



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PASSOVER > Last Day

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Passover/Last Day

**IS JUDAISM OFFENSIVE
OR DEFENSIVE?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Okay, now that we are free, what do we do next?

Passover celebrates the redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery, which we commemorated and recreated during the Passover Seder. But that begs the question: If we were freed 3,326 years ago when we left Egypt – and that redemption was permanent, transforming us into a free people – why are we told that we need to envision ourselves *always* being freed from Egypt. Once we have become free, we are free, so why do we still need to re-experience being set free? And, after we have re-experienced being set free in the first days of Passover, what do the last days of Passover add?

Maybe this made sense when the Jews were trying to exist under Greek or Roman oppression, or were being persecuted by the czars, but today? Never before in history have the entire Jewish people been as free as we are today. But if we are so very free, why are we continuing to pray for the final Messianic redemption?

The answer to all these questions lies in today’s futuristic Haftorah about another redemption that occurred on Passover, several hundred years after the very first one from Egypt. This redemption does not teach us so much how to leave slavery, but how to envision freedom.

It is a tale of biblical proportions, replete with ten tribes that went missing, two Jewish kings names Hezekiah and Hoshea, two Assyrian kings name Shalmaneser and Sennacherib, 185,000 Assyr-

ian corpses, and one very fascinating Messianic vision from the Prophet Isaiah.

In this wild story – stranger than fiction – the template for a perfect, harmonious, peaceful world was laid out for us.

Hint: It's one thing to no longer be enslaved; it's quite another to be a free person. True freedom is not merely living on the defensive but being on the offensive, not merely fighting the darkness but also finding the light.

IS JUDAISM OFFENSIVE OR DEFENSIVE?

1. But What If We Win? (Joke)

The Israeli Knesset is a hotbed for arguments, debates, and shouting matches. There are also some very creative ideas that come out of these debates. The tiny country needs them to survive.

In the early days, when the newborn state was struggling for economic strength, the Speaker of the Knesset suggested a brilliant idea: “Why don't we declare war on the United States?” They will obviously defeat us in no time, and then they will build us up like they did Germany and Japan, investing in our markets, and turning us into a world economic power.

Everyone in the whole place started yelling and nodding and saying, “Y'know, this is not such a bad idea...”

Amidst the din, stood up an old frail Jew, one of the founding members. He raised his cane and rasped in a Yiddish-accented chain-smoker's voice: “Dis iz all very good und nice. But I'm just having von kvestion – vot heppens if we win?”

2. Freedom, Shmeedom

Welcome to the eighth day of Passover. We have left Egypt a week ago, and just yesterday we crossed the Red Sea. We are, in all literal and figurative senses of the word: “free.” But now comes the question: “Vot heppens next?”

We Jews are great as underdogs, but what happens when we win? We have mastered the art of surviving despite all odds; we know well what we stand against. But when there is no enemy, what do we stand *for*? What is our identity and vision when we don’t have an adversary to define us?

3. A Tale of Biblical Proportions

While working my way toward the answer, I would like to share a story with you. It is a tale of biblical proportions, replete with ten tribes that went missing, two Jewish kings named Hezekiah and Hoshea, two Assyrian kings name Shalmaneser and Sennacherib, and one very interesting Messianic vision from the Prophet Isaiah.

Some 500 years after the Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people were living as twelve tribes of one unified nation in the Land of Israel. The Temple, built by King Solomon, was standing and all was peaceful.

For some good and some not-so-good reasons, ten of the twelve tribes decided to rebel. This resulted in the one unified people splitting off into two kingdoms, the Kingdom of Judah, which consisted of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin centered around Jerusalem, and the Kingdom of Israel, which consisted of the other ten tribes situated in northern Israel.

This split was the beginning of the end.

At the time, the superpower to the north of Israel was the Kingdom of Assyria. Some 240 years after the kingdom split, Shalmaneser, the King of Assyria, conquered the ten tribes of Israel (then under the rule of King Hoshea), and exiled them from their land, ultimately dispersing them

throughout the globe. Thus, they are known today as the Ten Lost Tribes – they are lost and we have no idea what became of them.

Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Judah (then under the rule of King Hezekiah) was alive and well and living in the south of Israel. A few years after the ten tribes were conquered, the new Assyrian king, Sennacherib, attempted to finish the job. He laid siege to the Kingdom of Judah and its holy city, Jerusalem.

How does this story end? Does this story end? And why am I sharing this biblical narrative now, on the last day of Passover? What's the connection?

4. A Passover Night In Jerusalem

As mentioned, the king of Judah at the time was Hezekiah. The Midrash relates that – as Sennacherib was getting ready to breach the walls of Jerusalem with his vast army – Hezekiah, along with his people were singing praise of God, that is, reciting *Hallel*. And why were they singing this beautiful sequence of psalms known as *Hallel*?

It was Passover night.

Though they sang, Hezekiah and his people were nonetheless afraid, for they were vastly outnumbered by the Assyrians and it seemed as if Jerusalem would fall into Sennacherib's hands. But that did not happen. The next morning, they awoke to find their enemy's corpses strewn under the city walls, dead from some kind of plague. As the Book of Kings records:

And it came to pass on that night that an angel of the Lord went out and slew one 185 thousand of the camp of Assyria. And they [the Israelites] arose in the morning, and, behold, they [the Assyrians] were all dead corpses.¹

¹ II Kings 19:35.

Sennacherib, vanquished and defeated, went back to his capital city of Nineveh.² There, as he prostrated himself in the temple of his god, two of his sons slew him with a sword.³ And that was that.

The Jewish people sang on that Passover,⁴ celebrating our redemption from our enemies, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: *This song shall be to you as the night of the sanctification of the festival.*⁵

5. Prophecy of Isaiah

The Code of Jewish Law⁶ prescribes that the Haftorah for the eighth and final day of Passover is to be from the Book of Isaiah – specifically, we are to read the section where the prophet discusses the Messiah and the Messianic Era.⁷ Why? Because, as mentioned, Sennacherib’s downfall occurred on Passover and this prophesy of Isaiah predicted it.

This explanation is, however, a bit troublesome.⁸ Sennacherib’s downfall occurred on the *first* night of Passover, and that is when the Jewish people sang the song of praise known as *Hallel*. Why, then, do we read this Haftorah on the *eighth* and *final* day of Passover?

Additionally, the Haftorah selection doesn’t really mention Sennacherib and his demise, but speaks rather of redemption in general. There are much more direct and clear verses in Isaiah⁹ that describe in vivid detail Sennacherib’s downfall. Why not use those? Why choose Isaiah’s

²Many of the treasures of the Middle East now sit in the British Museum. One of those items is a clay hexagon describing Sennacherib’s military campaigns. An inscription on it reads: “Hezekiah, King of Judah, I locked in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage.” Noticeably absent is the description of Jerusalem falling, because it didn’t.

³ II Kings 19:36-37.

⁴ Isaiah 30:29.

⁵Rashi ad loc writes that “festival” refers to the Festival of Passover.

⁶Tur Orach Chaim 490; Harav, Orach Chaim 490:13. See also Rashi on Megillah 31a.

⁷ Isaiah 10:32-12:6.

⁸See *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 7 pp. 274.

⁹Isaiah 37:36-38.

prophetic vision of the Ultimate Redemption¹⁰ to commemorate the redemption of Jerusalem in the time of King Hezekiah?

Indeed, why did Isaiah prophesy about the Ultimate Redemption at this time? After all, he was alive when Sennacherib attacked and Jerusalem was saved; he could easily have talked about current events – not events way off in the future.

Apparently, he had his reasons (or better put, God had His reasons to send down this prophecy through Isaiah).

6. The Eighth Day

Jewish mystical literature¹¹ teaches that the reason we read this Haftorah on the eighth day of Passover and not the first is because the eighth day itself is a day when the Messianic aura, the redemptive energy, the electricity of the ultimate deliverance, is most magnified and felt.¹²

Perhaps we can explain this phenomenon as follows:

Passover divides into two parts: the first seven days, and the eighth day. Although the entire holiday is about redemption, the focus of the first days is on the past redemption from Egypt (which was incomplete), while the focus of the last day is on the future and complete redemption.

The first seven days are “defensive” days, when we break out of exile and fight against the shackles that bind us. We discover what it means not to be oppressed by a domineering nation. The eighth and final day of Passover is an “offensive” day, when we discover the meaning of freedom, not as absence of slavery but as a state of being on its own – we envision a future world of freedom and peace.

¹⁰ See *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim* 12:11.

¹¹ See *Likkutei Sichot* *ibid* pp. 272ff and sources there.

¹² Indeed, the Baal Shem Tov instituted a third meal on the eighth day of Passover, called *Moshiach's Seudah*, the Messianic Feast. See *Sefer Hasichot* 5702 p. 109; *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 22, p. 34 cited later in the sermon.

There are two parts to freedom. The first is removing the chains, destroying the bonds, obliterating the restraints, busting out of prison, leaving Egypt. And this is what we have been doing the entire Passover – all of Passover we have been leaving exile.

Then, there is the second part of freedom, in many ways the more difficult part of freedom, and that is ... establishing what it is to live as a free human being ... defining what freedom means and what it looks like.

The first part of freedom is very much leaving our past behind; the second part is envisioning our future. We all know our pasts; it is very real and tangible to us. But we have never experienced our future, so how can we know what it's meant to look like?

Leaving exile is clear – these shackles bar us from ourselves, and we must break them. But once all the fetters are gone, what does life look like? What are the components of freedom? Now that we are free to strive, to yearn, to dream, what is it that we are striving, yearning, and dreaming for?

7. Offense vs. Defense

There are two ways to relate to the world – defensively or offensively.

Defense is making sure our opponent does not overcome us. This is called ensuring that we are never slaves. And we do this by separating ourselves from all things that are enslaving and constricting. But this only works when there are things that are limiting and restricting. What happens when there aren't, when we are indeed free of the shackles?

Here's where living on the offense comes into play. This does not involve combating any enemy per se. This type of living means creating new and freeing experiences.

For some 2,000 years we, the Jewish people, have been playing defense – defending ourselves from our enemies, fighting the darkness.

Now (in the last 60 years or so), we have had the unprecedented opportunity to live like free men, without enemies looming. And now we are

on the threshold of the final redemption – learning not only to fight darkness but also to embrace the light.

And embracing the light is an entirely different experience than fighting darkness. Think of a prisoner who has been locked in a dark dungeon for centuries. Once he is released, he first undergoes the shocking transition from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom. Then he begins a new process of learning to embrace the light and to live his life according to his new-found freedom. To not merely be out of prison, but to actually be a free man.

And this is the power of the eighth day of Passover.

The first seven days of Passover are spent busting through the shackles of slavery; the eighth day is envisioning what a world without shackles looks like.

This is the relevance of Sennacherib’s demise on Passover to the Ultimate Redemption, and why we read of it on the eighth day.

The Israelites in the times of King Hezekiah were not slaves – they were free. They had their own land, their own king, their Holy Temple – yes, they were a free people. But what did they do with their freedom? They did not know what to do with it. They did not know how to be free. So they began enslaving one another.

This reminds me of that terribly sad scene toward the end of *The Shawshank Redemption*, when Brooks Hatlen, an elderly inmate, is finally released from prison after fifty years. He looks around at the world and doesn’t know how to cope with freedom. He knows how to live like a prisoner, he does not know how to live freely. So, after a few days of freedom, what does he do? Tragically, he hangs himself.

This is strikingly similar to what the Jews in Israel did. They were finally free from Egypt, settled in their own land; they had a benevolent king, God’s divine prophets to guide them, a Holy Temple to center them, and yet, what did they do? Did they peacefully in harmony? Nope. They did the exact opposite. They split into two kingdoms, ultimately losing ten tribes of Israel.

What was their problem? Why could they not live as one?

Because they did not know how to live freely under God.

As our opening joke put it, the Jews knew how to survive if they lost the war – but not what to do if they won.

8. The Salvation¹³

Only when Sennacherib threatened Jerusalem did Hezekiah and his people turn to God for salvation. And then the angel of God came to vanquish their enemies. But even more, God sent Isaiah a vision, a template for how to ensure we would never, ever fight with one another again.

On the eighth day of Passover we read the formula for being free. We taste true freedom of the final redemption. And it is a custom – instituted by the Baal Shem Tov– to eat on the last day of Passover an actual meal call *Seudat Moshiach*, the Banquet of the Messiah.¹⁴

Tomorrow Passover will be over, and we will be out of Egypt. But will we know how to be free? *Achron Shel Pesach*, the eighth and final day of Passover teaches us how.

9. Template for Redemption

And it is all contained in the prophetic words of Isaiah, which we read today, describing the template for the Ultimate Redemption.

Let us repeat a few verses of today's Haftorah,¹⁵ which give us a glimpse of the ultimate universe – what the world will look like when it will realize its purpose, when it is saturated with Godliness and cosmic spiri-

¹³ See *Likkutei Sichot* cited earlier.

¹⁴ See above.

¹⁵ Isaiah 11:1-12.

tuality. For this is a template of how we are meant to live our lives today to prepare for – and bring about – the Ultimate Redemption:

And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

And the spirit of God shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the awe of God.

Every single Jew has the deepest roots. We are all branches that grow out of the roots of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Though there will be a collective Messiah, each one of us has a “spark” of the Messiah within us,¹⁶ empowering us to achieve personal redemption – to bring peace to the individual elements of our lives.

Relying on the spirit of wisdom and understanding and knowledge, and placing the awe of heaven in front of our eyes, is how we begin living in a redemptive fashion. This is how we begin living on the offensive in order to make the future happen now.

And his delight shall be in the awe of God; and he shall not judge by what his eyes see, nor decides by what his ears hear.

But with justice shall he judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and slay the evil with the breath of his lips.

One of the major differences between exile and redemption is how we look at and judge other people. Living on the offensive is learning to see our brothers and sisters, our neighbors and strangers, with justice and equity. So much discord in the Jewish world comes from one Jew not judging another favorably. Today we can bring about global unity by looking at one another in a unifying and non-judgmental way. If we do this, then...

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the beast of prey and the yearling together, and a little child shall lead them.

¹⁶ Ma'or Eina'im, Parshat Pinchas.

And the cow and the bear shall graze, their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

And the infant shall play near the cobra's den, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's nest.

10. Our Reality

We all have wolf elements and lamb elements. There are parts of us that are like leopards and parts of us that are like kids. There are people that act like wolves – Wolves of Wall Street – and parts of us that are innocent like lambs.

We must ensure that all parts of our lives live in harmony, no one part threatening the other. This is called being proactive, being on the offense, being a redeemer not a jailer.

Our present world is often quite hostile and dangerous for our children, on many different fronts. Redemption is transforming this physical plane into a world in which the literal or figurative cobra's dens and viper's nests will not endanger a pure and innocent child. For says Isaiah:

They shall not hurt nor destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea.

Exile is a displaced world unaware of its divine purpose – ignorant of the knowledge of God. “In all your ways know God,” we are told.¹⁷ Each and every one of us, whether we be rabbis, doctors, lawyers, retirees, homemakers, parents, bankers, janitors, electricians, carpenters, contractors, teachers, whatever, we all – in our personal and unique lives and “in all our ways” – must “know God.” We must recognize the Divine in all that we do and realign our lives to our divine purpose – whether it be through a class, a study-partner, a sermon, a tweet, an email, a text, a kind word. Today, the technological revolution has made it easier than ever for the knowledge of God to literally fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁷ Proverbs 3:6.

This is called redemption. This is being on the offensive and proactive. This is a far cry from simply not being enslaved.

And this is how we make the ultimate future happen now.

And in that day it shall be that the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations shall rally to him, and his abode shall be honored.

And it shall come to pass on that day, that God shall set His hand the second time to recover the remnant of His people who shall be left – from Assyria, and from Egypt, from Pathros, and from Kush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.

And He shall set up a banner for the nations and assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

11. Begin Today

Remember those ten lost tribes? We must repair the schism and gather in all of our brothers and sisters, the entire family of Israel.

It is our job to begin living this way now. To join hands in utter unity – with unconditional love. We have already busted the chains, we are a physically free people, we have nothing enslaving us now. Our work is to proactively achieve spiritual freedom – to become leaders, not just be reactive to other masters.

As Passover culminates, we are blessed with opportunity to gather in our *outcasts, dispersed, from the four corners of the earth*. We must learn how to allow the perceived wolves to coexist harmoniously with the perceived lambs. We must exalt the good and dispel evil. We must make the world such that it is safe for all children, where even the cobra's den or the viper's nest is no threat, but all are part of God's wondrous world.

This, my friends, is how "Next Year in Jerusalem" happens. We take Isaiah's prophetic instruction and *make* it happen in our lives – here and now.

For if we live redemptive lives, God will surely make it so.

12. Free

They once asked a Jew what he thinks of free thinkers.

The Jew replied: Free? I'll take two of them.

Perhaps the stereotype that Jews like free things stems from the fact that the opposite of free things are enslaved things and Jews have always strived to be free. The opposite of a free thinker is an enslaved thinker and that's not attractive at all.

For much of our history, to be free of oppressors was a goal. But today *we are* free in fact. Today the goal of the Jew is not to be free *from* something but to be free for something – free to live divinely!

May we carry this message of Passover – both the first seven days and, especially, this eighth and final day – into the entire year. And this year, nay, this very day, we will surely dwell in a peaceful and unified Jerusalem, with the coming of the Messiah and complete and final redemption. Amen!

Happy Acharon shel Pesach, last day of Passover!