Spin the Seder

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QUESTION TIME

"I have learned more from my students than from my teachers." (Talmud, Taanit 7a)

There are many ways that one may learn things from their children. What the Talmud is referring to is not that the student or child in question has an increased level of knowledge or awareness in a particular field. It is precisely through the mechanism of a student to teacher relationship that the teacher learns the most about education, the student and possibly even themselves.

on the Haggadah, he also remarks that the entire process is one of reflection, encouraging children or participants to question. The verse commands "vehigadata levincha" - one should reply to one's child, indicating that the manner of retelling the Passover story should be done through question and answer format.

In another essay, Rabbi Sacks stresses the centrality of reflection within Jewish pedagogy, noting how Passover's central purpose - of inculcating family, friends and

"ONE CAN LEARN FROM EVERYONE INSOFAR AS THE VERY ENCOUNTER ITSELF GIVES BIRTH TO OPPORTUNITIES TO REFLECT UPON OUR BEHAVIOUR."

Naturally, children and students are more skilled at practising various aspects of this process than adults. I remember seeing a study that on average a child asks seventy-five per cent more questions than an adult. I recall reading (and wasn't entirely surprised!) that a curious child asks as many as 73 questions every day! We often joke that our three-year old has a knack of asking us questions at the most inconvenient of times. An earnest challenge faced by every parent is to not smother this potent force, instead meeting each question with the same level of energy and wonder with which they are asked.

Rabbi Lord Sacks a'h makes a timeless observation: Education means teaching a child to be curious, to wonder, to reflect, to enquire. The child who asks becomes a partner in the learning process, an active recipient. To ask is to grow. In his commentary

students in the shared story of the Jewish people - is formalised by enacting and re-enacting this reflective process. This is the very essence of 'Maggid', which literally translates as 'telling over'. He contrasts this phenomenon with that of the value of questioning in other religions and cultures.

Most cultures traditionally see it as the task of a parent or teacher to instruct, guide or command. The task of the child is to obey. "Children should be seen, not heard," goes the old English proverb. "Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord," says a famous Christian text. Socrates, who spent his life teaching people to ask questions, was condemned by the citizens of Athens for corrupting the young. In Judaism, the opposite is the case. It is a religious duty to teach our children to ask questions. That is how they grow. (Sacks, the Necessity of Asking Questions, 2017).

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Rabbi Sacks is alluding to the practice that the Haggadah suggests that we should place peculiar items on the table during our Seder for the purpose of encouraging those present to question and seek answers to the Jewish narrative to gain a true and deep understanding of our history and destiny. By encouraging this, we are compelled to nurture and create an environment where children and adults are able to share in this experience.

The renowned 20th-century thinker and author Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe states that the Mishna which teaches "Who is wise? He who learns from everyone." (Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1) doesn't necessarily mean that each person can learn something from everyone they meet; such a notion is demonstrably and practically impossible! Rather, he explains that 'one can learn from everyone' insofar as the very encounter itself gives rise to opportunities to reflect upon our behaviour. There is an innate lesson in analysing our viewpoints and behaviour in each interaction and reflecting upon their shortcomings to learn how to act better in the future. Through this reflective process, we gain experience and build cognitive muscles. By adopting this process, we will succeed in turning all of our interactions into learning experiences. In a sense, we will preserve the childish sense of wonder in all its beauty.

WHY IS THIS YEAR DIFFERENT?

This year, many of us will have a good answer for the timeless Passover question, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" This night is different because I am worried about my loved ones. This night is different because I may not have all the family around the table with me for Seder. This night is different because I am alone.

How are we meant to navigate all the loneliness and uncertainty and not fall into the abyss of paranoia that has overridden our news outlets and radio stations, let alone our conversations with family and strangers alike?

As slaves in Egypt, the Children of Israel had to contend with many unbearable circumstances. According to the sages, the onset of the first of the ten plagues, the plague of blood, actually signified the end of more than two centuries of slavery. Those plagues then continued more or less uninterrupted for a whole year. As frogs emerged from the depths of the Nile, locusts swarmed Egyptian airspace, and mega-hailstones of ice and fire rained down from the heavens; the Jewish people stayed indoors. The double-miracle was that the Jewish people not only witnessed the destruction of their oppressors, but also in that the plagues did not affect them. They sat by their windows and looked out at the destruction of the world as they knew it. The reset button had been pressed and they were witnessing the destruction before the rebuilding.

