



SHIUR



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JSUD

“Passover in the Times of Corona”

**Commentary on the Passover Haggadah by Micki Weinberg for JSUD
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“In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

A Brief Forward:

I view JSUD as an organization that sees Jewish thought and practice both as a means towards social and political engagement as well as a tool for self-reflection and shaping contemporary German Jewish life. For this reason, I am excited to provide a customized commentary-supplement for the most revolutionary “guidebook” and practice that the Jewish people have: the Passover Haggadah and Seder. Passover in the times of Corona—is an opportunity to accelerate what is inevitable—the reclaiming of Jewish life by Jewish students and youth. What better exercise in this process of Jewish growth and empowerment than answering the question: how will you celebrate Passover on your own, without any support but yourself? If you do nothing, nothing will happen. It is up to you to shape your night—and future.

The following commentary is based on my *shiurim*, and discussions, questions and feedback from German Jewish students. My hope is that it accurately reflects the concerns, questions, and values that you hold

dear—and that it can be one step among many in stimulating the process leading towards personal and social transformation.

I look forward to seeing you all in healthier and safer times!

Yours,
Micki Weinberg

Passover is about deep, structural transformation. The people of Israel, *against their will*, (remember, it is the God/Moses team that are pushing for freedom, not the slaves) are forced to undergo a complete change from slavery to Pharaoh (a physical entity) to free subjects of an incomprehensible Divine that is known as “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*”¹ or “I will be that I will be.” Everything that they were taught was right is no longer valid. They experience a radical reconfiguration of values and reality.

In life, do we choose to change? Or do circumstances force us into transformation? What does the strange formulation of God’s name imply? Is it fixed and defined? Or in flux and always in a state of potential/becoming?

Corona has led to a complete value restructuring. Many people’s sense of productivity and identity was tied to their work, social and familial relationships, their routines, and many other forms of life that seemed fixed and taken for granted. Suddenly, we realize that these structures are not so sturdy, and shockingly for many, not so necessary! Sometimes this can lead to a positive opportunity to discover other forms of life and values—from connecting with your family in ways you never conceived, to connecting to yourself (alone!) in ways you never thought of. Other times this can lead to loss, emotional turmoil, and pain. Maybe now we can understand the complexities of the Exodus story and the Haggadah—how there were some amongst the escaped slaves that actually wanted to return to Egyptian slavery with its fixed routines and seemingly solid structures², how after all the miracles, they still worshipped idols³. When we say in the Haggadah that each of us must see ourselves as slaves in Egypt, on this Seder in the times of Corona, we might be able to actually say, we know how they felt!

KADESH

In times of crisis, we can see how each person or group of people have a different hierarchy of values. We see how different people prioritize questions of family, health, leisure, religion, and money in their own ways. All can be important, but each value its place and time. What is the time now for? What is your hierarchy of values?

¹ Shemot 3:14

² Shemot 16:3

³ Shemot 32:4

We all may share the same values, interests, drives, as others—but as Jews we collectively decide what our hierarchy of values is...and on Passover, you have the choice to make this night different from all other nights. You can binge-watch *Tiger King* on Netflix like many of your friends, or you can dedicate a night to exploring the Haggadah and experiencing the Seder in a new and unique way.

As Jews, we sanctify time and space. What is incredible about Kadesh—“To sanctify”—is that we are the ones empowered to transform this night into a holy night. We do not wait for any outside power or external force—it is up to us! If you do nothing, nothing happens. We determine what values are important to us and how we relate to time and whether we sanctify it or let it dissolve into nothingness. How will you make this night different from all other nights?

URCHATZ

Washing in Jewish ritual is associated with questions of purity and impurity—and functions as a sort of “spiritual cleansing.” The exodus story is about transforming from a state of impurity to purity. The people of Israel in Egypt were said to have been on the lowest level of impurity⁴, and yet, they were destined to receive the Torah; not Abraham nor any of the other patriarchs, but a nation of impure slaves! What does this say about the power of transformation? Why do you think that the impure Israelites received the Torah and not the pure and perfect patriarchs? What might this imply about the potential for leadership and transformation of Jews that were not raised with traditional backgrounds? Even Moses himself didn’t grow up as a Jew!

YACHATZ

We break the middle *matzah* in two...and it’s the broken piece, the *afikoman*, representing the *korban pesach* or Passover offering, that is the last thing we eat at the end of the night. Why is something so central to the Passover holiday only exist in a broken state?

