

Tomorrow night, as Jews around the world make our way through a Passover seder, many will sing: *Avadim hayinu hayinu. Atah b'nei chorin, b'nei chorin*. We once were slaves, but now, we are free people. We'll recount our people's most defining narrative, our move from oppression to freedom: We did hard physical labor. We didn't have control over our time or our bodies or our futures. We couldn't advocate for our needs. We were whipped by our taskmasters, our babies' lives were taken. Even as we make our seder tables joyful places to teach our children, this is not a story for the faint of heart. But then, we sing, *atah b'nei chorin*, now we are free people.

Just look at us - on all other nights, we sit up straight or recline, but on this night, *kulanu m'subin*, we recline on pillows, like Greek aristocrats who dipped their delicious foods into other delicious foods. We are so free that we don't even pour our own glass of wine, so that none of us might have to labor for our own drink. We taste the sweetness of our charoset, embodying our freedom.

And as the maggid section of the Haggadah, the storytelling, begins, we recite the words of Ha Lachma Anya, saying: Let all who are hungry come and eat! *Hashata avdei, L'shanah ha'ba'ah b'nei chorin*: This year we are **slaves**, but next year, we will be free people!

Wait. Which is it? *Avadim hayinu or hashata avdei*? We **were** slaves or we **are** slaves? **Atah b'nei chorin**? Or **l'shanah ha'ba'ah b'nei chorin**? **Now** we are free people, or **next year** we will become free people?

In many ways, **this** is the crux of the Passover seder and the purpose of going through this ritual every year. And this year, I suggest that it could not be a more urgent question: Are we free or are we not free?

We look kind of free. We take vacations. We eat foods that we want. We celebrate our holidays freely. We lift our voices at marches and to call our elected officials. And yet, we are all too aware that not only are our freedoms at risk of being threatened, but that there is a growing list, here and overseas, of neighbors, loved ones, and strangers who we are tasked with caring for 36 times in the Torah, who are, without question, not free. And becoming less so by the day.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a German Rabbi in the 1800's, reflected on similar truths. He pointed to a familiar exhortation in the haggadah: *b'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatzah mimizrayim* - in every generation, we must each see ourselves *k'ilu*, as if we ourselves went out from Mitzrayim, the land of our slavery. And he asks: what is this *k'ilu*? As if. What does that mean? And he explains that *k'ilu* here warns us that our freedom itself is an "as if" because we don't know what our own next chapter will be; perhaps we will become not free again. *K'ilu*, he teaches, reminds us that we are always teetering between freedom and losing those freedoms. Perhaps this year more than any other year that many of us have lived through, Rabbi Hirsch's words ring true.

We will sit down to seder this year, knowing that a 29 year old father with no criminal record, named Kilmar Abrego Garcia, is sitting in a notorious El Salvadoran mega-prison known for

depriving those held there of food, water, and sanitation, fostering routine violence, and dehumanizing and disappearing those imprisoned there. While our government has admitted that he was taken there because of an administrative error, regardless of what the Supreme Court has now ruled, they refuse to bring him home. He is not free.

We will sit down to seder this year knowing that there are still 59 hostages being held in Gaza, 24 of them believed to be alive and some of them known to be in literal chains, aching from hunger, and living in the darkness and breathlessness of *avdut*, enslavement. We know that our own members' cousins, Gali and Ziv, are among them, and that they have been there for 553 days. They are not free.

We will sit down to seder this year knowing that the children of Gaza and Palestinian civilians live in terror, continuing to suffer and to starve, trapped in a war they did not ask for and don't have the power to end. They are not free.

We'll sit down to seder this year, knowing that students with green cards or visas, like Rumeysa Ozturk, Tufts University graduate student, have been snatched off the street by plain-clothed masked men, spirited away because of their speech. Even if it is speech that we strongly disagree with, in this country, protecting freedom of speech is fundamental to the freedom of any person who might speak in opposition to our government. They are not free.

We will sit down to seder this year knowing that the House just passed the SAVE Act which threatens to disenfranchise 69 million women, among others. In a democracy, your vote is your freedom. If that proceeds, they will not be free.