This came to a crescendo at the last of the plagues, the killing of the firstborn, when the Jews were instructed to stay indoors, and

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paint their doorposts with the blood of the Egyptian deity, the sheep; "And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt" (Exodus 12:13).

The name Passover itself is a reference to the fact that God did not destroy us in a plague. In the current global climate this takes on a whole new meaning. Rashi, the famous 11th century commentator asks: Why does the verse say, 'when I see the blood'? Surely God sees everything? Rather, what it means to say is that God will be paying close attention to the fact that you are engaged in the performance of His commands — then, and only then, will 'I pass over you'.

When the world is self-destructing outside, God is looking to see what we are doing inside.

For the duration of the year of the plagues, the Jewish people had to learn how to undo the psychological constrictions that slavery had embedded in their consciousness, and how to conduct themselves whilst figuratively stuck indoors. As the world was recreating itself outside, we were recreating ourselves inside. This was our preparation for freedom. Our freedom was preceded by a time to re-evaluate our values and decide what we stood for. It was a period not of isolation but of incubation. It was a time to inculcate within ourselves who we are, what is important to us, and to know that the strength to actualize our potential comes from within.

Perhaps we have been reliving this process over the past year. Perhaps we have been afforded the opportunity to reset. To rethink. To reassess what is important to us. As the world outside descended into the unknown, we were tasked with resetting ourselves inside. As we collectively turned inward, and the dust and fumes of our human footprint begin to settle, the fish returned to the seas, the birds sang once more, and the smog hovering above our concrete jungles began to dissipate. As this happened outside, it happened within us too.

We may have been isolated, but we were also insulated. We may have been confined, but we were also redefining our lives. We were suffocating, but we were also incubating. We were separated, but we were also reminding ourselves that we are integrated with the global human family.

How do we navigate the loneliness and make this night as 'different'? We can begin by changing our focus from the outside to inside. The great sage, Ben Zoma, described happiness as not a pursuit of that which you lack, but an expression of that which you already have. Our ability to access our state of happiness and joy and meaning will come not from looking outside at the things we haven't been able to access for so long, but from peering inside into the world that our consciousness inhabits. Indeed, happiness doesn't come to you, it comes from you.

Even though we are alone, we are alone together. Let's make this night different not because we were forced to, but because we choose to.

FAR AWAY FROM HOME

This year, like last year - I feel like one of those Rabbis in Bnei Brak.

I always used to envision the scene in this part of the haggadah. A group of five saintly sages, dressed in their festive best, reclining to the left on their Talmudic-era couches, passionately discussing the story of the Exodus. Around them is delicious aromatic food and they are surrounded by their families and loved ones.

The problem is, when we look carefully at the names and history of each of these important sages, we soon realise that none of them actually lived in Bnei Brak! The Talmud tells us the hometowns of most of them - and it's not Bnei Brak. In fact, the only sage who we know lived in Bnei Brak is Rabban Gamliel, and he isn't mentioned in this story at all. So what were they doing there on Passover night? Why weren't they at home?

One of the important roles of the sages of that generation was to counsel and advise the various communities scattered across the land of Israel. The Talmud and Midrash (Oral Torah) relate that one of the primary ways that they would reach the northern and southern corners of the land was by ship. They would depart from Jaffa port (which was right near ancient Bnei Brak) and traverse the length of the land, docking at the various seaside cities.

One of the busiest times of the year for Rabbis and community leaders is just before Passover, when they must advise on the kosher-status of Passover food, help to oversee the making and distribution of matzah, arrange charity for the poor (a fixture in Talmud-era calendars called 'kimcha d'pischa' - literally "provisions for Passover", and help people set up their homes for the upcoming festival.

With all this in mind, it is suggested that perhaps that year, these five rabbis had docked back in Jaffa too close to Pesach. Thus, they didn't have enough time to reach their hometowns in time to celebrate the festival with their families.

"THEY WERE FAR FROM FAMILY, UNABLE TO REACH THEIR HOMES IN TIME TO HAVE THE SEDER TOGETHER... SOUND FAMILIAR?"

