



An Open Invitation: Insights on the Pesach Haggadah

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There are many *mitzvos* (commandments) we fulfill during the *Pesach Seder*. We consume *Matzah* as a reminder of both servitude and liberation; we drink the Four Cups as a behavioral demonstration of our freedom and we eat the *Marror* (bitter herbs) as a commemoration of the bitter and difficult circumstances we endured during 210 years of Egyptian servitude.

Even with this beautiful and holy plethora of *mitzvos*, the main focus of the sacred *Seder* night is the *mitzvah* of *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim*, the retelling of the Exodus narrative. We recite *Avadaim Haayinu* (*we were servants to Pharaoh*), and link this historical experience to our contemporary circumstances. By melding our past into our present we allow ourselves to re-experience the exalted feelings of emancipation and freedom.

Yet, at the very moment we are about to begin to relate the story of slavery and salvation we recite a fascinating paragraph – *Ha Lachma Anya, this is the bread of affliction*.

This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt.

Let all who are hungry, come and eat.

Let all who are needy, come and celebrate Passover (partake of the Paschal lamb).

This year we are here - next year, may we be in the Land of Israel.

This year we are slaves - next year, may we be free.

The Rav, Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik zt'l asks a simple question. *“Why are we “inviting” people to our Pesach Seder after the Seder has already commenced? After all, by the time we issue this invitation we have already drunk the first of the Four Cups (Kiddush) and the Seder is well underway. Furthermore, if we are truly interested in inviting people, why make this declaration in front of the already invited guests? The people at the table already have a license to be present. If we are looking to invite those who may not have a Seder to attend, if we are looking to invite those who are in need, why not go to the door and extend a true and sincere invitation to those on the outside?”* What is the meaning and the message of this paragraph?

The Rav explains that this “invitation” is a symbolic manifestation of our new-found freedom. A slave does not have the ability to engage in the *mitzvah* of *Hachnosas Orchim* (hospitality) for one simple reason—the slave has no possessions. The slave has no rights of ownership. Everything he owns becomes the property of his master. Furthermore, the slave is so focused on survival and self-preservation that even if he somehow manages to acquire something (and hide it from his master), he hoards it for himself, worrying that if he shares it with others he will compromise his own existence. In this section of *Ha Lachma Anya* we make two profound declarative statements. I am free and as such I can invite anyone and everyone I desire. I am free and I have the ability and inner strength to share with and care for the other. I am no longer a slave who is solely focused on survival; I am free and can look out for the needs of the other. *“Let all who are in need, come and celebrate with me; I can think about and concern myself with the welfare of others. Whoever is hungry, come and join - I can help - I am free.”*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his commentary on the Haggadah (page 11) quotes from Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi. *“According to Levi, the worst time of all was when the Nazis left in January 1945, fearing the Russian advance. All prisoners who could walk were taken on the brutal ‘death marches.’ The only people left in the camp were those who were too ill to move. For ten days they were left alone with only scraps of food and fuel. Levi describes how he worked through the night to light a fire and bring some warmth to his fellow prisoners, many of them dying. He then writes: ‘When the broken window was repaired and the stove began to spread its heat, something seemed to relax in everyone, and at that moment Towarowski (a Franco-Pole of twenty three, with typhus) proposed to the others that each of them offer a slice of bread to us three who had been working. And so it was agreed. Only a day before a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of the Lager (concentration camp) said: eat your own bread and if you can, that of your neighbor – and left no room for gratitude. It really meant that the law of the Lager was dead. It was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died slowly changed from Haftlinge (prisoners) to men again’.”*

The precious words of the Rav and the moving personal account of Prima Levi teach us a profound lesson. Our first mandate on the Seder night is to establish for ourselves, our family and our people what freedom truly means. Freedom is not simply the absence of an oppressive task-master or the ability to do as I choose. Freedom is the ability to do something meaningful with my life. Freedom is the opportunity to harness my strengths, abilities and resources and find a way to make the world a little kinder. Freedom is the ability to impact those around me in a positive fashion. Freedom is the ability to be attentive to the difficulties and challenges of the other and to do what is in within my power to mend the many broken hearts.

Let all who are hungry, come and eat. Let all who are needy, come and celebrate Pesach. Let all who are in need know that I am here and ready to help.