



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Passover 5772

By Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus

If we were to try to summarize the purpose of the Seder ritual in one sentence, we could find that sentence in the Haggadah itself: “*Bechol dor vador, chayav adam lir’ot et atzmo k’ilu hu yatza miMitzrayim*—In every generation, each of us must see ourselves as if we, ourselves, went out from Egypt.” The foods we eat and dip, the prayers we say and sing, the telling of the story—all these are designed to enable us to relive the experience of the Exodus.

It is not a story of some other people long ago; it is OUR story. We were there. We were slaves, who tasted bitterness and wept salty tears and made mortar for bricks and baked flat bread. And we were liberated, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with signs and wonders. We, ourselves, experienced these things and, each year, we re-enact them out of our primal memory. We raise our cups and remember both our oppression and our freedom—together.

This memory took a contemporary turn recently, as I read *The Help* and saw the movie, observing the polite society that tolerated and encouraged oppression in the American South. From there, my imagination wandered to the polite society in Egypt who benefitted from the labor of the Hebrew slaves, and imagined their reaction at the Exodus: “What? Pharaoh is letting them go? Who will draw water for us? Who will build our cities? Who will do the work that is beneath us?”

It is easy to condemn them, both the pampered Egyptians and the ladies who employed “the help.” But we have more in common with them than we’d like to admit. All of us benefit from the underpaid labor of those who mow our lawns and wash our dishes at restaurants; who sew our clothing in modern sweat shops and make the components of our smart phones; who care for our infirm elderly and pick our fruit and vegetables; and who do all the unglamorous jobs that make our world comfortable.

The Torah reminds us over and over that we must care for the poor and the stranger, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. But this memory is short lived: most of us are comfortable now, and it is hard to remember true hardship; the command to be empathetic sometimes gets forgotten as we have forgotten our own suffering.

The purpose of the Seder is to remind us that the people who labor so that we can live the way we do are not unlike us; we once wore their shoes. When we “see ourselves as if we went out from Egypt,” we remove the blinders we usually wear. We see the faces of those workers and can suddenly identify with them. We see our own image and God’s image reflected back.

When we see injustice in the world, both close to home and far away, we should recognize that our privilege doesn't just protect us from injustice; it comes with serious responsibility to alleviate it. Seeing ourselves "as if we went out from Egypt" means that we should be part of the solution. Each of us must find a way to make a difference, to make the world better in our generation. That understanding is what we ingest with our symbolic foods at the Seder. When we see ourselves as if we, ourselves, went out from Egypt, we see ourselves as change-agents, as God's partners in repairing a broken world.



Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus is the rabbi of B'nai Yehuda Beth Sholom, a Reform congregation in Homewood, Illinois. She is the immediate past-President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the organization of nearly 2,000 Reform rabbis in North America and around the world. She was the first woman to be president of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, and was a founder and president of the Women's Rabbinic Network. She loves to cook, and particularly enjoys Pesach recipes handed down through the generations of her family.

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