

Shabbat HaGadol/Metzora 5784

April 19, 2024

Jews can get obsessed with Passover. Yes it's a joyous holiday, and yes it contains our most defining story of our people's emergence from slavery to freedom. Our liberation was also our birthing through the Sea of Reeds into nationhood, when we transformed from Bnei Yisrael, the children of our ancestor Jacob, to Am Yisrael, the people or nation of Israel. Yes, it is the most celebrated of all of Jewish days on the calendar – more Jews participate in seder than in any other holiday. But as is perhaps to be expected from a people who can get a little anxious sometimes, the build-up to Passover for many Jews is not as much about excitement as it is about stress. And the stress for many traditional Jews is about kashrut. So much so that the traditional greeting for Passover isn't just Chag Sameach, as we wish one another before other holidays, but Chag Kasher v'Sameach, a Kosher and Happy Holiday. As you may know, there are a whole set of efforts one must make to remove the chametz, all leavened products from the home, to kasher the kitchen, which involves some combination of burning and boiling many things in it – the use of a blowtorch is not uncommon–, and/or trading out one's dishes for a separate set that's saved all year just for this coming week.

This Shabbat, Shabbat HaGadol (the Big Shabbat), is traditionally when the rabbi gives the biggest sermon of the year other than High Holy Days, this one with a focus on how to have a kosher holiday. What specific rules must we follow and how must we follow them to have a kosher seder? Tonight, I'm going to give a Shabbat HaGadol sermon about how to have a kosher seder. It's not going to be about pouring boiling water over your stove or using a blowtorch on your oven. But this year, seder is going to be different than all other years that we have ever lived through, and the question is how do we have a kosher seder six months after October 7th?

On *The Promised Podcast*, a brilliant weekly offering from Tel Aviv that I cannot recommend highly enough, this week host Noah Efron quoted an Israeli Ima named Revital Guillambucho, who said, "As long as our kidnapped are not home with us, as far as I'm concerned it is not Jewish to celebrate Seder night, because we who in every generation see ourselves as if we left Egypt, we cannot say that this year. I am Ima to two sons who were called up as officers on Oct 7 and have been there ever since, and I said to them, 'My children I am sorry I cannot sit at any Seder table. I cannot dress for the holiday, cook for the holiday, go from course to course and read those words. What freedom do we have? To decide how many desserts we'll make? What freedom are we celebrating? In what world do we dare to leave the families of the kidnapped alone on this night? We have no right. It is not Jewish. I will be with their families. And I will strengthen their hearts, and I will try to chant a passage from the Haggadah I hope we will be deserving of. "Take us from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to celebration, from darkness to great light, and from enslavement to redemption and only then will we say before Him Halleluyah"."

However, Efron spoke of other Israelis who say that this year for the first time in a long time they *will* make Pesach, they *will* gather with family and friends to defiantly and proudly declare their Judaism.

Efron read to us from a new haggadah made by the Hostages and the Missing Families Forum, printed in the print shop of Kibbutz Be'eri whose CFO was murdered on October 7th but which reopened one week later. In the cover material the haggadah quotes from the laws pertaining to gifts to the poor from Maimonides's Mishnah Torah 8:10: "The redemption of captives held for ransom comes before taking care of the poor or clothing them. There is no mitzvah greater than redeeming the captivesbecause captives face danger of losing their lives."

That haggadah goes on to quote Israel Prize award winner Miriam Peretz saying, "How is this night different from all other nights? This year, so much is different. This year there will be missing from the tables, fathers, sons, brothers, daughters, women and men who fell in battle or were murdered on October 7. When the children ask how is this night different there will be many people around the table who have had great loss and pain. When the orphaned children ask how is this night different, how will we answer their question?"

My first recommendation for a kosher seder in 5784 is that we leave an empty chair at our tables for the hostages, and another empty chair for the dead.

My second recommendation is for the moment when we come to Vehi She'amda, the piyut in the haggadah that says that G-d has kept us surviving in every generation when an enemy rises up to destroy us. This year I encourage you to pray fervently at that moment for the return of the hostages. Israel's Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, David Lau, composed a prayer that you can find online, but better yet, do not use a script. Invite the people at your table to speak and pray from their hearts that all of the remaining living hostages will come home.

My third recommendation comes from Rabbanit Leah Sarna of Drisha Institute, who suggests placing a hand mirror on the seder table in solidarity with women who suffered rape and sexual assault by Hamas. Sarna says that what's so beautiful about the seder is its contextualization of Jewish trauma. According to Midrash, Israelite women used mirrors to defy Pharaoh's decree of death to their offspring, and to re-empower themselves to bring new life into the world even after their trauma. She wrote "Recall the historic suffering and endurance of Jewish women past and present, and let us hope and pray that that same healing will someday be found by our brothers — and especially sisters — in Gaza being tortured today."

