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Pesach: A Radical Freedom

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Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class

Why did the rabbis assign to this Shabbat of Passover to read from amongst the most radical of the commandments in the Torah? Emancipation and economic relief are the heart of this Torah portion. These passages demand of us the *shmitta* – release from debt for everyone; the obligation to loan money to the poor; and the emancipation of slaves. They parallel the preparations required for the Israelites to go forth from Egypt.

The Israelites in Egypt lived in grinding poverty as well as utter subjection. As slaves, they are unable to act for themselves, and their very imagination of freedom is impoverished. This is why merely bringing the Israelites out of Egypt was not enough: The Israelites started their journey with a feast and full bellies, and with their neighbors giving them gold and silver.

After 50 years this past Wednesday, since his assassination, America has come to view the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a hero – but for most of us, a shallow one, a generic hero who stood up for love and racial justice – but non-threateningly. The truth is much more powerful: the love that he preached was an active love and a threatening love, because it demanded much from us. Dr. King didn't stand for mouthing platitudes of equality: we forget that the night he was gunned down, he was present in Tennessee to stand with the striking sanitation workers of Memphis, to help them achieve just recompense, dignity, and fair treatment.

Dr. King understood what the Torah also understands: there is no freedom when there is structural economic inequality. It is no accident that Dr. King in his speech that night spoke of Pharaoh, reminding us that "You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery."

Pharaoh said the Israelites would join with Egypt's enemies, but his worry was that Egypt would lose its cheap labor source when the Israelites went up out of the land. But it was an excellent tactic to rile his people up by implying that we would take over (Shemot 1:10).

In Devarim 15:4 we read, "There will be no poor among you, for God will greatly bless you..." but in Devarim 15:11 it says, "The poor will never vanish from the land." How can both these verses be simultaneously true?

Yeshayahu Leibowitz comments that "There will be no poor among you" is not a promise, but rather a demand. We have the obligation of canceling debts in the seventh year, and observing

all the mitzvot that deal with social and economic justice –and only when we do this, do we prevent the circumstances in which there will be poor among us. If we fail in our obligations, then the other verse will be true, that “the poor will never vanish from the land.” In other words, God makes it possible for poverty to be eradicated because “God opens his hand and satisfies the needs of all creatures” (as it says in Psalms 145:16 which we read every day), but we create the circumstances that allow poverty to exist. Prophecy only predicts the way things ought to be, and that which is possible to bring about – but it is no guarantee; *that is our part*. Our covenant with God to live by the mitzvot is our promise to create a society in which God’s word can live. Leibowitz says, “No prophet predicts but that which should be,’... This applies equally to Israel’s redemption ... all of this is what *should be*, but whether it will be that way depends...on us.”

Similarly, the symbols of slavery and freedom are mixed together in our seder – in our mouths! – *because* they are joined together. In the Tur, (טור אורח חיים סימן תעה), R’ Amram writes, “one blesses motzi and dips into charoset and eats, and so also writes Rambam (z”l) but I don’t know why one dips this into the charoset. ... And also, the Baal Hamanhig raises a difficulty for their opinions that the matza is in memory of the freedom and the charoset is in memory of the mortar and how could [these two completely opposed symbols: freedom and slavery] be joined together?

We do not live in a time of full freedom, but one in which we have forgotten the truly radical nature of redemption. Matzah and charoset are together in our mouths whenever we speak of freedom, but not of the labor it takes from each of us to get all of us free.

The irony is that it is the charoset which is sweet and the matzah which is flat and bland. That mortar which ties us to the way we’ve always done it is indeed seductive and sweet – and freedom, real freedom, looks like some of us might lose what little we have if we have to share what we have got with others. And yet that is the vision of the Torah: *shmitta*. Freedom is not only a lack of fetters, it is a vision of equality and a tornado that resets the entire society so that we are all – as Devarim 15 repeats each time it refers to the poor, the slave and the one who needs to borrow – “your brother.”



Alana Suskin is an educator, activist, and writer. She holds BAs in Philosophy and Russian Linguistics, an MA in Philosophy and a graduate certificate in Women’s Studies, a master’s of rabbinic studies and ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She is a senior editor of the progressive blog Jewschool.com and has served on the boards of T’ruah, Jews United for Justice, and Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington. Committed to peace-building and interfaith efforts, Alana is currently engaged in a project developing relationships between Jewish and Muslim communities in Greater DC. She serves as Director of Strategic Communications for Americans for Peace Now and is a founding fellow of CLAL’s project, Rabbis Without Borders.