

THE NESIYA INSTITUTE  
*Passover Study Guide*  
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*OVDIM & BNEI CHORIN:*  
THOSE WHO SERVE AND PEOPLE OF FREEDOM



**השתא הכא, לשנה הבאה בארעא דישראל.  
השתא עבדי, לשנה הבאה בני חורין.**  
Now we are here, next year in the land of Israel.  
Now we are slaves, next year people of freedom.

**מתחילה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו,  
ועכשיו קרבינו המקום לעבודתו.**  
In the beginning, our ancestors served idols,  
But now the Omnipresent has brought us close to His service.  
*– from the Haggadah*

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## Sources for Reflection

### THE SERVANTS OF TIME

The servants of time are slaves of slaves.  
The servant of God – he alone is free!  
Therefore, when each person sues for his portion,  
“My portion is God,” says my soul.  
– *Yehudah Ha-Levi, medieval poet and philosopher*

### TO BE A JEW IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

To be a Jew in the twentieth century  
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,  
Wishing to be invisible, you choose  
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.  
Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:  
Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood  
Of those who resist, fail, and resist: and God  
Reduced to a hostage among hostages.  
The gift is torment. Not alone the still  
Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh.  
That may come also. But the accepting wish,  
The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee  
For every human freedom, suffering to be free,  
Daring to live for the impossible.  
– *Muriel Rukeyser (1944)*

### MODERN DILEMMAS OF FREEDOM

With the modern period, a revolutionary change occurred in Jewish status, both personal and ethnic. The term used to describe this shift, *emancipation*, literally means the formal process of freeing a slave. With the birth of democratic states and their new notion of citizenship, the term could be applied metaphorically to the granting of civil rights to those previously disenfranchised. On the human level, the results, though slow in coming and marred by a new anti-Semitism, were monumentally beneficial to the Jews. This extraordinary social progress permeated the modern Jewish consciousness and fundamentally shaped the contemporary Jewish discussion of freedom.

...Autonomy, however, strikes at the very heart of classic Jewish faith: God, not the self, gives law... For a minority of Jews, freedom within Torah remains the only way one can continue to be faithful to the covenant. The overwhelming majority of Jews, convinced by the spiritual benefits of emancipation, have sought some way of accommodating to it and thus to its emphasis on freedom.

National freedom has similarly been thoroughly recast in modern times. The human initiative asserted on the personal level gave rise to the notion of ethnic self-determination, most notably manifest in nineteenth-century nationalism. Among Jews this produced Zionism, despite the accepted understanding of the Torah that God alone, through the Messiah, should reestablish Jewish political sovereignty...

– from article on "Freedom," by Eugene B. Borowitz, in *"Contemporary Jewish Thought,"* edited by Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (1987)

### THE INSECURITY OF FREEDOM

Freedom means more than mere emancipation. It is primarily freedom of conscience, bound up with inner allegiance. The danger begins when freedom is thought to consist in the fact that “I can act as I desire.” This definition not only overlooks the compulsions which often lie behind our desires; it reveals the tragic truth that freedom may develop within itself the seed of its own destruction. The will is not an ultimate and isolated entity, but determined by motives beyond its own control. *To be* what one wants to be is also not freedom, since the wishes of the ego are largely determined by external factors. ..

Freedom is the liberation from the tyranny of the self-centered ego. It comes about in moments of transcending the self as an act of spiritual ecstasy, of stepping out of the confining framework of routine reflexive concern. Freedom presupposes *the capacity for sacrifice*.

Man's true fulfillment cannot be reached by the isolated individual, and his true good depends on communion with, and participation in, that which transcends him. Each challenge from beyond the person is unique, and each response must be new and creative. Freedom is an act of engagement of the self to the spirit, a spiritual event.

The glory of a free society lies not only in the consciousness of *my* right to be free, and *my* capacity to be free, but also in the realization of *my fellow man's* right to be free, and *his* capacity to be free. The issue we face is how to save man's belief in his capacity to be free.

– from *The Insecurity of Freedom*,  
Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel  
(1966)

### BIBLICAL GOALS OF THE EXODUS

I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

– *Exodus 3:8*

When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as He has promised, you shall observe this service. And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this service?" you shall say, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians but saved our houses."

– *Exodus 12:25-27*

You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

– *Deut. 24:17-18*

## *The Nesiya Commentary*

Passover is known as the “Festival of Freedom.” But what freedom are we actually celebrating? What does it mean to celebrate freedom? Are there different freedoms we can choose from?

The Hebrew word for “freedom” doesn’t appear in the Biblical story of the Exodus. Even though many translators interpret God’s action of bringing out the Israelites as meaning “to go free,” the text speaks only of “*yetsiat mitzrayim*,” going out of Egypt.