So many have asked: how do we celebrate Passover in a year such as this? Are we free or aren't we and how do we celebrate being free, if we are still, and others are not? And if Rabbi Hirsch is right, that our freedom is always on a precipice, *k'ilu*, as if tomorrow it could be gone, then what?

We might find that it comes back to Ha Lachma Anya, which begins with the words: Let all who are hungry come and eat. And ends with the words: This year we are slaves, but next year we will be free.

So some commentators ask: how? How will we become free next year? And they point to that first line. They teach that by opening our doors, by noticing that there is a person before us that is lacking in a primary need, by caring for them, by not looking away, that is how we will become free, whether it is hungry for food or hungry for liberty. Commentators draw on a Talmudic text from Baba Batra, that states: גְּדוּלָה צְדָקָה שְׂמֵקֶרֶת אֶת הַגְּאוּלָּה. Great is righteous giving because it hastens redemption. That by tending to the need for another to be redeemed from their aching, to be free, we hasten the end of exile.

Which is to say: we are as free as our ability to help others become free.

Anne Applebaum, a journalist and historian, wrote this week about how dictators will often muse about how the people don't really want the burden of freedom and all its trappings. She quoted Mussolini, who once said: "the truth is that men are tired of liberty." Tyrants like pharaoh will often, in their desire for unchecked power, try to chip away at, or bulldoze over, the people's freedom. So when we land on Passover, it's helpful to remember that our seder is not just a night of storytelling and memory. The seder is meant to be an action on us, to remind us that freedom must be vigilantly guarded against those who would benefit from our having less of it. Ha Lachma Anya teaches us that providing it for those who are being denied it is both our obligation as well as the key to our own.

So how might we allow the seder to act on us? Well, the seder is an extraordinary and creative space. When we taste the *maror*, the bitterness, we could invite everyone to get out their phones and donate to an organization that can make someone else's life less bitter. At the breaking of the matzah, recalling the breaking of a spirit, you could make a collective phone call right there, at the table, to your elected official and ask them to protect a person or a law that has been broken. At the Four Children, write a shared letter or poem and put it up on social media - all over - and make sure everyone knows the story of some child or parent who is not free but who needs to be freed. Or protected. Or rescued. Or at Dayenu, decide to march with CBE for democracy - because it is enough already. Or make colorful and hopeful signs between the gefilte fish course and the chopped liver and when you open the door for Elijah, go stand outside with your sign for awhile and sing of redemption and talk to the people who walk by about the freedom that you are determined to hasten. For ourselves and for others.

We can make our seder tables an organizing hall. A clandestine gathering held when it wasn't always safe to seder. A revival tent. A strategy session. A history lesson. A future imagination. Make it a town hall. Make it a warm and loving meditative space. With breath and signs of spring's endurance. Make it full of hope and grit and also laughter and joy and creative ideas about how you, how we, might help someone else get a little more free before it ends.

I know that we don't always know just what to do or how to do it. And being responsible for ensuring that we and others are free next year, is a lot.

This week, we read parshat Tzav and we find Aaron being deputized as High Priest. He will have to lead now. He's the guy. And he stands there while Moses sprinkles him with blood and oil and places on his shoulders the weight of the priestly vestments. And we can imagine that Aaron is standing there, trepidatious at best. The last time he tried to lead, he built a golden calf. He doesn't know what to do. Or how to do it. But he has been tapped for leadership. And so, with his hands shaking, he breathes deeply through the ritual. The people need him, so even not knowing if he will succeed, he accepts the mantle of leadership.

As Passover rolls in tomorrow night, through the rituals of the seder, may we also find that we have been tapped for leadership. And even though we may not know exactly what to do or how to do it, and our hands may tremble under the weight of it, may the seder move us. Lift us toward action, toward being the leader that each of us is called to be. And may we protect our

fragile freedom, for us, for others, and for future generations, that we and those who need us most can live as *b'nei chorin*, as free people, this year and next. Shabbat shalom and Chag Sameach.