So here were five people - among the most towering figures of their generation - celebrating Pesach in the most non-ideal of circumstances. They were far from family, unable to reach their homes in time to have the seder together… sound familiar?

So they did the best that they could. They gathered together and, despite the challenges, they created a Pesach seder, aided by their retinue of students and colleagues.

This year, 2021, like last year, I am comforted by this story. With family far away that we haven't seen for a year, and family nearby that we haven't embraced for a year, I feel like I am in good company. Like Rebbe Eliezer, Rebbe Yehoshua, Rebbe Elazar ben Azaria, Rebbe Akiva and Rebbe Tarfon, and like all the thousands and thousands of isolated and isolating Jews around the world - let's go ahead and celebrate Pesach.

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LOOKING FORWARD TO LOOK BACK

We raise our glasses and celebrate the Jewish people's survival against the odds. Not only that, the Haggadah emphasises: "Go out and learn"- look around and see. We are a people that many of the major world powers have sought to destroy. Yet we have emerged stronger. Eighty years have passed since Jews came limping out of Europe - so many bereaved and mourning close family. Yet they marched on. We saw survivors with almost superhuman courage, looked forward, building a new life for themselves and for the future.

role of masters, while the Egyptians became their subordinates.

What did they do with that freedom? Did they seize children out of the embrace of their mothers and cast them in the Nile just as had been done to them? Did they assault the taskmasters who just a few days earlier had tortured them mercilessly? Did their youth smash the windows of the offices from which was administered the hatred and persecution of the Jews? No. Not one person was hurt, not one house destroyed, not one act of

"BY DEFEATING THEMSELVES, THEY ALSO WON THE GREATEST OF ALL VICTORIES: THEY BECAME FREE"

In antiquity, rebellion by slaves meant total destruction to satisfy an understandable but at the same time blood-thirsty urge for revenge and desire to uproot the 'established order'. History records many violent and ruthless insurrections of slaves against their masters. Ancient Rome saw multiple confrontations with slaves who had declared themselves free. European history witnessed the Peasants' Rebellion in medieval Germany and the bloody Cossack uprising in Ukraine.

After generations of suffering, persecution and servitude, after centuries of back-breaking labour, murder of Jewish baby boys and more, how did our ancestors respond to being set free? One can only imagine how they felt that night. For the first time in generations, not only were they not oppressed, downtrodden or tortured, they had suddenly assumed the

vandalism, hate, revenge, or violence. Put in that position, what would we have done with our newfound freedom, our licence to act without repercussion?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik highlighted that this response is unique in the history of revolutions. He writes; would we blame the Jews if they had engaged in a few acts of vandalism and even murder on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan, killing a few of the taskmasters who had thrown their newborns into the Nile?

But the Jews did nothing of the sort. They defied their instincts and refused to gratify a basic need of the human being - the need for revenge. But when we act on these feelings, we may find ourselves in a prison of our own making. And so, by defeating themselves,

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they also won the greatest of all victories: they became truly free. This is exactly what we commemorate and celebrate on the night of the Seder. Freedom is self-determination, the capacity to rise above our innate emotions or our instinctive reactions to the behaviour of others. Freedom is the ability to decide we won't let others define us and we won't let others 'own' how we feel.

The Jews in Egypt were entitled to be filled with anger and the desire for revenge. It would have been understandable had they been consumed by a negative fury directed at the Egyptians. But rather than focus on toxic emotions that would weigh them down, fill them with hate and hold them back – in a sense, 'enslaving' them still - they instead chose to focus on their newfound freedom in a different way. Instead of swarming the streets of Egypt screaming for revenge, they retreated to their homes, gathered with their families, ate the Pascal offering and sang songs of praise to God.

In short, their reaction was remarkable.

As Rabbi Sacks observes: "This is what makes us Homo-sapiens - in any given situation we can look back or we can look forward. We can ask: "Why did this happen?" That involves looking back for some cause in the past. Or we can ask, "What then shall I do?" This involves looking forward, trying to work out some future destination given that this is our starting point.

Both are legitimate ways of thinking, but one leads to resentment, bitterness, rage and a desire for revenge. The other leads to challenge, courage, strength of will and self-control. That for me is what the Jewish people represent: the triumph of choice over fate.

