On This Passover We Ask: Are We Truly Free?

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One of the most famous passages of the Passover seder is called “Ha Lachma Anya — This is the bread of affliction.” It is sometimes referred to as the “invocation.” It is the moment when the leader of the seder welcomes all the guests at the seder, especially those who are in need, and invites them to celebrate Passover with everyone at the table. It is recited and sung in Aramaic, so unless one pays attention to the translation, one can miss the importance of the passage.

The original version in traditional hagaddot is translated as follows:

"This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need come and celebrate Passover. Now we are here. Next year in the land of Israel. Now we are slaves. Next year we will be free.”

Traditional version of Ha Lachma Anya

It was clearly written for Jews who were living in the Diaspora. For them, “here” meant — and means — wherever one lives in the world outside of the land of Israel. In the future, “next year” we are told, the Jewish people will return to live in their own land, the land of Israel. In the meantime, “now”, i.e. in the present, we are still “slaves”, that is, not completely free. Only when we will live as a sovereign people in our own land will be really be free, according to this traditional reading. This passage reveals how much the mindfulness of the journey to the land of Israel, which ought to be a land of freedom, is central to the Exodus narrative and the history of the Jewish people.

But are Jews in the Diaspora really “slaves” anymore? And, are Jews in Israel really as free as we would like to be?

One of my favorite haggadot — the Pesach Hagaddah of the Kibbutz Ha-artzi/Hashomer Hatzair Movement from the early 1970s — offers us a revised and updated version of this traditional text:

"This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. All who are hungry—let them come and partake. All who are in need, let them come and celebrate the Passover. This year, only we are the redeemed of Israel. Next year, it shall be all the people of Israel. This year we are slaves, next year, we shall be free men.”

Kibbutz version of Ha Lachmah Anya, 1970

What is the major change suggested by this reading?

On the one hand, it suggests that only those who live in Israel now are “redeemed”, which was a reflection of the “negation of the Diaspora” that was inherent in earlier Zionist ideology (which has mostly disappeared over the years). On the other hand, this passage reminds us that even though we are currently (“this year”) living in the land of Israel, we are still slaves this year! Only “next year”—in the future—as we continue the ongoing journey from physical and psychological “slavery”—will we experience the liberation that comes with freedom.

This year, in Israel, we are still enslaved to old conceptions and some very immoral and inexplicable policies. The most blatant recent ant-freedom policy is that recent decision of the government of Israel to deport thousands of refugees from Eritrea and Sudan who are seeking to fulfill their own exodus from slavery to freedom. Fortunately, thousands of Jews in Israel (and abroad) are objecting to this policy on moral and pragmatic grounds. Also, many in Israel are still enslaved to the notion that we can rule over another people—the Palestinian people– forever and deny them their freedom on a permanent basis. This is untenable and cannot be allowed to continue.

As we re-tell the exodus narrative on Passover, we are mindful that “In every generation, we must see ourselves as if we too were part of the Exodus from Egypt.” This is one of the central teachings of the Hagaddah. Millions of Jews in the contemporary period have left their Egypt’s—countries in which they were denied basic freedoms and the ability to lead free Jewish lives, such as the Arab countries, the Soviet Union and other formerly Communist countries, Ethiopia, and more. But it seems many other Jews—especially many of those who are in power in Israel today, have brought the mentality of “Egypt” with them and have forgotten the message of freedom that is the essence of Passover.

On this Passover, we will remind them that freedom is not just for Jews, but it is a value for all people. As we read in the Ha Lachma Anya: “Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need come and celebrate Passover.” All human beings deserve food security, and all human beings should be able to experience the joys –and responsibilities—of freedom.

Wishing all my Jewish friends a Chag Sameach U’m’shachrer[1], a Happy and Liberating Holiday!

And to all my Christian friends and readers, a Happy and Fulfilling Easter holiday!

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