

# PESACH: THE CHALLENGE OF TRUE FREEDOM

*by Rabbi Yonason Goldson*

As everyone knows, on the first night of Pesach we eat matzah and bitter herbs, we recline at the table, and we drink five cups of wine.

**Five** cups of wine? We drink four cups of wine, don't we? Well, that depends whom you ask.

Of course, it really is only four cups that we drink at the Pesach seder. Acceptance of this practice, however, has not always been universal. Rather, it evolved as the best possible compromise between two contradictory Talmudic traditions. And only by going back to the root of the custom can we fully appreciate the relevance of our annual reenactment of the exodus from Egypt.

The four cups of wine reflect four separate phases that concluded with the Jewish people's transformation from Egyptian slaves into a free and autonomous nation. Within the narrative of the exodus itself, four different expressions of redemption allude to the process through which the Jews attained their freedom -- a freedom that was not born in an instant, but only as the culmination of four distinct and imperative stages.

*Vehotzeisi* -- And I will take you out from the burdens of Egypt. Although Pharaoh endured ten plagues before he sent the Jews forth from Egypt, only half that many persuaded him to release them from their labors. This enabled the Jews to adjust to independence, to learn what it meant to make their own decisions before the time when they would be held accountable for the choices they would make.

*Vehitzalti* -- And I will rescue you from their service. A slave whose master makes no demands upon him is still a slave. Having already been exempted from their labors, now the Jews were prepared to face the challenges of real freedom.

*Vegoalti* -- And I will redeem you with an outstretched arm. History teaches us that freed slaves often fail to make the adjustment from slavery to freedom. The culture of slavery may be so deeply rooted in their psyches that they cannot succeed as free people. Similarly, the Jews needed divine

assistance to purge their hearts and minds of the corrupt values of Egyptian culture, foreshadowing the way Jews all through history have had to struggle against the corrosive influence of foreign ideologies.

*Velokachti* -- And I will take you to Me as a people. Once liberated from the physical and psychological bondage of Egypt, the Jews still faced the subtle dangers of unrestricted freedom. Only with a sense of identity and purpose, only with a clearly defined national mission, could the Jews emerge from cultural anarchy to embrace true freedom.

But there remains one final expression in the narrative of our collective transformation from slaves to free people:

*Veheiveisi* -- And I will bring you into the land. As a free and sovereign nation, could the Jewish people begin to fulfill their mission even before they established themselves in their land, in Eretz Yisroel? Or is it impossible for us as Jews to consider ourselves truly free while we remain exiled from our ancestral homeland? This is the essence of the debate whether we drink four or five cups of wine.

What is our conclusion? We have none. We simply don't know. However, we do know that we have to drink at least four cups. So that is what we do, then wait for Elijah the Prophet to come, not to drink the fifth cup, but to tell us whether or not we should drink it ourselves.

But some of us refuse to wait for Elijah to affirm our commitment to Eretz Yisroel. This year, like every year, hundreds of Jewish high school graduates from around the country have deferred their first year in college to study Jewish tradition and Jewish law in the land from which we are exiled. No threat of terrorist violence has been able to dissuade these young men and women from renewing their connection to the land and the heritage of their ancestors.

And, perhaps even more impressive, their parents have set aside their own fears and their own worst nightmares to encourage their children to travel half way around the world to pursue their highest calling: to rise to the challenge of Jewish freedom.

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