Another recommendation inspired by the Promised Podcast is a gloss found in the new Israeli haggadah put together by Noam and Mishael Zion for the part of the seder that is most uncomfortable for many of us, *Shefoch Hamatcha*, when we open our doors and call upon G-d to pour out G'd's wrath upon our enemies. To understand this moment in the seder, we must remember that seder night for a thousand years was a dangerous night for our ancestors. It was a dangerous night because the blood libel, the lie that said that Jews killed Jesus, became another lie that spread through villages throughout Europe – the lie that Jews killed Christian

babies to use their blood to make matzah. This blood libel has taken a new form since October 7th, as cartoonists and writers in the Middle East, Europe, Australia, and the United States have accused Jews of the ritual murder of babies, of drinking the blood of Palestinians, and of stealing the organs of Palestinians. In Europe in the Middle Ages, Christian mobs would storm Jewish homes on seder night and massacre them. Thus the courageous and defiant opening of the door and the call to G-d for wrath and vengeance upon our enemies.

However, we now see where wrath and vengeance get us, and it is nowhere good.

As antisemitism in this country reaches a level most of us have never seen before; as we feel dehumanized by others; and as wrath, vengeance, and hatred have filled so many hearts among our people in the last six months, **my fourth recommendation** is that when we open our doors to read Shefoch Hamatcha, we also respond with a counter-message.

It is an excerpt from a speech by Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the mother of hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin, given at the UN last November. She said, "When you only get outraged when one side's babies are killed, then your moral compass is broken and your humanity is broken. And therefore in your quiet moments alone all of us everywhere on planet Earth need to ask ourselves do I aspire to be human or am I swept up in the enticing and delicious world of hatred? This is not a phenomenon unique to Israel or Gaza. This is everywhere on our planet. I understand that hatred of the other, whoever we decide that other is, is seductive, sensuous, and most importantly, it's easy. Hatred is easy. But hatred is not actually helpful, nor is it constructive. In a competition of pain, there is never a winner.

"One thing that gave me a whisper of hope from all of the horror on October 7th," she said "...one of the witnesses with whom I spoke told me that when the rocket fire first began and all of those young, music-loving hippies went running into the bomb shelter, there was a Bedouin man who was a guard at the kibbutz across the street, and he ran into that same shelter for cover. And as Hamas closed in on the bomb shelter, the man told the young people, 'shh, stay quiet, let me go talk to them.' And he went outside and he said in Arabic, 'I'm a Muslim, everyone inside is my family, we are Muslim, you don't have to search in there.' He tried to save them. He could have just said, 'I'm a Muslim', and just saved himself. But he tried to do the right thing, even though it was terrifying, and even though it required unimaginable courage. He was brutally beaten, and the witnesses do not know what his fate was. But I take comfort," the mother of hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who has still not returned, said, "I take comfort for a fleeting moment, knowing that there was someone trying to do the right thing in the universe that had been turned upside down. We human beings have been blessed with gifts of creativity, insight, and perception. Why are we not using them to solve global conflicts all over the world? Because doing this is hard, and it takes fortitude, imagination, grit, risk, and hope. So instead, we opt for hatred, because hatred is so comfortable, so familiar, and so very, very easy."

Hatred is not only an obstacle to peace. It is also an obstacle to freedom. In fact, we have learned through excruciating pain this year that our people are not free even in our own land. And we will not be free as long as we are occupying Palestinian people. We will not be free as long as Palestinian people lack their own freedom. Israel simply cannot be a democracy with civil liberties and social freedoms as long as Palestinian people lack their own liberties, their own democracy, their own state. Our freedom is intertwined and interdependent with theirs.

This story, the Passover story, has always been about us, but it has never been *only* about us. Always, from the first seder, which took place in the Torah itself, this story has been about a G-d who hears the voice of the oppressed, about a G-d who stands for freedom for humanity. We know this because the story was turned into the most frequently named mitzvah of the Torah – 36 times – “do not oppress the stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” And to be clear, Egypt in Torah is the word Mitzrayim. It is not referring to the modern state of Egypt or any Egyptian alive today. It is a symbolic place, Mitzrayim, which literally means the narrow place. It is a symbolic place of constriction, of being entrapped, bound, captive, oppressed, suffering.

Therefore, **my fifth recommendation** is that we place an olive on the seder plate to represent Palestinian liberation and the hope for peace between our peoples. It was an olive branch that the dove brought to Noah in the ark, letting him know that the flood was ending and there would be a future for life on earth. The olive is not only our symbol of hope and peace, it is a symbol of nationality and connection to the land for Palestinians. As recently as 2011, olive trees covered a majority of the land in the West Bank, but thousands of olive trees on private Palestinian land have been destroyed by settlers in recent years. Therefore we place an olive on our seder plate to include the cause of Palestinian freedom in our cause for freedom, so that one day we can truly be free.

As we know, that freedom feels very distant as the war is in its seventh month. Right now, more than a million Gazans are starving. Many are in danger of starving to death. How do we sit at our tables with a feast before us, singing Dayenu, when people are starving? Our ancestors thought about that when they designed the seder. They specifically called upon us to open our homes, our tables, our feasts, our hands, to people who do not have.

My sixth recommendation for a kosher seder is for Ha Lachma Anya, when we say, “This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need come and partake in the Pesach offering.” Stop everything right there. Do not let it just be words. Make it real. Have a link or a QR code, and call upon everyone at the table to give to Anera, a vetted humanitarian organization that is providing hundreds of thousands of meals and sanitation kits to people in Gaza right now. Once everyone has donated on the spot, then break the middle matzah and resume the seder.

