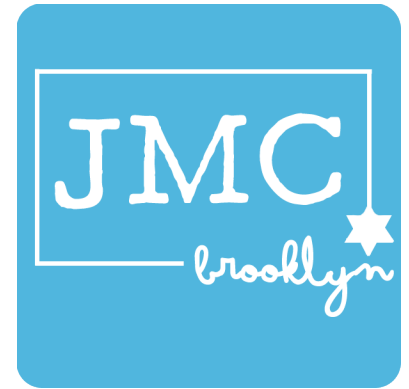


Freeing Your Inner Pharaoh

written by alison laichter and benjamin ross



How can we use the story of Passover to find freedom in our own lives?

For many, Passover is a time when we gather to re-tell the most famous narrative of the Jewish people. We read and remember the familiar story of how the Hebrews move from bondage in Egypt to freedom: the mighty Exodus. At the Seder, we eat matzah - the unleavened bread - to remind ourselves of the haste in which we left. We taste bitter herbs to remind us of the embittered state of slavery in which our ancestors lived. We dip foods in salt water to remind ourselves of tears shed. On Pesach, we use many symbols to invite us into the space of the enslaved. The Seder rituals of reading the Exodus story, sharing a meal, singing songs, allow us to travel to a place of freedom and spaciousness.

Throughout the Seder, we are reminded of the great leaders of our history: Moses, Aaron, Miriam. We reflect on their bravery, wisdom, and faith. We can use this story to call our attention to how we are leaders in our own lives and in our communities. The Hebrew word for Egypt, Mitzrayim (מצרים), literally translates to “narrow space.” The holiday of Passover is an opportunity to think about how we are moving ourselves and others through narrow and constricted places.

Let's start in our own Egypt or constricted place. Go around the table and each person can say one way that they feel held back in their own lives (examples: "I'm too busy and don't have enough time in the day," "I don't feel fulfilled by my job right now," "sometimes I feel trapped in my routine and responsibilities," etc).

What can Pharaoh teach us about moving from a constrained space to a place of freedom and openness?

Pharaoh, the all-powerful Egyptian leader, sits on the other side of the Exodus narrative - he is the antagonist, the bad guy. He's unreasonable, rigid, and, honestly, nobody wants to be like Pharaoh. But, wait! What can we learn about Pharaoh's experience of the Exodus?

The story goes that before the first plague befalls Egypt, God tell Moses, *"I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I shall multiply my signs and my wonders"* (Exodus 7:3). Interestingly, through the first five plagues Pharaoh hardens his own heart against liberating the Hebrews: streams turn to blood; everyone is covered in frogs, lice, flies, and then all the livestock dies. After each plague Pharaoh is ready to relent and then changes his mind. He's stubborn and doesn't want to let his slaves go. *"Pharaoh saw that there had been relief and kept making his heart stubborn"* (Exodus 8:11).

For the next five plagues, God steps in and hardens Pharaoh's heart. Through boil, hail, harvest, and locusts, Pharaoh remains resolute as his people and land suffer greatly. Why does God do this? Why not let Pharaoh "let the people go" and spare his country?

Let's get into Pharaoh's head: Go around the table and each person can offer an idea of why Pharaoh just couldn't let go (examples: "too stubborn," "it's not fair!," "it hasn't gotten that bad yet- we'll be fine").

What does Pharaoh have to do with us?

As we use the Seder to re-tell the Exodus story, to transport ourselves mentally into the space of the enslaved, we can also use this as a tool to ask ourselves how we harden our own hearts. How much suffering do we need to live through before we change how we live our own lives?

Invite everyone to close their eyes and reflect on something they'd like to let go of- let's ask ourselves, "What is hardening my heart? What in my life is not serving me?" Go around the table and each person can share what they can do to find freedom from their own personal plagues (examples: "apologize to my mother and begin to work through our differences," "buy a gym membership and actually use it," "wake up earlier to meditate each morning," "be more generous through tzedakah [charity]").

What does freedom feel like?

Sometimes our hearts harden, just like Pharaoh's heart did. We don't want this to happen, but sometimes it just does. We don't like the situation we're in; we don't like how we react. Even though we know how wrong it feels in our kishkes, we can't help it. On this Pesach, let's allow ourselves to feel released from this bondage. Like the Israelites stepping one foot after another toward the Promised Land, let's move past our enslavement, letting go of what doesn't serve us, what isn't helping us be our best selves.

Ask everyone to imagine what it might have felt like to walk through the parted Red Sea, to know that we would not be slaves, that we were truly free. Take a moment to relax your shoulders, close or rest your eyes, and check in with your heart. What does it physically feel like to be free? Thinking about the idea of an exodus of body and mind, Go around the table and ask each person to say one word expressing how it feels to be free (examples: "spacious," "a little scary," "limitless," "exciting").

Remembering our own capacity to enslave and be enslaved, as well as our ability to find freedom in our lives, is one of the most meaningful practices of Passover. May we all be blessed with a Passover of liberation. May our practice be a source of strength as we find paths to freedom, and may our open-heartedness benefit all beings.



The Jewish Meditation Center of Brooklyn is a home for Jewish meditation in New York City and beyond: a thriving community of meditators and spiritual leaders who are transforming the world through the cultivation of awareness, compassion, and Jewish wisdom. Visit www.jmcbrooklyn.org to sign up for email updates, check out our full calendar, read our blog, and find out how you can be a part of the JMC, ushering in the next generation of Jewish meditation!