

How to be Joyful on Pesach in Such a Complicated World (the Lessons of Rabbi Akiva)

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According to the latest estimates, over 4.3 million Ukrainians have fled the country, mostly women and children, leaving behind husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons to fight for the homeland against the Russian army. More than 10 million have fled their homes in search of safety in other parts of the country, taking with them only that which they can carry. They have ventured out, unprepared for the harsh winter weather and the sheer danger of traveling in the open. Twelve million Ukrainians are reported stranded or unable to leave their homes. Many of those people are elderly, disabled, and otherwise disadvantaged. They live each day hoping that a rocket doesn't tear through their apartment building, or that marauding Russian soldiers don't shoot them in the streets. Many thousands of Ukrainians have made their way to Israel, not all of them Jewish mind you, but the Knesset recently appealed to Israelis to open their homes to Ukrainians and offer them a place to attend a Passover seder. Most of us marvel at but don't necessarily fulfill the Haggadah's proclamation: *Kol dichfin yeitei v'yeichol*...All who are hungry, let them come and eat. This year in Israel, many will do precisely that. As I said, though, there are plenty of Jews in Ukraine who will not have the luxury of celebrating Pesach in the Jewish state. In Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa and other places, Warm Homes have been set up to accommodate those who were unable to escape, 10,000 seder kits are being distributed across the country—a country that currently does not have a functioning postal service. Britain's Rakusen Kosher Food manufacturer has dedicated its entire factory to producing a million Passover matzot, 70,000 boxes all for Jews trapped in Ukraine. The situation is dire and dangerous.

We tend to joke about the chore of Passover cleaning, kashering, the big meals, and long guest lists. But to make those jokes and even to be exhausted by all the preparations is really a luxury that we have as Jews who are in fact *b'nai chorin*...we are free--to celebrate, to enjoy, to eat lavishly, and drink four or cups of wine, and recline around beautiful tables precisely because of the miracles that this holiday commemorates. We wish each other a *chag sameach*, a Happy Passover; During *chol ha'moed* we say *Moadim le'Simcha*, 'A Joyous festival!' and we refer to this season as *z'man cheiruteinu*, the season of our freedom, our redemption. We sing Hallel and celebratory seder songs about our deliverance and God's protection and care for the Jewish people. But how are we supposed to maintain such a joyful posture, not just for the Passover holiday, but the entire month of Nisan, when we turn on the news and see such egregious suffering, such wanton destruction, the horrors and brutality of war? We are obviously not the first generation of Jews to grapple with this cognitive dissonance. And I believe the Haggadah contains a powerful palliative to the despair we might be feeling as we attempt to also capture the joyful, hopeful spirit of Pesach.

As we conclude the Magid section of the haggadah and just before we drink the second cup of wine and prepare to wash for matzah, we recite an extended *bracha*...We don't just say *borei p'ri ha'gafen*, but we first say another blessing. As the Haggadah was being developed, there

was actually a disagreement between two of our greatest Sages about the language of this blessing. Both Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva agreed that the first part of the blessing should be: Blessed are you Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has redeemed us and redeemed our ancestors from Egypt, *asher ga'alanu v'ga-al et avoteinu mi'Mitzrayim*. Rabbi Tarfon said, that's it. That says it all! But Rabbi Akiva said, no that does not say it all! He added..."AND who brought us to this night to eat matzah and bitter herbs. So may the Lord our God bring us in peace to other seasons and festivals that are coming to us, happy in the building of Your city, and rejoicing in Your service; and there we shall eat of sacrifices and Pesach offerings of which the blood will reach the side of Your altar to be accepted. And we shall thank You in a new song for our redemption and for our lives' salvation. Blessed are You, Lord, Redeemer of Israel. And then, *Borei p'ri ha'gafen!* For those of you who remember since last year, it is in fact the much longer Rabbi Akiva version of this blessing that made it into the Haggadah, and not Rabbi Tarfon's abbreviated text. The question is, what's the difference?

