

How is this year different from other years?

Rabbi Igor Zinkov reflects on the festival of Pesach



If you ask the average Russian-speaking Jew what the most important Jewish festival is, most likely they will think of Passover. Many years of restrictions of personal and religious freedoms made

Russian-speaking Jews sensitive to the key themes of Pesach – freedom and redemption. ‘Let My People Go’ became a motto for many ‘refuseniks’, that is, Soviet Jews who were refused permission to leave the Soviet Union. Even today, thirty years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, many of my Russian-speaking Jewish friends would choose to attend a communal Seder Pesach over any other Jewish festival.

How does one mark this Festival of Freedom, when circumstances restrict your ability to make choices? The traditional text, recited at Seder tables, reads: ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Eternal One our God took us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not led our ancestors out of Egypt, then we, our children, and our children’s children would have remained slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.’ During the pandemic, regardless of your background and experience, Passover becomes the expression of our hope and a space to reflect on what it means to be free. Today the theme of freedom is poignant for all of us, not just post-Soviet Jews.

Last year I had the privilege of leading an online Seder Pesach with Natan Sharansky, an Israeli politician and human rights activist, who spent nine years in Soviet prisons as a refusenik in the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s.

In his speech, he shared that even in prison he celebrated Pesach. He did not have matzah, so he dried a piece of bread. He did not have bitter herbs, so he used salt instead. He did not have a Haggadah, so he recited some poetry which he remembered. In one of his interviews, Sharansky said, ‘I believe that inner freedom is the basis of freedom in the world, and I believe that human rights, the desire of people to live in freedom, is the basis of real security, of peace, and of stability in the world.’ Even though one’s physical freedom can be restricted, one can still choose to be free.

In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, which chronicles his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps, Victor Frankl wrote, ‘The last of the human freedoms: to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom, which determined whether or not you become the plaything to circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity.’ Circumstances can limit your actions, but nobody can limit your freedom.

According to Jewish tradition, in every generation we must regard ourselves as though we personally had gone out of Egypt. Perhaps this year it is our turn to experience the Exodus. At Pesach we will gather online, sing songs, come out of our metaphorical ‘Egypt’ and hope that redemption will come soon. As usual, we will end the Haggadah with the hopeful call ‘Next year in Jerusalem!’. Although the texts will be the same, their meaning will be different from all other years. This year we will end the Seder Pesach with the hope that next year we will celebrate the Festival of our Freedom in person.

Next year in person!

Igor Zinkov