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The eternal challenge of Passover, 1944.

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THE ETERNAL CHALLENGE OF PASSOVER

WRHS

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, April 9, 1944

That there is some great idea or set of ideas worthy of transmission from generation to generation deserving of profound study, and which is useful to the progress of mankind is indicated by the many admonitions of our sagas and in the Bible -- to make sure that the story of the Exodus is told and retold time and again...Thou shalt tell it to thy sons are the injunctions of the Bible. The whole Seder Service, you will recall, is built around this idea of telling the story of the Exodus to the children for pedagogic purposes. The young are encouraged to ask questions. Certain special ceremonies, symbols, food, are made part of the service to arouse the interest of the young and to stimulate their interest. Why the matzah? Why the Maror? Why ~~two~~⁴ cups of wine at the table? Why the cup of Elijah?

It is a mitzvah to tell the story of Passover and he who tells the most about it is most deserving of peace. And among our ancient Rabbis it was customary to devote the whole night, from sun down to sun up to recounting the story of Passover, its fascinating details, the story of the Exodus of the Jews. And over and over again in the Bible we are told, as you learned from the selections which I read this morning: "Remember this day on which ye went forth from Egypt from the house of bondage." Many a moral law in the Bible carries the exhortation "Remember that ye were slaves in the land of Egypt." This is given as a consideration for the faithful observance of the law. "Do not pervert justice due to a stranger or orphan, for ye were strangers in the Land of Egypt...If a countryman of yours is sold to you, he is to work for six years for you, but in the 7th year you must set him free...and you must not send him away empty-handed." Your man-servant and your maid-servant should rest on the Sabbath Day along with the members of your family, for remember you were slaves in the Land of Egypt and you had no Sabbath day of rest." "When you reap the harvest in your field and forget a sheaf, you must not go back to get it, nor must you beat your olive trees and go over them a second time." The must be left for the stranger, the orphan and the widow, for remember you were slaves, poor helpless slaves in the land of Egypt.

"Thou shalt not vex a stranger nor oppress him for you yourself were once strangers in the land of Egypt." Always it tells, time and again, the Bible weaves back to the Story of the Exodus. In fact, the preamble to the Ten Commandments, the basic religious code of Israel links up with the Exodus -- "I am the Lord Thy God Who brought thee out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage."

The three major festivals -- Passover, Shavuoth and Succoth all revolve around the story of the exodus from Egypt. In fact this epic of four hundred bitter, black slavery ~~off~~ odd years of slavery, which our ancestors spent in Egypt which culminated in a great revolutionary drama of emancipation constitutes the continuous background for all subsequent Jewish history. The Exodus determines everything, in effect, in Jewish life, far more than the American Revolution affected American history in subsequent years, or the French Revolution, French life in subsequent years. The Exodus was the to the Jews, the Declaration of Independence of '76 and the Emancipation Proclamation of '83 to the American people. Wherever and whenever the name Egypt was mentioned that was a challenge to the ear of the Jew, because it reminded him of the basic racial experience of his people. He will never forget. No prophet or teacher of Israel will ever permit his people to forget that.

And it was fortunate that it was so. And it was fortunate that so much stress was laid on the telling and re-telling because there were many subsequent Egypts in the Jewish history -- many of them. For the people as a whole, or important segments of our people found themselves strangers in strange lands. All through out history, as late as 1944 great sections of our people, ^{at} ~~in~~ one time or another found themselves in the cauldron of fire, under the lash of taskmasters, persecuted and threatened with extermination as in the days of the Pharaohs, in the land of Egypt. And when such experiences befell our people they were able to recall the Saga of Egypt. They were able to remember how their ancestors suffered, what sustained them, how they survived, and how they finally were redeemed.

And so they were able to take heart after reading the Haggadah year after year. "This is the experience of our fathers and of us that not oneman alone in the distant past arose to destroy us, but in every generation men arose to destroy us. But the Holy One, Blessed Be He, delivered us from their hands. Therefore they were able to say in the ghettos of the Dark Ages in Europe, in the ghettos of modern Europe -- at all times when they lifted the bread of affliction, they were able to say: This the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate, which we are eating, but just as they were redeemed, so we too will be redeemed. We are slaves today. Next year we shall be free.

