

One of my favorite moments in the seder is the Haggadah's demand that each of us see ourselves as though we have been redeemed from Egypt, which I see as a kind of personal litmus test. Is this a year of *tzuris*, in which Pesach calls me to see myself as already redeemed, envisioning hope, change, and possibility? Or do I sit at the seder feeling content, blessed, and satisfied, needing a reminder that once I was enslaved in Egypt, and having been redeemed, I'm now obligated to be empathic, humble, and engaged in the work of redeeming others? Indeed, each year, and within each person around the table, the Haggadah resounds differently. Do we feel newly liberated, or do we yet yearn for redemption from pain, suffering or loss? Do we embody new selves, or are we still enslaved to old patterns?

Collectively too, Pesach's message changes over time. When Jews have been oppressed, we have told the Exodus story as an affirmation of faith in our own future freedom: just as God freed our ancestors, so one day will God redeem us. In times of external freedom and prosperity for Jews, we may have turned inward, working on our collective *midot* (character traits), ridding ourselves of characterological *hametz*. Or we may have moved outward, broadening our perspective and mining our story as a model for a more universal redemption, examining our role in helping other peoples move toward freedom.

Of course, whether as individuals or as a people, it is never either/or -- we're never limited to only one perspective or meaning. At the same time, different times and circumstances may demand a shift in focus or a particular emphasis.

This year, it strikes me that the Pesach story challenges us -- as American Jews, and as Jews invested in the health and future of our beloved Israel -- to understand the redemption from slavery as a continual process, rather than as an event. As an initial matter, yes, freedom is won at a particular point in time, be it 1776 or 1948. But ever after, freedom must be continually re-attained, lest it be lost. Every moment of every day -- in ways large and small, individually and collectively -- we make choices that either claim or forfeit, enlarge or constrict, our freedom.

In a sense, every deed and word reflects such a choice. But the seder highlights some very particular actions and ways of being as freedom-enhancing choices.

**We delay our meal.** This teaches that if we do not learn to consciously control our impulses and animal desires, we will become enslaved to them. At the seder, we delay physical gratification for the purpose of experiencing spiritual, intellectual and moral edification and elevation; we consciously bracket certain needs -- real and pressing though they are -- in order to address higher values. Free people are capable of doing that. Choices that weaken our impulse control, or that yield to emotional reactivity rather than nurturing mature reflection, move us toward slavery.

**We eat *lechem oni* (the bread of affliction, the poor person's bread).** This teaches us that it is worth risking physical comfort and security to obtain freedom, and that one who sacrifices freedom for material comfort or a feeling of safety makes a poor bargain. The seder is of course a celebration, but it is also a reminder of the anxiety, challenge, risk and loss involved in becoming and staying free. Choosing safety or wealth over freedom easily moves us back to slavery.

**We tell our story aloud.** This teaches that words have the power to redeem or enslave. Whenever we use the gift of speech to heal, to create, to reveal truth, to connect, to increase understanding, to open dialogue, we reclaim freedom. Every time we tolerate - or God-forbid speak - words that cause harm, that are false, that sow hatred, that limit possibility, that cloud

vision and insight, that close off discussion - we are a step closer to slavery.

**We welcome all who are hungry, and four types of children, to share our seder table.** This teaches that freedom demands openness -- in two primary respects. One is the openness of generosity, sharing the fruits of our labors, and the bounty of our blessings. Hoarding our gifts and possessions eventually enslaves us to them. The other is openness to difference -- hearing and valuing people with differing perspectives, beliefs and worldviews; differing abilities, talents and limitations; differing character traits, personalities and needs. Hunkering down only with people like ourselves -- who look and sound just like us, and who confirm what we already know, think, or believe -- limits our capacity to grow and makes us smaller, eventually enslaving us in isolationism and solipsism.

These are just a few examples. I encourage and invite you to discuss at your seder tables what the Haggadah and the rituals of Pesach teach us about the principles, values, character traits, and behaviors necessary not only to obtain but to retain freedom. How do those lessons play out in our world today?