

15 STEPS TO FREEDOM

by Rabbi Dovid Green

We thank Rabbi Shraga Simmons and Rabbi Yosef Goldstein for contributing to this Pesach Dvar Torah.

On the first nights of Pesach we have a commandment to retell the story of our exodus from Egypt. The Hagada is made in a special order to facilitate all the observances of the night. One thing which becomes clear from the outset is that we praise and thank G-d many times during the seder. It is an underlying theme throughout the seder to show our thanks to G-d for freeing us from the bondage of Egypt. Thankfulness is one of the goals of observing the seder.

The book Duties of the Heart (Rabbi Bachya Ibn Pekuda) discusses at length all of the wonderful things which G-d bestows to the human race. He follows that chapter with the discussion of serving G-d. His reasoning for juxtaposing those two chapters is that when someone contemplates the good which he receives, it behooves him to react with recognition and appreciation to the giver. When we realize the extent of what we receive from G-d in its full depth, logic dictates that we serve Him.

The term "bread of shame" is used in the Talmud, and has become a well known term. As we know it is used to depict the feeling one has when receiving something he has not earned. A healthy person wishes to return in some measure the favor he has received. It is human nature. This is why G-d created good and evil in the world, and gave us the opportunity to choose between the two -- so we could earn the good which we receive in this world and the next. Interestingly, we can conclude that G-d puts up with all of the things in this world which occur against His will, just so we can work at doing right, and not receive bread of shame.

A student of Torah approaches the Pesach seder with this attitude. We recount the story of our exodus from Egypt and our birth as a nation of servants of G-d. We internalize the teachings of the seder, and we come to a greater clarity and commitment to show G-d our recognition and appreciation in a tangible, ongoing fashion.

15 Steps To Freedom by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

A Jewish man is waiting in line to be knighted by the Queen of England. He is supposed to kneel and recite a sentence in Latin. When it comes his turn, the Queen taps him on the shoulders with the

sword -- and in the panic of excitement he forgets the Latin line. Thinking quickly, he recites the only other line he knows in a foreign language which he remembers from the Passover Seder: "Mah nishtana ha-lailah ha-zeh mi-kol ha-leilot." The puzzled Queen turns to her advisor and asks, "Why is this knight different from all other knights?"

Passover is the time when each Jew embarks on a personal journey from slavery to freedom. In order to guide us in our quest, the Sages carefully wrote a book outlining 15 steps to freedom. It's called the hagada. The Sages say that Passover occurs on the 15th of Nissan (the Jewish month), to teach us that just as the moon waxes for 15 days, so too our growth must be in 15 gradual steps. Think of these as 15 pieces of the Passover puzzle. Assemble them all and you've got freedom!

1. Kadesh

To begin the Seder, we make kiddush and sanctify the day. The word "kiddush" means special and unique. The first step to personal freedom is to recognize that you are special. You have a distinct combination of talents, skills and experiences that qualifies you to make a unique contribution to the world. In Egypt, the Jews were forced to build the store-cities of Pithom and Ramses. Why was this tortuous labor? Because these cities rested on swamp-land, and every time the Jews built one level, it sunk into the ground. Slavery is a life with no accomplishment, no achievement, and no meaning. On Passover, we begin our journey toward personal freedom by asking: What is humanity's biggest need? What can I contribute most profoundly to nurture and protect the world? And... what am I going to **do** about it?

2. Urchatz

"Why do we wash our hands at this point in this Seder?" the Talmud asks. "Because it is an unusual activity which prompts the children to ask questions." The very name hagada means "telling," for the goal of the Seder is to arouse curious questions, and satisfying answers. We've all felt the sense of awe upon meeting a fascinating person, or reading an enlightening new book. But as adults we may become enslaved by the idea that it's more sophisticated to "know it all." Passover teaches that to be truly free we must approach life with child-like wonderment. "Who is the wise person?" asks the Talmud. "The one who learns from everyone." Passover is the holiday of springtime, joy and renewal. That's why the Seder is filled with unusual activities. Be curious. Be a student of life. Be free.