It is this with this strength, hope and courage that we journey forward as a people – from Egypt, from Rome, from Spain, from Auschwitz – the path in front of us paved with a preparedness and a willingness to continue to build, create and welcome in a bright future.

[Adapted from the works of Rabbi Sacks (On not being a Victim, Re'eh 5778), Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Festival of freedom page 34) and Rav Efrem Goldberg (Freedom in Prison, Pesach 5780)]

IS REVENGE SWEET?

When we think of God, it probably isn't a positive thing to imagine up a terrifying presence, suspended over the universe, waiting for us puny humans to mess up so He can deliver upon us eternal justice and pain. That certainly isn't the Jewish view.

Hashem is the all-encompassing, infinite, unquantifiable source of Mercy. In fact, the ineffable Name of God that we pronounce 'Adonai' – the same Name with which God 'introduced' Himself to Moses at the burning bush, is a name that means 'just as I loved you before your sin, so too will I love you afterwards'.

With this in mind, one could ask, why did God treat the Egyptians to a nightmarish year of blood and boils and boulder-sized flaming hailstones? How does this fit with our understanding of God being the ultimate source of mercy?

Let's dissect the very first plague for a better view. Our sages teach (Ethics of the Fathers 5:1) that when God created the world, He did so with ten utterances. These utterances introduced energies into the creation through which the world would subsequently operate. But, the sages continued, these energies were trampled on and ignored by generations of people and therefore had to be reintroduced at a later date in history. The Exodus was that date. The ten plagues vividly reintroduced those vital energies into the consciousness of the Israelites, the Egyptians and the rest of the world. Let's see how.

God demonstrating complete control over the Nile was not simply hijacking a nation's primary source of drinking water. The Nile was far more than just the physical lifeblood of the people; to them it symbolized the negation of dependence on 'God as Provider'.

This was in direct contradiction to the utterance in the creation narrative: 'Behold I have given you all the grasses…and all the trees with fruit.'

> "WE DO NOT TOAST A NATION'S DOWNFALL, NO MATTER HOW MUCH JUSTIFIABLE HATRED WE MIGHT HARBOUR TOWARD THEM."

God gives us the ability to be self-sufficient, but not to make the mistake of believing that we are the ultimate source of our own sustenance. It is only through His mercy that trees bear fruit and soil brings forth wheat.

By laying to ruin the source and national symbol of self-sufficiency, God unequivocally reintroduced the notion to all peoples that He is the sole provider of sustenance - a show of daily mercy and love.

The plagues were not delivered out of spite, revenge, or to needlessly humiliate the Egyptians. For God's sublime master-plan, the Israelite nation *had* to be delivered from the hands of the Egyptians in that precise manner, at that precise stage in history, and they *had* to witness the plagues while the Egyptians

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experienced them, not so that they could gloat over their enemy's downfall - that is antithetical to the very nature of a Jew, and is the classic reason given for our removal of drops of wine from our cups at the mention of every plague. We do not toast a nation's downfall, no matter how much justifiable hatred we might harbour toward them. As King David wrote (Psalms 24:17): "When your enemy falls, do not rejoice".

Rather, there was a vital lesson and revelation achieved with each plague. This was a lesson for the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the world at large. Each plague re-established in undeniable terms God's dominion over all aspects of nature and reintroduced the ten original utterances and energies with which the entire universe shines.

THE GRATITUDE ATTITUDE!

There seems to be an unwritten code about Jewish events that requires a "boring speech". So ubiquitous are these, that we have come to expect and even tolerate them. But every once in a while, something in one of those speeches catches our ear and perhaps even leaves an impression. There was one such speech I heard that left the room stunned. No one zoned out. No-one switched on their "tolerating boring speech" façade, no-one sneakily scrolled through their news feed under the table. Instead hearts were awoken and inspired. The audience walked out of this occasion changed somehow.

The event was a luncheon celebrating the soon to be wed young groom, and the speaker was the groom himself. He was, as some in the audience were learning for the first time, a fortunate survivor of an innovative neo-natal cardiovascular open-heart surgery when he was a newborn, who had gone on to leave doctors in awe of how he had thrived as he grew. Every year his practitioners would marvel at how he had developed against all odds. On this occasion he stood, confidently

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making eye contact with the audience after opening his speech with a short Torah thought. But then he shifted gears.

