

Overcoming Our Limitations

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I'd like to try if I can to encapsulate a message for this Holiday of Freedom. We read again and again in the Haggadah in the story of Pesach that G-d took the Israelites out of Egypt 'with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm' – and we are told that the reason that G-d needed a mighty hand and an outstretched arm wasn't because of the Egyptians – it was to force the Israelites out: because nobody wants to change.

Whether you live in comfort, or you live in slavery, change is hard. In fact, according to one of our Sages, the reason that the Red Sea had to close after the Israelites passed through it was so that they couldn't get back again! Because if G-d had left the Red Sea open, when they saw the desert on the other side, they would have turned round right there and then and headed back again.

So the message of the holiday is – you have to be different – that freedom demands of us to force ourselves not to stay in the old patterns that preceded the opportunity to be free. When you are not free, you cannot change. When you are free, it is frightening to change. And the challenge of the Pesach season is in fact the challenge that the philosopher Emerson says he carried with him his whole life. The most important intellectual influence on him wasn't Plato, wasn't his father who was a well known preacher – it was his aunt, and when he was a young man, she said to him "Always do what you are afraid to do". That is the essential lesson of life — if you're scared of it, do it.

So on this Pesach season, what is it that we know would grow our soul that we are frightened to do? That's the sea we have to walk through. That's what we must decide. There is nothing more dangerous to religious life, to spiritual life, to emotional life, than the deadening of constant routine. If we cannot change, we cannot grow. Some changes can be subtle and small. Some of them can be enormous – the direction of our lives, dealing with the neglect of our relationships with each other and with G-d, our practice and study of our tradition and of our faith.

So what is the lesson of Pesach? For a week we eat differently, we worship differently, we tell the story in a different way, and it is to let us know that in fact, we can be different – that the enslavement of self in our day and in our time is just that: an enslavement by ourselves of ourselves.

We read in one of the psalms: 'From the narrow straights I called to you O G-d – you answered me and widened the world'. The world doesn't get wider geographically or topographically, but we can widen the world inside ourselves, expand our souls, change our lives, walk through the sea, and never go back.

Chag Sameach.