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FIRST DAY OF PASSOVER

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“FREEDOM NOW”

Imagine the scene: 260 Jews hike into the desert near Moab, Utah – and share in a dramatic Seder – held under massive rock arches – complete with dancing, singing and teaching. Exactly at sunset, these folks move to a spot along the Colorado River – where they eat brisket and matzah ball soup while sitting on a strip of fabric laid out on the desert floor.

(Washington Post 6 April 2012)

No – it is certainly not your grandparents' Seder – nor probably the Seder most of us have ever experienced – but according to the article on the front page of yesterday's Washington Post, many Jews are seeking a new sense of community and new forums and settings for time-honored celebrations. Whether observed in the Utah wilderness – at a posh resort hotel – or in the comfort of our home, it

is abundantly clear that Passover retains a strong grip on our individual and collective Jewish psyches.

Why so? While decidedly particularistic – after all, the Haggadah at the Seder relates the story of our people as they emerge from Egyptian slavery to freedom – the message of Passover is also profoundly universalistic. Here is how Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it:

“When black Americans say: ‘let my people’ – when South American liberation theologians in the 1960’s based their work on the book of Exodus, when Nelson Mandela entitled his autobiography, The Long Walk to Freedom, each was adopting Israel’s story and making it their own. More than Plato’s Republic or Aristotle’s Politics, more than Rousseau’s The Social Contract or Marx’s Das Kapital, the Pesach story has been the West’s most influential source-book of liberty.”

Henrich Heine once quipped: “Since the Exodus, freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent.”

The core message of Pesach continues to inspire both Jews and many others precisely because it conveys a core ethical truth: every human being is a child of God – and every human being has the right

to the fullest expression of freedom. Pesach, then, is not just about matzah, Haroset and maror. Pesach is about how Jews join together as families and as a community each year – generation after generation – to voice our passion for a world where human dignity and justice are God-given rights accorded to all.

The corollary of that proposition is that when those rights are missing or are being trampled, we must not be silent.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity of speaking at the weekly vigil held each Monday at noon on behalf of Alan Gross. Outside of the building on 16th Street in the District which houses the interests of the Cuban Government, I shared the following thoughts with the assembled group.

“Alan Gross is a captive of the Cuban Government. A member of our Washington Jewish community, he is languishing – in poor health – in a Cuban prison. Day after day, month after month, now year after year, he is alone and separated from loved ones. The cruel forces orchestrated by the Cuban government and pitted against Alan Gross represent a deeply disturbing miscarriage of justice. As Jews, we cannot stand idly by – when our friend and neighbor is in danger.

Ours is a tradition where Pidyon Shevuyim – the freeing of captives – is a compelling moral imperative. First pioneered by Abraham when he succeeded in saving his nephew Lot – and then enacted at other moments in our history – the concept of Pidyon Shevuyim teaches us that voices raised in protest can achieve results. The examples are many: the Jews of the former Soviet Union, the Jews of Ethiopia – and most recently, Gilad Shalit.

Alan Gross desperately needs our intercession on his behalf – with our hope and prayer that the Government of Cuba may free him – restoring him to his family and to us, his community.”

I concluded my comments:

“Soon we shall celebrate Passover. It is Hag Ha-Herut, the Festival of Freedom. To paraphrase the immortal words found in the Torah – and which echo through time – Let us call out to the Cuban Government: “Let Alan Gross go!”

All of us remain stunned by the recent murders at the Ozar Hatorah School in Toulouse, France. It is horrifying that 70 years after the deportation of tens of thousands of Jews from France to the

gas-chambers of Auschwitz, Jewish life in France is again under assault... In Montpellier, the Jewish religious center was fire-bombed, as were synagogues in Strasbourg and Marseilles. In Paris, there are numerous anti-Jewish incidents each day ... and the phrase “Dirty Jew” was smeared on the statue of Alfred Dreyfus.

France is the third largest Jewish community in the world – after Israel and the United States – and sadly, on this Pesach, the Jews of France are not fully free. We dare not be bystanders in their anxiety and pain.

Oppression assumes many forms. It may be the sense of futility that haunts those seeking employment in our own society – and turned down over and over again. It may be the despair of those lined up at our local Manna Food Center – struggling to maintain a semblance of stability for themselves and their families – when the divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots” becomes ever-greater. It may be the anger of those who see in the death of a young black teenager in Florida yet another manifestation of the prejudice and racism still inherent in our American culture.

Each year, the arrival of Pesach reminds us that our community, our society, our world – and we ourselves – are works-in-progress. The Haggadah is not just about long ago. It is about the “here and now” ... speaking to our hearts and minds – and challenging us to be change-agents: to roll up our sleeves for freedom ...

freedom for Alan Gross –

freedom for the Jews of France –

freedom for those who are by-passed on the road to the fulfillment of the American dream.

For only when we have done our work as change-agents can we truly sing “Dayenu” – “It is enough. “