

Pesach Seder in Bnai-Brak Hills Michal Kohane

It's almost a regular seder. There is matza and grape juice, a lovely tablecloth and a beautiful seder plate, traditional *hagadot* and yummy food waiting. As the sun peaks in through the barred windows, it's time to sit down and tell stories of freedom and hope.

Most women in the room wear green; the kind that faded in endless laundries, though not enough to erase their first initial and last name from their heart pocket. Some manage to put on a little make up and redo their hair; some smile; some want a hug, others just nod correctly. Very few have family visiting.

When we're not reading, blessing, singing and tasting the traditional foods of the seder, the conversation veers to one of the inmates who just received her probation: will the board allow her out? Will she be granted her freedom? The woman next to me leans over and says, 'I'm due to go in front of the board in seven years, but you know what, I don't think I will. There is nothing for me out There'.

There are moments that the whole world disappears, and all that's left is this room, these women and this celebration. And yet. Pesach seder at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility is a whole different story. How do we discuss freedom behind bars? What is the meaning of "*zman cherutenu*" here? Is there anything, or are we just mimicking old customs?

The Hagada opens with a strange story about a group of rabbis who gather in Bnai Brak "all that night" to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt until their students come to tell them it's time for the morning prayer. The story is full of peculiar information. We tend to think it was the night of their seder since, after all, they were telling about "*Yetzi'at Mitzrayim*"; but if so, why meet at the hometown of the youngest one of them, and not honor the elder? In fact, why even specify the location? Where are their wives, children and families? And why are the students outside? Can't the rabbis themselves see the morning light? Not to mention that if I was one of their students and had a chance to attend a seder with Rabbi Akiva, for example, surely, I would want to be inside and hear these five amazing rabbis' insights and commentaries. Unless... maybe it was not a seder after all.

It's possible that the story addresses the previous comment:

"And the more one exceeds in telling about the ובח וכל המרבה לספר ביציאת מצרים, הרי זה משובח
exodus from Egypt, the better"

Really? We're so used to this statement that we might have forgotten to ask what it means. One could argue that there is only so much to say about the same old story of the Children of Israel leaving Egypt. What's to add? We read it every year when the relevant Torah portions come up, and then again, on Passover. What's going on?

The hint might be in the words **אותו הלילה** --- that night. Their talk is not only about the once upon a time but about their own night, the darkness of their own lives under the Roman rule, and their own exodus plans. This explains why they meet at Rabbi Akiva's place, who will be the spiritual leader and staunch supporter of the Bar Kochva Revolt.

And if that's not enough, the students invite the rabbis for "**קריאת שמע של שחרית**" - the shma prayer of dawn. In the Jerusalem Talmud, **עמוד השחר** - "the pillar of dawn", refers to redemption. It's clear that while the sages discuss and plan, sitting "inside", ultimately, it is the next generation who is "outside" which is watching to see the **ge'ula** (redemption) with its very first rays of light, to announce it to the world. A careful read reveals that what they are really telling us is that the way one "exceeds in telling about the Exodus" is by talking not only about the past, but about the present as well. They set an example that this story is current to each one of us in our here and now.

Then comes Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaria and talks to us about **המשיחיות** – the future Messianic days, and we're told that we are going to tell the story of *Yetzi'at Mitzrayim* even then too. What is the question here?

In Sanhedrin 99, we learn that the only difference between this world and the Messianic era is **שעבוד ותמלכוי** – that we will not be subjugated to other nations, i.e. political freedom. The Hagada reminds us that even then the story of the Exodus will be recited and repeated. At the end of the Hagada's Magid section we talk about **שיר חדש** - a new song, namely a song we have not yet sung at all!

What is that new song? For each of us it can and should be different. And for some, it might even be the challenge of finding freedom in prison.

This year, let's not just tell the story of 3000+ years ago; let's tell the story of us, of our own grandparents and parents, and let's explore and open the door to the story of tomorrow, that story that is one day still to come.



Michal Kohane has been a long-time leader and educator in Northern California, serving as rabbi, federation executive director and more. Most recently she's been the Rosh Kehila of the Prospect Heights Shul in Brooklyn. Michal holds a BA in Studies of Israel and Education, an M.S. in Jewish Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychology, and is completing her PsyD in organizational psychology. Michal's first novel, Hachug ("Extracurricular") was published in Israel by Steimatzky and she writes a weekly Torah blog. Now back in Israel where she grew up, she continues to be a scholar in residence in Israel and abroad.