

Oz Torah

By Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple AO RFD
Emeritus Rabbi of the Great Synagogue, Sydney

A selection of Rabbi Raymond Apple's insights on Pesach from
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Freedom in slavery

Achad HaAm wrote a now famous essay entitled *Avdut B'toch Cherut* – “Slavery in the Midst of Freedom” – in which he argued that even though a person may be free in a physical sense, they can still be enslaved in mind and heart.

Turning Achad HaAm's title around we can also speak of *Cherut B'toch Avdut* – “Freedom in the Midst of Slavery”.

The body can be constrained by slavery, imprisonment, severe illness or other circumstances that prevent free movement, yet the mind and heart can rise above the constraints and soar free.

Victor Frankl's concept of logotherapy, emerging from the suffering of the Holocaust, testifies that when a great cause or idea impels a person, they can never be broken by pain, persecution or prejudice.

“Facts are not fate,” says Frankl in his book, “The Will to Meaning”; “what matters is the stand (one) takes towards his predicament, the attitude he chooses towards his suffering.”

Holocaust literature records the moral resistance of *k'doshim* who refused to give way in their thoughts and feelings to the blackness of the physical moment. Natan Scharansky and all the Prisoners of Zion said they understood what freedom was and that enabled them to survive.

The sages knew of *Cherut B'toch Avdut* when they said that the slaves in Egypt maintained their

language, their moral standards and their faith in God despite the cruelty of the taskmasters.

There is even a Talmudic passage that says the Israelites were already redeemed in Egypt, not only when they left (Pes. 116b). Once their mindset was that of free people, the remaining period of slavery was unable to defeat them.

Franz Rosenzweig, centuries later in the 1920s, suffered from an illness that almost totally incapacitated him in a physical sense, but he never gave up his philosopher's mind or his determination to think, write and teach.

However thick the walls are, a person can still soar free.



We'd be left behind

Matzah is *lechem oni* – bread of affliction, bread of austerity. The Zohar, however, calls it the food of faith. The affliction or austerity we can understand, but faith?

One answer is that when the Israelites hurriedly left Egypt and went into the wilderness, no-one asked, “How will we survive?” Matzah symbolised their faith that God would look after them wherever they went.

Our generation, though, is rather different. We would probably have made things so difficult that Moses would have given up on us and left us behind.

When Moses said, “Get ready for departure,” we would have replied, “We hope you're only talking to the orthodox Jews (or the ultra-orthodox, the Zionists,

the liberals, the secularists)” and Moses would have needed to smooth out so many feathers that Pharaoh would have clamped down and stopped the lot of us going.

When Moses said, “God has given me a message for you,” we would have objected, “But who are you that God should choose you? You weren’t elected democratically, you aren’t even a speaker... why should anyone listen to what you say?”

When Moses said, “Your food will be matzah,” we would have said, “How kosher is it? If it’s not *glatt* kosher we don’t want any.” If Moses had said, “It’s under God’s supervision,” we would have objected, “And who gave HIM *s’michah*?”

When Moses said, “We’re going to Israel,” we would have said, “Why not America (or Australia)? The houses are bigger there, the salaries are higher.”

When Moses said, “You’ll be living in thatched huts,” we would have said, “What – without plumbing, electricity and air-conditioning? And what happens if the roof leaks?”

When Moses said, “We’re stopping at Sinai for the Ten Commandments,” we would have said, “Slow down! We need a committee to inspect the site and report back, a second committee to check that the Commandments are politically correct, a referendum to decide on the preamble!”

Poor Moses. Such a vision, a destiny, an exhilarating cause to offer us, and all we can do is nitpick. Our ancestors were right. We need faith, rising above the material and mundane: faith in God, in our task, in ourselves.

God said, “Speak unto the Children of Israel and tell them to go forward.” Without faith we will never go forward.

Who asks the questions?

