

Last year, the Conservative movement gave people permission to eat kitniyot on Passover. Soon after this was announced, a friend called me with a question about her toddler, who has a deep and abiding love for hummus - as in, he eats it by the bowlful. She wanted to know: how could she legitimately serve rice and beans and not serve hummus?. I asked why she wouldn't want to give her son his favorite food. Because, she replied, then he might enjoy the holiday too much. Isn't this holiday all about suffering?

We can all relate to that sentiment, I'm sure; some of us remember the drudgery of an all-Hebrew seder dragging past midnight into the wee hours of the morning; others hate matzah with a deep passion; and still others just find it daunting to clean their homes. Regardless of the reason, our people's collective psyche has plenty of unhappy memories of Passover, so it is no surprise that the average Jew's perspective would be that the focus of Passover is to suffer. After all, we were slaves in Egypt, right?

But that unintended message could not be further from the goal of this holiday. True, joy is not commanded on Passover the way that it is for Sukkot; however, celebration, praise, and exaltation are. The Haggadah instructs us to lift our cup of wine and say,

לְפִיכֶן אֲנַחְנוּ חַיִּיבִים לְהוֹדוֹת, לְהַלֵּל, לְשַׁבַּח, לְפַאֵר, לְרוֹמֵם, לְהַדָּר, לְבָרֵךְ, לְעֵלֶה וּלְקַלֵּס  
 לְמִי שְׁעָשָׂה לְאַבּוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ אֶת-כָּל-הַנִּסִּים הָאֵלֶּיךָ: הוֹצֵיאָנוּ מֵעֲבָדוֹת לְחֵירוֹת מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה,  
 וּמֵאֵבֶל לְיוֹם טוֹב, וּמֵאִפְלָה לְאוֹר גְּדוֹל, וּמִשְׁעָבוֹד לְגִאֲלָה. וְנֹאמֵר לְפָנָיו שִׁירָה חֲדָשָׁה:  
 הַלְלוּיָהּ.

Therefore we are obligated to thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt, lavish, bless, raise high, and acclaim He who made all these miracles for our ancestors and for us: He brought us out from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to [celebration of] a festival, from darkness to great light, and from servitude to redemption. And let us say a new song before Him, Halleluyah!

Partially, the disconnect is because Passover's positive message is one of anticipation and hope - future joy - rather than a recognition of anything yet realized. Both the Daat Zkenim and Chizkuni comment on Deuteronomy 16 that the word "joy" is used in connection with the holiday of Sukkot three times, once with the holiday of Shavuot, and not at all with Pesach. The logic behind this comes from the agricultural year: by Sukkot, the harvest has been fully brought in and it is a joyous time of plenty, and on Shavuot, the barley and wheat harvest has been brought in, so there was partial rejoicing. But on Pesach, no part of the harvest had been collected yet, so any rejoicing would have been presumptuous.

This moment of anticipation and hope is a major theme of Pesach. We are commanded to remember that WE were slaves in Egypt - not our ancestors but US. In that moment when we left Egypt, what were we feeling? Certainly the moment can be described as joyous was the feeling of standing on the other side of the Red Sea, no longer being chased by the Egyptians. But that simultaneous exhale from 600,000 sets of lungs was not joy at any newfound sense of freedom - in all likelihood, the most prevalent emotion was relief that we were no longer fleeing for our lives. And wrapped around that feeling were layers of anxiety, anticipation, curiosity, and hope - a deep fear of the unknown future that Moses and God were promising, along with a

healthy dose of skepticism and caution that there was a good life of freedom to be had outside of Goshen.

It is only with the hindsight that comes from being many generations removed that we can even contemplate equating the holiday with the feeling of suffering. Consider this, from Mordechai Eliav in “*Ani Ma’amin.*”

The Winter of 5605 [1945] was a difficult one in the Feihingen concentration camp in Germany. We suffered from arduous labor in the stone quarries, cold, and hunger; as well as an epidemic of typhus which killed many. To those who died of typhus were added the victims of the cruel murders of the SS men. The result was despair and apathy and indifference to our fate.

