

A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

The Meaning of the *Shmurah Matzah*

One of the centerpieces of seder night is the eating of matzah, the unleavened bread. And while matzah reminds us of the haste in which the Israelites departed from the land of Egypt, it contains in it another compelling message. The evening of the Passover seder, we are required to eat not just any piece of matzah, but what is known as “guarded matzah.” (This matzah is often called *shmurah matzah* in North America, and it is special because, from the time the wheat is harvested in the field through baking, there is an additional measure of vigilance to be sure that at no point in the process does the wheat turn into leaven.) The reason that we eat this particular matzah is to call to mind the nature of the event described in Exodus 12:42: “That was for the Lord a night of vigil to bring them out of the Land of Egypt; that same night is the Lord’s, one of vigil for all the children of Israel throughout the ages.” When the Torah tells us that seder evening was “a night of vigil” (*leyl shimurim*) for both God and the children of Israel, what is the precise meaning of the term *shimurim* (watching or vigil), and how does it affect the way we understand the matzah?

While many commentators, including Abraham Ibn Ezra, believe that “a night of watching” refers to God’s act of vigilance in guarding the homes of the Israelites from the Angel of Death, Ramban offers us a very different perspective. Arguing that the expression is deeply connected to the act of the Israelites for all generations, Nahmanides contends that it is quintessentially “a night of watching” for the Israelites. He writes, “it means that the Israelites are to observe Pesah by worshipping God through the eating of the Passover-offering, the remembering of the miracles, and the recitation of praise and thanksgiving.” In other words, it is a night of *observance* for the Israelites. The Israelites are commanded to *observe* the Passover ritual in every generation. In this way, it becomes an evening that is devoted wholly to God. Plugging Ramban’s exegesis back into the text (Exod. 12:42) would lead us to read the opening of this verse in this fashion: “It is a night of observance *dedicated* to the Lord.”

Ramban’s reading compels us to both understand and eat the *shmurah matzah* in a different way. According to Ramban, this ritual is about sacredness; that is to say, directing our hearts and minds to God on this very special evening. The essential act of the night involves our celebration of God—an event that is timeless, spreading across all generations. Quite beautifully, Ramban links our past, present, and future in this annual commemoration of the Jewish journey toward freedom.

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Torah from JTS

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By Dr. Eliezer Diamond, Rabbi Judah Nadich Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS.

“This Year We Are Slaves”: How and Why Do We Celebrate Freedom in the Face of Oppression?

What does it mean to celebrate Passover in the shadow of death?

I ask this question for two reasons. First, I am awed but also mystified by those who celebrated the festival of freedom in the gulags and death camps. Why did they not see such a celebration as cruel joke, commemorating a freedom granted in the distant past while suffering cruel and often inhuman oppression in the present? And second, I ask myself, what can I learn from them that should inform my own celebration of Passover?

To address the first question, let’s attend to the words of Simcha Bunim Unsdorfer, a former inmate of Buchenwald, as he recalls the events of Passover 1945 in his memoir *The Yellow Star* (Thomas Yoseloff, publisher). As the holiday approached, Unsdorfer obtained some scraps of paper and wrote a Haggadah from memory. He also acquired a small amount of flour and baked three small matzot. On the night of Passover, he celebrated the seder with his fellow inmates, using a rusty cup of coffee to stand in for the traditional four cups of wine. His unwavering faith, his dauntless determination to celebrate a seder, and his description of that seder are awe-inspiring and moving. But I am most struck by the following passage in his account:

[The work in Buchenwald] served as a source of great courage and hope for me. It was a reminder that our people have gone through many difficult and tragic experiences in our long history and have been freed each time, by the will of God, from our bondage and slavery. How wise, I thought, of our great rabbis of the past to command that Passover and Purim be repeated each year and thus remain alive among the Jewish people. Where would we have gained the strength and courage to survive all our sufferings, were it not for our great historic past?

In this passage, Unsdorfer draws upon his faith and imagination to reframe the horror and oppression of Buchenwald. His work becomes that of the Israelites in Egypt, and is transformed from an oppressive reality to a promise of redemption. Unsdorfer is sure that, like the Israelites of old, the Jewish people will once again be redeemed from slavery and oppression through God’s saving might. And what enables his faith is that the Passover story has, as he puts it, “remain[ed] alive among the Jewish people.”

For Unsdorfer, the continued existence of the Jewish people in the face of adversity and oppression is a consequence of divine intervention, “by the will of God.” This indeed is the belief expressed in the traditional Haggadah: “In every generation they threaten us with extinction but the Holy One Blessed be He, saves us from their grasp.” Yet a careful reading of his words makes it clear that the Jewish people have always been indispensable agents in their own redemption. For how did Passover “remain alive”? Only because Jews chose to celebrate it year

after year, in every time and place, in times of tranquility and persecution. These celebrations expressed a resolve to live as Jews in the face of all obstacles, and it is this tenacity that has been crucial to the survival of the Jewish people. Moreover, the observance of Passover with its message of hope has, in turn, strengthened that resolve. As Unsdorfer himself says, if not for the observance of Passover, “where would we have gained the courage and strength to survive?”