MAGID: HA LACHMA ANYA/ THE BREAD OF AFFLICTION

Between the slavery of Egypt and the freedom of the Promised Land, there was the wondering in the desert. The Seder doesn’t end in Jerusalem, but with the hope to be in Jerusalem. We are situated in a position of transition, on our way but not yet at the Promised Land. What values are there in the state of transition? We always seek the answer or the destination, but what about that in between state?

Reb Menachem Mendel of Kotzk commented on the saying in Pirkei Avot 5:14, ‘One who goes, but does not do, he is rewarded for going.’ He asks, ‘if he did not reach his goal, why is he rewarded? Rather, a person does not reach any step without first going!...In the journey itself one senses the reward...’⁵

⁴ Zohar Chadash *Yitro*, Israel is on the 49th level of impurity

⁵ *Sneh Boer BeKotzk*, Meir Orion, p32

How does this align with the poem *Ithaka* by C.P. Cavafy⁶?

“As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them:
you’ll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won’t encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you’re destined for.
But don’t hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you’re old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn’t have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.”

⁶ Edmund Keeley translation

MAGID: FOUR QUESTIONS

So much of the Seder is about questions and not answers. How amazing is it—that for thousands of years, we focus on preserving questions rather than answers! Many traditions and religions are about dogmatic truths that tend to ossify and decay and grow obsolete over time. By remaining in the question, we acknowledge the dynamic, fluid nature of life. Right now, we have no answers. We don't even know what will happen in the next weeks or months. The seder is a time to crystalize what we are all feeling now—that sense of question and uncertainty—and dwelling and being all right with it.

Rainer Maria-Rilke wrote:

“Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.”

MAGID: AVADIM HAYINU/ WE WERE SLAVES IN EGYPT

So much of the Seder is about story-telling a specific narrative. Did you know there were other narratives about the Exodus by non-Jewish sources? Many anti-semites in ancient Rome believed that the Israelites were kicked out by Egypt because they were infected with leprosy. The ancient Roman Jewish historian Josephus Flavius wrote a whole book called *Against Apion* refuting anti-semitic claims by Apion and others. What we realize from this—is that there are many ways to shape a narrative while still being true to our sources and history. The Seder commands us to acknowledge our lowly roots, yet elegantly frames the narrative in an inspiring and constructive way—so that all the suffering and problematic moments in our past culminate in a higher sense of freedom than we could ever have imagined. No longer is Israel subject to the laws of Man, but instead they become subjects to the Infinite! By constantly rehearsing the story—we maintain our humanity and our empathy, recognizing that even though we may not have personally experienced slavery, we (including converts) are commanded to say that we were slaves in Egypt. What does this do? How does this affect the way we connect to others? What does preserving this narrative and empathizing with the oppressed do to us today?

MAGID: THE FIVE RABBIS STAY UP ALL NIGHT IN BNEI BRAK

Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining in Bnei Brak...Why do we mention these Rabbis and the place they were at? All the Rabbis in the group, except for Rabbi Akiva originated from the tribe of Levy. And according to the Midrash, the tribe of Levi was the only tribe of Israel not enslaved in Egypt⁷. Rabbi Akiva was a

⁷ Shemot Rabbah 5:16

descendent of converts to Judaism. Bnei Brak, was known as a place of converts⁸--which demonstrates how, despite that none of the Rabbis involved descended from the Israelite slaves in Egypt, they still retold the Exodus story!⁹

The Rabbis were retelling the Exodus story during the height of the Hadrianic persecutions against Jews in Roman occupied Judea during the 2nd century and in the midst of the Jewish rebellion. They told the story of exodus and freedom during a time of crisis and oppression.

As we can see, while the circumstances in which we are celebrating Passover, may not be ideal, unfortunately, Jewish history is filled with instances of Jews in far worst situations than ours “celebrating” Passover. How did they celebrate during the Roman oppression? During the Crusades? During the Cossack pogroms? How was Passover in the ghettos and camps? What meaning did they find? How does the act of reciting, of remembering effect our way of being in each turn of history?

We are all experiencing Corona in our own unique ways—yet we will be breaking through the boundaries of time and collectively joining generation after generation who recited the same words and practiced the same traditions, some alone, some with their families, some free, some not free. Yet—and this is the paradox—the same traditions trigger different responses, and the uniqueness of our response *is that very tradition* that is the practice of the Seder.

MAGID: THE FOUR SONS

The Four Sons reflects the diversity of humanity. Not every one is the same! Corona affects each person differently, for some who are infected, they barely notice it; for others it can lead to death. Corona is teaching us that as much as we would like to imagine that we are all the same, we are not—and it is important to acknowledge *and engage* the diversity that exists within humanity. In a beautiful paradox, the Four Sons unifies us together to acknowledge diversity. Crisis times in history often do the same thing—it is only by being fully aware of the unique needs, history, and characteristics of our fellow human beings that we can connect on a deep level. Can humility to recognize that we cannot fully understand the complexities of the human condition be the first step to understanding?

