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**Sacred Symbols, Eternal Story**

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**April 5, 2025 – Pesah 5785**

It’s so Jewish that our most celebrated annual ritual is gathering around a table, and even as we know a feast awaits us in the next room, complaining for hours about how hungry we are. In our family, it’s three to four hours before we get to the food, and then another three to four before bedtime. In between, there’s a lot of singing, some fierce debates, and always plastic frogs.

But of course, even with all of this, the very heart of the seder is *the story*.

For thousands of years, our people have gathered to tell and retell our origin story, which has sustained the Jewish people for thousands of years. We read this story not as an accounting of a historical event, but as a reminder of eternal truths. A moral and spiritual frame of reference for all times— including our own.

Now, in one of the quirky rules of Passover, Rabban Gamliel taught:

רַבָּן גַּמְלִיאֵל הָיָה אוֹמֵר: כָּל שֶׁלֹּא אָמַר שְׁלשָׁה דְּבָרִים אֵלּוּ בַּפֶּסַח, לא יָצָא יְדֵי חוֹבָתוֹ

…Anyone who has not said these three things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation, and they are: the Pesach sacrifice, matzah and maror. (Mishnah Pesahim 10:5)

These three symbols of the seder are so central, apparently, that were we to neglect to mention them, we’d have to go back and do the whole eight hours again.

In your haggadot next week, you’ll see varying interpretations of why these three are considered by Rabban Gamliel to be the most important, and why he poses them in this order. The multiplicity of responses to these questions reveals that there is no one settled interpretation, which I am taking, this year, as an invitation to offer three of my own interpretations. Three core ideas for Passover 2025, in the year 5785, offered in the midst of the uncertainty, upheaval, and heartache of our time, three lessons from our distant past, an urgent cry to us in our own time.

I will start with the *maror*, the bitter herb, reminding us of the bitterness of the suffering of our ancestors in Egyptian bondage.

The first two chapters of Sefer Shemot, the Book of Exodus, take *b’nai Yisrael* on a journey of descent—transitioning within one short verse from our people being fruitful, abundant and strong—to a new king arising, determined to quash the body and crush spirit of our ancestors through harsh labor and infanticide.

Their suffering lasts for generations. But the turning point comes at the end of chapter two, when the children of Israel groaned because of the severity of the work, and they cried out(Ex 2:23).

And God hears them, and remembers the covenant. Their cry becomes the catalyst for their redemption, in Ramban’s words, *awakening* *the Divine attribute of mercy*.

The moral message here is clear: ours is a God who pays attention to human suffering. Ours is a God who will not tolerate a world of human pain. And neither should we. To experience Passover is to enter a kind spiritual boot camp designed to train our hearts to turn toward the heartache, never away from it. Just as God did.

This message strikes me as profoundly urgent these days, in these times of so much pain.

Mikhael Manekin, a wise, brave, humble, and ascendant voice in our time, spoke in a [conference](https://www.youtube.com/live/A2uhLcFQQRI) in NY last week about *Smol Emuni*, the Israeli, religious left. Their movement, he explained, exists to address many of the same painful questions we ask again and again in this community:

*How are we to perceive the meaning of God’s moral demands in light of violent political interpretations of those who claim to speak in God’s name?*

What happens to the Jewish soul *when we refuse to acknowledge the suffering of the other, a refusal that [in our time]—*Mikhael pointed out—*is having the perverse result of sacrificing our own hostages in the name of vengeance?*

This question calls to me with a burning intensity: *What happens to our hearts when we can no longer see one another?* Perhaps this year, the *maror* will remind us: draping in the banner of our tradition, or our people, or our party or our country while diminishing and denying human suffering of others undermines not only our deepest and most foundational Torah, but also our humanity.

This is a *hillul Hashem*, it is a desecration.

Before us, and all around is, is a landscape of human heartache. Perhaps the *maror* this year will awaken within us the moral strength to face the anguish, especially when we want to deny it, to retreat from it. Perhaps it will remind us that the most direct way to embody the image of God is to stand with those who are suffering, even when it hurts to do so.

As Rav Kook wrote, in Orot HaKodesh: “The pain of others must shake the very soul of the righteous.” We would do well to remember that in our time. We who expect and demand that the world sees our pain, please, please let us see the pain of the other too.

Second, the *Pesah*, the *pashal* lamb. Remember that on the night of the 10th plague, Israel was instructed to: S*laughter an animal as a pesah offering*, and *paint the blood* עַל־שְׁתֵּ֥י הַמְּזוּזֹ֖ת וְעַל־הַמַּשְׁק֑וֹף -- *onto the lintel, on two doorposts* (Ex 12:7).

This was intended to protect the Israelite households from the angel of death, an outward sign to pass over their homes and spare their first born.

But of course God’s angel already knew exactly which homes were Israelite and which ones were Egyptian. What, then, is the significance of the blood?

It is clear that the ritual is not for God, or the angel, but for the people themselves.

The Israelites must have been terrified. But these people—battered but not broken, having endured so much inhumanity—needed to step forward nevertheless and show, as Sforno writes, that they were *not passive recipients of divine salvation but active participants.* They had to be a part of their own redemption story.

