

A Message from the Rabbi

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Pesach looms ever closer! As it was back in 5765 and 5761, the first seder is on a Saturday night. This means that the fast of the firstborn is on Thursday, the search for chameitz is on Thursday night, and the burning of chameitz is on Friday morning. For those doing a quick calculation, you have already realized that this year we will have an extra day of “no-chameitz” – nine

days this year. What do we do on Friday evening for motzi? Just enough leaven is left – and carefully sequestered from your otherwise kosher l’Pesach home – for Friday evening and Saturday noon ... or else, you can make a motzi over egg matzah (since we must save the “real” matzah for the seder).

So why do we do it? Why *should* we do it? Why should we *continue* doing it? Let me suggest a reason other than masochism.

The year 70 CE is the year that the Romans destroyed the Second Temple. We call this the *churban*. The destruction of the Second Temple was the greatest watershed moment in Jewish history. Everything we do as Jews today, including the way we celebrate Pesach, was created in large measure by our Sages who lived during first centuries of the Common Era.

Their task was to create a sustainable nation living in dispersion (Diaspora) – a “nation” without land, without its own economy, and without any defense force. The Rabbis created a system that could be set up in any place that Jews lived. They transferred the sacrificial service of the Temple to the worship service of the synagogue. They created social welfare systems and educational systems and economic systems and ritual systems that could be adapted to any place at any time. Quite an achievement, wouldn’t you say?

Now I’m guessing that it wasn’t any easier to keep kosher in “the old days.” There were no freezers or refrigerators, no supermarkets with kosher sections. Homes were much smaller (where did they keep four sets of dishes?). It was hard enough just putting food on the table without having to create a massive number of restrictions (what animals you can and cannot eat, how they are to be slaughtered, what

can be mixed with what, and when?).

Ultimately the message of Pesach in our time is: Freedom Isn’t Free. We who live in the most affluent Jewish community in history have forgotten this message. We take our freedom for granted. We take our rights for granted. We take our ability to integrate fully into American life for granted.

Living in Egypt wasn’t easy, but the freedom of the wilderness was even harder in many ways. Living in the wilderness was hard, but conquering a land and establishing the institutions of a just and compassionate society was even harder. Living in the Land, maintaining it and defending it was hard. But exile was harder. Two thousand years of exile was very hard. (This is beginning to sound like *Dayeinu!*). And here we are today. Not hard at all, is it?

That is why we American Jews in our time need Pesach. The meticulous cleaning of our homes, preparations for our seders, the food restrictions, the inconveniences, the four festival days of missed work ... all of these are hard, and often expensive.

So why do we do this to ourselves year after year? Why should we value the difficulty and expense and personal inconvenience? Isn’t it better that life is easy? I doubt that any of us believe that we somehow *deserve* our relatively easy lives?

Pesach comes each year to remind us that our freedom is not free. American Jewish freedoms come at a cost. That cost is that, in a free society, we have to work even harder to affirm our Jewish identity. We have to work even harder to build strong communities and vibrant Jewish infrastructures. We have to work harder to transmit these values to our children and grandchildren.

So let us embrace the challenges of our preparations for Pesach. They remind us graphically just how valuable our freedom is. The cleaning and the buying and the arranging all help to remember just how many unearned blessings we have in our lives.

Don’t *enjoy* the work. Just remember that our difficult preparations for Pesach teach us just an powerful a lesson as the seder itself teaches us: Freedoms aren’t free. Meaningful Judaism isn’t free. We need to work at it. And the more we work at it, the more likely it is that we will find the meaning and the blessings we seek.