

Pesach Yizkor 2016

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 4/29/2016

Of all the invitations you have received this year, perhaps the strangest one was at the Seder. "Ha-Lachma Anya..." We hold up a dry piece of matzah and offer hospitality to our guests: "This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the Land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat..." What kind of an invitation is that?! "Welcome to my home, Now let's eat of the bread of suffering!" Really? Is that the best we can do? At Sukkot we invite guests, both real and mystical (Ushpizin) to a fine festival meal. It may be in a ramshackle hut, but we serve our best, and we serve it on our finest. But at Passover we say, "Come taste the bread of our suffering. We ate this as slaves. We baked it in a hurry. Here, try it!" So what's the deal with that?

But matzah is not only a symbol of our slavery, it is also a symbol of our freedom. It is the bread we ate when we left Egypt. However, what makes it truly the "Bread of Freedom," and not merely the "Bread of Affliction," is our willingness to share it with others. A story about Primo Levi illustrates how that transformation from bread of slavery to bread of freedom take place. Author Primo Levi was an Italian doctoral student in chemistry when the Fascists came to power in the 1930's. Bright and energetic, he had a hard time finding a sponsor for his doctorate because of racial laws. Eventually, he saw the handwriting on the wall and joined a group of Italian partisans but they were caught by the Fascists and interned in a prison camp. When the Nazis came to Italy he was sent to Auschwitz. Miraculously, he survived, and in 1947 wrote his most famous work, "If This Is A Man," which describes his experiences there. He writes that toward the end of the war, with the Russians advancing, the Nazis left the camp and marched every prisoner who was able on a "death march." Too weak to walk, a number of the prisoners were left behind, including Primo Levi. It was January of 1945, and Levi writes that even after all he had been through, when the Nazis left it was even more horrible when they occupied the camp.

For ten days, Primo Levi and his fellow prisoners were left alone with only a few scraps of food and a little bit of fuel oil for heat and or cooking. In his book, Primo Levi writes how he tried to help his fellow prisoners, most of whom were dying. In the hopes of warming up the room in which they were huddled, he tried to light a fire, but the window glass was broken. So he tried to first cover up the window. Here is what he writes, "When the broken window was repaired and the fire began to spread its heat, something seemed to relax in everyone, and at that moment Tovarowski, a 23-year old Pole with typhus, proposed to the others that each of them offer a slice of bread to the three of us who had been working. And so it was agreed. Only a day before a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of the bunks in the camp said, "Eat your own bread, and if you can eat the bread of your neighbor, too." There was no room for gratitude. Sharing bread meant that the law of the concentration camp bunks was dead. It was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died slowly changed from prisoners to free men again."

Sharing, and the sharing of food in particular, is the first act of free people. Slaves cannot afford to share food. People with no future cannot share food. One who fears tomorrow does not offer his bread to other people. But, a person who is willing to divide what is hers and share it with others has shown herself capable of having faith in a brighter tomorrow. Such a person is not one amongst a number of strangers. The one who is willing to share is the person who is willing to make community. The one who is willing to share has faith in tomorrow. That's why we begin the seder by inviting others to join us; that's what changes the "Bread of Affliction" into

the "Bread of Freedom." The prisoners who fed Primo Levi, who shared what was theirs were still living in pain; they were still suffering. But, their sharing lessened their suffering. When they went from silo-ed individuals to a community of shared concerns, their pain was lessened. ...And this is why we come together as a community to share the Yizkor memorial prayers. Nothing I or anyone else can say or do will bring back those who are gone, but the shared experience of mourning unites us all. We do not mourn alone. We do not carry the burden of sorrow all by ourselves. We share the pain of loss together. But, at the same time we work together to create a vision of hope and faith, a vision of a life after loss, which is what we have all been through. For some the sting of loss is more recent, for some part of a distant past. But by coming together in community we share a sense of purpose and a commitment to healing. We have lost loved ones, all of us. But we are in this together, and it is in the sharing of that sense of loss, and yes, even in the sharing of our pain, that we find the seeds of hope and the vision of a life that is still very much worth living. From a shared sense of loss comes a renewed faith in our shared future.