

6 QUICK INSIGHTS FOR YOUR PASSOVER SEDER



TRUE FREEDOM IS ABOUT GIVING

הא לחמא עניא

The Seder begins with the declaration “הא לחמא עניא” in which we invite anyone who does not have a Seder to join. Many commentators are puzzled as to why this seemingly purely ceremonious invitation is the introduction to the Seder. Surely we aren’t actually extending an invitation, since we say this declaration in the comfort of our homes where no one who is actually in need of a meal can hear us. So why is this “invitation” the introduction to the Passover Seder?

Passover is the holiday for celebrating freedom. True freedom requires a purpose. Freedom does not mean running around fulfilling your basest desires. On Passover we begin with an invitation to others to partake in the meal as reminder that true freedom requires responsibility, namely, the responsibility to give. The greatest expression of freedom is the ability to give and to assist others. The Passover meal begins with an invitation to those less fortunate - an important reminder of what true freedom entails.

There was once a man named Tommy, whose motto in life was “Tommy doesn’t give.” He was careful not to cause harm to others and would mind his own business, but he was insistent that he would never get involved in any philanthropic activities. Any time he was asked for a donation or request, he would simply respond, “Tommy doesn’t give.”

Tommy was once on a boating trip and as the water got more turbulent, he fell overboard. The captain on board reached out to pull Tommy back up. “Give me your hand,” he pleaded with Tommy.

The drowning man responded, “Tommy doesn’t give.”

Giving should not be viewed as a form of self-destruction; rather, true givers realize that the one who gives also receives. A truly free person looks at giving as a testament of independence rather than a frustrating burden.



WHY IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT?

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה

In many homes with young children, parents and siblings may feel a little overwhelmed when a kid comes back from school with a small tome of Torah ideas to say at the table. As the child lays out pages and pages of ideas from their teacher, parents silently sigh to themselves, “Do they really plan on reading all of that?”

Interestingly, Rav Kook explains that the whole point of the questions at the seder is not to **find answers** but rather to instill an excitement in a child for **the question itself**.

In fact, Rav Kook understands that the questions of נשתנה are not even for the standard child – they were created for the child who does not know how to ask (שאינו יודע לשאול). The Passover Hagaddah designed questions even for those can’t ask in order to give each child the firsthand experience of questioning.

Unlike answers, questions demonstrate the vast potential and possibilities that lie within Jewish learning. On Passover, we give each child a voice – not so much in order to facilitate the answers, but more to demonstrate the excitement and empowerment of questions.



LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT EMPOWERING OTHERS

ויוצאנו ה' ממצרים...
לא על ידי מלאך

Why isn’t Moses mentioned at the Passover Seder? The great Jewish leader who pleaded with Pharaoh for his people’s freedom, the leader who parted the sea when hope seemed lost, is nearly completely absent from the Passover story. Why isn’t he directly mentioned? Was he not invited to the Seder?

A chassid came to see his rabbi. “Rebbe, I had a dream that I was the leader of 300 chassidim. What should I do? Should I start my own chassidic sect?”

The rabbi replied: “Come back when three hundred chassidim have a dream that you are their leader.”

A great leader does not look for followers. The greatest wish of a true leader is to render himself superfluous. Leadership is not about demanding power from others, it is about empowering others.

A testament to the leadership of Moses is his absence from the Seder. He embodied the Jewish people and the continued existence of the Jewish people is a testament to his success. As a leader there was no need to mention him or give him lavish praise. Our greatest tribute to his success as a leader is by following the example of his character.



MAKING IT PERSONAL

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. That's why people are so careful to put their best foot forward and really make a case for their relevance and importance when you first meet them.

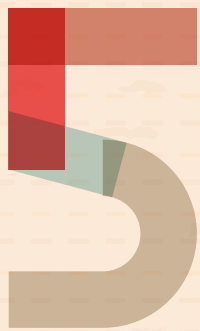
God, however, chose to introduce Himself to the Jewish people in a very curious way. The Torah (*Exodus* 20:2) records that at Mount Sinai, God introduced Himself by saying, "I am the Lord your God, Who took you out of the Land of Egypt."

Why didn't God make a better introduction? Redemption from Egypt was great, but isn't God's role as the Creator of the entire universe a little more relevant and impressive?

God, as always, knew better. While giving us the Torah at Mount Sinai, God revealed Himself as the God who "took you out of Egypt" and *not* the God who "created the world" in order to emphasize that Judaism is not about a cosmic deity, but rather it's about a personal relationship.

Yes, God's creation of the world is a crucial part of history, but the story of the Jewish people began with our redemption from Egypt.

God's introduction was a reminder that the most important part of our Judaism is making sure that it is personal. It's important to know there is *a* God, but on Passover we emphasize that He is *your* God.



RAPID TRANSFORMATION AND GRADUAL GROWTH

הוציאנו מעבדות לחרות מיגון לשמחה

No one likes rushing their work in a desperate effort to meet a deadline, but the Jewish people at their first Passover had to work against the clock.

As the Jewish people began preparing to leave Egypt, God specified that their Passover offering should be done as quickly as possible (*Exodus* 12:11). *Do it, but fast.*

In later years, however, the Talmud (*Pesachim* 96a) points out that it was no longer necessary to make the Passover offering in haste. *Take your time, get it right.*

Why didn't God insist that future Passover offerings should be prepared quickly, just as the original Passover offering was prepared quickly? If all the later laws of the Passover offering are based on the sacrifice they brought in Egypt, shouldn't the element of speed have been preserved as well?

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin explains that this distinction - the haste required for the first Passover offering in Egypt, but not required for future years' offerings - is a paradigm for how personal transformation unfolds.

Initially, when a person is inspired, they need to capitalize on their enthusiasm and act quickly. Our first Passover was our initiation into spiritual life and that type of transformation requires a fast pace to build momentum.

Long-lasting growth, however, needs a second stage as well. After the initial burst of inspiration, a person needs to go through a more gradual and reflective process to ensure that their growth is healthy and sustainable. This is the type of transformation that we experience during Passover of all future years. After experiencing the rapid initial transformation in Egypt, God reminds future generations that after the original burst of inspiration, growth must happen gradually.



THE UNIQUE TASTE OF EVERY ASPECT OF JUDAISM

כן עשה הלל ... היה כורך מצה ומרור ואוכל ביחד

History is filled with famous sandwiches, from the non-kosher Reuben to old-fashioned deli. At the Passover Seder, we highlight the "Hillel Sandwich," which is a combination of matzah and maror (bitter vegetable) wrapped together in a questionably delicious, but definitely kosher sandwich.

Interestingly, the Talmud debates whether this sandwich is advisable, since the taste of the matzah might blunt the taste of the maror. According to some opinions in the Talmud, there is a principle called אין מצות מבטלין זו את זו - the taste of one mitzvah should not temper the taste of another. Why then did Hillel recommend this sandwich? Why wasn't he concerned about this principle?

Hillel, it seems, wanted the taste of matzah and maror to blend together. Matzah is the bread we baked during redemption, whereas maror represents the bitterness of exile. For Hillel, it was important to realize that sometimes the tastes of exile and redemption can happen simultaneously.

Of course, we pray for a complete redemption from all affliction, both public and private, but Hillel invented his sandwich as a poignant reminder that exile or redemption is not always a binary choice. We need to accept that some redemptions may have traces of tears and we need to be able to discover a sense of freedom even within our exile.