Now what is the great idea, or the great set of ideas at the heart of this beautiful challenging Festival of Passover? Why it is the one and self-same idea for which men are fighting today, in 1944, for which men fought and died on battlefields, on barricades, in undergrounds from the days of Moses, they yearned and languished since the days of the slaves who groaned under forced labor at the walls of Pithom and Raamses. It is that for which men had to struggle and acquire by blood and sweat and tears from the days of innocent male children in the River Nile at the order of Pharaoh to the butchering of myriads of innocent civilian men women and children in our own day, in the day of Hitler. But the essential idea, the essential set of complex ideas is Freedom -- resistance to tyranny, but much more than that -- the essential right of men to be free, but also the duty of men to be free. The great idea of the divine compulsion upon men to sacrifice for freedom. To discipline themselves to be worthy of freedom. To realize that Freedom derives from God and is sustained through faith in God. All that this tired and tortured world of ours is fighting for today, is previewed in the greatest struggle for human freedom in the history of mankind, 3500 years ago when Israel knocked off the shackles of slavery and struck out for freedom and national independence.

Freedom -- that word is bandied about a great deal today. Frequently men fail to understand what is involved in it. Everyone knows that slavery is bad. And yet not all slaves want to be free. People oft-times prefer slavery for themselves because slavery has its compensations. Slavery does give a man a certain primitive material security. The master must take care of his slaves, if only to keep his slaves strong enough to work. Slaves don't have to think, to plan, to make decisions, to assume responsibilities, to run risks. All they have to do is to obey, and to obey is not the most difficult experience that the human being is confronted with.

Now when Moses came to the children of Israel who were in Egypt they didn't welcome him. They had been oppressed for 400 years. You would think they would hail him as a great deliverer. They had been so brutalized by centuries of serfdom. They had sunk deep into slavery, and they did not want freedom. They would not listen to Moses, says the Bible because of the inadequacy of their spirit, because of ~~the~~ the hard labor to which they and their fathers had been subjected for generations. They had been molded into the form of slavery. They knew that their lot was hard. They knew they were treated like beasts of burden. But like beasts of burden they had their provender, their cucumbers, onions, garlic and fish.

They were unwilling to exchange this security of their slavery for the high and dangerous adventure of free life. And Moses had to educate them to want to be free. Now you might think that was peculiar to the Jews in Egypt 2500 years ago, but it is today even more so than in those days.

We all, in recent years have witnessed the sad spectacle of nations, whole peoples going back to Egypt voluntarily, voluntarily seeking primitive security which modern totalitarian slavery offered them. They could not stand up to the high exactions and disciplines of freedom which the modern complicated life demanded of them. They preferred the cucumbers, onions and garlic which the modern pharaohs

promised them.

The real danger of our day is not so much that peoples will be enslaved by conquerors, but that they will enslave themselves. The complexities of modern life are becoming so great, the uncertainties of modern life so many, the problems so complicated, that there are men who are becoming more and more inclined to relinquish the responsibilities which are theirs under a democratic way of life and turn the whole job over to some clever Fascist charlatan and adventurer who promises to do all that for them and to set all things right in a jiffy.

The story of the Exodus warns against this danger. The revolutionary spirit which was finally kindled in Israel which defined the democratic dogma for mankind will not permit the individual or the nation to wallow in the slough of the spiritual indolence and resignation of serfdom. God wants men to be free, to accept the hard discipline of freedom. "Proclaim freedom throughout the land and to all the inhabitants of the land. The servant who served his master for six years and refused to leave his master, who preferred serfdom to freedom had to be taken to the doorposts and have his ears as everlasting shame because he prefers slavery to being a free man.

Men have not only the right to be free, but the duty to be free. That is the first great idea in this Festival of Passover.