But in this death camp there were some who stubbornly held fast to their Judaism until the last moment. Passover was coming. How does one refrain from eating *hametz*? A few days before *Pesab* ... I received fifteen kilos of flour. When I got the flour to the foundry I told my friends of the miracle – and it is impossible to describe their joy. The will to live which was almost extinguished, was kindled anew.

On the night of the first *seder* we gathered in the foundry as the marranos did in ancient Spain. We started awesomely. “We were slaves.” Each of us had three *matzot*. In place of wine we used water sweetened with sugar. We had potatoes for *karpas*, and white beets for *maror*. Salt and water were not in short supply. We recited the Haggadah from some *siddurim* which we had succeeded in hiding all this time.

Despite its setting, this is a story of awe, ingenuity and miracle - not of suffering. A generation after the Holocaust, would anyone consider commemorating Yom HaShoah by inflicting hard labor on their children? Surely not. Does that negate the devastating effects of the Holocaust? No. It merely speaks to the cautious optimism

and sense of relief one might have felt upon being liberated from the camps. Just as survivors would not commemorate their liberation and ensure future generations remember by forcing suffering, neither do we encourage suffering for Passover.

When we talk about making the holiday of Pesach a holiday that recalls only that we were slaves in Egypt and not that God brought us out with an outstretched arm and a mighty hand, we are highlighting our privilege. Had we experienced liberation and redemption first hand, we'd be more confident in our telling of the story. Let us notice that in traditional siddurim, one of the first blessings we say upon rising in the morning is *בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. שְׁלֵא עֲשֵׂנִי עֶבֶד*: Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who did not make me a slave. If we truly understand the suffering of being a slave, we would not wish it on anyone.

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Traditionally, congregants only heard from their rabbi twice a year - once this Shabbat and once on Shabbat Shuva. The importance of these two Shabbatot was enough to bring even reticent shul-goers out to hear the sermon. Shabbat Hagadol became known as a time when the rabbi would deliver an extensive sermon, teaching often late into the afternoon. The *Sefer Shibolei Haleket*<sup>1</sup> explains: “On the Sabbath before Passover the people stay late into the afternoon ... in order to hear the sermon expounding upon the laws of removing leaven ... and it goes on, and the people do not return home until it is over ... and due to this length, the day seems greater and longer to the people than other days, and therefore they refer to this Sabbath as the Great Sabbath”.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Zedekiah b. Abraham Harof Anav, Italy, 1210 - 1275

<< I'm sure you all agree that an incredibly long sermon is cause for celebration. >>

While I have no intention of teaching into the afternoon, it is worth recalling four (4) pseudo-halachic principles as we prepare for Passover. Rather than reminding you what is and is not kosher for Passover (because I assume you know or have already asked), I want to highlight a few leniencies that might make your holiday a bit more joyous. Year after year, these are the principles that I strive to remember, because the tendency to equate Passover with suffering is strong and hard to counteract.

1. Dust is not chametz. Yes, if a curious observer came into our home the week before Passover, they might wonder why we're rotating the mattress and changing the air filter. But these twice-yearly chores are on our calendar for Pesach and Rosh Hashanah because those are easy times to remember, not because they are required for the observance of the holiday. It is just as easy to remember, and perhaps less stressful, to put off these chores until after the holiday is over. Clean out your fridge to get rid of chametz, yes. Sweep out the dusty corners of your closets? Only if you want to - and have somehow finagled invitations to someone else's house for both Seders.
2. "When do we eat?" is not one of the four questions. The order of the seder puts Kadesh (wine) first and Karpas (dipping veggies) almost next for a reason. This is a festive meal - start eating! Only slaves wait and wait and wait for their meals. Free people eat as soon as they've thanked God for the food. Once we've said the blessing over vegetables that grow in the ground, it's time to pass

the platter of veggies and creative dips. Asparagus with garlic aioli, baked potatoes and sour cream, french fries and ketchup, and if you're eating kitniyot, carrots and hummus (spoon optional) - the options are endless. We're all much more interested in the foundational story of our People's narrative when we aren't hearing our stomachs growling.