MAGID: THE TEN PLAGUES

Corona and other natural disasters shock the developed world and remind us how the human base that unites us all is united in its fragility. Whether a plague or any other natural disaster, no matter who you are or what you're armed with, your fate is the same eventually. The Egyptians represented the height of civilization—and even with their armies and magicians, and every other form of power known to Man they were unable to withstand the plagues and crashing

⁸ Bavli Sanhedrin 96b

⁹ For more on this, see Dayan Dovber Spiers Haggadah commentary in *Ginzei Knesset Yisrael*

seas. Yet, for all their hubris, we mourn their deaths, as the Midrash teaches us, they are also come from the same source as we do¹⁰. From Tel Aviv to Tehran, from the poor beggar to Prince Charles there is no difference in the face of Corona.

SHULCHAN ORECH: ENJOYING THE MEAL ALONE

Rabbis from across the spectrum, Reform to Chareidi, have called upon us for the sake of avoiding risk to our health, not to go to synagogue and not to celebrate the Seder communally. This is a unique situation that reflects the humanistic ethos of Judaism; where human life takes precedence over anything else. According to the Talmud, we are to “live by the mitzvot, and not die by them¹¹.” In the Exodus, Israelites leave Egypt, where their lives are secondary to the demands of their human masters, and move to a state of being where their life is primary. By celebrating Passover alone, we are also celebrating human life—and elevating the Divine within human life!

As you create your own special space by consciously performing these ancient rituals you are sanctifying through ritual and thought, space, time, life, body, and language. Tonight, you are privileged to experience this directly, on your own, with nobody watching but yourself! What we do alone is the ultimate test of who we are. How are we when we are only with ourselves? When nobody is watching?

We say we are celebrating Pesach alone, but are you alone? So many times we experience life through different veils and filters—and each influences us in a different way. What happens when you strip away influence after influence and you are with nobody else except yourself? Is this even possible? Maybe that’s the question: How do you eliminate all the influences so that you can be with one soul—and feel that it is you? Or if we conclude that it is impossible to be free of influence, we can ask, what influences do we want to shape our lives? What actions can we take to build a life that we want?

Rabbi Samuel Eliezer Edels known as the Maharsha, brings down a legend that “according to every thought and word and action of a person—an angel is created...whether for good, or for evil, according to whatever the person’s desire is. Therefore the authority is in the hands of the person, according to his will and thoughts.¹²” According to Ibn Gabirol¹³ and Maimonides¹⁴, “angels” are the thoughts and drives of the human psyche. What we see here is how we are empowered to generate the influences that shape our behavior. Freedom means deciding what influences and what forms of life we want.

¹⁰ Bavli Megillah 10b

¹¹ Bavli Yoma 85b, Rav Yehudah in the name of Shmuel

¹² Maharsha in *Chidushai Agadot* on *Bavli Makkot* 10b

¹³ Quoted by Rashi on Bereshit 28:12

¹⁴ Guide to the Perplexed 2:6

COUNTING THE OMER

On the second night of Passover we count the first of 49 days of the Omer that end on Shavuot when we celebrate the giving of the Torah. There are many reasons and associations with the counting of the Omer, including agricultural, historical, and mystical. The Omer is a time of semi-mourning, where we commemorate our ancestors who died in plague¹⁵, war, and other tragic circumstances.

There is also another side to the counting of the Omer—where by acknowledging and being present in our transient and impermanent state, unfulfilled and unfinished, like the *matzot* that had no time to leaven, we still do not forget to count towards the future, towards the culmination and *raison d'être* of the Exodus—the receiving of the Torah, when meaning and purpose was given. We should note, that it is the giving of the Torah that we count towards, not the entering into the Land of Israel, for without Torah, without meaning, how can we reach a destination? The destination is shaped by the means and journey.

What kind of journey do you want—both for yourself and for society?

After all this interpretation, I'll conclude with the following words of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel¹⁶:

לֹא הַמְדִּירָשׁ הוּא הָעֵקֶר, אֶלָּא הַמַּעֲשֶׂה!

“Interpretation is not the main thing, but action!”

¹⁵ 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva are said to have died from plague due to not respecting one another, see Bavli Yevamot 62b

¹⁶ Pirkei Avot 1:17, how similar is Karl Marx's 11th Thesis on Feurbach, “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”