He said, "Every year we sing a family favourite at the Seder table: Dayeinu. But as I approach my wedding day I have adapted this song to form one of my own....

"Dayeinu - it would have been enough had I survived the surgery. It would have been enough to have been born with loving parents who looked out for me the whole way through and gave me every opportunity imaginable... It would have been enough to reach my Bar Mitzvah to watch my family's Rabbi who supported us through it all, stand with tears in his eyes and say the blessing "Shehechiyanu - who brought us in life to this day... It would have been enough to see how I succeeded at school and further studies...

He continued, whilst the audiences eyes grew wet, before he concluded: "It would have been enough, but the fact that I have now found someone to marry...no words can express how thankful I am!" The audience, by now wiping the tears away, sensed that this young groom had to stop there simply due to his own emotions. His point was made. Powerfully.

When we take stock and consider each step of our journey and articulate our gratitude, we stun ourselves and those around us. Incremental savings, when partnered with compound interest stacks up in an exponential way. Imagine when we consider ourselves not just the product of our personal journey, but within the context of Jewish history. We are not sitting in 2021 in isolation (well, we might be in isolation in one sense!). We are the product, the survivors, the torch-bearers of the greatest story ever told. Every step on that story could have been otherwise. But it wasn't. We are obligated to see ourselves in that chain. Links are still being added to it. We are the ones who forge them.

"DAYEINU IS NOT JUST A GREAT TUNE. IT'S THE SECRET TO JEWISH HAPPINESS."

Dayeinu is not just a great tune. It's the secret to Jewish happiness. Connect to that story and you have just accrued the greatest amount of compound interest imaginable that you can now add to your gratitude account for all time.

Some speeches leave a mark and wake us up, and sometimes a little song can do that too.

THE CARDBOARD CONTRADICTION

Like it or hate it, delicious or inedible, the matzah occupies centre stage at the Seder. As the story begins, we raise the matzah and invite all to join us as we prepare to embark on the annual journey through the Haggadah. We declare 'this matzah is "lachma anya" - the bread of slavery and suffering; we hold it up to remind us of the torture and pain our ancestors experienced in Egypt and beyond throughout our tear-soaked history.

The rest of the night follows this framework, as the story is told from the beginning through the lens of the matzah. Starting with Abraham the first Jew, through the Ten Plagues, the Splitting of the Sea and forty years in the desert, the story picks up speed and then winds down as we smell the aroma of chicken soup and brisket. But as we turn the final corner, the Haggadah pauses for a moment and asks the question we have all been wondering since we picked up the matzah and said 'ha lachma anya' all those hours ago.

Why in fact, do we eat matzah tonight?

The Haggadah quotes Rabban Gamliel, one of the greatest Jewish teachers who ever lived, the halachic authority and leader of the Supreme Court in the Land of Israel some two thousand years ago. He famously answers that the Jewish people eat matzah, unleavened bread, to remind us of the unleavened bread our ancestors ate as they left Egypt. They did not have time to wait for their dough to rise as they rushed out of their Egyptian prisons and into freedom and we, in turn, eat this unleavened bread to remind us of that. Matzah, says Rabban Gamliel, is the bread of freedom and we eat it to remind us of that newfound gift we received thousands of years ago.

Now that's confusing at best, even paradoxical. The identity taken on by matzah at the outset of Maggid is very different to the one it takes on as we prepare to conclude this central section. Which is it? The bread of 'slavery' or the bread of 'freedom'? Do we eat it to remind us of the slavery of our past or to celebrate the new-found freedom of our present? The matzah seems to pose the ultimate contradiction, difficult to digest both literally and symbolically!

"THE REALITY IS THAT IT TAKES LOSING SOMETHING TO APPRECIATE IT AND IT CAN TAKE SLAVERY TO VALUE FREEDOM."

Human beings by their very nature take life for granted. This is true in a general sense but even more so when we look at life in the context of miracles. Whether the miracle we see is a human eye, a new-born child or a rover landing on a far-off planet. Objectively, a granule of grain rotting in the ground, dying and decaying, is the epitome of death and lost opportunity. When a new sprout bursts forth from that degeneration it should be no less of

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a miracle than a corpse coming back to life, but since this happens every time a seed is dropped into a ploughed field, it has been rebranded as nature. Like the human eye and a new-born child, perhaps another way to view nature is a miracle that happens very often.

