

# The Festival Of Physical And Spiritual Freedom

By Rabbi Ezra Boyarsky

Passover, which the Israelites celebrated just prior to crossing the Red Sea, was the first festival service that each family was commanded to observe. This pre-eminently historical event known as "Pesach Mitzrayim" (the Passover of Egypt) was a prelude to "Pesach Dorot," the Passover the Jewish people were enjoined to commemorate annually for all future generations.

Pesach Mitzrayuim, which the Children of Israel enacted in great haste but with enlivened spirit, marked the end of 210 years of their enslavement and pioneered the first recorded revolutionary breakthrough for the cause of human freedom.

This fearless act of defiance dealt a stupefying blow to the Pharaoh and his enslaved idolatrous subject. Like the Israelis, the Egyptians also writhed and squirmed under Pharaoh's despotic rod. But while the Egyptians submitted to Pharaoh's autocracy, the Israelites rallied to the call of God's appointed activist leaders Moses and Aaron, and judiciously resolved to end their dehumanized existence, break loose from the fetters of bondage and acquire physical freedom.

The four cups of wine which we are required to drink during the Seder service represent the four expressions of liberation the Eternal employed in His promise to redeem the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

Four contextually synonymous expressions are found in Exodus 6: "Therefore speak unto the Children of Israel, I am the Eternal and will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians and I will deliver you out of their service and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments and I will take you to me for a people and I will be to you a God. (Emphasis added.)

Upon close examination, it becomes clear that only the first three terms deal directly with redemption, while the fourth -- "I will take you" -- relates not to the Exodus, but to the future when the Israelites were to accept the Decalogue of Mt. Sinai, having merited the status of an "Am Segula" (a Divinely chosen nation).

Yet the Talmud regards even the fourth expression as bearing directly on the Exodus, hence

the obligatory fourth cup of wine. How is this seeming incongruity reconciled?

The tyrannical, paranoid Pharaoh operated with two pernicious, heinous methods to solve the Jewish problem. First, he exploited the Israelites' ever-increasing labor force to the fullest possible potential by assigning them to insufferable, dehumanizing, back-breaking labor, calculated for their eventual extermination (the method emulated by Hitler). Second, he sought to liquidate them through the more subtle and "humane" process of assimilation (currently practiced by the Kremlin).

The Exodus from Egypt, therefore, accomplished a double objective. It won for the Israelites physical redemption. And it won spiritual freedom with God's giving of the Decalogue at Mt. Sinai.

The fourth cup of wine commemorates the redemption from spiritual serfdom and is a "sobering" reminder that physical freedom alone is far too inadequate for the survival of the Jewish people.

Statistics indicate that from 1941-86 intermarriage among American Jews rose ten-fold. And as additional data reveal, intermarriage is closely correlated with another negative aspect of contemporary American Jewry -- the growing loss of its religious character. Taken together, they appear as a frightening specter of the fast-grinding, intractable assimilatory process that is plaguing the American Jewish community.

Last February, Israeli Premier Yitzhak Shamir told a group of New York Jewish educators, "The ongoing process of assimilation that has gripped American Jews is of such a threatening magnitude that unless Jewish education received top priority, we are in danger to lose more than in the Holocaust."

It would be particularly fitting to reflect on this when we arrive at the point of the Seder service at which we drink the fourth cup of wine.

(Rabbi Ezra Boyarsky is editorial consultant to Jewish Weekly News, Springfield, Mass.)

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