

**Three Words to Ponder on Pesach**  
*Shabbat HaGadol*  
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**(Based on a sermon by Rabbi Jacob Chinitz)**  
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All the steps and the ritual in the Seder involve physical action. But there is also talk. Questions are asked. *Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim* – “telling the story of the going out of Egypt” is, after all, talk.

One particular demand for talk is central: *Kol Shelo Omar Shelosha Devarim Eilu BaPesach Lo Yatza Yedei Chovato*. “Whoever has not recited these three words has not fulfilled his obligation.” Three words are required to be said, not only done, or the duty has not been fulfilled. I suspect it is not the talking that is crucial but the thinking.

What are the three words? **Pesach, Matzah, and Maror.**

Why? Well, you could say that these three objects symbolize the story of the Exodus. But how?

I’d like to suggest that these three symbolize three crucial aspects about this festival of freedom, aspects that raise questions, aspects that we should explore, each and every year.

Those three are: **Discrimination**, as represented by Pesach; **Urgency**, as represented by Matzah; and **Reality**, as represented by Maror. Each poses serious challenges to us.

**I.** Raised in the modern world, we reject **discrimination**. The democratic ideal rejects discrimination: in color, sex and class.

And yet, discrimination is at the heart of the Pesach story. What is more blatant discrimination than killing one firstborn son and not killing another firstborn son?



The word Pesach means to skip, to be unequal, to discriminate. Modern liberalism rejects this essential element of Pesach. “All men are equal.” All religions are worthy.

How do we reconcile this with Pesach, which says that morality demands discrimination between good and evil, enemy and friend, truth and falsity? How do we reconcile this?

**II.** The essence of Matzah is timing, **urgency**. Dough that stands for less than 18 minutes is Matzo, for more than 18 minutes is Chometz. The Exodus was an **urgent** manner. It was not relaxed enough for regular bread. There used to be a company that sold bread in the area where I lived called, “Bond Bread.” They used to have a billboard commercial reading: “Baked While You Sleep.” Matzo cannot be baked while you sleep. It must be baked by the timing of a stopwatch.

History and Destiny are not for the relaxed but for the **urgent**. The stock market, surgery, sports, and warfare all demand split-second timing. Shabbat starts exactly 18 minutes before sunset. One sixth of the Talmud is called Moed (Holy Days) and in Rambam's Code one fourteenth is called Zemanim (Seasons). Though we might be attracted to religion because it can grant us comfort and consolation, at its heart, religion is not timeless, restful, and eternal, but rather timely, urgent, and temporal.

What should we be **urgent** about in the world in which we live? We all seek leisure and relaxation, but when should we also seek **urgency**? What are the **urgent** moral issues that demand our full attention?

**II.** **Everybody is repelled by Maror.** Even those who eat it try to sweeten it by charoset, made of apple, nut and wine. But Maror demands bitterness with the Charoset shaken off. (In fact that are Jews who, after dipping their maror in charoset ritually wipe off the charoset and eat the maror unsweetened.)

Why do we eat maror? *Ki Moreru Chaye Avoteinu*. “They embittered the lives of our ancestors.” They – our ancestors -- had *real* mortar between the bricks they laid for the Pyramids.

**Pain** is bitter, but without it we would not be warned of impending disease or oncoming fire. Not that we crave pain. There's the statement in the Talmud: *Lo Hein Velo Sekharan*. (Berachot 5a) “We desire neither pain nor its reward.” But

life without pain, a seder without maror, with only wine, matzo and kneidlach, is not real, true or Jewish.

What is worth pursuing – notwithstanding the pain?

Creating the state of Israel took enormous effort and left much, much loss in its wake.

In every generation we have to ask ourselves:

Is it worth enduring the maror if we can have the pesach, and the matzah, and the z'man heruteinu, the season of our freedom?

(Zionism and the State of Israel have given us a lot of Maror to eat. But is Diaspora complacency, diaspora happiness, better than Israeli pain? Without Israel, we would have a post holocaust world without consolation. The Wandering Jew would not be a Christian legend but our permanent state in history. Without Eretz Yisrael, Am Yisrael and Torat Yisrael would vanish from this bitter world.)

### Conclusion

The one who does not say, mean, understand these three words: Pesach, Matzo, Maror, has not fully confronted the challenges of the Pesach story. The one who does not know how to discriminate morally; to live urgently; and to swallow the bitterness, is not fully sharing in the Jewish journey through history.

Let's do that: let's talk about being different from others – in an honorable and a moral way; let's talk about the urgent matters of the world – the needs that are going unmet that we shouldn't be complacent about; and let's talk about sacrifice; let's talk about what we might need to give up to pursue salvation; and let's celebrate Pesach with energy and commitment.