

Telling the Story of True Liberation

Parashat Tzav/Passover

Evan Traylor, CBE Rabbinic Intern

April 12, 2025

Shabbat Shalom! We are just a few hours away from beginning our Passover celebrations, marking our people's journey from oppression in Mitzrayim, literally the "narrow-place", to liberation in a land flowing with milk and honey. At the center of our seders this weekend will be the *maggid*, the telling of this story that has for many Jews become the central story of our people and our tradition. It is the story that we tell year after year after year. We accompany this story with symbols and rituals of all kinds to bring the story to life so that we feel like we are not only telling the story, but that we are actually living it out.

Mishnah Pesachim makes this clear: “Bechol dor v’dor...In each and every generation a person must view themselves as though they personally left Egypt, as it is stated: “And you shall tell your child on that day, saying: It is because of this which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:8).¹ Everything we do at the seder is to try to make us feel like we were actually there! It’s not enough for us to talk about the tears of our ancestors, we must taste salt water like we ourselves are crying! We can’t just imagine the bitterness that Pharaoh treated our ancestors with, we ourselves must taste that bitterness! And we can’t only think about the mortar that our ancestors used to build tall palaces and pyramids to Pharaoh, we have to recreate our own mortar - through tasty chopped up apples and nuts. The telling of the story is supposed to be more than just a telling - it’s supposed to bring us into the story ourselves.

¹ Mishnah Pesachim 10

And yet, the text of the story is important. Now, if you've already been preparing to lead your seder, or if you remember from previous years, you'll know that the story in the haggadah, no matter what version you use, is not the plain text from Torah. Within the haggadah is a telling of the text from Exodus. We read about several influential rabbis, sitting around together hundreds of years later, remembering the story and telling it to their students. So already, we're getting a second-hand account of the Exodus story from these rabbis. It's lifting up the parts of the story that they think are the most important, the components that most fully express our values. Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (z"l) wrote that, "To be a Jew is to know that the task of memory is more important than history." Memory is more important than history. Much has been written about the historicity of the Exodus story, considering whether or not each of the events of our story "actually happened." And there is much to be explored there! But this morning, I'd like to suggest that instead of picking apart each and every line of the Exodus story, that we focus on the overall arc of this epic story.

Karen Armstrong, the British author of many books on comparative religion, notes that, “We are meaning-seeking creatures. A myth, therefore, is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information. If, however, it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed.” For Armstrong, the term “myth” is not derogatory, comparing myth with fact. A myth is merely a deeply held story that helps groups of people communicate their values. The historical facts come second with myths because the values and beliefs are at the forefront. This distinction is perhaps made clear by this quote from the Jewish social justice activist, Leibel Fine, who said that “I don’t know if Sinai happened, but I know that I was there!” And so it is with our Haggadah. Through the story that we will tell this weekend, gathered around our seder tables, we are to tell it as if we were there! And through that telling, we are expressing our gratitude for having escaped Egypt; we’re expressing the imperative to welcome the stranger; and we’re expressing our unwavering belief that we shall overcome, someday, somehow, no matter the obstacle.

Despite the words of our story not changing, the telling of the story is different year after year because we are different, the world is different, each and every year. And maybe this year in particular, it feels as though so, so much has changed since we told this epic story just one year ago:

One year ago, we had not yet witnessed all the drama and turmoil of the United States Presidential election.

One year ago, although the war in Gaza was raging onward, we had not yet welcomed home many of the hostages, or known about the status of the Bibas family, or learned the tragic story of Hersh Goldberg-Polin being killed.

One year ago, many more Palestinians were alive, even amidst dire circumstances in Gaza.

And one year ago, we had not yet known, although many predicted, the extent to which the current administration would utterly and dangerously disrupt our lives.

Alongside the shifts in our world, we are different than one year ago. We have started new jobs and found new passions; we have lost loved ones and gained loved ones; we have experienced any number of things that will make the telling of the Passover story this year different for us and for the people gathered around our seder table. And so the question for us this morning and for the next week of Passover is what is the story that we will tell ourselves and our loved ones about this time in the history of the world?

We could, we could, tell the story of Mitzrayim, of the “narrow-place.” In the beginning of our Passover story, Pharaoh claims that the Israelites had grown too numerous and that they might ally themselves with other nations against Egypt. Therefore, they must be destroyed. This fear-based myth expresses the values of Pharaoh and Egypt at the time - fear and scarcity of the unknown leading to domination at all costs. There is a similar story being spread today, that we have much to fear from immigrants seeking a better life here, or that we are made weaker from diversity, equity, and inclusion, or that many individuals must suffer to support the few. So yes, we could tell this story, this myth, that certainly expresses the values of a part of our country. But we would do so with the Mitzrayim mindset, the narrow-place dictating the story.

But we could also tell a different story. We could tell the story of a people and a place that passionately welcomes and defends immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, exactly because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. We could tell the story of a people and a place that knows that diversity in all its forms makes us stronger, because we know that an erev rav, a mixed multitude of people, went out of Egypt alongside the Israelites. We could tell the story of a people and place that understands that all of us deserve a life of dignity, because we know the difference between the degradation of enslavement in Egypt and the liberation that comes with the Promised Land. We can tell a different story. And perhaps the telling of that story can start with us, each of us, with our loved ones, tonight and throughout the week, telling the story again - but this time with new eyes, new ears, new minds, and new hearts.

I'll close this morning with the words of political philosopher Michael Walzer: "Standing on the parted shores, we still believe what we were taught before ever we stood at Sinai's foot; that where we go, it is eternally Egypt; that there is a better place, a promised land; that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness. That there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together."

May our telling of the story inspire us to keep marching, all together, hand in hand, until we reach that sacred, shining, beautiful Promised Land. B'shana habaah b'yerushalim. Next year, in Jerusalem. Chag sameach and Shabbat Shalom!

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it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed.” For Armstrong, the term “myth” is not derogatory, comparing myth with fact. A myth is merely a deeply held story that helps groups of people communicate their values. The historical facts come second with myths because the values and beliefs are at the forefront. This distinction is perhaps made clear by this quote from the Jewish social justice activist, Leibel Fine, who said that “I don’t know if Sinai happened, but I know that I was there!” And so it is with our Haggadah. Through the story that we will tell this weekend, gathered around our seder tables, we are to tell it as if we were there! And through that telling, we are expressing our gratitude for having escaped Egypt; we’re expressing the imperative to welcome the stranger; and we’re expressing our unwavering belief that we shall overcome, someday, somehow, no matter the obstacle.

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Tell the Story Haggadah, The Telling

We tell the story as if we ourselves were redeemed, not only our ancestors

“I don’t know if sinai was real, but i know i was there.” - Leibel Fine

We are meaning-seeking creatures. A myth, therefore, is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information. If, however, it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed. - Karen Armstrong

“To be a Jew is to know that the task of memory is more important than history.” - Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

It is through myths and stories that we communicate our values. And so through our Haggadah, we are communicating our gratitude for having escaped Egypt; we’re expressing the importance of welcoming the stranger; and we’re expressing our unwavering belief that we shall overcome, no matter the obstacle.

And so what story will we tell about this time in this history of the world?

Will we...

So yes, we could tell the story of...

But we could also tell the story of...

Start of the maggid, we are here, next year in Jerusalem.

It’s not enough for us to talk about the tears of our ancestors, we must taste salt water! We can’t just imagine the bitterness that Pharoah treated our ancestors with, we ourselves must taste that bitterness! And we can’t only think about the mortar that our ancestors used to build tall palaces and pyramids to Pharoah, we have to