There is another. One must be prepared to sacrifice for freedom. It is our religious duty to sacrifice for freedom. The Jews of Egypt, most of them would have perhaps welcomed Freedom. Why not -- provided they did not have to pay a high price for it, or any price for it, provided that they did not have to suffer for it. When Moses first came to see the Pharaoh of Egypt and ask him to let the Jews go free, the Jews were content to have him do it. But when his mission failed, and Pharaoh regarded it as insolence for this Jew to come and ask for liberation of his people and as a result made the burdens heavier. Henceforth there was to be no straw provided to make bricks, but the same quota

had to be met day by day. When Moses' mission failed and the burdens of the people became heavier, the people said to him: "May God punish you for giving us an unsavory reputation with Pharaoh and his courtiers, for putting a sword into their hands to slay us.

They wanted to be free, most of them. But the easy way. They were not prepared to fight for it. When they left Egypt the good Lord gave directions not to lead these slaves along the straight easy road, but rather to follow a round about way which actually took them forty years. Why? Lest the people repent and want to return to Egypt. And at the Red Sea, when they found themselves with the Red Sea in front of them and the hosts of Egyptians closing in upon them, what did they do, these people who would be free? They turned in anger and said: "Are there no graveyards in Egypt?" "What have you done to us to take out of Egypt? Is not this what we kept on saying to you in Egypt - let us alone! let us be slaves to the Egyptians! It is better to be slaves in Egypt than to die in the wilderness!"

Just to be alive, in squalor, in degradation -- anything -- just to live -- freedom is not worth fighting for if freedom is not worth dying for.

And later on, after they crossed the Red Sea and found themselves year after year going from place to place, how regularly these slaves complained: not enough food -- not enough water -- not enough meat -- too many enemies to fight. The Promised Land -- why that is nice. Of course we want it, especially as it is a land flowing with milk and honey. But to hunger and thirst for it - to suffer the heat of the day and the cold of the night, to wander in the howling wilderness for it, for 40 long years -- why that is too high a price to pay. Let us go back to the slave pens of Egypt. That is why this generation of slaves that left Egypt had to perish in the wilderness. They were not fit to reach it.

So the second great idea embodied is that Freedom is something that must be sacrificed for. It is something for which people must be prepared to fight

for and to die for, to suffer painfully and patiently and persistently defeat after defeat, frustration after frustration. It is worth it. Our boys in the dug-outs, foxholes, deserts and on the cold mountain peaks understand it -- sacrifice. They know far better than our civilians at home realize -- how much sacrifice.

It is but the saga of the Exodus toward mankind. And Passover, my good friends, is not only a memorial of our people's redemption in the past. It is the symbol and prophecy and guide of all people's redemption in the world, of all people dying in the world.

If the world is to be free and to remain free, future generations must be educated in the duty of men to be free. No one has the moral right to prefer any other kind of government for himself but one which makes him share in the responsibilities of government, which demands his participation in the decisions which affect his life and that of his fellow-citizens and challenges him to exercise freedom.

Legallistically, I assume that it is perfectly proper to say that every people has a right to choose his own type of government. Morally, no people, any people, has a right to choose a government which does not cherish, exercise the mandates of freedom, of collective freedom in a voluntary organization of men.

If the world is to be free and to remain free, future generations must be educated to sacrifice for freedom in peacetime -- not merely in war time -- to learn self-restraint, discipline, patience, to forego exploitation. There can be no freedom in society if men act as rapacious enemies and seek aggrandizement. That leads to eternal disruption -- in other words, ultimately to the coming of slavery.

Finally, if our world is to remain free, we must rediscover the living and directive faith in God. It was on that rock that Israel built its conception of human dignity and freedom and the right of the individual.

There is a God. And man is made in the image of God and anything which constricts or inhibits or distorts or confines the spirit of man, any form of political slavery or economic or social slavery, or educational slavery distorts this image of God in which man was fashioned. Man is entitled to be free because he is a child of God who proclaims freedom to our world.

When men lose their faith in God they come ultimately to lose their high and exalted conceptions of the stages of the individuals, and of the destiny of men. And the tragedy of our age is that man has been degraded, that faith in God has been lost, because peoples and states have driven out the consciousness of God as a compelling idea in their lives.