Born into freedom, we expect it to continue. Because we have never lived in slavery or under a tyrannical regime, we take liberty and opportunity for granted. The reality is that it takes losing something to appreciate it and it can take slavery to value freedom. The bread of freedom can only be fully appreciated if it is first understood in the context of the bread of affliction that came before it. The matzah is both what our forefathers ate while enslaved in Egypt and what they ate when they marched to freedom because freedom only finds true meaning when it is juxtaposed to slavery.

The Torah writes in no less than twenty-four places the prohibition to oppress a stranger. There are many potential reasons for this but surprisingly the reason actually given is "because you were slaves in the land of Egypt". The irony here should not be lost on us. Of all nations, the Jewish people know best the bitter taste of slavery and the harsh reality of exile and living in a strange land, and as a result of that experience, we are now obligated to identify with others facing the same predicament. Only because we were there can we identify with it fully and that creates the responsibility.

The matzah is bread of slavery and simultaneously bread of freedom. This is not a paradox. Just as there is no paradox between a decaying seed and a flourishing shoot. Matzah takes on both identities by urgent necessity. Without understanding our history, it is impossible to grasp our future and the message of the matzah is clear - don't take freedom for granted.

ONE DAY MORE

Bob and Joe were a pair of homeless beggars living together in the back alleys of London, close friends and partners in grime. Joe was Jewish and Bob was not. After many days without a proper meal, Joe told Bob with boundless joy that tonight was Passover. “The Jews hold a gigantic feast and everyone is invited! If we just stand outside synagogue we’ll certainly be invited for Seder night. Trust me, you’ve never seen anything like it!”

Bob was ecstatic and excitedly hurried along with Joe to the synagogue. Sure enough, they both got invited to the home of one of the wealthiest Jews in the city! The table was set beautifully with the finest dishes and cutlery fit for royalty. Bob’s mouth began to water. He couldn’t believe his tremendous luck! After a few songs, a glass of wine was poured for all of the guests and an incantation intoned. Bob waited until the blessing was completed and drank thirstily, his heart bursting with excitement, sure that they were about to bring out all the delicacies he could ever dream of.

Unfortunately for Bob, this isn’t what happened. Instead, everyone washed their hands and nibbled on radish heads. “Strange”, thought Bob, “I’m sure they’ll bring out the main course now”. But no. Instead the guests all broke plain square crackers in half and began to talk, and talk, and talk, and talk some more! This went on for hours; no food, not even more wine was forthcoming. Nothing! Growing a bit antsy, Bob took a deep breath and resolved to remain a bit longer in the hope that the food would be brought out soon. Finally, everyone began silently and rapidly chewing mouthfuls upon mouthfuls of the dry, cardboard-like crackers. While it wasn’t the succulent chicken he was waiting for, Bob partook with gusto. At least it was something to satisfy his terrible hunger! With hopeful eyes, he noticed that things seemed to be moving a bit more quickly now. Perhaps the meal was finally beginning?

A moment later a white shredded substance was brought out. He couldn’t exactly make out what it was, but he was sure it was something delicious! Bob made sure to take an extra big bite (he deserved it, after all, waiting so patiently). Instantly, his smile disappeared. The shooting sensation of intense heat that erupted in his throat, spreading up his nose and burning his eyes was unlike he had ever experienced before. Furious, and with tears streaming down his red and swollen face, Bob spat out the vile substance, jumped from his seat, and ran out of the house in a fit of anger! A few hours later, he was woken suddenly by a kick in the leg. He looked up to see his friend Joe standing over him and smiling from ear to ear. “What are you so happy about?” he

"THE WORLD HAS BEEN STARVING FOR CONNECTION AND SECURITY. WE'VE HAD OUR FAIR SHARE OF BITTER THINGS. AND YET THERE IS LIGHT AT THE END OF THIS LONG TUNNEL."

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grumbled. “You Jews are crazy! That was no feast, that was torture!” “You fool!” Joe cried. “If you would have waited just a few minutes more, you would have experienced the most incredible meal of your life! Just a few more minutes of patience and perseverance and you could have had everything you ever dreamed of!”

