

Vayakhel Pekudey 5786
Three Passover Proposals
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With Maya having spoken so beautifully earlier about this week's Torah portion, I want to begin by returning to one of the ideas she shared. She reminded us that the building of the Mishkan was a community project. People brought different skills and talents, and the Torah describes them as "wise of heart." Together they created a sacred space at the center of Jewish life.

That image of people bringing their own gifts to something shared is actually a helpful way to think about another experience many of us will be having very soon. In just two weeks many of us will be sitting around Passover tables with family and friends, and like the building of the Mishkan, the Seder is something we create together. Everyone brings something: a question, a story, a memory, a perspective.

Which is why I want to begin thinking about Passover a little earlier than usual this year.

You may have heard of Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat just before Passover, when rabbis traditionally speak about the holiday. But if we only begin thinking about Passover the Shabbat before it begins, we miss an opportunity.

And this year especially, many of us are carrying more on our minds than usual. Our eyes and hearts are turned toward Israel and the Middle East, where events continue to unfold and where people we care about are living with uncertainty and danger. We follow the news, check messages, and pray for the safety of those in harm's way. At the same time, a major Jewish holiday is approaching that asks something of us as well. Passover asks us to prepare, reflect, and sit down together to tell one of the most important stories our people know.

Even in uncertain moments, Jewish life continues. We worry, we pray, we hope for peace, and we still gather around our tables to tell the story of freedom.

So today I want to offer three questions as we begin this two-week journey toward Passover: one easy, one medium, and one a little more challenging. Think of them as ideas you might reflect on between now and the Seder, or perhaps bring to your own table.

Let me start with an easy one.

The laws of Passover are extensive, but what many of us notice most is that for a week something changes. Some of us remember kitchens that were completely transformed: different dishes, different foods, different routines, and boxes brought down from shelves we had not opened since the previous year. Even if our homes do not undergo that level of transformation, the holiday still asks us to notice something different.

So here is the question: what is one noticeable thing you could change for the week of Passover that would remind you each day that this is not an ordinary week?

Maybe it is something small. Change your toothbrush when the holiday begins, use a different water bottle or drinking glass during the week, or put a box of matzah where you normally keep bread or cereal. Even a small change can serve as a daily reminder that this week is meant to feel different.

Mah Nishtanah — why is this night different from all other nights — is not really just a question for the Seder night. In a sense it is the question of the entire holiday.

Now here is the medium one.

The Seder is often described as the Feast of Freedom, commemorating the journey from slavery in Egypt toward the building of a people and a future. When we think about freedom, we usually think about freedom from: freedom from obligations, pressures, and responsibilities.

But the Passover story also teaches freedom to. Freedom to choose the direction of our lives.

Freedom to build something meaningful. Freedom to use our energy and gifts for things

that matter. The Israelites leave Egypt not simply to escape Pharaoh, but to move toward covenant, purpose, and responsibility.

So here is the question for Passover this year: what are the freedom-to's in your life right now? Perhaps your list might include: Freedom to deepen a relationship, to learn something new, to give your time and attention to something meaningful, or to become more fully the person you want to be.

So we have an easy question and a medium one. One about noticing difference, and one about the meaning of freedom.

Now let me offer the harder one. I do not know if you will take me up on this challenge, but if you do, I think you might find it rewarding.

Do you know what the bestselling Haggadah on Amazon is right now? It is called *The 30 Minute Seder*. I am sure it is a fine Haggadah, and if thirty minutes works for the people around your table that is completely fine. In that time you can touch on the major steps of a ritual more than two thousand years old.

But here is the challenge. Somewhere in your house there is a full Haggadah. It might be in a Passover box or on a shelf. Take it down sometime between now and Passover and read it — start to finish — without skipping.

If you do, you will notice parts we often rush past at the Seder. The section where the rabbis slowly unpack the verses of the Exodus story word by word. The discussion about why we begin the story with shame and end with praise. The long midrash about the rabbis staying up all night in Bnei Brak discussing the Exodus.

These passages may not be the fastest way to get to the meal, but they reveal something important. The Haggadah is not only telling the story of the Exodus. It is modeling how to ask questions, interpret tradition, and keep the story alive in every generation.

And that brings us back to our three questions as the holiday approaches: what small change will remind you that Passover is different, what freedom-to will you embrace this year, and will you take a little time to sit with the story itself before the Seder arrives?

Because if you do, when you arrive at the Seder table in two weeks you may hear the Haggadah a little differently, no matter how many parts of it you read out loud, or don't. And like Maya reminded us through the example of the Mishkan, sometimes the holiness of our tradition is found not only in the big ideas, but in the details we might otherwise overlook.

And perhaps especially in moments like the one we are living through now, when the world can feel uncertain, the story of Passover reminds us that the Jewish people have always told this story in challenging times as well as joyful ones. We tell it to remember who we are, to strengthen one another, and to prepare ourselves to bring that story of freedom to life again this year.