

APRIL 3, 2017

Parashat Tzav – Shabbat Hagadol & Passover

Symbols Leading to Action – Shabbat Hagadol

I will send you Elijah the prophet (Malachi 3:23)

אנכי שולח לכם את אליה הנביא (מלאכי ג:כג)

Around the world, the Seder is more than a religious or educational experience; it's a family affair. On Seder night of 2002, during the height of the Intifada, a massive bomb destroyed the dining room of the Park Hotel in Netanya, killing thirty and injuring 160 more as they enjoyed the traditional Passover meal with their families and friends. In addition to the actual loss of life on that day, we can only imagine the pain of the families who now sit together at countless *sedarim* without their loved ones physically present. That terrible evening spurred the formation of an Israeli NGO called Na'ava which dedicates itself to bring together families who have suffered the tragic loss of loved ones from terrorist attacks in the Jewish state. Called "[The Empty Chair](#)," the communal Seder allows families who share the bond of loss to mourn, remember and move forward together. Na'ava has already invited 150 guests to the Seder this year, which will be led by Eliezer Rosenfeld, whose son [Malachi was killed in a shooting attack](#) in 2015.

For centuries, in addition to the four cups of wine that we drink at the Seder, Jews have poured a fifth cup—a Cup of Elijah—that is left untouched. What is the reason for this unusual custom? According to the Gaon of Vilna, there is a rabbinic dispute about whether we must drink four or five cups of wine at the Seder—a dispute that was never resolved. Thus, the custom developed to pour the fifth cup but not drink it. It was given the name "Cup of Elijah" because it is foretold that Elijah will one day resolve all of our disputes and disagreements.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed offers a different interpretation. He notes that the four cups of wine represent the four languages of redemption found in the book of Exodus (6:6-7): "I will bring you out...I will deliver you...I will redeem you... I will take you..." But there is also a fifth expression of Redemption: "I will bring you into the Land..." (6:8). Rabbi Melamed suggests that over the long centuries of exile, our ancestors began to wonder whether we would return to the land of Israel and whether it was appropriate to drink from the fifth cup. But we do not drink it, rather we pour it as a symbol of our faith in the future and the knowledge that one day we would indeed merit our return to the Promised Land. We call this cup the "Cup of Elijah" to connote our faith in the return of the famed prophet, as we note in the haftarah of Shabbat Hagadol: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord." (Malachi 3:23)

The Cup of Elijah demonstrates both for ourselves and our children that words are not enough; they must be backed by an action—even if it's only symbolic—that concretizes our faith and our emotion. While we pray and yearn for redemption, only when we combine faith with action does it become rooted in our identity. In modern times, Jews have expanded on this notion of symbolism at the Seder as a means of spurring ourselves to greater action. The idea of an "Empty Chair" at the Seder is not new. In his book "Jewish Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook," Rafael Medoff notes that during the long struggle to free Prisoners of Zion locked behind the Iron Curtain in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 80s, "Passover Seders in private homes frequently featured an empty chair to represent Soviet Jews who were not free to celebrate the holiday." That symbolic chair spurred Jews to protest, speak out and take action, and it ultimately led to the release of not just the Prisoners of Zion, but to the freedom of millions of Jews from the grip of the Soviet Union.

Perhaps we should consider this year returning to the custom of the "Empty Chair." With so much suffering in the world, including the hundreds of thousands of innocent lives lost in Syria, we must also use the night of freedom to

remember the suffering of others in the world still today. At the same time, that empty chair should also remind us that while life in Israel is indeed quieter than it has been in recent years, over forty Israelis—including an Arab-Israeli and two Americans—have been killed in terrorist attacks. Their families will indeed sit down to the Seder night this year—some together, and some alone—with an empty seat at the table. On a night filled with symbols, we must add our own symbols to remind us that we cannot just remember those who are suffering; we must also commit ourselves to take action on their behalf. ■

Finding Cures in the Haggadah - Pesach

These are the ten plagues (Passover Haggadah)

אלו עשר המכות (הגדה של פסח)

As we recount the Ten Plagues during the Sedarim, we spill a bit of wine for each plague. Rabbi Matt Berkowitz explains in the *Lovell Haggadah* that we perform this ritual in an effort to share in the suffering of the Egyptians. Our cup cannot be full when others—wicked as they may be—suffer. After we recount the plagues, we find a curious argument between Rabbi Yossi the Gallilean, Rabbi Eliezer, and Rabbi Akiva. According to Rabbi Yossi, “the Egyptians were stricken by ten plagues in Egypt, and then were struck by fifty plagues at the sea.” Rabbi Eliezer argued that, “in Egypt they were struck by forty plagues, and at the sea they were stricken by two hundred plagues.” Rabbi Akiva upped the ante insisting that, “in Egypt they were struck by fifty plagues, and at the sea they were stricken by two hundred and fifty plagues.” All of this leads to a simple question: What difference does it make whether the Egyptians suffered a total of sixty, or two hundred forty, or even three hundred plagues? Why does the number make any difference? Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna explains that the argument was based upon a subsequent promise made to the Jewish people: Should the Israelites adhere to the Torah, “I will put none of the diseases upon you which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that heals you” (Exodus 15:26). In other words, rather than simply upping the number of plagues, the rabbis were searching for ever greater numbers of diseases which would no longer plague the nation. Rather than searching for plagues, the rabbis were searching for cures.

Today we search for cures to terrible diseases not in the biblical text, but in advanced laboratories with cutting-edge science. Like their ancient predecessors of Israel mentioned in the Hagaddah who sought to eliminate the possibility of a great number of diseases, the people of Israel today have recently made incredible strides in identifying and treating dangerous and deadly diseases.

Last month, researchers from Tel Aviv University’s Sackler School of Medicine published an article describing the [discovery of a newly developed proteins](#) which, “can be specifically modified during the division process—mitosis—to unleash an inherent ‘death mechanism’ that self-eradicates duplicating cancer cells.” The discovery could lead to treatments of incurable cancers that do not respond to traditional chemotherapy. Earlier this year, an international team of researchers led by Israel’s Professor Hossam Haick of the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, scientifically demonstrated that diseases like cancer and Parkinson’s can be detected by analyzing a person’s breath. Last month the [Jerusalem Post reported](#), Haick—an Arab Christian born in Nazareth—received the Humboldt Research Award in Germany, given to prominent researchers who have significantly influenced their fields of study. And just last week [Ynet reported](#), “Israeli scientists from the Rehovot-based company Nucleix succeeded in developing a first of its kind blood test to diagnose lung cancer.” Every year, approximately 1.8 million new lung cancer patients are diagnosed, of whom 1.59 million will die within the first year of diagnosis often because most cases are discovered by chance long after the disease has developed and spread. With this new blood test, medical professionals will hopefully be able to test people with a high probability of developing cancer to allow for early and effective treatments. Nucleix CEO Dr. Elon Ganor told Ynet that, “This is a significant achievement after eight years of work. We developed the test here in Israel. We dreamed of making a significant contribution to humanity and saving lives, and we are convinced that this test will indeed save hundreds of thousands of people every year worldwide.”

Now more than ever, the people of Israel are working hard to develop revolutionary products to identify, treat and cure deadly diseases which will dramatically improve the lives of millions of people around the world. ■