

From Narrowness to Expansiveness: the Internal and the External

Seder night, the night of questions, brings us face to face with questions about freedom. In this season I ask: what changes can I make in my life and the world such that I can become free?

The haggadah, read at seder night, is a guide that can help us become free.

Hidden in the Hallel, the Psalms of praise traditionally recited on seder night, is a verse that suggests to us what might be at the essence of freedom.

Closed in by my troubles I called on the Eternal, who answered me and set me free. (Psalm 118:5)

A more literal translation would be:

From the **narrowness** (*metzar*) I called on the Eternal, who answered me in the **expansiveness** (*merchav*) of the Eternal.

The word of narrowness, *metzar*, is the root meaning of the word for Egypt – *mitzrayim*. Egypt can then be understood as ‘that place which restricts us’. To help us understand how to move out of Egypt we can explore the meaning of narrowness.

You might recognise narrowness as a feeling that arises in our bodies in those moments of anxiety or pain where we feel closed in. I think it can be triggered from two places.

Firstly it can come to us from the **external** world. This is what slavery is about: narrowness imposed on an individual by others. When one person/group limits the ability of another person/group to act they are impose ‘narrowness’ on them. Slavery is an extreme, though unfortunately, all too contemporary example of this. Other examples are the daily oppressions that take place as a result of political structures be they sexist, racist, homophobic or xenophobic.

The other source of narrowness can come from our own **internal** world: feelings of fear, experiences of shame, worry at how others might be judging us. Within the narrow confines of our internal world these feelings can become patterns of thinking, compulsions or addictions that consume our time and attention and leave us feeling even more closed in, narrow and alone.

At the heart of the haggadah is a debate between two 3rd century Babylonian rabbis. In response to the guideline for the Pesach seder that we must begin the telling in ‘shame and end in praise’ (Mishnah Pesachim 10:4), Rav argues that shame is idolatry and praise is being in service to the one true God – the move to spiritual freedom. Contrastingly, Shmuel argues that shame is the experience of slavery and praise is the move into physical freedom.

Rav is suggesting that it is the **internal** experience - the patterns of thought, the ideology – is the freedom of the Pesach story and Shmuel is arguing that it is the **external** condition, the change from being restricted physically by others to being free of them that represents the freedom of the Pesach story.

The genius of the haggadah is that it identifies the truth in both of these understandings and insists that we tell both Shmuel’s story and Rav’s story as part of the seder. The seder acknowledges that both external conditions and internal processes can place us in *metzar/narrowness/Egypt*. The seder invites us to work on both of these in order to be free: we are invited to challenge the oppression that takes place where one individual or group limits the abilities of another and we are invited to acknowledge those internal patterns of thinking that enslave us and restrict us.

How do we know then what freedom is? This is the *merchav-Yah* – expansiveness. Just as we know narrowness from our bodies so too do we know expansiveness: those moments when you feel open, hopeful, free – when you can stretch out and when you can run or dance with joy.

May this Pesach help you to move from narrowness to expansiveness, from Egypt to freedom in your internal world and help guide you to do your part to enable the move from narrowness to expansiveness in the external world around you.

Rabbi Daniel Lichman (rabbidaniel@rjuk.org) is the rabbi to Progressive Jewish Students. His teaching focuses on bringing Torah to life to enrich our lives. He is a graduate of Leo Baeck College and is available to visit your campus.

Progressive Jewish Students, a joint project of Reform and Liberal Judaism offers educational, religious and pastoral support for Progressive Jewish students by helping to build vibrant Progressive Jewish communities on campus.