My seventh recommendation is already built into our seder, at the plagues. We reduce our joy, by dipping our pinky finger into our wine and taking out drops for each plague, reducing our joy in compassion for the suffering of the other, even the suffering of our enemy. That’s the tradition.

Think about it. The story tells us that our ancestors were enslaved for more than 400 years. All their baby boys were murdered. They were beaten mercilessly, worked to death. And then, in commemorating that experience and our liberation from it, our Rabbinic ancestors reduced their joy because the Egyptians were suffering. When Pharaoh and Pharaoh's army drowned in the sea because they raced into the water to re-enslave the fleeing Israelites, G-d rebuked the singing angels. We do not rejoice over the suffering of our enemies, and certainly not over the suffering of the innocents who live among them. Perhaps you will tell some of their stories as you reduce the wine in your cups.

Haaretz published these stories of Gazans in January. Maha, 26, who moved with her family from Gaza City to Rafah, related that the 22 members of her extended family had to make do with two cans of ful (fava beans) a day and that she felt hungry all the time. Noel, 43, who arrived in Rafah from Beit Lahia, said that her family was subsisting on date cookies distributed once a day. Alham, 38, who was uprooted from Gaza City to Rafah, said her baby nephew had stopped being breast-fed because his mother was too weak to produce milk. Now, in the absence of baby formula, he cries from hunger all the time. This was in January.

Italian lawyer Francesca Albanese, who is in Gaza representing the UN, said to Haaretz in January that more than one thousand children have undergone amputations without anesthesia.

Anera published these stories of Gazans in December and January. Saida, a 36 year old mother of four said, "The inability to get medicine for my children just makes their health conditions worse, making each day more challenging than the last. I just want to go home. I want my children to go back to school. I want them to have dreams for their future. But at this moment, that all seems so far away."

A woman named Fawziya said, "The situation at the UN school shelter is so terrible. We couldn't even use the bathroom. The school where we were seeking refuge didn't have water. Sitting in a tent outside is way better than sitting in a shelter. It is full of people with diseases. My grandson got sick there."

A man named Islam, who was diagnosed with a severe case of cancer three years before the war, said, "A few patients with cancer have been allowed to leave. I am patiently waiting for my turn. There is no clean water to drink, so we have to drink polluted water. The lack of food has left me suffering from severe stomach issues."

If we empty our wine glasses in response to the suffering of Pharaoh's army who sought to enslave us, all the more so do we reduce our joy at the suffering of innocents in Gaza.

My final recommendation for a kosher seder this year relates to the moment near the end when we open the door for the prophets Elijah and Miriam, who represent hope for a redeemed future. This year, let's actually imagine what a redeemed Israel, a redeemed Palestine, a redeemed Jewish people, a redeemed world looks like. What will healing look like? What will freedom look like? Do not be afraid to dream big. Do not be afraid to describe the world looking very different than it does now. You can even give everyone paper and pens, break into pairs or groups of three, and ask them to write a newspaper headline that would appear 10 years from

now and another that would appear 50 years from now. Invite them to paint a picture with their words of the world we are aiming for, the world we are praying for, the world we are working for. Imagine it like it is possible, like it will be real.

Our parasha this Shabbat is Metzora, a grappling with the strange disease tzara'at, which could afflict human bodies, clothing, and houses. The Rabbis decide that tzara'at is actually a spiritual disease more than a physical disease, and that it is caused by *motsi shem ra*, the use of language to harm others.

This war has been a war of words as much as a war of violence and starvation. We here in this country have turned on one another with words. Words have been used to dehumanize both sides. Words have been used to deny the suffering of both sides. Words have been used to divide people in this country from one another. It may be that you will attend a seder where people are divided, a seder in which finding the right words feels challenging, even risky. It may be that you will attend a seder where the expectation is that words of compassion can only be spoken for one side or the other side. But take courage from the fact that words have also been used in these last six months to inspire compassion for both Israelis and Palestinians. Words have been used to inspire nuance, and words have been used to inspire hope. This, above all, is how to have a kosher seder.

Rabbi Shlomo of Karlin, a student of the Magid of Mezrich who lived in the 18th century, said about verse 14:2 of our parasha "This is the teaching concerning the afflicted one / *zot tihiyeh torat ha metzora*" "A person who speaks in favor of the merits of everyone in the world [all of humanity]...brings about the inflow of blessing in all the worlds. If you proclaim them all to be worthy and good, this adds to the glory of Israel. That gives glory to the blessed Holy One, who created such glorious and praiseworthy beings. You even cause the angels above to speak in favor of God's creatures!...Thus an abundance of blessing flows through all the worlds. But when you speak maliciously about God's creatures and denigrate them, it is the work of the blessed Holy One that you are denigrating, the worlds that God created."

I wish you all a seder filled with words of nuance and compassion, of kindness and blessing, of love and gratitude. I wish you a seder in which we remember that even in the bleakest of circumstances, freedom is always possible. Most of all, I wish you a Chag Kasher v'Sameach.