When we were very young we showed how grown up we were when we first asked the four questions on *Seder* night. *Mah Nishtanah*, we piped up, and proud and adoring elders beamed with delight.

Later we probably moved through a stage of rebelliousness and maybe didn’t even come to *Seder* at all. Perhaps we knew, perhaps we didn’t, but that hurt our parents unbelievably. They had imagined us to be the wise son, and lo and behold, we had turned into the *Rasha*, or even worse, the son who stayed away.

Then we settled down and were back at *Seder*, and before long we ourselves were grown up and starting a family, and the cycle began again. Jewish life would not be the same without *Seder* and the four questions. The age-old dialogue with Judaism takes many forms, and our attitude to the Haggadah is the litmus test of how it is going.

Not that it is enough to ask about unleavened bread and bitter herbs. There are other and deeper questions that should be asked by the Jew who thinks.

Questions about God and man, life and death, good and evil, relationships and temptations, spirituality and secularism, authority and autonomy.

The worst thing a parent can do is to give the dismissive response and say, *M’darf nicht fragen*... – “You shouldn’t ask”.



The Midrash says that when a person asks the simple son’s question, *Mah zot?* - “What is this Judaism?” it is both a good and a bad sign. It is bad because it shows there is ignorance; it is good because it shows there is interest.

The interest has to be encouraged. Few parents have enough theological training to handle the questions personally, but they should try to acquire it.

Long before your child of whatever age starts asking you about ideas and attitudes, you should be asking the deeper questions yourself.

You will not necessarily find easy answers, but you will be able to move off the sidelines and become a player in the dramatic dialogue that keeps the Jewish future on track.

The egg & I

Among the characteristic foods eaten on Pesach, eggs figure prominently. There is a roasted egg on the *Seder* plate, representing the *chagigah* or festival offering; and many families have the custom of eating hard-boiled eggs at the beginning of the meal, though no-one is certain as to the reason.

The egg is a religious symbol in almost every culture. In Judaism it figures in many contexts from the exalted to the everyday.

It is mentioned only once in the Torah: "If you come across a bird's nest on any tree or on the ground, and it contains baby birds or eggs, then, if the mother is sitting on the chicks or eggs, you must not take the mother along with her young" (Deut. 22:6). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says this law stresses respect for motherhood; if you need to take eggs or a young bird, the mother's feelings must be spared and she must be allowed to go free.

The Talmud has a tractate called *Betzah* or Egg, dealing with the use of an egg laid on a festival. It gives facts about chickens and eggs, but deals mostly with the laws of *Yom-Tov*.

Naturally eggs figure in the laws of *Kashrut*, and the *halachah* often uses the size or value of an egg as a convenient measure. Thus a *Kiddush* cup must have the capacity of one and a half eggs; and in Poland people would shop for a *betzah* of salt or oil.



Eggs are served at the meal after a funeral. Being round with no opening, the egg is a symbol of mourning which, say the rabbis, "is like a wheel which continually revolves in the world, and one must not open one's mouth in complaint." On Tishah B'av we are all mourners, and eggs are eaten at the final meal before the fast.

But Pesach is the best-known occasion when eggs feature in a religious ceremony. The roasted egg stands for the festival offering brought in Temple times by the pilgrim worshipper.

Why an egg? Some link the Aramaic word for egg, *beya*, with a root meaning "desire"; the *beya* sums up our prayer that God may desire to redeem us from all bondage.

The roasted egg is separate from the hard-boiled eggs which some eat during the *Seder* meal; these suggest a comparison with the Jewish people, for an egg gets harder the more you boil it, and the more that we suffer oppression the more determined we are to remain Jewish.

The egg is also a symbol of creation. There is a link with the spring festival with its renewal of life for nature and for the people of Israel who on Pesach emerged to new life and hope.

May this Pesach see the end of oppression everywhere, the emergence of all who are downtrodden from slavery to freedom, and the spread of the spirit of hope for all mankind.

