

There is a custom that on the Shabbat afternoon preceding the Pesach seder, Jews are to read the Hagadah. According to the Code of Jewish Law (Orach Chayim 430), the purpose is to familiarize ourselves with the story of Pesach—the story of our liberation and commitment to serving as *avdei Adonai*—God’s servants—as we prepare for the Pesach feast. So, in fact, we read the Hagadah and tell the Pesach story three times: First on the Shabbat before seder, and then once during each seder night.

Our Jewish tradition loves rituals; we especially love rituals of preparation. We spend weeks getting ready for Pesach: Immediately following Purim, there are four special Shabbat *parshiyot*—four Torah portions—to help us prepare for Pesach. The Shabbat prior to the seder was one of two Friday nights where a rabbi would teach about the laws of cleaning for Pesach. We clean the chametz—the leavening from every crevice of our homes—and take a feather the night before seder in a ritual search for the final leavened crumbs called *b’dikat chametz*, immediately followed by *biyur chametz* where those crumbs are burned. We go as far as to “sell” our chametz so as to rid our homes from any leavened impurity during the festival. All this before we set the seder table and chant the four questions.

Why? Why go through so much painstaking work even before the ritual begins?

If we return to the verses of Exodus in the moments before our people cross the sea *mignut l’shevach*—from slavery to liberation—we find our answer. You may recall that the Israelites have fled Egypt. Pharaoh—who had said they were free to go—changed his mind yet again and sent his vast army after them.

The people are terrified. Woven into this moment of terror—the sea before them, Pharaoh’s brutal army behind them, quickly approaching—is a brief conversation that reveals the *ikar*—the essence—of our question. Torah reads:

וּפְרָעָה הַקְּרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲגָה מִצְרַיִם | נֹסַע אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּרְאוּ מֵאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה:

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Eternal.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הַמִּבְּלִי אֵיךְ־קָבְרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתֶּנּוּ לְמוֹת בְּמִדְבָּר מֵה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם:

They said to Moses, “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?”

הֲלֹא־נֶחַדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ בְּמִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר תִּתֵּן לָנוּ מִצְרַיִם וְנַעֲבֹדָה אֶת־מִצְרַיִם כִּי טוֹב לָנוּ עֲבֹד אֶת־מִצְרַיִם מִמָּוְתוֹ בְּמִדְבָּר:

Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’”

This is the moment that Rabbi Benay Lappe describes as the “crash moment.” Every story, she teaches, has a crash moment. A moment of interruption and disruption—in which everything we thought was true, everything we believed about ourselves and the universe, is suddenly—in the words of the Purim story—*vanafochu*—turned upside down.

You know what I’m talking about, right? We’ve all had a crash moment. Being fired from a job. Coming out when we and our families had a different vision for us. Marrying the person we thought was the one only to find out they weren’t. Facing the death of a beloved companion.

For the Israelites fleeing Egyptian bondage, they confronted the terror of the crash of liberation with pointed intensity. *Did you bring us out of Egypt to die?* They were so terrified of the future, of the unknown, of what their lives might look like, they were willing to return to slavery.

As Lesli Koppelman Ross notes, “Slavery does offer a certain freedom that can be attractive: the freedom from responsibility for yourself and others, the freedom from having to establish goals, figure out how to reach them, or think beyond the moment. It takes strength and guts to walk out of a known situation, which for all its pain, is predictable. It is human nature to want to stay put within the stability of the status quo. The danger is that often in those situations you don’t even know that you are mired in a negative situation, one you don’t realize until too late.” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/self-liberation/>

But God and Moshe refused to allow our ancestors to get stuck; they refused to let them die in the muck and the mud of Egypt and they made them realize it before it was too late. They refused to let this epic moment of disruption be the final moment of the story. They demanded the crash yield forward motion.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם אֶל-תִּירְאוּ הֶתִּירְאוּ הֶתִּיַצְבוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת-יְשׁוּעַת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲשַׁר רְאִיתֶם אֶת-מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם לֹא תִסְּפוּ לְרַאתֶם עוֹד עַד-עוֹלָם:

But Moses said to the people, “Have no fear! Stand by and witness the deliverance which God will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again.

Al tirah-u. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. I am here in your terror and I am here in your liberation. In this moment, we are one.

Al tirah-u. When I hear these words today, I hear stories about the Syrians fleeing in lifeboats finally started to get reported, many people asked somewhat incredulously, “Why on earth are these parents risking putting themselves and their babies in such flimsy rafts?” You could feel the judgment in every word. No good parent would ever do such a thing.

But one parent whose name is lost to history shared her stunning bravery. “You only place your baby in the water when the land is too dangerous to survive.”

We know that story, you and I. That’s our story, too. The story of Moshe’s parents who placed their Jewish son in a wicker basket and sent him floating in the Nile. Why did they do that? What kind of parent does that? The kind of parent who knows that Pharaoh will murder Jewish

baby boys and the kind of parent who knows that the water is his only chance for survival. The kind of parent fleeing violence on the land who knows their child's only chance at a future is to courageously step into the water.

I began tonight by asking the question of why all these rituals of preparation for seder: Why prepare with ritual and story and more ritual and more story to tell the ultimate story of our fear and our hope, our enslavement and our liberation?

Why?

We prepare ourselves in small bites—literally, one ritual morsel at a time—in order to metabolize the greatness, the awesomeness, the terror of freedom. We need to do the deep spiritual work to move from seeing ourselves as *avadim hayinu*—that we were slaves—to *advai Adonai*—servants of the Holy. The Hebrew word is almost the same; one is enslaved, one serves the Divine. But the experience and our place in holding the letters, from where we tell the story, is transformed. We are no longer enslaved. Thank God.

The seder ritual was designed to inspire ritual empathy—that we remember in our bones the experience of our bound ancestors and we cry their cries for freedom. That we understand the peril and the risks others take in pursuit of freedom today. The seder is a theological mandate, a demand that we look to our fellow humans who are enslaved—actually enslaved today—and demand their freedom.

The preparation for Pesach isn't about some precious notion of piety. If we clean our homes of leaven but we do not cry out for the enslaved, if we do not demand the release of all who are enslaved, it is not sufficient! If we read the Hagadah and tell the story of our ancient liberation and are not compelled to challenge the systems of oppression that seek to obliterate the humanity of our neighbors who are truly enslaved, then the seder is nothing more than a quaint anachronism for a family get together, where the story goes on too long and the over-salted soup is too cold.

The preparation work we do for Pesach is to open our hearts, to exercise the spiritual commitment, the moral call to do the work of God's service: to let all who are hungry come and eat! To cry out like our bound ancestors until God wakes up and we wake each other up to liberate every enslaved human on the planet!

We prepare, slowly, over weeks, with rituals, so that we can embody the intense moment of the crash of our ancestors: When the world of slavery we knew must end and the future of freedom is before us and all we have is God, each other, and a commitment to Divine service.

I pray that your preparation for Pesach is robust and unsettling. I pray cleaning inspires us to cry out and march for freedom. I pray that our sederim are beautiful and compelling and inspiring and uncomfortable. May every creature on the planet know true liberation. A zissen Pesach.