3. Karpas

We take a green vegetable and bless G-d for creating fruits from the ground. Gratitude is liberating. "Who is the rich person?" asks the Talmud. "The one who's satisfied with what he's got." This appreciation comes through focusing on details. For example, to get this green vegetable to our table, it had to be planted, harvested, packed, shipped, unloaded, unpacked, displayed, and rung up by a cashier - before we even bring it home! If we truly appreciate all we have, we'll be constantly

proclaiming: "Life is a wonderful gift!" (On a deeper level, we dip the vegetable in salt water to let us know that even those things which appear bitter -- a lost job or a broken relationship -- are ultimately for the best.) Gratitude is an attitude. It requires constant effort and attention. A Jew strives to say 100 blessings every day. The reward is emancipation.

4. Yachatz

We break the middle matza, and put it aside to serve later as the Afikomen. Why do we break the matza now if we don't need it until later? Because a key to freedom is to anticipate the future and make it real. The definition of maturity is the ability to trade a lower pleasure now for a higher pleasure later. Children lack this perspective and demand instant gratification. (Why not eat 10 candies now? Because you'll get a stomachache later!) The challenge of adulthood is training ourselves to look at the long-term consequences. "Who is the wise man?" asks the Talmud. "The one who sees the future." We break the middle matza, not for now, but for later. Because true freedom is a long-term proposition.

5. Maggid

The Sages tell us that the unique ability given to humanity is the power of speech. Speech is the tool of building and construction. G-d used it to create the world ("And G-d **said**: Let there be light."). On Seder night, we use our gift of speech for the central part of the hagada: telling the Passover story. The very word "Pesach" is a contraction of the words "Peh Sach," meaning "the mouth speaks." The Hebrew name for Pharaoh, on the other hand, is a combination of "Peh Rah," meaning "the bad mouth." For just as speech has the power to build, it also has the power to destroy. Gossip and slander drive apart families and communities. On Passover, we use speech to "build" humanity - by communicating, connecting, and encouraging each other. We stay up long into the night, relating the story of our exodus, tasting and sharing the joy of freedom.

6. Rachtzah

One aspect of freedom is the ability to elevate ourselves above the lowest common denominator on the street. We've all felt the sensory assault of billboards, gratuitous talk-radio, immodest fashions, and violence on TV. At the Seder we wash our hands as a preparatory step before the matza, in order to carefully consider what it is we're about to eat. One who is concerned with spiritual and physical health is discriminating about all forms of consumption: which movies to watch, which friends to spend time with, and what standards of business ethics to uphold. The streets are filled with a multitude of options. But we must not consume indiscriminately. We "wash our hands" to cleanse and distance ourselves from unhealthy influences. Freedom is the ability to say: "I choose not to partake."

7. Motzi

We make the "hamotzi" blessing to thank G-d for "bringing forth bread from the ground." Which is

odd because G-d bring **wheat** from the ground - and **man** turns it into bread! In truth, G-d gives us two gifts:

1. 1) the raw materials, and
2. 2) the tools for transforming it into life.

Today, technology has pulled us away from seeing the beauty of G-d's creation. We fine-tune our environment with air-conditioning, synthetic foods, cosmetic surgery, and genetic engineering. Mankind is perilously close to "playing G-d." But in truth, man cannot create anything perfect; man can only tune into G-d's ultimate perfection. Which is more awesome to behold - the world's biggest super-computer, or the human brain? Between your two ears are 10 billion nerve cells -- a communication system 100 times larger than the entire communications system on Earth. When we make "hamotzi," we hold the matza with all our 10 fingers - reminding us that while human hands produced this food, it is yet another gift from the Creator and Sustainer of all life.

8. Matzah

Both bread and matza are flour mixed with water, then kneaded into a dough and baked. What is the difference between them? The difference is that dough has sat unattended for 18 minutes and becomes leavened (bread). The matza which we eat on Passover has been baked quickly. The spelling of "matza" is similar to "mitzvah:" Just as we shouldn't delay in the making of matza, so too we shouldn't procrastinate in performing a mitzvah. The lesson of matza is to seize the moment. Delaying even **one second** can mean the difference between an opportunity gained or lost. Why 18 minutes? Because the number 18 is the numerical value of "Chai," meaning "life." They say that "baseball in a game of inches." In reality, life itself is a game of seconds. The Talmud tells of people who had sunk to the depths of humanity, and then in one moment of insight reversed their lives for all eternity. More than just the difference between matza and bread, the Seder teaches us the difference between life and death.

