

# Let Pesach Set You Free

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Of all the Jewish holidays, Pesach resonates especially well in America and other democratic societies. These societies can identify with the Jewish people in Egypt, enslaved and oppressed by a dominant race, who overcame their persecutors to live as a free nation. Former President Obama himself expressed this sentiment a few years ago during his weekly address at Passover time: “In America, the Passover story has always had special meaning. We come from different places and diverse backgrounds, but we are bound together by a journey from bondage to liberty, enshrined in our founding documents and continued in each generation.”

This Shabbat, Shabbat HaGadol, it is customary to read through most of the Haggadah. This is done because the miracle of redemption had already begun at this time in Egypt. Additionally, this reading gets us ready for Seder night.

Although we will stop short of reading this part of the Haggadah this Shabbat, our Sages summed up the purpose of the Seder by quoting the passage “In each generation, each person is obligated to see himself as though he personally went out of Egypt.”

Pesach is more than a historical remembrance – it’s a reenactment. The proper observance of Pesach isn’t just a matter of reading certain words and doing certain things, but of tasting and experiencing personal freedom. The observance of Pesach and its customs should serve as a catalyst that spiritually elevates us above the physical limitations of this world and all its worries, anxieties and issues.

And yet, so many kvetch about all the cleaning and shopping and prep work it takes to get ready for Pesach and the Seder. Isn’t this process supposed to be liberating? Where are we going wrong?

Reb Noson writes:

“Rebbe Nachman cautions us not to be overly stringent in any observance. The Rebbe quotes the Talmudic maxims “God does not rule over His creatures with tyranny” (*Avodah Zarah* 3a), and “The Torah was not given to the ministering angels” (*Berakhot* 25b) ...

“Rebbe Nachman was also very much against all the special stringencies that are observed on Pesach. Many people go so far in observing many fine points of custom that they are literally depressed by the holiday. He spoke about this at length. One of his followers once asked the Rebbe exactly how to act with regard to an ultra-stringent observance. The Rebbe made a joke of it.

“The Rebbe spoke about this quite often. He said that these ultra-strict practices are nothing more than confused foolishness. He told us that he had also been caught up in this and would waste much time thinking up all sorts of

unnecessary restrictions ... He said, 'True devotion consists mainly of simplicity and sincerity. Pray much, study much Torah, do many good deeds. Do not worry yourself with unnecessary restrictions.' ... He concluded, 'There is nothing that you absolutely must do and if not ... If you can, fine, but if not, 'God exempts a person under duress' (*Bava Kama* 28b)."

Our problem is that we tend to get caught up in the minutia of Pesach. When it's finally time to begin thinking about why we are doing all of this effort in the first place, we are so emotionally and physically zapped that we can't be bothered. To paraphrase Reb Noson, "People ask, 'How am I going to make Pesach?' One way or another, Pesach will be. But what is going to be with Pesach itself? What is going to be with the essence of Pesach?"

Rebbe Nachman gives us profound and simple advice. It's not up to us to worry about stringencies and extras. Our job is to keep the basic laws without getting stressed. A competent Rabbi is able to help with this. However, our focus should be on appreciating the holiday and its deeper meaning. Then our observance will bring us to the feeling of personal freedom that Pesach demands of us. Amen!

*Based on Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom #235*