

## **D'var Torah for Shabbat/Last Days of Pesach 5781**

Shabbat Shalom, Chag Sameakh !!

Because this Shabbat coincides with the Seventh Day of Pesach, we interrupt the normal order of the Torah readings, the weekly parasha, to do special readings for Pesach. Tomorrow morning's Torah reading will come from the book of Exodus (no surprise) and will depict the exodus itself through the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and the Song of the Sea (*Shirat Hayam*).

As I'm sure I've said on other occasions, Passover, or, more accurately, the Passover seder, is probably the most celebrated of Jewish holidays. It can be appreciated on so many levels. On the most basic level, in normal years, it is a social gathering. On a more traditional level, Pesach depicts the beginning of the Jewish people as a people. The Book of Exodus and the rest of the Bible that follows it, generally talks of the Jewish people as a whole in contrast to the Book of Genesis which begins with creation and evolves into the story of the extended family that would eventually become the Jewish people.

There are so many different Haggadot. Most of us are familiar with the ubiquitous Maxwell House Haggadah, which is complete, but bare bones. Many Haggadot are filled with commentaries explaining the text of the Haggadah itself. One of my favorites, of the ones we have, is a Haggadah with different colored lettering depending on the source of the passage. For example, if the source is Biblical, the print will be in black ink, if the source was Tannaitic (meaning coming from the period of the Mishnah which was "sealed" around the year 200CE – a rabbi from the era of the Mishnah is called a Tanna, which is why the time period is called Tannaitic), the print is red. It goes all the way to contemporary times with seven colors of print all together. In other words, even very traditional Haggadot evolved over the centuries. By the way, there is an entire volume of the Talmud devoted to Pesach. Because the major theme of the holiday is freedom and our liberation from slavery, it's a theme that many people can adopt. It's also a theme that is universal. Very secular kibbutzim in Israel created their own Haggadah emphasizing the universal theme of liberation. In the late 1960s, Arthur Waskow, who was just beginning to return to his Jewish roots, created a "Freedom Seder," and made his own Haggadah for that. Later, Jewish Women's Liberation created a "Women's Haggadah." You get the idea. The Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943 was inspired by Pesach and occurred during it.

As we all know, the number four is associated with the Seder. We begin with the four questions, the *mah nishtanah*, we have the four children, and we have the four cups of wine. As I said earlier, there is an entire tractate of the Talmud devoted to Pesach. The last section contains many of the elements that we associate with the Seder and the holiday. There was a difference of opinion as to whether there should be four cups or five cups at the Seder. It was based on the various promises of freedom mentioned in the Torah. The fifth promise is seen as the future great liberation, which in our tradition is the coming of the *Mashiakh* (messiah), or the messianic era. The rabbis solved this difference of opinion over the number of cups by having a fifth cup on the table, that no one drank – of course, this is the cup of Elijah, *kos Eliyahu*. Eliyahu (Elijah) is always associated with the messianic era – he will be announcing the arrival of the *Mashiakh*, according to our tradition. So when we invite him in during the Seder, we basically are saying, we want *Mashiakh* now.

Pesach has two foci then – first our history, our past liberation – and then, our future liberation. How do we end the Seder? Officially it ends with “*L’shana haba’ah biYerushalayim*” – next year in Jerusalem. That doesn’t mean that we’re hoping to take a congregational trip to Israel or even a personal one – it clearly means that we’re hoping that by next year the *Mashiakh* will come and the Jewish people will be gathered from “the four corners of the earth” and return to Israel. In fact, the Seder even begins with this idea. After we make kiddush and eat the *karpas*, the green vegetable (usually parsley or celery), we uncover the Matzah and chant *Ha Lakhma Anya* (this is the bread of humility or oppression, depending on how you translate “*anya*”). The chant is only five lines long and ends with: “this year we are here, next year in the land of Israel, this year we are slaves, next year we’ll be free.” Those two phrases come from the Geonic Period, which was from 650 – 1075, when the largest center of Jewish life was still in Bavel, in Babylonia, but was shifting to Europe, and particularly Spain, Germany, and southern France. In other words, it was introduced when the experience of exile from our homeland was deeply embedded in Jewish life for hundreds and hundreds of years. But the longing for the ultimate redemption, a utopian era, was fundamental to Jewish life.

If we look at the Haftarah readings for this time period, they contain this message too. The Shabbat before Pesach, i.e., last Shabbat, is called *Shabbat HaGadol* (the great Shabbat). The Haftarah for *Shabbat HaGadol* ends with the prophecy that G!d will send Eliyahu to us before the great and awesome day of G!d i.e. the coming of the final redemption. The Haftarah

for the eighth day of Pesach, i.e. this Sunday, is from the Book of Isaiah talking directly about the coming of the messiah. These are some of the best-known messianic prophecies starting with chapter eleven of the Book of Isaiah. I'm going to quote a section of it, because it's so eloquent.

“A shoot shall grow out of the stock of Jesse (Jesse is King David's father – the *Mashiakh* is supposed to be a descendent of King David), a twig shall sprout from his roots. The spirit of the Eternal One shall alight upon him: a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and valor, a spirit of devotion and reverence for the Eternal One. He shall sense the truth by his reverence for G!d, he shall not judge by what his eyes behold, nor decide by what his ears perceive. He shall judge the poor with equity and decide with justice for the lowly of the land.... Justice shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his waist. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw. A babe shall play over a viper's hole, and an infant pass his hand over an adder's den. In all of My sacred mount (i.e. Jerusalem), nothing evil or vile shall be done; for the land shall be filled with devotion to the Eternal One as water covers the sea.”

Clearly, we are not there yet. We're far from there, in fact. It deeply saddens me how divided people are in this country and in Israel too. There is so little tolerance for opinions that differ from our own. There are so many crises occurring simultaneously. Yet, with all that, our tradition holds on to the belief that there is a glorious future that we are striving for and Pesach is part of our annual reminder to always work towards that great dream.

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