

THE DISCIPLINED PATH TO FREEDOM

by Judy Gruen

In his riveting autobiography, "Fear No Evil," Natan Sharansky recalled one of the many Passovers he spent in a Soviet prison. When his captors confiscated the small piece of matzoh a fellow prisoner planned to slip him in his punishment cell, Sharansky simply used salted sprats as his bitter herb, a cup of hot water in place of the wine-apple-nut mixture of charoset. He recited some Psalms he had memorized from the book that he had smuggled in but which his captors eventually discovered and confiscated.

"I tried to recall everything I could from the Passover Haggadah," he wrote, "starting with my favorite lines: 'In every generation a person should feel as though he, personally, went out of Egypt. . . Today we are slaves, tomorrow we shall be free men'."

Few Jews today can appreciate the sweet taste of freedom at the Passover seder like Sharansky, who was physically enslaved and often brutalized, but, through sheer force of will, remained psychologically and spiritually free.

As Jews around the world sit down to the Passover seder this year, they will commemorate the Jewish exodus from slavery in Egypt more than 3,500 years ago. Traditional Jews will conduct their seders using the ancient text of the Haggadah that Sharansky recalled from memory while a prisoner. Undoubtedly, Natan Sharansky will once again read from the complete text as a free man in Jerusalem, something he has been able to do since his own personal liberation in 1986 from the Soviet gulag.

But in an effort to make the seder seem more relevant, some Jews have tried to stamp their own intellectual and political mindsets on the Passover celebration by creating all manner of new Haggadahs: for vegetarians,

feminists, gays, environmentalists. Ironically, those most likely to create or use these Haggadahs have enjoyed political freedom their entire lives.

But are these self-styled Haggadahs the pathway to a Jewish spiritual awakening? In fact, the original Haggadah holds many layers of meaning for those willing to focus on its words and to plumb its ancient, timeless commentaries.

Among the Haggadah's most important messages is that gratitude, humility and subservience to God have important places in our lives. The Haggadah (literally, "the telling") underscores this message in part by the way it characterizes the leader of the Exodus, Moses himself, whose name is mentioned only once. The true star of this show is God.

It's understandable that Jews unacquainted with their own tradition would try to create a more meaningful seder experience through alternative Haggadahs, but by rewriting the text, they miss the point. Passover wasn't meant to be an expression of do-it-yourself liberationists. In treading the time-honored path of the Haggadah, Jews open themselves to the possibility of connecting with a primal spiritual freedom. If even Moses, who split the sea with a wave of his staff, remains silent in the pages of the Haggadah, how much more are ordinary men and women meant to ponder the idea that spiritual freedom lies along the disciplined path that God set out for His people. The idea may seem ironic, but it is also deeply meaningful.

After more than 200 years of Egyptian bondage, the Jewish exodus was but the beginning of the birth of the Jewish nation. Only later were our ancestors psychologically and spiritually ready to receive the Torah, the blueprint for Jewish living, the guide to infusing every facet of our lives with holiness.

With that in mind, the Haggadah becomes far more than a menu of things to say, to eat and to drink. It becomes a living reminder that freedom requires discipline. It reminds us too that even today, many of us are still enslaved to a variety of false gods: money, ego, power, status. With its quiet lessons in humility and liberation, the Haggadah needs no external or

modern agenda imposed on it to be relevant.

As Natan Sharansky knew even in his darkest days, imprisoned for the crime of being a Jew longing to live freely in Israel, the Haggadah offers a guidepost for true, lasting, genuine freedom.

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