3. The word "seder" means "order," not "table." We've all spent too many sedarim stiffly sitting in a narrow chair at a squished table, reclining into someone else's plate when leaning left. Pillows, couches, cushions, blankets, and bean bags are all great stand-ins for those dreaded folding chairs. My family's goal this year is not to sit around the table until the shulhan orekh, the festive meal, when it would seem like the antithesis of freedom to not let people eat at the table.
  
4. In general, our sages, both ancient and modern, are clear that the mitzvot of Passover cannot be fulfilled until nighttime, which here in Boston is fairly late this time of year. At the same time, the Torah is clear that we must teach our children the story of the Exodus, and the Talmud makes it a point to say that we need to make the seders interesting for our kids. So what happens when the two values conflict? Obviously including our children in a seder that starts after dark is ideal. But for those of us with toddlers or other human beings who turn into a giant flailing pile of tears if they stay up past their bedtime, there is some<sup>2</sup> halachic weight to argue in favor of starting early. For anyone who wants to have that conversation, I'm happy to share some sources. For everyone else,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.halakhah.org/2009/03/starting-seder-early.html>

let's all promise to have a little extra patience with one another on the mornings after.

When the rabbis of yore spent all afternoon of Shabbat HaGadol teaching the intricacies of Pesach kashrut, I assume they were doing it to ease anxieties and make the holiday a bit smoother and easier. We need not make things harder than they need to be.

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I want to close by sharing an article that I reread every spring. It is called “The Stories That Bind Us”<sup>3</sup> and was published in the NY Times in 2013. Research has demonstrated that the most resilient children are the ones that tend to know the most about their family’s history. Researchers developed a “Do You Know?” scale that asked kids 20 questions.

Examples included: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know the story of your birth?

....

The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.

Their research concluded two months before Sept. 11, 2001. When national tragedy struck, they went back to the families that they had interviewed and reassessed how

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html>

they were doing. The children who knew most about their family's history continued to prove to be more resilient and able to handle stress.

The article highlights that psychologists have found that every family has a unifying narrative - and those narratives take one of three shapes: ascending, descending, and oscillating. The ascending family narrative says, "we came from nothing, we worked hard, and look at what we accomplished." The descending narrative roughly states, "we used to have it all and then we lost everything." And the healthiest narrative - the oscillating family narrative - tells of families that have had ups and downs, advances and setbacks, but who, through it all, stuck together as a family.

THAT is the story of the Jewish people. We were slaves in Egypt and then we were free. We were given the Torah but we messed up and built the Golden Calf. We suffered and overcame; we were persecuted but survived; we complained a lot and persevered. Our narrative oscillates from the very beginning through today - and it wasn't easy, but through it all, we have stuck together as a People.

When we all sit down for seder on Monday night - whether early or on time, sitting around a table or on a couch, in a spotless or dusty home - keep this in mind: more than any other time during the year, Jews around the world are doing the exact same thing together. We were slaves and now we are free to celebrate our People, our shared history, and our redemption.

Shabbat Shalom.



## SOURCES

**Daat Zkenim - Deut. 16:18**

והיית אך שמחה. אתה מוצא כתיב שלש שמחות בחג הסוכות. ושמחת בחגך. אך שמח. ושמחת לפני ה' אלהיך דכתיב בפרשת אמור אל הכהנים וגבי שבועות לא כתיב אלא חדא ושמחת לפני ה' אלהיך. וגבי פסח לא כתיב שמחה כלל לפי שבפסח עדיין לא נלקטו התבואות ולא פירות האילן. ובחג השבועות כבר נלקטו התבואות ואיכא חדא שמחה ולא יותר כי עדיין לא נלקטו פירות האילן וגם התבואות לתוך הבית אבל בחג הסוכות שלקטו התבואות ופירות האילן וגם הכל נאסף לתוך הבית אז השמחה היא שלימה לכך כתיב ביה שלש שמחות:

“you shall have nothing but joy.” When discussing the festival of Sukkot, the Torah uses the expression “joy,” three separate times, twice here and once in **Leviticus 23:40** The word שמחה occurs only once in connection with the festival of Sh’vuot, and not at all in connection with the festival of Passover. Seeing that at Passover time no part of the harvest had been collected yet the time had not come to rejoice over the harvest. By the time of Sh’vuot the barley and wheat harvest had been collected, so that there was partial rejoicing. Sukkot signaled the end of the harvesting season, so that at that time the farmer’s heart was full of joy. This is reflected in the Torah using the word “joy” three times in connection with that festival.

