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In his delightful book entitled Jewish Humor, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin tells the story about advice columnist, Abigail Van Buren, also known as “Dear Abby.”

One morning, the following letter appeared in her column.

It read as follows:

“Dear Abby – I am not Jewish – but I have many Jewish friends – and I know that you are Jewish too. So maybe you can help me understand: Why is it that whenever I ask a Jewish persona a question, they always answer with another question?”

Abby responded: “How should we answer?”

However apocryphal that tale may be, it nevertheless goes to the heart of our Passover experience. One of the highlights of the Seder is Mah Nishtana – the asking of the 4 Questions. Now, there is even a book which offers the translation of Mah Nishtana in 300 different languages – to ensure that in every corner of our world – there is easy access to these questions.

The purpose of the Seder is not just to chant ancient Hebrew formulations – as important as they may be – but to use our texts as a springboard for dialogue, debate and exploration of the way our Jewish historical narrative of the Exodus continues to reverberate in its message and implications.

We begin our Seder with the invitation:

“Let all who are hungry come and eat.” . . . and so, the obvious question:

Is hunger a reality in contemporary America??

Let’s listen to a 10-year old John from Canton, Michigan:

He says:

“I feel bad when my mom tries to buy me some food and (I tell) her: “Mom, if you’re not getting yourself something, then I’m not getting anything” . . . and she says: “Yes you are” . . . and I say: “No, I’m not.” It makes me feel sad that my parents sometimes feed us kids and not themselves. But it makes me happy that they care so much about my brother and me.

I’m ten years old – and at about my age, kids want to help care for their family a little more . . . My mom is really struggling to get a job . . . My dad is disabled and can’t work a regular job anymore. To pull together some money, we go out and find some scrap metal and sell it to the junkyard for maybe a hundred bucks a load.”

John continues:

“There was a period before we got food stamps, when I was so hungry that it hurt a little in my stomach and kind of made me out of breath. I didn’t tell my friends about our situation. It was a private thing. I got really bad grades in school then, and I was used to getting good grades. If I’m hungry in school, I can’t focus a lot – and I don’t understand the lesson. I’m glad that the school I’m in now can provide breakfast – because you need breakfast to get you going in the morning. The school gives us apple slices, bagels and cheese and those little fruit juices. When I don’t eat in the morning, it makes me drowsy – and I stare off in space just thinking about lunch . . . and if I didn’t get school lunches, I’d be a little disappointed, because I might not have enough to eat.”

In spite of these circumstances, John concludes on an upbeat note:

“I think we are going to have a good life again. When that happens, I’m gonna help hungry people out, like invite them to dinner and give them some food to take home. I will be excited when my mom gets a job. Then we will be “good to go” – and have some extra money for some of the stuff that we haven’t been able to do. Maybe we could go to Cedar Point (an amusement park). I’ve never been – and always wanted to.”

Hunger in America – out of the mouth of babes.

Our next question: Are there still Jews in our world who are oppressed – and who are waiting to come home to Eretz Yisrael? At the start of 2013, about 2,000 Falas Mura remained in Ethiopia, awaiting Aliya to Israel . . . a process which has been unfolding over the last 30 years – and is on the verge of being completed.

A few weeks ago, “a group of Ethiopian Jews gathered at the transit center in Addis Ababa. A half-hour before sundown, they formed two lines in the center’s small courtyard, carrying nothing but small bags and backpacks. They exited through the center’s gate – one by one and walked silently through filthy alleys strewn with trash and rotting animal bones – to the bus that would serve as the last leg of their Ethiopian journey – before boarding a plane to Israel.

No one spoke – no one made even a sound – except the soft sound of their feet taking them home at last.”

More than 80,000 Ethiopian Jews have been re-settled in Israel. On our B’nai Israel trip to Israel last summer, we visited with some Ethiopian teens in our sister-community of Bet Shemesh. Their needs are many and complex – in their effort to move from a third-world culture to the “start-up nation,” which is the nature of contemporary Israel – fast-moving and technologically very sophisticated. The road to freedom for Israel’s Ethiopian Jews is not yet entirely fulfilled – but there is hope – there is progress – and there is the expectation that in partnership with Jews throughout the world, they will have a better future.

And right here at home, in the chambers of our American Supreme Court, a few miles away, a landmark case is being heard today, as we mark our Festival of Freedom, Hag ha-Herut. Do American gays have the fundamental right to experience the joy, security and benefits that marriage in our society offers to others? That is the core question that the nine Supreme Court justices will be reviewing – while all America waits for the answer – especially those who for so long have felt the sting of discrimination and inequality.

Israel Zangwill, the great English writer, put it aptly:

“On Passover, Jews eat history.”

Why do we sit at the Seder each year – eating history . . . ?

Because the story of freedom, full freedom for all God’s children – continues to unfold – touching us – inspiring us – and teaching us that by our actions, we must bring the era of justice, kindness and peace a little closer.