

Imagining Our Way to Redemption Pesach 2021

“When I celebrated the Seder in solitary confinement, I needed to decide what would be matzah, what would be *maror* and what would be wine, when all I had in solitary were three slices of bread, three cups of warm water and a bit of salt. I decided that the *maror* was salt, the wine was warm water, and the matzah was dry bread. Recalling the lines I had learned for my first Seder, I felt that our struggle continued. It strengthened my spirit. “*B’Shana zo anu avadim l’shana ha’baa bnei horin, ha’shana anu kan uv’shana ha’baa b’Yerushalayim*” – “This year we are slaves, next year free men; this year we are here, and next year in Jerusalem.”¹ So Natan Sharansky, the famous refusenik who spent 9 years in Soviet prisons, describes his first seder while imprisoned. Sharansky describes an act of determination and commitment: even in his prison cell, he honors his Jewish identity and celebrates Passover, and through that celebration, he connects his story to the Jewish story. But what Sharansky describes is also an act of imagination: his salt becomes maror, his water becomes wine, his bread becomes matzah. He is no longer sitting in a prison cell, but at a seder table. And his imagining is doubled, because the seder is itself a reimagining of the exodus from Egypt. Sharansky is transported -- through the medium of ritual -- back through the seders of his past and all the way to the mythical past of his ancestors. Not bad for three pieces of dry bread, some warm water, and a bit of salt.

Sharansky’s story reminds us that imagination is at the heart of the ritual of the Passover seder. The central challenge of the seder is “*b’chor dor vador...lirot et atzmo k’ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim,*” in every generation, to see ourselves as if we personally

¹ <https://blog.nli.org.il/en/sharansky-seder/>

went out from Egypt.” But the irony is that imagination was required even at that first Passover we’re all trying to imagine being part of, the moment when the sacrifice and celebration originated. For the original Passover meal, the first time that the Passover lamb is roasted and eaten along with matzah and bitter herbs, occurs the night *before* the Israelites are freed from Egypt. Remember, it’s the blood of the Passover sacrifice that is put on the doorposts to protect the Israelites from the final plague (Exodus 12). So, as Rabbi Josh Feigelson points out, “Passover has always been a holiday requiring imagination. ‘In every generation one is obligated to see oneself as if they personally went out of Egypt,’ instructs the Talmud. The key words here are *as if*: An act of imagining is always required. For most of my life, as for many American Jews, the imagination required was to see ourselves as slaves and captives, to imagine ourselves into that reality. But for the Israelites at that first seder in Egypt...the imagining was anticipatory: it involved imagining what it would be like to go out, to be free, and to recognize the spiritual freedom we may have even when our physical, economic, and political freedoms are constrained.”² Imagining the experience of becoming free has been built into the celebration of Passover literally from its beginning.

And it’s a good thing, because we have needed the practice. As many scholars point out, over the centuries Jews have celebrated the holiday of liberation while suffering all kinds of oppression. As Alana Newhouse puts it, “Most Jews throughout history have not been free, whether from murderous regimes or famines or pandemics. What we have been is devoted to the idea that we deserve to be.”³ And so Jews have celebrated Passover while in all sorts of narrow places -- in European ghettos and

² <https://fetzer.org/blog/passover-time-coronavirus>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/opinion/sunday/passover-covid.html>

Soviet prisons and even on Zoom -- reenacting the liberation of the Israelites and renewing our faith in the possibility of a future liberation. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that the seder gives us, and especially our children, the gift of faith. "It is a faith that in this world, with all its violence and cruelty, we can create moments of redemption, signals of transcendence, acts of transfiguring grace. No people has risked and suffered more for a more slender hope, but no hope has lifted a people higher and led it, time and again, to greatness. So we end the night with a prayer and a conviction. The prayer: 'God of life, help us win a victory over the forces of death.' And the conviction? That by refusing to accept the world that is, together we can start to make the world that ought to be."⁴ If there is a secret to the Jewish People's survival, it just might be the capacity to imagine a better future and a better world.

The Haggadah's demand for imagination isn't just to ensure that we never forget our sacred story, or even just to ensure that we continue to hope for and envision our own liberation. By requiring that we exercise our imaginative faculties, the seder is also a practicum for empathy. Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb recounts a lecture he heard from a chasidic rebbe.

The rebbe then went on to elaborate upon two psychological processes that are necessary to invoke during the seder night as we recite the Haggadah, the power of imagination and empathy. We are often restricted by our own tendencies to rely upon our reason, rationality, and intellectuality. In a sense, we are slaves to reason and need to learn to allow ourselves to go beyond reason and give our imaginations free rein. Only then can we "see ourselves as if we had personally endured slavery." We are also required to imagine ourselves as if we are the

⁴ *The Jonathan Sacks Haggada, Had Gadya.*

other person. If the other person is poor, the mitzvah of charity demands that we ourselves feel his poverty. If he is ill, we must literally suffer along with him. This is empathy.... Learning to use one's powers of imagination in order to empathize with the plight of others is the essential objective of this holiday, "z'man cheiruteinu," the season of our freedom.⁵

As the chasidic rebbe intuited, and as modern psychological studies suggest, the better our imaginations are, the more empathetic we become.⁶ Every Passover is an invitation to grow in both imagination and empathy.

As we celebrate our second Passover during this pandemic, our imaginative and empathetic faculties are again put to the test. This year, we might not have to imagine what it is like to be a person in bondage, as we have all experienced our own confinement. But if we are lucky to have been spared the worst of this pandemic, we might need to imagine what it's like to be in the shoes of a person suffering from Covid, or someone who's lost a loved one to the virus, or a person who's lost his job because of it. If we are white, we might imagine what it's like to be a Person of Color in this country. And, hopefully, our imaginings will then lead us to ask those who are suffering, "What is it like? And how can I help?" The writer Isabel Wilkerson describes this act as "radical empathy." "Radical empathy...means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective."⁷ With a greater understanding of and empathy for all those who are still in bondage, we can then engage in that other sort of imagining, the imagining of ourselves, and all people, leaving Egypt. This year, we imagine a world free from this

⁵ <https://njewishnews.timesofisrael.com/the-power-of-imagination/>

⁶ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00576/full>

⁷ *Caste*, pg. 385.

virus. We imagine a country where People of Color aren't targets of hate, where gun violence isn't its own deadly epidemic, where people aren't living in hunger and poverty. We imagine the world as it ought to be rather than the world as it is today. And we commit ourselves to making those visions into reality. As the scholar Michael Walzer writes, "We still believe...what the Exodus first taught... first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt; second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and third, that 'the way to the land is through the wilderness.' There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching."⁸ May our seders this year inspire us to get marching.

⁸ "Exodus and Revolution" in *American Jewish Thought Since 1934*, pg. 153.