The Torah tells us there are several purposes for the liberation from Egypt. One purpose is for the Israelites to establish a sovereign nation in “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8, 3:17, 13:5). The Exodus is a first stage in the journey to the land of Israel. In Egypt, we were strangers in a strange land. Our lives were controlled by taskmasters and our labor served others. In Eretz Yisrael, the land promised to Abraham, we will not only cease to be strangers, we will work for ourselves. Our settlement in the land will provide us with the potential for both sovereignty and prosperity.

As the story proceeds, the purpose of the Exodus takes on an additional dimension – the obligation to serve God (Exodus 12:14, 26). The Israelites are given laws and instructions concerning rituals that they are obligated to perform both during the Exodus and when they begin to live in the land of Israel (Exodus 12). We are not only on a journey to a land of our own and a life working for ourselves; the Exodus is not a path to free choice. We are leaving Pharaoh’s control to serve God, who also has rules and demands. The Passover ceremony is itself called an *avodah*, a service (Exodus 12:25). Although we will no longer be *avadim*, slaves, we are expected to become *ovdim*, those who serve.

These two different purposes of the Exodus are reflected in two different core texts within the *Maggid* (telling) section of the Haggadah. The first, which discusses our experience as *avadim*, slaves, focuses on the journey toward physical liberation, and culminates in the idea of our becoming *bnei chorin*, people of freedom, in the land of Israel. The second, which begins with “our ancestors were idolaters,” focuses on spiritual liberation, and culminates in our becoming *ovdei Hashem*, servants of God.

Freedom, as most modern westerners understand it, is defined by an individual’s right to choose for oneself and to pursue one’s own happiness. We see ourselves as most free when we have a maximum range of options and the greatest capacity to pursue what we want. The idea that the Exodus was a means to two different goals – sovereignty in our own land and service to God – is in tension with this concept of freedom.

So why did the Rabbis understand Passover as the “festival of freedom,” and the Exodus as the event which empowered Jews to become *bnei chorin*, people of freedom? How can we be free if we’re commanded to build our own land and serve God? Can we be free even if our choices are limited? Can we be both *ovdim*, those who serve, and *bnei chorin*, free people?

Jewish freedom is paradoxical. For Jews, serving a higher purpose is freedom. We aren’t free until we choose to act. Once we choose to act in service of a larger purpose, we relinquish the freedom to do whatever we want. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “freedom presupposes the capacity for sacrifice.”

Perhaps the Haggadah is hinting at this idea when it has us proclaim that now we are still slaves, *avadim*, and next year we will be free, *bnei chorin*. What is the value of seeing ourselves as slaves today? On a basic level, it’s clear that the Passover celebration wants us to reenact the transformation from slavery to freedom. On a deeper level, though, perhaps the authors of the Haggadah want us to realize that we are

not actually free. We only achieve freedom to the extent that we serve a higher and noble purpose. The experience of service is integral to our freedom.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, Jews have more freedom to direct our lives than we ever had before – both inside and outside the land of Israel. The burden of choice has also never been greater. The challenge is to embrace the burden of our freedoms. As Muriel Rukeyser writes in her poem, we need to dare "to live for the impossible."

But what freedom should we dare to yearn and live for? Today, many passionate and activist Jews differ significantly in how they choose to give meaning to their freedom. For some, spiritual freedom is most fully expressed through the fulfillment of *mitzvot*, God's commandments. For others, the strength and vitality of the Jewish people in the land of Israel is the highest priority for Jewish freedom. For yet others, the highest expression of their spiritual freedom is social action on behalf of oppressed and underprivileged peoples throughout the world, an ideal which is often associated with the repeated commandments in the Torah to love and care for the stranger because "you were strangers in Egypt."

This diversity in how Jews choose to give meaning to their freedom reflects a uniquely modern challenge to our celebrations of Passover: Is it important for Jews to see ourselves as working toward a shared vision of freedom?

If Jews exercise significant freedom in choosing to devote themselves to different priorities and values, what common vision do we share? Can we work with others toward something greater than ourselves without giving up our freedom? To what extent should our own personal choices be affected by what we feel would be best for the Jewish people as a whole?

This Passover, we bless you with the opportunity to renew your search for a greater purpose, and to share the blessings of service and freedom.

### ***Suggested Discussion Questions for Your Passover Seder***

Share with those at your Seder an experience or period of time in your life when you felt truly "free." Share a time when you felt that you were not free. What was it about each experience that made you feel the way you did?

Do you agree with the idea that serving a higher purpose is the highest form of freedom? How do you choose a purpose worthy of your service? What steps would you like to take this coming year to make your freedom more meaningful to yourself and others?

The Hagaddah asks us to see ourselves, in every generation, as having gone out from Egypt – but it doesn't tell us what to do next. What is your personal "*yetziat mitrayim*" – going out of Egypt? And what is your personal "*Eretz Yisrael*" – your promised land? Is it important to have a destination in mind in order for freedom to be meaningful, or is it sometimes enough to know what to leave behind?