9. Maror

At the Seder we say: "In every generation they rise against us to annihilate us." The Egyptians broke our backs and our spirits. The Romans destroyed the Second Temple and rivers of Jewish blood flowed. And so it was in every generation: Crusades, Inquisitions, Pogroms, Holocaust, Arab terrorism. Intense and irrational violence has stalked our people to every corner of the globe. Why the hatred? The Talmud says the Hebrew word for "hatred" (sinah) is related to the word "Sinai." At Mount Sinai, the Jewish People acquired the legacy of morality and justice - a message that evil cannot tolerate. We taught the world "to beat their swords into plowshares." We taught the world "to love your neighbor as yourself." We taught the world equality before justice, and that admiration belongs not to the rich and powerful - but to the good, the wise, and the kind. Hitler said: "The Jews have inflicted two wounds on mankind - circumcision on the body, and conscience on the soul." How right he was and how much more work we have to do.

Throughout the generations, the forces of darkness have sought to extinguish our flame. But the Jews have somehow prevailed. We have G-d's promise that we will be the eternal nation. For without our message, the world would revert to utter chaos. At the Seder, we eat the bitter herbs - in combination with matza - to underscore that G-d is present not only during our periods of freedom (symbolized by the matza), but during our bitter periods of exile as well. He will never forsake us.

10. Korech

The Hillel Sandwich is "bricks-and-mortar:" broken matza held together by bitter herbs and charoset. The matza was once whole. So too, the Jewish people can become crushed and divisive. But we are held together by our common links to Torah and our shared historical experiences. The Talmud says that as Jews in Egypt, we were redeemed only because of our unity. We were unified in our commitment to each other and to the future of our people. Weeks later at Mount Sinai, we stood together and accepted the Torah with one heart and one mind. Today, we are fighting amongst ourselves under the watchful eye of the world media. It is both embarrassing and discouraging. The biggest threat to Jewish survival may be from within. Our only response is to stand loudly and proclaim: Every Jew is a Jew. Period. The inclusion of the "wicked son" in the Seder expresses our conviction that no Jew is ever irretrievably lost. We are all one family, responsible to love and care for one another. The matza may be broken, but it can be restored. It is this "Hillel Sandwich" which has traditionally symbolized our commitment to glue the Jewish nation back together. On the merit of unity we were redeemed from Egypt, and it is on that merit that we shall be redeemed once again.

11. Shulchan Orech

When we think of attaining levels of holiness, it seems strange that one of the mitzvahs of Seder night should be eating a festive meal. That is because the Jewish attitude toward our physical drives and material needs is quite different from that of other religions. Our religious leaders are neither celibate nor do they meditate all day on a mountaintop. Rather than negating or denying the physical, Judaism stresses the importance of feasting and marital relations. G-d wants it that way. The proof is that instead of creating all foods bland (or in the form of "protein-pills"), G-d concocted a variety of flavors and textures - orange, strawberry, chocolate, banana and mango. Why? Because G-d wants His people to have pleasure! Adam and Eve were put into the Garden of Eden - the Garden of Pleasure. The Talmud says that one of the first questions a person is asked when they get up to Heaven is: "Did you enjoy all the fruits of the world?" On Seder night, we eat the festive meal to teach us that true freedom is the ability to sanctify life, not flee from it.

12. Tzafun

The last thing we eat all night is the Afikomen. (Matzah for dessert?! And I thought we were having macaroons!) We eat this final piece of Matzah -- not because we are hungry -- but because we are commanded. Physical pleasure, though an integral part of our lives, sometimes gives way to a

higher value. To illustrate this concept, the Talmud compares a person to a "horse and rider." The purpose of a horse is to take you where you want to go; but left to its own devices, the horse will get lazy and may even throw off the rider. That's why the rider has to be in control and making all the decisions. So too, our bodies are the vehicles for moving us through life; they require care and attention -- but not to the extent of assuming a pre-eminent position. There is a difference between eating healthy, and flying to Europe in order to dine on authentic Italian food. A person dominated by material strivings is anything but free. Judaism says: control the physical so it does not control you. Become a master of yourself.

It is this ability to rise above our physical selves that demarcates the difference between humans and animals. The story is told of the Baal Shem Tov looking at his neighbor eating dinner - and instead of a person, seeing the form of an ox. The man was solely in pursuit of physical pleasure, no different than an animal. Freedom is the ability to put our soul in control. "Who is the strong person?" asks the Talmud. "The one who can subdue his personal inclination." At the Seder, we hide the Afikomen, search, find it - and win a prize! The same is true with our spiritual yearning to do the right thing. Although it might be buried inside, we can search for it find it - and the prize is pure freedom.