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (d.1810, Uman, Ukraine) would say that so often when life is difficult and the challenges seem never-ending, we reach a point where we feel as if we simply can’t go on. The story of the two beggars teaches us that it’s just at those moments that we need to gather all of our strength and find the courage to hold on just a little bit longer.

The story of the Exodus is one of hope. In the history of Egypt, no slave ever escaped. How could an entire nation ever walk free? And yet after centuries of enslavement, God miraculously redeemed us just when it seemed things were at their worst. It is following the darkest points in the struggles of life that the dawn of salvation breaks.

These past twelve months the world has been waiting patiently. The world has been starving for connection and security. We’ve had our fair share of bitter things. And yet there is light at the end of this long tunnel. We’ve all had a very difficult year but as Passover arrives this spring, the sun is shining and there is blossom and bloom. Throughout the world, vaccination programs are in full swing and Covid cases are dropping drastically. There is hope for better days ahead. The bitter taste of marror might still linger on our tongues but I hope we can all take a moment and smell the aroma of that incredible feast wafting in from the kitchen. Good times are coming! The great feast is just around the corner - if we can only hold on for just a few more minutes.

THE CLOCK STRIKES MIDNIGHT

It's close to midnight, you have sat for many hours. Your stomach is full; three cups of wine, matzah and a nice helping of lettuce mixed with apples and cinnamon. You have recounted the Exodus story in all its glory and re-lived the moments our ancestors left Egypt.

For some, the retelling of the Exodus story is like a history lesson; long, boring and repetitive. Haven't we done this before? I'm sure we were here last year, and the year before and the year before that?

If you have reached this far in our publication, there is no doubt you will have read a lot on the significance of the Haggadah. It is not merely meant to be a historical account, but rather, a retelling in order to connect to the power of freedom. And perhaps through all of that – through living and experiencing freedom - the climax is 'Hallel'; the words of praise expressed as we fill our final cup.

So why Hallel? And why now?

"In every generation, everyone is obligated to see themselves as though they personally left Egypt."

During the Seder, we must personally experience our own exodus from the slavery of Egypt. We begin by recounting the misery of our toil and labour, tasting the saltwater tears of our nation's suffering. We suffer the harshness of bondage through the bitter herbs, and we feel the quickening haste of the sudden redemption as we eat the matzah, the bread which had no time to rise before we fled Egypt. Each of us 'leaves Egypt'—and in 'spontaneous' response, we cannot help but sing the song that Jews have sung throughout the centuries at their moments of redemption: Hallel! We echo Moses and the Jewish people on the banks of the Red Sea, Mordechai and Esther in Shushan, the Jewish people at Chanukah and so many other miracles that have become a part of our history. We sing it not to commemorate an old, dusty miracle, but to celebrate the redemptive miracle we experience personally during the Seder.

We need not stand. We do not have time to go to Synagogue. It is as though Hallel is the champagne brought out at the end of the meal to toast the joy of victory.

The Hallel of the Seder thus reflects the

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character of the entire festival. Pesach celebrates the creation of the Jewish people, the forging of our relationship with God. And yet it is not merely the anniversary of our covenant with God, not merely a day on which we remember that He took us out from another nation and consecrated us as His own, but the re-enactment of that marriage. Hallel celebrates that moment when we personally leave Egypt and start out on the road to accepting the Torah at Sinai and becoming God's chosen people. But why is this specifically expressed through song?

Music and song belong to everyone, regardless of race, creed, age, or status in life. Music speaks from the soul. It reaches out and expresses what words are unable to say. A mother communicates her love for her baby who may not understand a word she says, but feels safe and loved just the same, as she hums a lullaby.

Whatever experiences a person may be going through, whether it is a heartbreak or unspeakable joy, can be expressed through music. Never mind that the lyrics may be inadequate. The melodies alone are able to convey messages, soul to soul. A beautiful melody can bring tears to one's eyes. It is powerful enough to soften the hardest heart and heal the most painful memory. It breaks barriers of time and space, provides comfort for the grieving, and calms the anxious mind. It is a gift that everyone can share. It is unlike any other language because it can hardly be understood, and yet it is acknowledged and completely appreciated for what it is. This is why in Judaism whenever there is overwhelming gratitude or sadness, the moment is often expressed through song. Because song/music is one step higher than conversation. It expresses something far deeper.