If hearing the people’scry was God’s turning point, this act, the act of painting the outer doorposts with blood, was Israel’s. This was the moment that they affirmed their agency. It was an outward demonstration of their faith in a different future. Their refusal to accede to Pharaoh’s demands, and their insistence that they needed and deserved something better. In the eyes of our rabbis (see, especially, Rav Kook here), it was this one act that marked their transition *from passivity to agency, from degradation to covenant.*

What does this mean for us, in our time? It means that we, too, are called from passivity into agency. From despair to faith. It is a reminder that redemption will only come when we embody our deepest values.

And yet, even as I write these words, I am cognizant of the brave, young Gazan protest leaders who were murdered by Hamas last week, after they took to the streets to demand an end to war. To affirm that peace is possible.

I think of the tireless Israelis, protesting week after week against this government, pleading for the return of the hostages and an end to war, facing an increasingly violent police force that seems to have no shame in beating and battering even elders, even families of the hostages.

I think of the young Latina woman in our own community, daughter of immigrants here in LA, who shared this week how empowered she felt in 2016 to organize a walk out in her school. Oh, what it meant to her to be able to do something, to say something! And I think of how she wept when she said that now she could never do the same, because it would surely result in her own arrest, and perhaps endanger the lives of people she loves.

Perhaps as we name and lift up the *pesah* at our *sedarim* this year, we will consider this paradox: To act today could be to risk everything. And yet we, like our ancestors, must also weigh: what is the cost of not acting at all? What future, then, will we face? And as we do, I hope we’ll remember: taking to the street is important, but it is not the only way to manifest our core values. Go back and reread the first few chapters of Exodus, a playbook for resistance—including everything from explicitly rejecting unjust laws to persisting in living and loving, even despite the conditions around us.

The final symbol is *matzah*.

Freedom was hard won for the Israelites, coming only after those 10 formidable plagues were unleashed on Egypt. We generally read the plagues as punishments against the Egyptian people for the terrible suffering they forced upon the Israelites. But—quoting [Sforno](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.7.3?lang=bi&with=Sforno&lang2=bi) again—there is another way to interpret God’s actions. The plagues, he argues, were actually brought *to awaken the conscience of the oppressor…* *in the hopes that Pharaoh would finally see the light and become a genuine penitent.*

האל חפץ בתשובת רשעים ולא במיתתם

…because God desires that the wicked person change, not die!

Think of it! What God *actually* wanted was for Pharaoh and the Egyptian people to take responsibility for the injustices they committed. Make amends. Chart a new course, together with the Israelites.

The Egyptians needed to be liberated too, from a story that taught them that there is only oppressor or oppressed. Victim or victimizer. They needed to recognize that God’s redemption was big enough to liberate *everyone—*that the Israelites *and* the Egyptians could have their dignity. Could have a future.

The tragedy of the Exodus, as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, is that Pharaoh could have been a part of the redemption story. He could have joined in the Song of the Sea, the song of the liberated. But instead, he invested only in outward indicators of strength—vast wealth and vast armies. Until one day, all those chariots and horsemen drowned in the Red Sea.

At the *Smol Emuni* conference last week, Dr. Yasmin Abu Freha, a Palestinian Bedouin doctor and October 7 first responder in Israel’s south, treating victims of the Hamas attacks, spoke of the Orwellian nature of Israeli society—where *all are equal, but some are equal more than others…* *What about tzelem Elohim,* she asked. *What about the belief that we are all equal? That we are all chosen by God?*

She closed by quoting her teacher, Professor Paul Farmer, the brilliant doctor and author: “*The idea that some lives matter less than others is the root of all that is wrong in the world.”* This he called “the central pathology of our time.”

This is a lesson that Pharaoh failed to learn. But we—you and I—still can.

The matzah is said to be both the bread of our affliction, and the bread of our redemption. How can one thing be two contradictory things at once? Because that is the reality of our world. We are all one thing and another, all at once. And within each of us is the sacred possibility of transformation.

Perhaps this year we’ll see that *matzah* on our seder plate as an invitation to a more spacious, capacious, robust understanding of what liberation can mean. How it must include all of us. How until all of us is free, we are, none of us, free.

Passover is nearly upon us. Next week, when we sit down at those carefully set tables to complain about how hungry we are, let us enter the story slowly. Mindfully. Let us remember that this is not just a story, it is *the* archetypal redemption story. It is a reminder that as much as the world has changed since ancient times, power and oppression, degradation and exploitation remain very much a part of the human condition.

But the Exodus story is also a reminder that any moment could be the inflection point between oppression and liberation. When we taste the *maror*, let us remember that the deepest and holiest work of a Jew is to be awake to, and identify with the suffering of those around us.

When we see the *pesah*, let us remember that we still have agency. We must use our voices and even our bodies to protect ourselves and one another.

And when we eat the *matzah*, let us remember that there is enough for everyone. That we can stretch our moral imagination to counter the dominant scarcity narratives of our time. We can hold fast to the vision of a world in which every one of us can live in full dignity.

And let us remember: ours is not the first generation in which telling this story, reiterating these foundational ideas, is risky. Dangerous, even. And perhaps that is the greatest reason of all to tell this story. This is the closest we, as a people, *come to the generational transmission of hope, a desperate necessity in our time.*

I wish you all a deep, meaningful, liberating, *Pesah*.