Elijah & the poetry of Pesach

Filling Elijah's cup, and opening the door for the prophet, are among the most colourful and poetic of our observances on *Seder* night. For Elijah the prophet is the unseen guest at every *Seder*.

A person's character is known by the company they keep. Who goes with a Jew? Jews can defy space and time. They can find friends in their own era; they can also choose the company of their ancestors. They live alongside the patriarchs; Moses and Aaron walk with them, David and Solomon. A Jew lives with them; they live in him.

But our dearest companion of all is Elijah, deathless prophet, courageous hero, moved by the spirit of the Lord.

We meet Elijah in infancy. Elijah has a special chair at a *b'rit* as the angel who accompanies the child through life. Elijah is "the messenger of the covenant", for he once complained, "Israel have forsaken Your covenant".

We long daily to see Elijah. We pray in the grace after meals, "May God send us Elijah the prophet to give us good tidings, salvation and consolation".

Elijah will not come on the eve of a Shabbat or festival, for are not all Israel occupied with preparations for the day? But we await him at the end of Shabbat, when we sing *Eliyahu HaNavi* and smile to think he sits under the tree of life and records the names of those who keep the Sabbath.

We think of Elijah on *Shabbat HaGadol*, when the *Haftarah* says God will send the prophet before “the great and awesome day of the Lord”.

We eagerly anticipate his arrival on *Seder* night. We open the door and pour him a glass of wine. Elijah will come to announce *Mashi’ach*; the exodus from Egypt was in Nisan, and Nisan will see the messianic redemption.

Elijah as teacher, peace maker, champion of God, guardian angel of Israel, precursor of *Mashi’ach* – the thought goes with us along the path of life. Elijah shows a Jew how to think; said he, two men in a market place were sure to go to heaven – two jesters.

Their merit? That they made others happy. He it is who will remove the question marks of which the Talmud says, *teku* – short for “Elijah the Tishbite will solve questions and problems”.

He is the peace maker who “will turn the hearts of fathers to children and children to fathers”. He is the champion of God, who will not bow to Ahab or follow idols. He is the guardian angel who defends Israel, especially on Pesach, when Jews sat in fear of the mobs.

He is the precursor who will come three days before *Mashi’ach*. He will sound the trumpet and announce the coming of peace. He will arrange the seating in the Garden of Eden.

Elijah is our philosopher and friend, companion, champion and defender. Yes, cynic, scoff if you dare. Tell me you have no time for folklore or fancy. Will you, then, rob your heart of poetry, your mind of inspiration, your soul of wonder? Did not Bialik say: “As long as the soul animates man, longs for light and thirsts for beauty, man needs the fountain of poetry”?



The modern Ten Plagues

During the Hitler period a leading American reform rabbi, Ferdinand Isserman, depicted “the remarkable parallelism of the ten plagues which afflicted ancient Egypt with those which already afflict modern Germany”.

This was the way Isserman applied the Ten Plagues to Nazi Germany:

1. **Blood** – the Nazis stained the pages of history with the blood of innocent human beings.
2. **Frogs** – Germans had become a chorus of frogs taking their cue from the master frog.
3. **Lice** – like irritating lice, spies and secret police were everywhere.
4. **Flies** – like flies, Nazism was infecting the minds of the youth.
5. **Murrain (cattle disease)** – German commerce and industry was morally bankrupt.



6. **Boils** – the body of the German people was infected with fear and cowardice.
7. **Hail** – Intellectual honesty and cultural independence were being crushed.
8. **Locusts** – German energy was diverted from constructive purposes to a mighty war machine.
9. **Darkness** – Germany was putting out the lights of European culture.
10. **Death of the First born** – Nazism carried within itself the beginnings of its own destruction.

The world has seen great constructive developments since 1945 but there is no lack of problems and plagues.

We can all use the Isserman method to identify today’s problems and trouble spots. But we need to go further and enlist our energies in the mindsets, ethical commitments and projects that will help to eradicate the plagues and build a new global community.