The power of Hallel at the Seder is just that. To bring us closer to our final goal. To realise our hopes and dreams and to connect us to our soul. If we do the Seder right and look towards our own personal exodus stories and use the Seder to begin to illustrate that, then we set our soul free.

"MUSIC SPEAKS FROM THE SOUL. IT REACHES OUT AND EXPRESSES WHAT WORDS ARE UNABLE TO SAY."

Hallel is that realisation. That connection, that ability to break free and sing YOUR song, whose notes are the truest and most powerful expression of your personal freedom.

THE G.O.A.T

We have reached the culmination of a beautiful Seder, feeling inspired and a tangible connection to God himself. Yet, there is a nagging voice at the back of our head which we just can't ignore; 'Yes, *now* we feel inspired and uplifted, but how do we make it last? Will we continue to have faith, even when all odds are against us, or will we allow everything to fall apart and surrender to whatever challenge is round the corner?''

The song of ''Chad Gadya'' tells us the tale of a father who buys a kid goat for two ''Zuz'' to add to his herd. However, the goat grows up and starts to form a persona of its own. Curiosity kicks in - which eventually leads to it rebelling against its master, until finally - the goat runs away. And thus begins one of the most popular songs – and metaphors – in all of Jewish liturgy.

After wandering around for a bit, a cat comes and attacks the little goat. Failing to escape the cat's claws, the goat is left with no choice but to give itself up to the cat's hunger. Suddenly, out of nowhere a dog comes to the rescue and scares the vicious cat away. Feeling eternally grateful to the dog for saving his life, the goat seeks to thank it. But then a big wooden stick appears, and beats the dog away. The stick feels unbeatable, he is the hero that beat the hero, and in his pride and ego, he is oblivious to the tiny spark which ignites a little flame, slowly engulfing wood that was dry enough to sting the dog. Before we know it, the stick is lost in an inferno of fire. The fire, brutal and ferocious, consumes all in its way, only to be met with crushing failure as it heads into the river bed. Water, as powerful and destructive as much as it sustains life, is the very definition of limitless and defiant of all boundaries. However, it too cannot escape the parched ox. Yet the ox too has its limitations – the human slaughterer. And yet he too cannot escape the angel of death, ever.

By the time we get to the penultimate stanza, we have totally forgotten that this whole mad caper began with a simple stray goat.

"BY THE TIME WE GET TO THE PENULTIMATE STANZA, WE HAVE TOTALLY FORGOTTEN THAT THIS WHOLE MAD CAPER BEGAN WITH A SIMPLE STRAY GOAT."

The goat, plucked from the jaws of death and now standing by witnessing the chain reaction unfold before it, a chain reaction its rebelliousness caused in the first place, suddenly feels very lost and alone. All it yearns for now is its master, its father, who bought it for two ''Zuz''.

The story of ''Chad Gadya'' is a direct parallel to the Jewish nation who were bequeathed to God as we stood at mount Sinai and declared 'we will do, and we will listen'. We are that young goat, acquired for two precious tablets (the ones with the Ten Commandments, not Apple) just as the goat was purchased for two 'Zuz'. Unfortunately, as the tale shows, as time passes we explore different paths and impulses, causing us to spend a lot of time

and effort searching for ways to find fulfilment. In turn we become blind to our true purpose and forget what our mission is in the world. As eras and civilisations wax and wane, we sometimes find ourselves cornered by a vicious 'cat', which we may or may not overcome. But then we put our trust in a 'dog' whose salvation simply doesn't last. As life continues and we fall into a monotonous dance called "living", we don't seize the opportunity to stop and think about our real purpose. We lose focus and get blindsided by the sticks, fires and waters of this world. Some we perceive as posing a threat. Some we perceive as providing a solution. Yet ultimately, none of them prevail.

And so we specifically end the entire Seder with the song of 'Chad Gadya'. To remind us that we can be our own script writers and direct a different tale. A tale that will hopefully be an inspiration and source of encouragement for when we feel a loss of confidence and faith in God's eternal love and commitment to us. A tale that will proclaim – we are God's beloved children. And our story is the Greatest of All Time.

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