Rabbi Tarfon certainly captured the spirit of Pesach. He connected the events of the past *asher ga'al avoteinu*, that God both redeemed our ancestors, *v'ga-al otanu*, and that we are the direct recipients and beneficiaries of that redemption. What Rabbi Akiva adds, however, is hope for the future. This redemption was not only an event in the past, but an awakening of even greater things to come. Rabbi Akiva, who witnessed the destruction of the Temple, who saw with his own eyes to razed and ruined city of Jerusalem still had the wherewithal to say, 'Jerusalem *will* be rebuilt, worship *will* be restored in the Holy City, while we may be shedding tears today, our mouths *will again* be filled with song in the future. We *will* be *s'meichim ve'sasim*, we will be happy, we will rejoice again! What an incredibly visionary Rabbi Akiva was. What a source of reassurance and hope.

There is another indication of this in an earlier episode of the Haggadah, that famous all-night seder of the Five great sages, Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, and of course Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon. The Haggadah says *she'hayu mesubin biv'nai brak...* that they were reclining together in B'nai Brak. Why does the Haggadah go out of its way to tell us where this seder took place? Why do we need to know that it happened in that particular town on the Mediterranean coastal plane in Eretz Yisrael? According to the Talmud, B'nai Brak was the home of just one of those five sages...and that sage was Rabbi Akiva. The other four came from their homes in other towns to join Rabbi Akiva at his seder. This is actually highly unusual and unexpected. Rabbi Yehoshua lived in Peki'in, in the upper Galilee, Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Eliezer lived in Lod. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria lived in Yavneh. Two of the Sages, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua were Rabbi Akiva's teachers, his mentors! Throughout rabbinic tradition, students, disciples left their homes to be with their teachers, not the other way around. Why would these revered, elder Sages travel to their younger colleague's town and home for *yom tov*? According to Rabbi Jacob J. Schachter, "they wondered, 'Where can we go to gain hope and inspiration to help us face our deep sadness, disappointment, and depression? And the answer

was clear. ‘We will go to Benei Berak, to Rabbi Akiva’s house. There we will surely be uplifted and find the strength to cope with our current reality.’”¹

In that same blessing that Rabbi Akiva composed for the second cup of wine, there is a phrase, *ve’nodeh lecha shir chadash*: We will give thanks to You, God, by singing a new song. Later Sages make a fascinating point about that wording. They say that all songs of thanksgiving for experiences in the past are in the feminine form, *shira*. Think about the Song of the Sea, *Az yashir Moshe u’vnei Yisrael et ha’shira ha’zot...* But the song of future redemption, the ultimate hope for the world is written in masculine form, *shir*. There’s a lot of kabbalah there, but suffice it to say that while we give thanks for every moment of grace, every rescue, every salvation, every relief from oppression in the past, we still hope for something even more grand, more universal to come in the future...a true *shir chadash*.

I pray that all of our homes and all of our seders will be imbued by the spirit of Rabbi Akiva. That we joyfully sing the songs of the past and look forward to the *shir chadash* of the future. That Rabbi Akiva’s insatiable optimism and hope will enable us to see beyond the suffering of today, and imagine a future of abundant blessing for all people. I hope we all incorporate readings, conversation, commemoration of suffering the world today; that we remember our Jewish brothers and sisters in Ukraine who will have seders in shelters, refugee camps, army bases, and synagogues. Jews who will skirt curfew restrictions in order to join others for a seder meal. Jews in Moldova and Poland and Romania and Hungary who will say at the end of their seder “Next Year in Ukraine,” hoping against hope that they will someday be able to return to their homes and communities. Let us remember the empty seats at seder tables because of those who were victims of recent terrorist attacks in Israel. But let us never be stuck in despair. Rabbi Akiva, who saw his entire world crumble before him, who took great personal risks to teach Torah, who himself became a martyr for the cause of the perpetuation of Torah and Jewish life, reminds us that Passover is both a celebration of a historic redemption as well as a template for the future restoration of the Jewish people, and all people. *Kein yehi yatzon, bimheira veyameinu...* may it happen speedily and in our day. And as we say, *L’shana ha’ba-ah Biyrushalayim!* Amen!

¹ Schacher, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Jewish Resilience: Holding Strong in a Time of Crisis, *Jewish Action*, Fall 2020