And it was on this self-same rock that the Founding Fathers of this great Republic built their conceptions of the inalienable rights of man, our free society. And if there is anything unique and magnificently distinctive about American life, if America has any mission to give to the world today, it is just this -- the conviction that man must remain free because man has received from his Creator the mandates of freedom which no one has the right to take away from him.

This, dear friends, is the great idea imparted in the Festival of Passover which our forefathers regarded so important, as ~~ix~~ to be worthy of transmission to mankind....

1) That there is some great idea ^{or ideas} - worthy of transmission in favor-
deserving of profound study, and useful to the program of -
is indicated by the many admonitions of our sages + of the
Bible itself. to make sure that the story of the Exodus is told
and retold and expatiated ^{upon} - 2221 2371 - Seder service -
for pedagogic purposes - Young encouraged to ask questions -
special forms - ceremonies - provided to arouse interest and
stimulate inquiring - Why the 23rd - the 21st - The cups
of Elijah? 1st 21st - all night long -

2) Over & over again: "Remember this day on which ye went forth from
Eg. from the house of bondage".
= Many a law in the Bible carries the exhortation: "Remember
that there was a servant in the land of Eg." - and this is
given as a condemnation for the faithful observance of the law.
= "Do not pervert the justice due to a stranger, an orphan -
= "If a countryman of yours... is sold to you, he is to work for
six years for you, but in the 7th year you must set him
free... and you must not send him away empty-handed -
= "Your man-servant and your maid-servant should rest
on the Sabbath day along with the members of your family -
= "When you reap the harvest in your field - & forget a
sheaf, you must not go back to get it - we must
you beat your olive trees & so on, then a second time,
we pick the grapes, you vineyard & so on, it a
second time - That is to go to the stranger, the
orphan, the widow - for
"You must remember that you were once a slave
(in the land of Eg. - that is why I am commanding
you to do this!

3) Then shall we see a change in officers being always returning to same basic theme.
Preamble to 10 commandments links up the basic religious code of Israel with the Exodus -
= And of course the 3 major festivals - revolve round it.
= In fact, Epic of 4 centuries of slavery - culminating in great revolutionary dream of Emancipation constitutes the continuous background for all subsequent Jewish history. It determines every thing to a far greater extent than any other book.
Deuter + Emancipation

4) Whenever Eg. was mentioned there was a challenge in it to the J. ex. It reminded him of a basic racial experience which he could never forget - and no prophet or teacher ever permitted our people to forget it.

5) There were subsequent Ego. - many, then - when our people, as a whole, or parts, found themselves straying in a strange land - disoriented - under the lash of cruel task masters - even as late as Exile 51944
= They then recalled Egypt - how their ancestors suffered, but survived and how they were finally redeemed - and they took heart. They read then Deuter - Deuter -
And they heart was uplifted -
Deuter Deuter Deuter

- 6/ What is the great - the essential idea of Passover?
- It is the one over which men are fighting for today for in 1948.
 - On Battle fields, on barricades, in undergrounds - since then -
 - Fanned for and languished for more the days of the slaves who groined under forced labor at the wells, Pithums & Khawass.
 - It is that which men had to acquire with blood, sweat and tears from the days of the plough to the innocent male children on the River Nile to the order, Pharaoh - to the lurching ^{in years of} imminent airborn men, women & children in the days of Hitler.

Freedom! Resistance to tyranny! The right & duty
of men to be free! The divine commission upon
men to sacrifice for freedom! To discipline us
to be worthy freedom! - To realize that, F. derives
~~from God and is sustained thru faith in God~~
- all that our tired & torturing world is struggling to
achieve to-day is pre-issued in the greatest
struggle for human freedom in the history of man-
kind - 35 centuries ago in the land, the
Pyramids

7/ Everyone knows that slavery is bad! And yet not all
slaves want to be free!

① Slavery has its compensations - a measure of animal
security - that's look after the slave. pharaoh needs
his slaves - if only to keep them strong enough
to work.

(9)

They don't have to think to plan to make decisions, to
assume responsibilities, only to obey!

Jews in ancient Eg - did not welcome the Moses - & his Mission
They had been pretty well brutalized - חלוקה של העם
לחלקים שונים

Their lot was hard, of course, and they were treated like beasts
but, like beasts they had their provender - ^{עושר, מזון, etc} their own flocks and
fish.