**Chizkuni Deuteronomy 16:15**

ושמחת בחגך למעלה בשבועות שמחה לפי שהוא זמן קציר וזמן שמחה כדכתיב שמחו לפניך כשמחת בקציר, וכ”ש עכשיו בסוכות שאספו הכל מן השדה אבל בפסח לא הזכיר שמחה לפי שעקרו של חג להזכרת הנס של יציאת מצרים הוא ועדיין אין עקר שמחה לקנות תבואה, ועוד שנינו בד’ פרקים העולם נדון בפסח על התבואה ושמא יבא ברד או ארבה חסיל שדפון ירקון וילקה אותן. ושמחת בחגך, “you shall rejoice on your festival;” “rejoicing” has been mentioned already in connection with the festival of weeks (verse 11); The reason why it was mentioned there is that it is the period of harvesting a major part of the grain harvest. (**Isaiah 9:2**) At the time of Sukkot, such joy is increased greatly as everything that the fields and orchards produce is now being gathered in. Joy is not mentioned in connection with Passover as the season of ingathering produce has not yet started. Furthermore” we have been taught in the Mishnah Rosh hashanah 16,1 that one of the four days on which the world is being judged concerning the produce for the coming year is Passover. In other words, the fate of the harvest still hangs in the balance, and it would be premature to rejoice therefore.

**פסחים קח:**

ת”ר הכל חייבין בארבעה כוסות הללו אחד אנשים ואחד נשים ואחד תינוקות א”ר יהודה וכי מה תועלת יש לתינוקות ביין אלא מחלקין להן קליות ואגוזין בערב פסח כדי שלא ישנו וישאלו אמרו עליו על רבי עקיבא שהיה מחלק קליות ואגוזין לתינוקות בערב פסח כדי שלא ישנו וישאלו תניא רבי אליעזר אומר חוטפין מצות בלילי פסחים בשביל תינוקות שלא ישנו תניא אמרו עליו על ר’ עקיבא מימיו לא אמר הגיע עת לעמוד בבהמ”ד חוץ מערבי פסחים וערב יום הכפורים בע”פ בשביל תינוקות כדי שלא ישנו וערב יוה”כ כדי שיאכילו את בניהם

**Pesachim 108b**

...Our Rabbis taught: All are bound to [drink] the four cups, men, women, and children. Said R.Judah: Of what benefit then is wine to children? But we distribute to them parched ears of corn and nuts on the eve of Passover, so that they should not fall asleep, and ask [the ‘questions’]. It was related of R. Akiba that he used to distribute parched ears and nuts to children on the eve of Passover, so that they might not fall asleep but ask [the ‘questions’]. It was taught, R.Eliezer said: The mazzoth are eaten hastily on the night of Passover, on account of the children, so that they should not fall asleep. It was taught: it was related of R. Akiba [that] never did he say in the Beth Hamidrash, ‘It is time to rise [cease study]’, except on the eve of Passover and the eve of the Day of Atonement. On the eve of Passover, because of the children, so that they might not fall asleep. On the eve of the Day of atonement, in order that they should give food to their children

**הגדה של פסח ה'פי"ז**

(פז) בכל-דור ודור תיב אדם לראות את-עצמו כאלו הוא יצא ממצרים, שנאמר: והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר, בעבור זה עשה יי לי בצאתי ממצרים. לא את-אבותינו בלבד גאל הקדוש ברוך הוא, אלא אף אותנו גאל עמם, שנאמר: ואותנו הוציא משם, למען הביא אותנו, לתת לנו את-הארץ אשר נשבע לאבותינו.

**Pesach Haggadah 5:87**

(83) In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he left Egypt, as it is stated (Exodus 13:8); "For the sake of this, did the Lord do [this] for me in *my* going out of Egypt." Not only our ancestors did the Holy One, blessed be He, redeem, but rather also us [together] with them did he redeem, as it is stated (Deuteronomy 6:23); "And He took us out from there, in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He swore unto our fathers."