

WHO KNOWS FOUR? CELEBRATING OUR SEASON OF FREEDOM by Rabbi Rena Kieval

Tonight begins the “Season of our Freedom,” *zeman heiruteinu*, as Passover is called in rabbinic literature. The theme of freedom seems so very relevant this year. We have seen threats to democracy in our country, and we have been made intensely aware of how many citizens in our land do not enjoy equal freedoms. And of course, the freedoms of our personal, day-to-day lives have been constricted and restricted because of the global pandemic. This year, we do not take freedom for granted.

Freedom is the primary focus of our Jewish foundational story, the Exodus. Freedom and its many manifestations are also, of course, at the core of American democracy. When we think about freedom, we might recall the famous words of President Franklin Roosevelt, when he famously declared that all Americans and all people are entitled to Four Freedoms: the **freedom** of speech and expression, the **freedom** to worship God in one’s own way, **freedom** from want and **freedom** from fear. His dramatic words to our nation as it prepared to enter World War II were immortalized by Norman Rockwell’s beautiful paintings depicting these Four Freedoms.

Four is also the number which frames our Jewish celebration of freedom, the Passover *seder*. We recall four verbs from the Torah’s Exodus story which mark our people’s journey from slavery to rescue to liberation to redemption. We drink four cups of wine. We sing four questions and discuss four types of children, as we share the evocative tastes, symbols, songs and stories of the Haggadah and our story of liberation.

There are also “Four Freedoms,” four powerful, core teachings, that are suggested by the Passover rituals. Freedom is not only the focus of the Exodus story; it is also the theme built into the customs we observe. Consider the following:

ONE: THE FREEDOM TO START OVER

Passover is a spring holiday, *chag ha-aviv*, when life is renewed, starting over. Cleaning out our *chametz* can be both a physical and spiritual “spring cleaning,” cleansing ourselves of excess material “stuff.” It can be cleansing ourselves of arrogance, described by some sages as our ‘puffed-up’ *chametz* qualities, or of old behavior patterns we need to shed.

As free people, we might think about opportunities for our own second chances. Or, we might offer a second chance to others through our support or by mending a relationship. Just as the exodus from Egypt was a new start for the Israelites, we celebrate our freedom to start anew.

TWO: FREEDOM INCLUDES ALL PEOPLE

Before we start our seder, before we celebrate and enjoy our bounty, we symbolically “open the door” and say “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” Judaism teaches that liberation is not complete if all people are not free.

We are truly free when we can look beyond ourselves to the needs of others. As we break the middle matzah, we remember our broken selves throughout Jewish history, and those among us who are still not whole. We open our homes to guests, we give *tzedakah* and recall the mandate of the Exodus: a commitment to work harder to bring freedom to all people.

THREE: FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, AN OPEN MIND

The ability to question is the quintessential expression of freedom, and questions are an integral part of the seder. Only those who are free can challenge the status quo and ask hard questions. Jewish thought and law have developed through questioning and Judaism has always encouraged and nurtured intellectual openness.

One passage in the Haggadah that especially lends itself to an exploration of this theme is that of the Four Children. These four characters, based on verses in the Torah, are perhaps included in the Haggadah precisely to encourage challenging questions. As we meet them at the seder, we might consider what these questioners represent: different approaches to religion, different learning styles, different personalities, different aspects of ourselves. How should we best engage with these diverse characters when we encounter them in our own lives?

FOUR: FREEDOM FROM WANTING MORE, *DAYENU!*

The most beloved song of the seder, *dayenu*, literally means “it would have been enough.” This song highlights what it means to be truly grateful for all of our gifts, even if objectively they may not be sufficient, “enough.” A free person is one who is not imprisoned by a perpetual desire for more; a truly free person is able to appreciate their portion, celebrate it and joyously sing *dayenu* – this is enough!

Our sages teach that on Pesach, we do not merely *think about* freedom; rather each of us should truly *feel* what it means to be free. To accomplish this, at the seder we should not feel bound only to the traditional text of the Haggadah. “Anyone who expands on the story of the Exodus is to be praised,” they said.

This year, let us deepen our understanding of freedom and our commitment to it in its many profound manifestations. As we sit at our seder tables, let us explore, be creative and have fun, and may each of us find ways to truly experience the great gift of freedom.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach from my family to you and yours