# WINE, MATZAH AND TCHAIKOVSKY

*by Rabbi David Fohrman*

This year, as you sit down to the Seder table, ask yourself a question: Exactly what should I be thinking about as I take that first bite of matzah or first drink of wine? What kind of experience do the authors of the Haggadah want me to have?

We all know that Pesach is a moed of symbols. From Matzah to Marror , from wine to charoses; everything we eat at the Seder represents something; nothing is "just food''. The themes of these symbols are familiar to us: Matzah represents the bread that baked on our forefathers' backs; wine is the drink of free men. But their deeper meaning seems oddly vague.

Early in the Seder, the Haggaddah instructs us to declare: "This is poor man's bread; the bread our forefathers ate when they were enslaved in Egypt...". The image we find here is that of slavery. But read on. Later in the Seder, the Haggaddah tells us: "This matzah --why do we eat it? Because the Holy One redeemed our forefathers [from Egypt] before their dough could rise." Clearly, the picture now is one of redemption: Matzah symbolizes the speed with which we became free men. What, then, is the meaning of this matzah that we eat? Slavery or freedom? What mental picture are we meant to conjure as we eat this food?

Curiously, the same paradox asserts itself in another fixture of the Seder: The drinking of wine. We know that the four cups of wine commemorate the four words God used when committing Himself to redeem the Jews. Evidently, then, this wine symbolizes freedom. Yet we are also told that the wine commemorates the blood of Jewish children cast in the Nile -- one of the most painful moments of our slavery.

So what, then, does this mean? As we take that bite of matzah or sip of wine, what should go through our minds? Seemingly, we are asked to somehow experience slavery and freedom together. But is this really possible? And even if it is -- what would be the point of such a muddled mental game?

Perhaps the idea can be illuminated with an analogy.

Most of us have, at one point or another, heard a tape or performance of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. This classic work was commissioned by the Czar to commemorate Russia's victory over France in the war of 1812. It tells the story of historical battles through the medium of music, and so its not inaccurate to call the piece one long musical symbol.

Now, one might wonder: What makes this piece a classic? It actually contains almost no original music whatsoever. Tchaikovsky simply took two national anthems -- the French and the Russian -- and some Russian folk tunes,
and spliced everything together. Where is the genius here?

The genius, it seems, is all in the arrangement. Near the beginning of the overture, we hear the bold notes of the French national anthem mixed with Russian folk songs: The French have invaded the Russian villages. The folk songs are played in minor keys, as the music conveys the pain and bitterness of defeat. For a while, the French continue their musical charge;
but shortly thereafter they are met by the Czarist National Anthem. The Czar's
music gathers strength, and in a final clash, the Russian theme prevails; the Russians have been victorious over the French. At the end, we hear the same Russian folk songs once again -- but this time, they are played triumphantly, in major keys.

What is the cumulative effect? The message of the music, I think, is that one can't
truly appreciate victory if one has never experienced defeat. Indeed, it is only through defeat that freedom gains its full meaning. The final flurry of folk songs conveys the exultation of the villagers -- but it is an exultation
laced with the painful memories of past suffering. As we hear the folk songs played joyously, we are reminded of how, earlier, they were played mournfully. The victory is more meaningful because it contains within it the memories of loss.

And so it is with the symbols of the Seder. The matzah and wine are living, breathing symbols. For in the same bite that they offer us freedom, they also let us taste the faint memories of abject slavery. Our joy is

three-dimensional, rich and alive: We know what it means to be free because at the same time, we remember what it means to be slaves. Indeed, the words we say in the Haggadah teach this lesson to our minds. But through the foods we eat on that night, we learn it with our senses as well.

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