Yet, one may ask, what is meant here by survival? Undoubtedly at least some, and probably most, of those who participated in that Buchenwald seder in 1945 did not survive. Where was their redemption? Here we come to a hard but profound truth. Unsdorfer never speaks of his own survival, but rather of “our” survival. He understood that the redeeming power of God as reflected in the story of the Exodus and the strength that it gave him and his fellow inmates did not guarantee that they would leave Buchenwald alive. The promise it held for him was that whether he made it through or not, the Jewish people would live on. And though he did not quite say it, he clearly understood that this would come about in part because of his willingness, in the spring of 1945—in the shadow of death—to write a Haggadah, bake matzot, and organize a seder.

I sometimes imagine being transported to a seder in medieval Ashkenaz and hearing the participants chant at the end of the seder, “Le-shanah ha-ba’ah bi-Yerushalayim!” (Next year in Jerusalem!). I would pull aside one of the participants and say, “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but what did you mean when you said, ‘Next year in Jerusalem’? Do you really expect to be there in time for next Pesah?” If he or she were a Jew of simple faith, the answer might be, “Why not? The Messiah could come at any moment.” Another kind of Jew might answer, “Will I be in Jerusalem next year, or any other year for that matter? I doubt it. My children? Unlikely. My grandchildren? It doesn’t look that way. But this I know: someday my descendants will return to Jerusalem, and this will happen because I and my fellow Jews are willing to express a fantasy as a certainty every year.” And certainly the return of our people to Eretz Yisrael and the establishment of the State of Israel owe no small debt to those who expressed their belief—nay, their certainty—that the Jewish people would one day return to Zion. They kept the dream alive until its fulfillment became possible, and fulfillment was possible because the dream was kept alive.

The Haggadah tells us that we were redeemed by God, and I believe that this is true. But I believe that redemption also comes through stubborn and unselfish commitment and hope. And this is what I learn from Unsdorfer and others like him. He teaches me that my celebration of the seder is important simply because I do it. I am announcing, “I am here. I am taking up the legacy entrusted to me by the Jews who came before me, and I am passing it on to my children and my children’s children. And I achieve this by remembering and doing.” The story of the Exodus has much to teach Jew and Gentile alike, and we should all spend the upcoming seder plumbing its meaning. But first and foremost, the story must be told. And it must be told as an act of reflection on the past, commitment in the present, and faith and hope in the future. When we tell the story this way, we can be sure that we are ensuring that it will be told for generations to come.

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SERVICE OF THE HEART: EXPLORING PRAYER

By Rabbi Samuel Barth, senior lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

The Song of Songs: Lovers Absent and Present

This Shabbat, Hol Hamo’ed Pesah, we read *Shir Hashirim*, the Song of Songs, the provocative and enigmatic cycle of lusty love poetry that is embraced (though not without challenge) by the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Dr. Francis Landy of Calgary University wrote a powerful and lyrical treatise on the Song of Songs entitled *Paradoxes of Paradise*, which opens with the reflection of Rabbi Akiva—“All the Scriptures are *kedoshim*, holy, but *Shir Hashirim kodesh kodashim*, the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies”—radically deploying the term otherwise used to describe the holiest place in the Temple.

It is suggested that Pesah always falls in the springtime, naturally giving occasion for texts and poetry that dwell on fecundity, fertility, and the longings and fulfillments of lovers that seek each other, as through the chapters of the Song of Songs. Jewish tradition sees the text as an allegory of the love of God for Israel, and in a truly bizarre exercise in transplanting sacred myths into biblical realia, the Artscroll edition of the text replaces almost every reference to human anatomy with a metaphor from theology (for example, the breasts of the beloved are the twin tablets of the Ten Commandments).

Such an approach can only be born from a pious wish to capture the love without the lovers. Landy suggests that the Kabbalists are more faithful to the embodied eroticism of the text by speculating on the way that the human loveplay might be a metaphor for the inner experience of divine love. Perhaps the night of watching and anticipation that precedes the Exodus can be understood as offering some parallel to the anxiety and yearning of lovers awaiting their return to each other. The biblical narrative is certainly clear that it was God, and no other, who “passed over”—and yet came infinitely close to—the people of Israel in Egypt. God is not mentioned directly in the text of *Shir Hashirim*, but toward the very end there is an allusion in the word *shalhevetyah* (Song. 8:6) that perhaps refers to a spark or flame of love in which God is concealed. The counting of the days of the ‘Omer connect Pesah to Revelation and the union of God and Israel at Sinai; there are many versions of a *ketubbah* (marriage contract) between God and Israel dated for the Revelation at Sinai. The most famous is that of the prolific Safed mystic and poet Israel Najara (ca.1550–1625).

The text of Song of Songs 8:6–7 is rendered hauntingly by the great Israeli singer Ofra Haza (z”l).

As always, I am interested in hearing comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu.