



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > Second Day

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Pesach

**Passover as the Stairway to
Heaven**



Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”

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ABSTRACT

You fall down a flight of stairs. Thank God, you are not injured, just a bit bruised. Now how do you relate to this experience?

You could see it as a lesson in taking care. You could see it as a punishment for something wrong you did. You could see it as an inevitable part of life – sometimes you rise up, sometimes you fall down. Or you could blame it on someone else (like your wife who just waxed the floors).

These same four perspectives could be applied to any situation and – since it is Pesach – certainly to slavery and freedom.

But that’s not the Jewish way. The Jewish way is to take a totally different view: You fell down a flight of stairs? Big whoop – keep climbing!

And speaking of stairs...

The curious case of the staircase teaches us volumes about the search for freedom and the fulfillment of all our aspirations. And one Hebrew word in the Passover Haggadah – *maalot* – unlocks the secret to success.

Slavery thinks there is no hope; where I am is where I will always be. This is called prison. True freedom is knowing that I am never helpless, that where I am is but a step leading to where I will be.

As this sermon explains, Passover is a series of fifteen steps, a perpetual staircase that provides us with the means and tools to go from our present potential to realizing our dreams. But even more: Passover tells us that *life* is a staircase, that there is always another step, a greater height we can reach.

Time to step up your game.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE STAIRCASE: PASSOVER AS THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

1. Four Attitudes

Four Jews fall down the same flight of stairs.

(Nope, these four Jews have nothing to do with the four sons from the Seder night or the four cups of wine, though it is possible they are going home after the Seder.)

After the first Jew falls down the stairs, he picks himself up and says, "That was an unpleasant experience, how do I learn from it?"

After the second Jew falls down the stairs, he picks himself up and says, "I must have done something really bad to deserve that."

After the third Jew falls down the stairs, he picks himself up and says, "Such is life – that was inevitable, I'm glad it's over."

And after the fourth Jew falls down the stairs, he picks himself up and says, "Okay. Who pushed me?"

You could see the attitudes of these four as four perspectives on all the vicissitudes of life. You could interpret any experience in life as a lesson in something. Or as a punishment for something wrong you did. Or as an inevitable part of life – sometimes you rise up, sometimes you fall down. Or you could blame it on someone else.

By-the-way, you know that there are four basic needs in everyone's life: food, clothing, shelter ... and somebody else to blame.

2. Passover Application

Since it is Passover, these four attitudes to life can also be applied to exile and redemption, slavery and freedom, as well as all constrictions and limitations in our lives.

Slavery can be seen as an experience to be learned from. Slavery can be seen as a punishment for something bad we had done. Slavery can be seen as an inevitable part of life. Or slavery can be seen as something we are forced into or pushed into by someone who has the power to lord over us.

Everybody knows that Passover is the holiday of liberation. The Torah calls Pesach *Zman Cheiruteinu*, the “Time of our Freedom.” The Passover story, which we read and related last night, is the story of the Jewish people’s exodus from the slavery of Egypt.

But what exactly constitutes freedom? Is freedom learning from the experience? Is freedom not allowing anyone to push us down the stairs? Is freedom our ability to ask all of these questions?

I would like to suggest that freedom is something else altogether – that freedom is the ability to walk *up* the stairs.

3. The Curious Case of the Staircase

The curious case of the staircase teaches us volumes about the search for freedom and the fulfillment of all our aspirations.

The norm would be to see life as a platform, a landing. Where I am today is where I will be tomorrow. Certainly, this is the attitude of slavery. Slavery thinks there is no hope – where I am is where I will always be. This is called prison. True freedom is knowing that I am never hopelessly stuck, that where I am is but a step leading to where I will be.

The celebration of Passover is teaching us that no matter where we are, we are on a staircase and there is always another step to climb. Passover is all about freedom, about achieving more than we think we can, about breaking through the barriers to discover our highest potential.

But how? Practically speaking, how can we get from where we are to where we want to be?

Passover shows us how – step by step.

Consider that the Seder is comprised of *fifteen* steps. (Indeed, the word *seder* itself means “order” or “structure,” and this refers to the ordered structure of the Seder’s fifteen steps.) And we are now going to see where they are leading us.

4. A Nation of Accountants

By-the-way, besides counting to fifteen, the Seder does lots more counting – it is completely number-centric.

We dip *two* times; we eat *three* matzos; we drink *four* cups of wine; there are four questions asked; the Haggada tells of *four* sons; Egypt was afflicted by *ten* plagues ...

Is Passover so fascinated with crunching numbers so as to commemorate the tax season? I mean the first day of Passover fell out this year on April 15th!

Is going out of Egypt, the freedom to become a nation of accountants?

It would seem that a rigid numbering system would be the exact opposite of freedom. So what gives?

5. Maggid and Dayeinu

The fifth of the fifteen steps of the Seder is *Maggid*, which means “to relate” – that is, to relate the story of exodus. A solid chunk of the Haggada tells and retells the story of how an enslaved people became a free nation. And every part of that story – from the four questions we ask to the four cups of wine we drink – is meant to teach us about freedom.

The bulk of the actual storytelling is composed of different episodes, historical occurrences, and vivid descriptions of the Jewish journey. One of the more popular parts – toward the homestretch of *Maggid* – is *Daiyeinu*, a poem that depicts the progression toward redemption in a succinct and creative manner.

Daiyeinu is set to a very catchy and popular tune, *illu, illu hotzianu...* and is anchored by the venerable d-major refrain, *dai, dai-yeinu, dai, dai-yeinu, dai dai-yeinu, daiyeinu daiyeinu...*

The Hebrew word *dai* means “enough” and the word *daiyeinu* means “it would have been enough for us.” This poem uses all of the major events that occurred to the Jewish people, from God taking them out of Egypt, to the splitting of the Sea, to receiving the Torah at Sinai, to building the Temple in Jerusalem and says that if God had merely done but one of these things for us – *daiyeinu* –it would have sufficed.

Then we recite:

Thus how much more we should be grateful to the Omnipresent One for the doubled and redoubled goodness that He has bestowed upon us...

And then we list all of the major gifts God has bestowed upon us:

...for He has brought us out of Egypt, and carried out judgments against them [the Egyptians], and against their idols, and smote their first-born, and gave us their wealth, and split the sea for us, and took us through it on dry land, and drowned our oppressors in it, and supplied our needs in the desert for forty years, and fed us the manna, and gave us the Shabbat, and brought us before Mount Sinai, and gave us the Torah, and brought us into the land of Israel and built for us the Chosen House to atone for all our misdeeds.

In Hebrew, the opening line of *Dayeinu* goes: *Kama ma'alot tovot la'Makom aleinu* – meaning, *How many degrees of goodness has the Omnipresent One bestowed upon us.*

Let's focus on the word *ma'alot*, which I just translated as “degrees.”

As we know Hebrew is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional language. It's fascinating to note that the word *ma'alot* also means “steps” or “stairs.” So this could be translated as, “How many favorable steps has the Omnipresent One bestowed us?”

Indeed this prayer is structured like a staircase, one favorable step upon another.

What message can this stepped song have for us? And what can these layered stairs practically – and I mean *practically* – teach us about our own personal quests for growth, freedom, and realizing our utmost potentials?

6. The Maharal's Answer

One answer comes from the 16th century Torah giant, the Maharal of Prague, in his commentary on the Haggada called *Gevurot Hashem*.

The Maharal hones in on the opening line of the *Daiyeinu* – *Kama maalot tovot la'Makom aleinu*, *How many degrees of goodness has the Omnipresent One bestowed upon us* – and explains it as follows:

Now the Haggada mentions all of the goodness and kindness that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, performed for Israel. And calls it the “stairs of goodness” because each one has an additional ascent compared to the one before it, akin to a physical staircase where every single stair is a greater ascent than the first one. So, too, these degrees of goodness. Each and every one adds an additional layer and level, until the pinnacle of ascent, which is “building the Chosen House [the Temple] to atone for all our misdeeds.”

The Maharal of Prague finds a parallel between the staircase and the Jew's journey from exile to redemption. This is how he explains the escalating dynamic of the staircase. As with a staircase, every step is higher than the previous step, step-by-step we ascend until we come to the ultimate goal of building the *Beit Habechirah*, the Chosen House or the Temple – God's Home of Freedom.

Then the Maharal notes that the *Dayeinu* song lists exactly fifteen different degrees or steps,¹ beginning with taking us out of Egypt (number one), and culminating with building the *Beit Habechirah*, the Chosen House (number fifteen).

¹See *Haggada Shel Pesach Im Likkutei Tamim u'Minhagim*, where it notes that there are fifteen *maalot* but only fourteen *dayeinus*.

The number fifteen, the Maharal contends, is not random. The staircase leading up to the main courtyard in the Holy Temple had exactly fifteen steps as well. These steps themselves corresponded to the fifteen Songs of Ascent (*Shir Hamaalot*) that King David composed, and which are included in the Book of Psalms.

The Maharal continues:

The moon also ascends in cycles of fifteen, for on the fifteenth of the month the moon is at its fullest. Then, for fifteen days it wanes, only to wax again for fifteen days until it once again reaches its apex on the fifteenth of the month.

And, this is another reason why the holiday of Passover begins on *tet-vov Nissan*, on the fifteenth of the month of Nissan.

Thus we learn that fifteen is the pinnacle of ascent.

7. The Mystical Fifteen

On Passover we celebrate the birth of the Jewish people, the most mystical of all people. What better time, then, to get a little mystical? To get a little numerical? To delve into the *gematria* mysteries of the Kabbalah?

So consider:

God is referred to by different names throughout the Torah. With regard to creation, the name *Ya-h* (which is pronounced *Kah* out of respect) is referenced. *Kah* is composed of two Hebrew letters, *yud* and *hei*. *Yud* has the numerical value of ten, while *hei* has the value of five; together they are *fifteen*.

The Maharal teaches that God – *Kah* – structured the world as a staircase, whose two ends are earth and heaven. And there are fifteen steps built into the universe's structure to help us ascend to the greatest heights. That is, there is a fifteen-step staircase to take us out of Egyptian confinement (the bottom step) and to ultimately build the Chosen House (the top step) through which we connect with heaven.

In microcosm this was reflected in the fifteen steps of the Temple, and in King David's Songs of Ascents (*Shir Hamalot*)

This is also why the moon waxes and wanes in cycles of fifteen, and why its pinnacle is the fifteenth of the month. The moon is merely reflecting the structure that God – *Kah* – instilled into the universe.

Passover begins on the fifteenth of the month because Passover embodies this fifteen-step journey² And this is also reflected in the *Daiyeinu*.

8. The Fifth Jew Who Fell

Now ...

Do you remember our four Jews who fell down the proverbial stairs? The first saw it as an experience from which to learn; the second thought it was a punishment for something bad he did; the third thought it was an inevitable part of life; and the fourth wondered who to blame for that tumbling predicament.

I neglected to mention, but there was also a fifth Jew that fell down those same stairs. This Jew, however, was a very cool Jew, a very *unconventional* Jew. You know what this Jew did after falling down those stairs? He stood up, looked around, and began to climb, step after step after step.

As the other four Jews were busy figuring out how and why and when they all fell down, this fifth Jew was already a few flights up and still climbing.

All Jews are really like the fifth Jew. This means, it is conventional for the Jew to be unconventional.

⁶ Though the Maharal here does not say so, perhaps we might infer that this is also why the Seder itself is a fifteen-step progression.

The *conventional* way of looking at freedom is the *daiyeinu* way – it would have been enough if God had merely taken us out of Egypt. Now got out of Egypt and we are no longer slaves. This plateau upon which we now stand is our new reality, and we have to get used to it and make it comfortable for us and our own.

The *unconventional* way of looking at freedom is seeing the exodus from Egypt as merely the first step in the freedom process.

The profound depth of the Haggada as an entire book, and Passover as a whole holiday, is its message that life is a staircase, not a landing or a flat platform. Freedom describes a world that's a staircase; slavery describes a world that's flat. Free people climb; enslaved people stand still. Conventional thinkers travel horizontally; unconventional thinkers travel vertically.

This is the awesome, refreshing, innovative blessing of Passover. Going out of slavery is the *beginning* of the staircase. And the pinnacle, the building of God's Chosen House, awaits.

If, for whatever reason, you fall down a set of stairs in your life – and who doesn't? – Passover teaches that you but have to pick yourself up and continue to climb. Sure, at times it hurts, it hurts so bad that you just want to curl into a ball and cry yourself into oblivion... but then you begin to climb, to reach higher and higher. And when you look down, you see how all the pain remains below while you rise above.

Freedom is the power to always rise above. And when you do, to rise above again. And again. And again. To the pinnacle!

This is also why the Seder is so numerical. When talking about stairs, or steps in a journey, every step counts. Imagine removing one step from a staircase? The whole staircase would crumble.

So ... to reach humility there are three matzos, to reach redemption there are four cups of wine, to reach our children there are four questions, etc.

This is the Seder, and this is how we become free.

9. Should I Take the Stairs, the Escalator, Or the Elevator?

Let me propose to you that there are three ways to move through life.

The first is the elevator. You get inside a box and you are elevated to a higher plain. Once you are in the box, you are at the box's mercy. If it decides to elevate, great; if it decides to stall and breakdown, there is nothing you can do about it and you are left dangling, stuck in a box suspended between floors.

The second way to travel through life is via the escalator. The problem with the escalator is that it moves in only one direction. If you want to take a step back to see what just passed, you can't. If you want to stop to gather your thoughts, you can't. If you want it to go faster to bypass a distraction, you can't.

Then there is the staircase. The stairs involve a more laborious and time-consuming process of ascension than that of the elevator or escalator. But the staircase is always there and its rewards are eternal. The thing with the staircase is that you control it; it does not control you. You can choose how high to climb the stairs, or how low to fall down them.

Every day is another step, another stair in this stairway to heaven. This is why the Talmud instructs us, *every single day, man is obligated to experience himself as if he went out of Egypt today.*³ Freedom, true freedom is not pushing a button in an elevator and hoping for the best; and neither is it hopping onto an escalator and moving in one predictable direction.

Freedom, like a staircase, has its ups and downs; you can climb up the stairs to the highest heights, or you can fall down the stairs to the lowest lows. Freedom allows you to always reach higher, and to even add stairs.

Many people would define the formula for success as acquiring a set of virtues and qualities, methods and methodologies that successful people employ. *Like The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, or the *Eighty-One Secrets The Top Employers Employ*.

³ Pesachim 116b; Tanya Ch. 47.

In the Passover Haggada we learn that qualities and virtues also mean stairs, steps (*maalot*) in a journey. When you know that your qualities are truly steps for traveling upward – that you are on a path upward, on a mission for the Creator – then you can achieve all your goals and beyond.

This is the message of Passover. Yes, one step out of Egypt and we say *daiyeinu*, that would have sufficed. But sufficiency is not why we Jews are still here; our true miracle is that we have been gifted with more than the sufficient amount. We have been gifted with the key to ascension itself.

10. In Conclusion

All this talk about stairs has me winded, but it also has me remembering this tidbit a colleague of mine recently shared with me:

Yankel, Moshe, and Chaim were at a trade convention together and were sharing a large penthouse suite atop a seventy-five-story skyscraper hotel. After a long day of meetings they were shocked to hear that the elevators in their hotel were broken and they would have to climb seventy-five flights of stairs to get to their suite.

Yankel said to Moshe and Chaim: “Let’s break the monotony of this unpleasant task by concentrating on something interesting. I’ll tell jokes for the first twenty-five flights, and Moshe can sing songs for the next twenty-five flights, and Chaim can entertain us with stories the rest of the way.”

Great. And so it began. Yankel began telling jokes in the lobby and, at the twenty-sixth floor, he stopped telling jokes and Moshe began to sing. At the fifty-first floor Moshe stopped singing and Chaim began to tell stories.

“I would like to begin by telling the saddest story of them all,” said Chaim. “My dear friends, allow me to share with you that the key to our suite is downstairs in our car.”

Life is the tallest skyscraper imaginable. The building of the Chosen House, the Holy Temple, is the pinnacle.

Do not be concerned that you might climb and climb in life – and suddenly, oh oh, you find that you are missing the key. Here you are, up high, tens of years and thousands of flights later, and where is the key to your suite?!

Passover teaches that the key to true freedom is to see it as a series of steps, not as a one-time solution. And the key to this lock is in your own heart. There is no such a thing as walking up all these flights of stairs and not having the key to your suite. Walking up the flights of life is the key to your suite – and how sweet it is!

Chag Kosher v'Sameach and Happy Passover