

Pesach: the Inside Version

Four Other Questions

Every Passover, the Haggadah says, I should feel as if I, personally, were being liberated from Egypt. That is always the point of the liberation saga: it is my story. I am getting free. I ask myself four questions.

First question: Free from what?

The Hebrew for "Egypt" is Mitzrayim, which is a pun. It means "narrow place," like Detroit. Each year at Passover time, I get a little more free, each year I leave that narrow place which is too small for me now. It is a different place each year, because I am in a different place each year. Mitzrayim, "the narrow place," is also meant to conjure the birth narrows. Freedom is always a birth experience, a re-birth, renewal.

Second question: When does my freedom begin?

R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev asked this question: when does my freedom begin? I might think it begins with leaving Egypt. The koan of the question puts my memory to work on my own life, trying to discern the influences, who said what to me when that gave me strength, that planted a seed, that snuck the message by the guardians of my equanimity, the way the soul eludes the intellect and speaks directly to the heart. Who taught me to resist the easier, softer way of complacency, who taught me to dream, who taught me that I could transform, be transformed, that I could be free? Who was it? What teacher? What voice? Who is part of my freedom chain? Who made it possible for me to get free?

Third question: What is freedom?

It is written that the Torah was given in the third month after leaving Egypt, the Midrash plays with the pun for the word "month" which in Hebrew is related to the word for "something new" (chodesh/chidush). That's the form that my freedom takes every year, I move into something new, a place I haven't been yet. How do I know I have achieved some measure of freedom? Not because I have crossed the state line and passed out of Egypt into the Wilderness, but because I have learned something -- new.

Asking the two questions, when does freedom begin, and how do I know I have acquired freedom re-fashions the liberation concept, re-formulating my notion of freedom from something that I have or don't have, to the process, re-thinking freedom from a matter of arrival to the matter of the journey, re-envisioning the liberation saga from a matter of achievement to a matter of simply being on the road. It's not about arrivals, but about process, not about goal but about journey, not about there but all about here. Radically here, on my own freedom trail. A link in my own freedom chain.

Fourth question: What interferes with the freedom journey?

I put out the chometz, all the leavened food, from my life for this journey. What is this chometz that I remove from my life during Pesach? The chometz is anything inflatable, all the inflatable aspects of self that prevent God. The inflatable sense of self aggrandizement, the inflatable narcissism of self -- this is chometz, and this is what I take out of my life during Passover. There is no room for God in a person too full of self (Baal Shem Tov). I get, in a word, humble.

We call humility "bittul" which means suppression of self. Less self, more other, less self more Other--this is the emerging Jewish spirituality. When I eat matzah, that substance of no chometz, I am reminded that chometz takes me away from God.

Fifth Question (in Chassidus, there is always a hidden fifth concept): So, what is my response to the gift of freedom?

Gratitude, because it was a gift. Humility, because I didn't make it happen.

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