They were unwilling to exchange the brute security, then slavery
for the high & dangerous adventure of free men.

Moses had to educate them to want to be free & to dare
to be free.

Our age witnessed the sad spectacle of whole nations
"going back to Egypt" - voluntarily seeking the brute
security of the modern ~~slavery~~ ^{slavery} of the totalitarian
state - ^{because they could not stand up to the high} because they could not stand up to the high
exactions & discipline of freedom, and preferred the
mines & garb & circumstances provided them by
the ~~tyranny~~ ^{tyranny} of the ~~state~~ ^{state} on day.

Our age has lost
The real danger of our day is ~~that people~~ not so much
that people will be enslaved, ^{as} ~~but~~ that they will
enslave themselves. Complexities of modern life are
becoming so great, uncertainties so many, problems
so complicated, that men are becoming more &
more inclined to "get from under" their burden.

to relinquish their responsibilities which are theirs under a (5)
democracy, ~~to~~ and to turn the whole job over to some
clever Fascist charlatan & adventurers who promise to
do all that for them - and to set all things right in
a jiffy.

The Saga, E.g. warns against this danger. ~~The~~ The
revol. spirit of Israel which defied the demon dogma
for mankind will not permit the indiv. or the nation
to wallow in the slough of the sp. indifference & resignation
of serfdom. God wants men to be free!! 353 N10P1
Men have a Right to be free! They have a duty to be free!

8/ It is mandatory to sacrifice for Freedom! as for
every great human value.

Jews, E.g. might perhaps have welcomed Freedom - if they
did not have to pay a high price for it - life

First human loss to Pharaoh-ford. 'Heaven
burden - No shame! Gather it in - same grandly
But still heavier burden on them.

"May God punish you for serving us an unsavory repast
with Pharaoh's courtesies - for putting a sword into their
hands to slay us."

They wanted to be free - but the easy way!

= They were not prepared to fight for their F. - so that God
did not lead them out, Eg. the war way - Pharaoh
and his sons and all his army

= at Red Sea - 'Are there no prepared in Eg - "What
have you done to us to take us out E? Is not then about
we kept on saying to you in E - let us alone! let us be
slaves to the E! It is better to be slaves in E > to
die in the wilderness!

= Here is the real evil / Slavery revealed! Just to
live! In ignominy, in degradation, under the whip! -
There is not worth buying for - not worth dying for!

= And later on - in the long 40 yr. trial than the
wilderness - how often they complained - Food -
water - not enough meat - How impatient of bondage
Moses!

- O, yes, the promised land - To be a free nation
in their own land - to have plenty with milk
and honey! Why not!

But to hunger & thirst for it - to suffer the heat of
the day & the cold, the neglect - to wander in
the howling wilderness for it - 40 long years - light battle - with Amalek
O, how - hard you!

~~Full as Egypt every day!~~ Back to the slave pen, E. C.

① And so that generation of slaves had to die!

9/ The Saga, the Exodus - would be welcome in the
day-ant, & fox-holes in the fighting lines, the United
Nations ^{in death - in purple - in cry right with rights} They know - for better than we are at
have realized - how much sacrifice -

10/ Persuade is not only memorial of one's people redemption
in the past. It is symbol & prophecy & guide of all
people redemption in the future.

① If the world is to be free - future generations must be
educated not only in the right to be free, but in the
duty to be free. No one has the moral right to prefer any
other type of govt. for himself but one which makes him
share in the responsibility of govt - demands his participation,
in the decisions which affect his life & that of his fellow-citizens -
& challenges him to exercise freedom

② If the world is to be free - future generations must be
educated to sacrifice for it - in peace time as well as in
war time & to be self-restrained, disciplined, patient, to
forgo exploitation, to seek no privileges

- If the world is to be & remain free - it must rest⁽⁸⁾
on living & directing faith in God. - It was on that rock
that Israel built its conception of human dignity & freedom.
- "It was God who redeemed Israel!" It was on
such strong & sure foundations - "Founding Fathers" -
- Coming generations - Spirit -