13. Barech

Social pressure is one thing that holds us back from taking charge and doing the right thing. Barech, the "Grace After Meals" was instituted by Abraham 4000 years ago. Abraham would invite idolatrous wayfarers into his tent for a hearty meal, and then tell them the price of admission is to bless G-d. They thought he was crazy! Nobody believed in G-d! Abraham was called "Ha'Ivri" (the Hebrew), meaning "the one who stands on the other side." He was a social outcast and a lone voice in the wilderness. Would we have been able to stand up to that kind of social pressure? Do we speak out today against the proliferation of media sex and violence? Against drugs and crime in our streets? Slavery is a preoccupation with self-image and social status. ("What will they think of me if I voice my objection? How will I bear the pain of isolation and rejection?") The Hebrew word for Egypt is "Mitzrayim" - from the root "metzar," which means narrow and constricted. When we left Egypt, we became free of the societal forces which restrict us to a narrow path of fashion, image and ideas. Freedom means doing the right thing even when it may not be socially popular. I have to live with my own conscience. The reality is liberating.

14. Hallel

As the feeling of freedom inebriates our souls (helped along by the four cups of wine!), we sing aloud in joy. When the Jews came out of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea they broke out in song (Exodus chapter 15). When we see the upending of evil, the Egyptians drowning at the Sea, we are instinctively grateful to the One who orchestrated the turnaround! G-d delivers us from slavery unto freedom -- and we are amazed at the beauty and swiftness of it all. The Jews in Egypt had sunk to the 49th level of spiritual impurity, and only when they hit rock-bottom did they turn to G-d and cry

out. It was at that moment that they were redeemed. Redemption can be as quick as the blink of an eye. Our Egyptian experience began with Joseph sitting in the dungeon prison - and rising to the position of Prime Minister in the span of one day! The Seder is the only one of the 613 mitzvahs that is performed specifically at night, for on Passover, we turn the darkness into light. With "Hallel," we abandon all intellectual posits, and experience the emotional joy of freedom. Song is the expression of an excited soul. It is the way to break out of oneself and reach for freedom.

15. Nirtzah

We conclude our Seder with the prayer, "Next Year in Jerusalem." Every synagogue in the world faces Jerusalem. It is the focus of our hopes and aspirations - not merely in a geographic sense, but in a conceptual sense as well. The Talmud says creation began in Jerusalem, and the world radiated outward from this spot. Medieval maps show Jerusalem at the epicenter of Asia, Europe, and Africa. The world flows into this place, and all life's forces resonate here. From here, the whole world is cast into perspective. The name Jerusalem means "city of peace." Peace, "shalom," is more than the absence of conflict; it is the seamless harmony of humanity genuinely embracing a common vision. Jerusalem is a vision of G-d in our lives, a metaphor of a perfected world. Jerusalem gives us hope to achieve what we as a people must do, to sanctify this world. In Egypt, we hadn't yet absorbed this lesson: we were too burnt out from hard work (Exodus 6:9) and had become immersed in the spiritual abyss of Egyptian society. When we finally were redeemed, it happened so quickly and hastily that even then we were unable to grasp its full significance. What this means is that year after year, each successful Seder adds meaning to the original events, and brings us closer to the final redemption. As the Seder draws to a close, we sense the process of redemption is under way. We shout aloud: "Next Year in Jerusalem!" We're on our way back home.

Rabbi Shraga Simmons puts out a weekly dear Torah. Those who wish to know more should Email him at ssimmons@aish.edu.

During the Seder we sing the Dayenu. In the Dayenu we thank G-D for all he did for us and we say If he only would have (And stopped there, and done nothing else for us) Dayenu, It would have sufficed and we would have great gratitude for what he gave us.

One of the stanzas reads, "If he would have brought us close to Mount Sinai and not have given us the Torah, **Dayenu!** (It would have been sufficient)

The question here is obvious, what is the purpose of the Jewish nation standing at Mount Sinai other than to receive the Torah?

There are many answers to this question. I will share two answers that I have heard from to great Sages I have been privileged to know.

My Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman ZT"L of Ner Yisroel, used to give the following

answer. We all know that our forefathers kept all of G-d's commandments even before G-D revealed himself on Mount Sinai and gave the Jews the Torah. The way they were able to keep all of G-D's commandments was through the great spiritual levels they were able to attain. They attained such a great level of spirituality that they were able to understand exactly what G-d demands from mankind in the form of all of his Mitzvos/commandments.

Rav Ruderman used to explain that when the Jews stood at Mount Sinai and G-D revealed himself to the Jews they also attained the same spiritual level that our forefathers worked so hard, over many years, to attain and they also understood what G-D demands from every person. Therefore, even if we would not have been given the Torah we would have understood all of the laws in the Torah and we would have adhered to them. (He then went on to explain what the great advantage of actually receiving the Torah was. In short it was a new special relationship between G-D and the Jews in the form of his requiring **them** to keep his laws. A special bond of love and commitment was created by the giving of the Torah and the Jew's acceptance of it.)

Another answer I heard was from Rabbi Eliezer Kirzner ZT"L who was a Rov in Brooklyn, N.Y. for about 50 years. The Posuk tells us that "The Jews rested under the mountain" The Torah uses the verb **vayichan** which is a singular form of the verb. Rashi asks why does it not say **vayachanu** And they rested, using a plural form of the verb? Rashi explains that they rested: "As one man, with one heart." i.e. They was a such unity among Klall Yisroel, the Jews that they were as one single entity. With this introduction Rabbi Kirzner used to explain this stanza in the Dayenu. True there was a very high and lofty purpose in coming to Mount Sinai, the giving of the Torah by G-D himself. But, if all the Jews would have merited at Mount Sinai was that unity, That brotherly love that united all the Jews into one nation than that surely would have been sufficient!

Once the questions of the MAh Nishtanah (Why is this night different?) are asked the Haggada begins the answer with the "**Avodim Hoyinu**" We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and if the Holy one blessed be he had not taken us out of Egypt then we and our children and grandchildren would still be **enslaved** to Pharaoh in Egypt. (**Note:** The hebrew text says "**Meshubodim** Le parah... All the English Haggadot that I saw translate this as enslaved. In truth the word **meshubod**, has the same root as slave **eved** but it doesn't mean enslaved but subject, or responsible to.)

Many commentators ask: What does the hagada mean if G-d would not have taken us out of Egypt we would still be "enslaved" in Egypt? Over the past 3,000 years isn't it logical to say that the Jews would have revolted and escaped? Or, as had occurred in many countries, a benevolent leader would have freed the slaves. In either scenario we would not **still** be slaves!

There are two possible answers I would like to propose. The first I have heard many times from my brother, Although I forget the originator of the thought. It is true that physically we would have been freed from the heavy service in Egypt. However no matter **how** we became free we would owe

some debt of gratitude to our benefactors, who in all probability would have been Egyptians, then we would still be **meshubod** to them. In truth in fifty separate places in the Torah G-D reminds us to keep his Mitzvos, his commandments, **because** he took us out of Egypt! That is what the author of the hagada alluded to when he said if G-D had not freed us then we would owe a debt of gratitude to some flesh and blood creature and we would still be "Enslaved" by that debt. But now that G-D himself has freed us we are lucky to have been chosen by him to serve him and be **his** chosen nation.

Reb Aharon Kotler, Rosh Yeshiva and founder of the Yeshivah in Lakewood, give a different answer. He also points out the change in the wording of the hagada from We were Slaves, "Avodim Hoyinu" to "Meshubodim Hoyinu". He explains that there were two different and unique forms of enslavement in Egypt. The first one was purely physical. The Egyptians forced us to build storage houses in Pison and Ramses. The second form of enslavement was our spiritual enslavement. The Gemmorah/Talmud tells us the Jews sunk into the depths of "Tumah", The depth of sin and impurity until they were almost at the fiftieth level of impurity from which no human can elevate himself and return to the levels of holiness that a person should and must strive to attain.

Therefore, Reb Aharon explains, although it is possible that if Heaven forbid, G-d would not have taken the Jews out of Egypt The Jews still would have gotten free one way or another. However, since they would have been in Egypt and they would have continued that free fall, then they never would have been able to recover from that fall. That is what the hagada means by the term "We and our children and grandchildren would still be 'enslaved' to Pharaoh." Our spiritual exile **never** would have ended had G-D not extricated us at that exact moment.

These divrei Torah are in the merit of **Yosef Yehuda Ben Baila Rus**. May he have a complete and speedy recovery.

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