises up to destroy us, but G-d saves us from their hands.” Of course, this is the story of Jewish history, that a litany of persecutors have tried to destroy us, but always failed. Even in recent years, we could affirm this line’s resonance by thinking of Iran, which has long sought openly to destroy Israel, and now has directly attacked Israel for the very first time about 10 days ago. And even though Hamas has long been open about their equally genocidal intentions, we mistakenly thought things were contained. October 7th crystallized this frightening realization that Israel lives next door to people who actively try to eliminate the Jewish people, and who were alarmingly successful, if only partially, on October 7th. The enemies of the Jewish people do not merely live in the past but stand on Israel’s borders this very day.

One final thought: after the seventh plague, Pharaoh has had enough and concedes to let the Israelite men go for 3 days in the wilderness. Finally he says Yes. He asks Moses who will go, and Moses rejects his offer out of hand. Moses replies: “We will all go, young and old, with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds, for we must observe the L-rd’s festival” (Ex. 10:9). In other words, Moses rejected Pharaoh’s offer to let the men go, for that was insufficient. All must be free or no one is truly free. All are enslaved so long as some are not free.

This year we sit down at the Passover Seder not as free people, but as children of the Israelites who echo the demand of thousands of years: let My people go!

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