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Pesach

Our Personal Exodus: Giving Lasting Meaning to the Seder

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The Mishnah in Arvei Pesachim (Pesachim 10:5) teaches in the name of Rabban Gamliel, "We do not fulfill our obligation if we don't have the following three things at the seder Pesach, Matzah and Maror." These foods are emblems that serve to remind us of the bitterness of slavery in Mitzrayim and the redemption from that bitterness. Yet, these three elements are not mere mementos of Yetziyat Mitzrayim (the Exodus from Egypt). The Mishnah informs us that we must see ourselves as if each one of us departed from Egypt. As the pasuk says, "Tell your child I do all of these things because of what G-d did for me when I left Egypt" (Shemot 13:8).

There is an obligation not only to commemorate our liberation as a people collectively through mentioning these three symbols, rather, a person must also experience them through his or her senses. To fulfill the mitzvah properly, they must be discussed, touched, passed and tasted. At the seder, we not only talk of these tropes, but we literally internalize the feelings of bitterness, suffering and freedom, in order to impress them on our sense memory and psyche.

What is the purpose of this personal exodus each year? What is this experience supposed to effect in each one of us as individuals? The Mishnah presents one answer: out of this ritual follows the obligation to praise God for what was done for our fathers. The Mishnah, however, merely explains the historical aspects of the seder praising God for bringing a nation, our forefathers and foremothers, from darkness to the light. This doesn't explain why we have to see ourselves as having been freed by God from bitter enslavement!

"Ki ger hayitem b'erezt mitzrayim" "Because you were strangers in the Land of Egypt" a fundamental, foundational principle in Judaism. The Torah cites this refrain again and again, when exhorting us to care for those in our midst that are suffering, disenfranchised and powerless. More than a theoretical concept, it is a way of life. Because we were powerless, we give voice to those who have none. Because we tasted bitterness, we seek to sweeten the



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lives of those who cannot do it alone. **The seder teaches us empathy** - not intellectually, but experientially. For one evening, we live in the tension between poverty and abundance, between bitterness and sweetness, between slavery and freedom. Although we feel great joy in being with our family and loved ones, together we swallow salty tears of anguish and despair. Even as we see the multitude of pots simmering in the kitchen, we point to the bread of affliction. The opening stanza of the haggadah tells us: “Ha Lahma Anya di’Akhalu avhatna b’arah di’mitzrayim - kal d’khafen yetei v’yekhul, kal d’tzrikh yetei v’yifsah” Because the bread of poverty and affliction is in front of me, I invite all who are hungry or in need to eat and join me in celebrating Pesah.



Maharat Victoria Sutton is the Director of Education and Community Engagement at Congregation Beth Israel in Berkeley, CA. A graduate of Barnard College, with a BA in Biological Sciences, she also holds a Grand Diploma in Pastry Arts from the French Culinary Institute. She has studied at the Shalom Hartman Institute and Hadar and worked at Ohav Sholom of Merrick, NY, SAR High School, and Drisha. Victoria also served as a Victim Intervention Advocate at New York Presbyterian Hospital, where she trained to provide emotional support in the Emergency Room to survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. She completed the Rabbis Without Borders rabbinical fellowship, and participated in the RRC’s Retreat for Jewish and Muslim Emerging Religious Leaders and the YCT Interfaith Fellowship. Victoria has been awarded the UJA-Federation PENS Scholarship.