

How Passover Can Inspire You

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Abstract: Beyond the observance of two Seders, beyond even the meticulous observance of Passover's dietary rules, our sages teach that we have not truly celebrated Passover unless it makes a difference in our inner life, our inner world. We have not truly celebrated Passover until we liberate ourselves from at least one self-hurting and harmful habit.

Chag sameach to all. I hope you are having a joyous and meaningful Passover week.

As you might expect, the theme of my teaching tonight is: How Passover can inspire you. Passover inspires us because it gets us thinking about liberation – our own liberation. Now there are different kinds of liberation: There is political liberation – the freedom from oppression and persecution. There is spiritual liberation – the freedom from fear, from habit, from obsessions that rule us.

At our community Second Seder, I talked about Passover and political freedom. I described how Passover is a subversive activity, our annual Jewish re-examination of the way things are in the world, and the way things should be.

So tonight, let's explore the nexus between Passover and the pursuit of spiritual freedom, inner freedom. You and I are creatures of habit. We are greater creatures of habit than we think we are. Think for a moment of your daily actions and how habitual they are. Now tell me: what are some ways we are creatures of habit? From our daily cup or cups of coffee, to brushing our teeth, to reading the daily paper, we are truly creatures of habit.

But it's not only our daily actions that become habitual. Our minds are conditioned in so many ways, more ways than we care to think about. Even our daily feelings, our daily thoughts, can become automatic -- even robotic. We think we are awake, but actually we are asleep. We think we are free, but actually we are enslaved to habit, physically and mentally.

Our rabbis teach that Egypt – the land of Bondage -- is a place and more than a place. Egypt is a state of mind. In Hebrew, Egypt is "*mitzrayim*". Our rabbis parse it to mean "*metzar yam*" -- a narrow strait."

Egypt is whenever we live enslaved to habit. Egypt is whenever we live life on automatic pilot. Egypt is whenever we live asleep at the wheel. Some of us are in Egypt right now...

But Passover can help us. Passover challenges us to liberate ourselves from Egypt, to liberate ourselves from all forms of habit: to be free to behave differently, to be free to

feel new feelings, to be free to think new thoughts. Above all, through Passover God wants us to recognize that we have far more choice over our actions, thoughts, and feelings than we think we do. When it comes to our bad habits, we could be freer of them than we think.

So Passover challenges us to wake ourselves up. Passover challenges us to become fully aware human beings, fully alive human beings, human beings who are capable of being fully present in the truth of the moment.

So how do we get ourselves free?

Freedom always means taking a risk to make a new, and ultimately better, choice. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells a wonderful story about what ultimately persuaded his grandparents to leave their village in the Ukraine and voyage to America.

Whenever it looked like there might be trouble with the local peasants, Kushner says, his grandfather would shepherd the family to safety in the root cellar, then carefully take down the [prized] chandelier [in the living room] so that it wouldn't get damaged by rocks thrown through the window.... One week, when Kushner's grandfather was trying to get that chandelier safely into the attic, he dropped it and it broke with a crash into a thousand pieces. At that moment, Rabbi Kushner's grandfather said to his grandmother: "That does it: we're going to America."

We begin to liberate ourselves when we are determined to make a break with what is familiar and comfortable, and voyage into the unknown, which is both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. But let us not wait until the chandelier breaks to make a change. Do not wait until something of great value to you is lost or broken.

Beyond the observance of two Seders, beyond even the meticulous observance of Passover's dietary rules, our sages teach we have not truly celebrated Passover unless it makes a difference in our inner life. We have not truly celebrated Passover until we liberate ourselves from at least one self-hurting and harmful habit.