

Shabbat Hagadol 5780

Pesach in Egypt

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The Zohar, the key text of Jewish mysticism, teaches that the Hebrew name for Egypt – *Mitzrayim*, is derived from the word *m'tzarim*, meaning “narrow straits” (*mi*, “from,” *tzar*, “narrow” or “tight”). From this the Zohar concludes that when God took us out of *Mitzrayim*, we were extricated from a place of constricted opportunities, tight control, and narrow-mindedness, where movement was severely limited.

The Jewish writer and artist Lesli Koppelman Ross reflects on the teaching of the Zohar. She observes: “Each of us lives in his or her own *mitzrayim*, the external or physical narrow straits of financial or health constraints or, perhaps, personal tragedy; universally, the psychological burdens to which we subject ourselves.”

Considering the current restrictions that the invisible danger of Coronavirus places upon us, the idea that Egypt – that place of ‘narrow straits’ – is everywhere certainly takes on a new meaning. And with it, we reflect anew on the idea of Pesach as a celebration of our liberation from Egypt.

How are we to celebrate our freedom when we are not free to celebrate as we normally would? How can we capture the optimism of Pesach when for all of us the future is filled with uncertainty? When we feel stuck in our very own *Mitzrayim*, how can we get a sense of God’s redemptive powers?

None of these are easy questions but Pesach has always been about asking difficult questions. Questions play a central role in the Haggadah, which we read during the Pesach Seder. “*Mah nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot?*” – Why is this night different from all other nights? – the four question traditionally sung by the youngest child of the family accompany us through the whole Seder. Have you ever noticed, that the Haggadah doesn’t actually provide the answers for each of the questions? The questions are more important than the answers!

Mah nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot?

Many of our regular Pesach customs will have to be adapted, reinvented and reimagined this year as we are not able to gather in the same physical space as family members, friends and fellow congregants with whom we would normally celebrate the Pesach Seder. But whether you are celebrating a Seder by yourself, with just your household or with the wider community by joining one of our zoom-Seders, the rituals that are part of the Seder can help guide us in asking new questions about the meaning of the Exodus from Egypt for our days.

As you look at the familiar symbols on your Seder plate, ask yourself which is taking on a new meaning for you this year. As you pour the first glass of wine take a moment to think whether you feel ready to recline to the left – the traditional way to celebrate the luxury of freedom. And, if you choose to recline, what freedom are you celebrating? When you taste the sweet wine, think back to a moment of joy.

As the service proceeds to *karpas* – the dipping of greens into saltwater – the salty water symbolises the tears shed during slavery. My colleague Rabbi Evan Schultz asks: “How can I not connect my own tears with those shed by my ancestors? The salt water - the tears, the sadness, the enslavement, the sense of loss. It has never felt more real than it does right now.

I pause and think for a moment about the ritual of the salt water. We each take in our hand a tiny sprig of parsley. A thin, flimsy, fragile, barely edible sprig of parsley. Embedded within those tiny stems and leaves are Hope. Rebirth. Springtime. Light. That’s all we need to carry us through right now. A fragile, delicate, beautiful sense of hope touched by God herself. We hold it between our fingertips, and as it dances through the bitter waters, it remains intact. We offer a blessing. We taste the mixture of light and bitterness upon our tongues. We keep telling the story. We move forward through the wilderness, carried by one another, by the profound beauty of hope, the love that carries us amidst the sadness.”

The saltwater is an important reminder that we should acknowledge our pain; that even during an evening of celebration it is okay to admit that life is not always easy, that we live in difficult and uncertain times and it is okay to shed a tear. But the rabbis who put together the Seder were great psychologists and so in pairing the saltwater with the spring greens, hope emerges, even while damp with tears and so we are also called upon to reflect on what gives us hope as we recall the story of the Jewish people’s journey from slavery to freedom.

Just before we reach the meal, we reach the *Dayenu*, it should have been enough... but then there was more. Particularly in times of stress, this moment in the Seder, full of singing and simple repetition, can be a stark reminder of the importance (and the challenge) of practicing gratitude. In this unique year of COVID-19, which is impacting our Pesach celebrations, what moments of gratitude can you share – even on the days when you feel like you’ve had enough? What have you learned about yourself and your awareness to find gratitude even in difficult times?

Nobody can deny that this year’s Pesach Seder will be different to other Pesach Seders that we have celebrated before. Yet, even as we are stuck alongside our fellow Jews around the world in our modern day Mitzrayim, in our very own narrow straits, we can find hope and comfort in the different Pesach symbols and rituals.

As the new will mingle with the familiar we are called upon to find meaning in the knowledge that the Exodus was not simply a “freedom from ...,” but a “freedom to ...”.

As we acknowledge the many limitations to our current lives, we can nonetheless be grateful to the many freedoms that we can still enjoy – the freedom to enjoy the sight of the sun and the sound of birds, the freedom to reach out and to connect through the old fashioned telephone and our newly acquired technological skills, the freedom to be grateful for being part of a wonderful community which truly transcends physical space.

On this Shabbat Hagadol, as we look towards Pesach, let us connect our own tears with those shed by our ancestors and focus on the potential of the festival rather than the restrictions of our reality. So that as we recall our people’s redemption from Egypt, we will be filled with hope for a better future – *bimheira b’yameinu* – speedily in our days.

Amen - Shabbat Shalom