

Passover Freedom

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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As we come to celebrate Passover, we must remember the message of the moment. Freedom, once received, must be preserved. There is an old military saying in Israel, “only those who defend their freedom will keep it.”

With the one exception of Passover, freedom is not something given; it is earned. Freedom requires discipline, hard work and most of all, self sacrifice. In ancient Egypt we paid for our freedom with the blood of our newborn male children; our enemies also paid with the blood of their firstborns. Since that one unique moment in human history when G-d personally intervened and brought us out of Egypt by a supernatural hand, the responsibility to acquire and preserve freedom has fallen into human hands, blessed by G-d and grasping the sword.



Only those who wield the sword stand a chance to defend their freedom. Those who have “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (Is. 2:4) have acted prematurely. By doing so, in their foolish and fantastical illusions of peace, they have again been taken captive and today are in the depths of slavery. They are no longer free men, who can make their own choices and chart the course of their own destinies. Instead they are slaves, without a backbone and without resolve. They are weak in mind and body; completely subject to the directions, whims and commands of another.

Kohelet says (3:8) that there are both times for war and times for peace. Not for naught is the time of war written before the time of peace. War comes before peace. The plagues came to Egypt before the exodus and the apocalypse will come before Mashiah. Wars conquer enemies and only when the enemy is conquered can there truly be peace.

When Mashiah comes there will be plenty of time for peace. Until then, each and every day, it is time for war. Those who fight stand the chance to win. Those who do not fight have already lost. They are slaves. Torah teaches us that the status of a slave is less than a full human being. A slave is considered property and not a man. He cannot even observe many of the laws of Torah. Only a man can observe Torah, only a free man can serve G-d. Slaves grovel; free men stand tall. Slaves submit and follow orders, free men fight and surrender only to G-d.

Here in these United States, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. He paid for his courage with a bullet to the head. Today, most Americans, other westerners and certainly most Jews have willingly walked right back into slavery. Although today's slavery is mostly of the mind, still it is as binding and degrading as what was experienced by those living here over a century ago.

This Passover finds the vast majority of us again being slaves. We celebrate a Passover Seder as a hollow reminder of former glory. Today, we have no such glory. Today, we grovel before our many new masters. We embrace peace and passivism and fear raising the sword of free men.

Only free men can carry a weapon. Only free men can wield it and fight. Avraham Avinu was such a warrior; so was Yaakov his grandson. Our ancestors went forth from Egypt fully armed and ready for war (Rashi, Ex. 13:18). Yet, alas, today, their descendants sit in their plush homes, comfortable, fat, lazy and passive; ready to be led to the slaughter like lambs instead of being ready to sit at the head of the feast of free men, eating slaughtered lamb.

Today, the slaves fear to raise the sword, to slaughter again the paschal lamb; after all, what would the neighbors think? If I lifted the sword, what would others say? So instead of raising the sword of freedom to defend and conquer, the sword of slaughter is raised up against us, to slit the throats of those too peace-loving to care to defend themselves. Slaves die; who cares? Free men live; everyone cares and everyone is forced to respect them.

The Haggadah teaches that in every generation every man must personally see himself as if he personally went forth from Egypt. Torah is clear that our ancestors went out armed. Today, where are your arms? Where is your sword, your military knife or even your gun? Please do not respond with your loathing of violence and weapons. This only proves your disrespect for Torah and everything holy.

Since the days of Moses, Joshua and David, Israel has had an army and it was the greatest of honors to serve G-d as one of His holy fighters. How far have we fallen, how blind we are, how polluted are our minds that such a natural and logical thing such as self defense should be ignored by so many. Torah commands it and we ignore it, and still many call themselves Torah observant. They cannot even see their own contradictions.

If you want to be like our ancestors who left Egypt at the first Passover, then you should celebrate this Passover just like they did. You should have your weapons of war ready and displayed at your Seder table. They should be practical weapons, not ceremonial ones. You should know how to use them and teach your children how to use them. You should be ready for war. For remember, soon after the exodus, Amalek came and declared war. The people went out to fight, to survive. As it was then, so nothing has changed today.

Freedom survives because free men fight for it. Freedom dies when people grow lazy and lethargic. First they expect others to fight for their freedom, and then they turn their backs on even those fighters, disrespecting their heroic self-sacrifice. This is the mind of a slave and a coward. First the mind is enslaved, the body then always follows suit.

Passover celebrates victory by the Hand of G-d over the hand of man. Since the first Passover the victory of the Hand of G-d is achieved through the sword and not through the word as the slaves have taught! Talk has its place and it has its power. It is said that the pen is mightier than the sword. This too has its moments. Yet, when the pen and sword are united, then the free men cannot be conquered.

Indeed, even in ancient days, Rabbi Elazar ben Shamma taught (Sifre, Ekev 40) that the Torah came down from Heaven wrapped in a sword. We do not choose one or the other. We embrace them both. Both came down from Heaven equally and together. Both serve the Will of Heaven. Both united and together bring about the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven. Both together are necessary for free men to remain free.

Passover is the time to commemorate freedom, to remember it and to recommit to it. At my Passover table we will have weapons of war, symbols equal to matzah and marror. Matzah is the bread of freedom, marror is to remind us of slavery, and the weapons make sure that we do not confuse the two. We do not fulfill our Passover obligations unless we embrace freedom. This cannot be done by word alone; it must be done by deed.

Long live the fighters! Long live the free men who today and everyday experience the Exodus! Long live Torah! Long live David our king, in whose army we are now summoned to fight. Pick up your arms and sharpen your minds. Only then will you know how to wield the sword in the battle for freedom and righteousness.