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Mount Sinai is upright, indicating that learning Torah is a natural state, the very purpose for which we were created. Calligraphed in the sky, one sees Leviticus 25:55, “For it is to Me (God) that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt.” Thus, freedom manifests itself in becoming a servant of God rather than a servant to Pharaoh.

True liberation comes from the observance of Torah, which “inverts the pyramid of Egypt.”

Passover 5779

פסח תשע"ט



A Spiritual Caution for This Season

Rabbi David Hoffman, Vice Chancellor and Chief Advancement Officer, JTS

The Shulhan Arukh—the 16th-century law code that serves as the essential scaffolding for the Jewish legal system—introduces its discussion of the holiday of Passover with the Talmudic prescription:

We ask and inquire about the laws of Passover 30 days before the beginning of the Passover holiday. (OH 429:1, BT Pesahim 6a)

Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1530-1572) immediately comments on this law:

It is a custom to buy wheat and distribute it to the poor for the needs of Passover.

Rabbi Isserles’s project is to offer Ashkenazic glosses on the Shulhan Arukh, which represents the Sephardic tradition. But here, Rabbi Isserles’s comment seems like a non-sequitur.

In what way is Rabbi Isserles’s comment related to the previous law in the Shulhan Arukh that asks us to investigate the many laws related to Passover?

Even if one were to say that these two instructions are thematically connected simply as things one should do before the start of the holiday, there are other places in the laws for Passover that would be more appropriate for Rabbi Isserles’s admonition to provide wheat for the poor so that they, too, could bake matzot.

Why then did he share the custom of providing wheat for the poor here, immediately after the Shulhan Arukh's injunction to study the laws of Passover?

The seemingly disconnected placement of Rabbi Isserles's prodding comment in fact gives us insight into his concerns not just about the particulars of Passover, but about Jewish law in general.

Passover—with its many customs and (some even might say pedantic) laws, from the Seder to kashering utensils and the counting of the Omer—represents Jewish ritual observance at its most dense. Perhaps Rabbi Isserles's *first sentence* regarding this holiday was meant to serve as a spiritual caution: Don't let your immersion in the details of the laws of Passover—and perhaps even more broadly, don't let your pursuit of a religious experience—obscure the pain of others in your community. Make sure you take care of the hungry even as you study the legal particulars and pursue your own religious meaning.

This idea is expressed again on the seder night. The first sentences out of our mouths as we begin the *Maggid* section include: "Let all those who are hungry come and eat." This is not an invitation; if it were, there are better times to offer hospitality to the needy than when the door is closed to our homes and the seder has already begun.

Rather, this iconic sentence in one of our more sacred liturgical moments of the year is a bold declarative statement. *Maggid* is the story of the Jewish people, setting out who we have been through history and who we—as a people—aspire to become. And the section of the "telling of our story (*Maggid*)" that we offer our children and all those gathered around our table begins with the pronouncement, *we are a people who open our doors to the needy*. Before we indulge in conversation around the larger themes of freedom and responsibility, before we engage in the pursuit of personal meaning and play out all the wonderful rituals of the evening, we offer the value proposition that our religious experience must more fully engage us with the needs of others.

Law and ritual are uniquely powerful and evocative languages and symbolic systems. They offer us ways to manifest our values in our lives and in the world. The unavoidable problem with a symbolic system is

that the symbol can be perceived as the self-authenticating end. Rabbi Isserles prods us to ensure that our laws and customs always serve as a religious language that helps us more fully connect with and help those in our community that need us.

May we all be mindful of Rabbi Isserles's cautionary message and may we all merit to use the language of law as we believe God intended.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



“We Were Slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt”

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Rav Hanina explained, “God said to the tribes, ‘You have sold Joseph into slavery. By your lives, every year you will declare, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh,’ and thereby atone for the sin of selling Joseph. And just as Joseph went forth from imprisonment to royalty, so we too have gone forth from slavery to freedom”—*Midrash Tehillim, Mizmor X*

Mount Sinai and a pyramid mirror each other, two halves of a whole. The pyramid is upside down, demonstrating that slavery is unnatural. Servitude distorts reality and ambition. This distortion comes not only from slavery to a human master, but also from when we become enslaved to our own drives—lacking the ability to envision an alternative or to hold fast to hope.

The midrash about Joseph and his brothers above is inscribed in the background set against the pyramid. The pyramid is draped with Joseph's striped coat; the colors carry over into the border, a mosaic of multicolored glass, reflecting the shattered love of his family—torn apart by favoritism and hatred.