Passover, Rabbi Prof. David Hartman wrote in 2010, is meant to celebrate and sustain our deep yearning for freedom, not necessarily to show that God can change the order of the universe. Passover is a holiday that inculcates the belief that man will overcome oppression, that freedom will reign throughout the world. The faith that tyranny will ultimately be vanquished is deeply embedded in the significance of Passover.

By DAVID HARTMAN 1931-2013

…Coupled with the concerns about food, Passover suggests a supernatural model of redemption, which posits that God will break into history and save us just as He did during the Exodus from Egypt. Rather than give weight to our own personal will, responsibility and moral agency, this theological worldview says that the best we can hope for is that God will look down and have mercy on us. It is a way of understanding the holiday that positions us as passive and patient, waiting for an interventionist God to rescue us from our galut (Def: Jewish Diaspora) realities. Does this truly reflect what Passover is about? A memory of miracles? An obsession with rituals? Whatever happened to the dramatic, overarching themes of freedom from oppression, self-governance, and spiritual rebirth?

In search of a little religious sobriety, I recently began revisiting the work of Mordechai Kaplan, the great 20th century Jewish thinker and founder of the Reconstructionist movement. The crucial question for Kaplan is how do the commandments percolate into the lifestream of the Jewish people? How do the rituals shape us ethically? How do the mitzvot propel us to become full human beings and reach our powers of ethical personality? In other words, how does Judaism impact us in the quest for human self-realization? Kaplan’s philosophy grew out of his quest to understand how the Jewish people created patterns of living with the potential to redeem us from selfishness, narcissism, cruelty, and open us to a world of holiness.

... I am very moved by Kaplan’s thought. In Mordechai Kaplan I found a potential remedy to the frantic praxis and fervent fantasizing that have made such deep encroachments into popular religious thinking about Passover. Kaplan constantly tried to find underlying spiritual and ethical meanings beneath the surface of Passover. He sought to crack open halakhic formalism and reveal a deep teleology (def: purpose in the material world) of spiritual aspiration.

What is the holiday of Passover about? We all know the story of the Ten Plagues, the Exodus, the Splitting of the Red Sea. But what do we make of our inherited narrative, which we recount every year around the seder table? How do we
understand its theological implications? What kind of God is the God of Passover? And what are we talking about when we talk about freedom?

For the Jewish medieval philosopher Yehuda Halevi, the Exodus story is the central prism through which to understand the Jewish God, as it illustrates the most fundamental principle of Judaism: God’s absolute will and sovereignty over history. For Halevi, it is the miracle of the Exodus that mediates the reality of God. It is this view that Kaplan rejects unequivocally. The notion of Judaism as supernaturalism - the idea of a God who is above nature, yet whose interference nature must obey - is anathema to Kaplan’s thought. Kaplan, and his philosophical antecedents, such as Maimonides and Spinoza, did not see nature in opposition to God’s will. On the contrary, it was in the very processes of nature that they saw the divine. For Maimonides, God is revealed within the normal patterns of the world, within the natural order of the universe. According to this school of thought, we need not see God as supernatural in order to feel that God is present.

Maimonides maintains that it is precisely because God created human beings with rationality that once we begin to seek righteousness and perform good deeds, we have a natural hunger to continue. Those who, of their own initiative, “come to purify themselves,” are aided by God. God’s “aid,” in this sense, is built into the laws of nature - in this case, into the very essence of human nature. God has structured a universe in which human beings are driven by an innate capacity to act righteously. That is the meaning of divine grace. God is not seen in miraculous breakthroughs, but in the very structure of human reason and human nature.

Thus, according to Maimonides, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is distinctly not an example of God intervening in nature or compromising human will. God did not harden Pharaoh’s heart so much as he created a world in which Pharaoh’s ongoing refusal to free the Hebrew slaves gave birth to a self-perpetuating reality. For this reason, Pharaoh represents the antithesis of freedom. He is the embodiment of enslavement, of both the self and the other. Passover is meant to celebrate and sustain our deep yearning for freedom, not necessarily to show that God can change the order of the universe. Passover is a holiday that inculcates the belief that man will overcome oppression, that freedom will reign throughout the world. The faith that tyranny will ultimately be vanquished is deeply embedded in the significance of Passover.

As Erich Fromm writes in *Escape From Freedom*, the meaning of Passover is to celebrate deeply our belief that humankind will overcome oppression. Yet we must not allow that faith to obscure the need to address the various expressions
of modern-day slavery. How do we treat foreigners and immigrants in our society? Do we take seriously the precept not to oppress the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt? The Haggadah calls for nothing less than a seminar on freedom, slavery, and oppression. (But don’t be imprisoned by the Haggadah text. Fromm's book should be discussed at the seder.) And we should leave the seder table with a new consciousness of what freedom is and what it means to yearn for it.

When I was a rabbi in Montreal, I imagined a Jewish society in Israel where the values and themes of a particular holiday would inspire a national discussion. I dreamed that when the calendar turned to Passover, the dominant discussions in the culture would be about subjugation, alienation, and human dignity; that the prime minister, the rabbinate, and Members of Knesset would speak the language of freedom and self-determination. I hoped that the Jewish state would be a place where the deepest values of our tradition are filtered into the public discourse. That Passover would mean more than spring cleaning, that we would at least attempt to take the notions of oppression and freedom seriously and examine how they were reflected in our lived reality.

But what do we talk about instead? In place of a holiday about values, Passover has become a holiday about recipes…

When my children were little, I used to ask them at Passover, what is a slave? But they didn’t know. So I told them a story about a little boy whose father lived far away from the family because he had to make a living. The father was determined to be home for his son’s birthday. But when the day in question came, he had to call his child and explain to him that he couldn’t come because his master demanded that he work more. The son, of course, says, “Why do you have to listen to him?” And that father explains, “Because I am a slave and I have no choice.” When I told my kids this story, they thought, wow, what a terrible thing to be a slave, and that got them into the spirit of Passover. Why did I tell them this story? Because I felt an obligation to make it real in their lives.

What Kaplan wanted was to make Judaism real as an experience, not as a supernatural obsession. He did not believe that revelation meant God breaking into history. He believed that Judaism is not most essentially from God; it is, rather, the Jewish people’s prayer to God [say: “addressing the power that makes for fulfillment]. In Kaplan’s understanding, it is not that the Jewish people exist in order to serve God and to obey the commandments [say: “imperatives”]; the commandments exist to help the Jewish people access a sense of possibility for
their own moral future. Judaism is the Jewish people’s way of maintaining God [Life] consciousness in our souls.

Redemption is not otherworldly salvation at the end of time. It’s not the World to Come or Resurrection of the Dead. For Kaplan, redemption is not something that’s going to happen at the end of days when we’ll all be instructed to pack our bags and welcome the messiah. Redemption is an individual’s growth into a complete human being, a person who fulfills all of his or her aptitudes.

Redemption is not an abstract philosophical or theological construct, but a fine-tuning of the human soul that helps us to love more and to be more sensitive. It creates a meaningful pattern of self-fulfillment.

... Messianism... is not a predictive moment in history but a religious aspiration to redo history in the image of peace and love. It is the mission of these holy days to create conditions within human beings for their personal fulfillment. It is the purpose of the holidays to wake us up to our true capacities, to release the deeper ethical components of what it means to be a human being.

That is the reason it’s incumbent upon us to try to keep alive the ethical implications of the Haggadah. If we understand and internalize the true message of Passover, we can develop a whole new response to those without power, and take seriously the opportunity to love the stranger as yourself.

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• [italicized text in brackets indicates editor’s clarification or suggestion]
• ... indicates abridged original text
• http://www.jewishexponent.com/redemption-and-the-rational-mind