

Passover, *Peh Sach*, and Telling Our Stories of Hope

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In the 16th century, in the hilltop village of Tzfat in northern Israel, lived a community of Jews from Spain. When given the choice to live by converting to Catholicism or to die as martyrs for their Jewish faith, these Jews chose a third option. They fled Spain, the only home they or their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had ever known. They made their way to *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel. Traumatized, horrified, and yet relieved to be alive; they were exiles *and* pilgrims—grieving the home they had left behind, and yet flourishing in their ancestral homeland.

Imagine what a Passover season must have been like for *that* generation of Jews. The winds and rains of winter were subsiding, the Galilean hilltops were dotted with vibrant green, and the narrow streets of Tzfat were brimming with flora ready to burst into an array of colors and sweet aroma. Yet, this was a generation still cowering from the Inquisition, a generation for whom the Catholic Church and Spanish royal court wielded power as great as Pharaoh in Egypt. How did the Jews of 16th century Tzfat celebrate our people's festival of freedom with its message that there are no human authorities to whom we bow?

They gathered around their teacher, Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as Ha’Ari, the Great Lion of the Jewish mystical tradition. Ha’Ari taught that the meaning of Pesach is *peh sach*, “the mouth speaks.”¹ Ha’Ari knew that telling *our* story at the Seder table, both ancestral and personal, is the pathway to freedom for us, our people, and our descendants. By reading the Haggadah, by sharing our personal experiences, and by interweaving the two, we break the chains—physical, spiritual, emotional—that enslave us, freeing us to serve our higher purpose, and releasing sparks of holiness into the world.

Our people’s story remains unfinished; it is left up to each generation to add our own unique chapter to the Jewish sacred narrative. Inspired by their teacher, the Jews of Tzfat in the 16th century reimagined Jewish rituals to meet the needs of their time, a time unlike anything Jews had ever experienced before them. We are their heirs and beneficiaries—we feel their presence and we raise up their memory every time we sing *Lecha Dodi* on Shabbat, or engage in a *Tu B’shvat* seder, or believe that God expects us to engage in *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the brokenness of our world, all of which emerged out of 16th century Tzfat.

We, too, live in unprecedented times as Jews. Whomever you are and however you may interpret the disruptive events of the last several years, perhaps you, like the Jews of 16th century Tzfat, are feeling traumatized, horrified, relieved to be alive.

Since the events of October 7, 2023, and especially since the inauguration of the new administration, I have observed a staggering rise in anxiety across our congregation. Whatever your personal source of anxiety—a diagnosis, a death, a loss of income—I am sure

¹ *Pri Etz Chaim*, Gate of Festival, 4:5. And thank you to Rabbi Laura Rumpf for introducing me to this beautiful teaching, and sharing it with Beth Am’s newly formed Rosh Hodesh group.

your *tsurris* has been exacerbated by global events. Perhaps you are aghast at a growing authoritarianism around the world, and the constitutional threats to our democracy here at home. Perhaps you or a loved one are feeling existentially endangered by shifting laws that limit access to healthcare, shelter, and judicial protection. Perhaps you are panicked by those on the left and right who target Jews and seek to commandeer our story for their own purposes.

Anxiety is an understandable response to catastrophic events and [insert joke here] it has also been necessary for the survival of the Jewish people. As one 19th century Torah sage taught his students, “Anxiety is a spiritual strength because it represents concern for the future.”² In other words, as parents often say to their children: If we didn’t care, we wouldn’t be concerned. Our anxiety alerts us to what’s important, reminding us to pay attention and protect what we hold dear.

When left unchecked, however, anxiety is constricting, choking us with fear, crushing us with despair, depleting us of courage. That is when we know we are in *Mitzrayim*, the Hebrew word for Egypt, which can also be translated as a dark and narrow space. The weapon of Pharaohs of every ilk is to take individuals (each of whom is endowed with innate dignity) and deprive them of the hope that is their birthright.

Passover is our season that reminds us that hopelessness is antithetical to Judaism; to be Jewish is to rest secure that there is always the opportunity for hope.³ As Erich Fromm defines it “Hope is paradoxical. It is neither passive waiting nor is it unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur...To hope means to be ready at every

² Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Meichal Wisser), commentary on Proverbs 12:25

³ PTal, Berachot 9:2, 13b

moment for that which is not yet born.”⁴ At the Seder table when we describe Egypt, when we tell our stories, even (or especially) the most horrific parts of our story, we are not strangled by despair; instead, *peh sach*, by opening our mouths and letting our stories flow, we clear the space to cultivate hope and belief in a world not yet born. This is how the Jews of 16th century Tzfat approached Jewish living during an unprecedented global moment, and a creative outpouring and renewal of Judaism was the result.

This is why Ha’Ari teaches that telling our story is the pathway to freedom. By telling our story, we create the possibility of leaving the small, narrow space that has enslaved us. Perhaps this year at your Seder table you will want to explore three questions posed to us by *T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights*. These questions ask us to explore what is *Mitzrayim* for us right now:

What is an Egypt that you feel afraid to leave?

What do you need in order to take the first step out of Mitzrayim (the narrow place)?

What is one thing you can do to support a loved one, friend, or neighbor to prepare for the wilderness?

This Passover, let us gain inspiration from the generation in Tzfat who knew that words create worlds. Let us be the *peh sach*, the mouth that speaks.

Let us focus our attention so we can weave our story with that of our ancestors.

⁴ Erich From, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*, p.1

Let us tell the story of Passover, pushing back the darkness and despair of the moment to make space for freedom, for light, for truth.

Let us create a new chapter in the Jewish story that bequeaths to our descendants the hope that is their birthright. In so doing, perhaps we can discover a wellspring of Jewish creativity that will bring about peace for our people, peace for the human family, peace for the world.

Ken yehi ratzon, may this be God's will.

From my Seder table to yours, may you have a *zissen Pesach*, may you have a sweet Passover.