

Shabbat 04 06 18 Sermon

It seems like everything about Passover has to do with timing, doesn't it? And by that I don't mean only, and obviously, when do we eat yet? Which is a common refrain, like more than manishtana, the most often asked question in Jewish history is, are we there yet? Do we eat yet? Timing is everything, but timing is important in an essential way on Passover, no? I mean, everything about Passover screams time.

The timing of the Israelites, when they leave Egypt. Like, ki b'chi bazon yatsata mi mitzayim, you had to rush out of Egypt. Like, why do we have to rush out? What was the hurry? Was there a train to catch? Egyptians were not running after us yet, they still were. There was a sense of urgency around leaving Egypt. We'll get back to that in a moment.

But if you think about that urgency and contrast it with the elongated nature of our seders, it's a little bit amazing, right? In fact, it's not just funny, it's actually part of the mandatory responsibility of a person having a seder is to make it fuller. It's like, the more you tell the story. It's like, no, we heard that already. No, tell it again. Tell it again. No, tell it again. Tell it again.

Famously, you know, seders are supposed to end. Everybody has their, like, seder Olympics. When did you end your seder? Oh, three. Oh, an early night. I remember growing up, it would be like, going into shul, it would be like, what time is your seder? Two. Oh, yeah, wow. Were you guys feeling okay? Two in the morning? Come on, it's supposed to go all the way until dawn. Your students are supposed to come in and tell you, it's like, you know, the morning dawn has risen.

You're supposed to tell the story the whole night, and how amazing it is to feel the difference between Pesach, Mitzrayim, the urgency of leaving Egypt in the Bible, and what later became a night that wasn't supposed to end. You were supposed to recline like a king or queen. Royalty. Pesach Dorot, the Passover of generations, was completely the opposite of the Passover of that generation. They had to rush. We don't. They were slaves. We are not. Timing.

So fundamental to Passover. The matzah we eat is itself a reflection of that urgency. We eat it slowly, because how else can you eat matzah? But we bake it quickly. The matzah is baked quickly so that we can eat it slowly. The Israelites left Egypt so that we could slow down. We rush to get into Shabbat, and then we take a breath.

This syncopation of, I'm rushing to stop, is frequent on the New York streets when you find somebody with a yoga mat who bowls you over on their way to the yoga class. Come on, I know, I've done. Being in a rush to slow down, being in a rush to make the window that opens Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs with which we began tonight, which is the Song of Longing and Love, the Song of Lovers, is recited on Passover not once, but twice. We began tonight with songs or excerpts from the Song of Songs.

Tomorrow, some communities will read all eight chapters of it. Rabbi Benny Lau, a great rabbi in Jerusalem, friend, colleague, and teacher, writes in his book on the parashiot, on

the weekly portion, writes that the quality of Passover is a quality of lovers who are constantly looking for one another. There's an energy of excitement, of eros, of possibility. All of Passover has that quality. It's the beginning of the year.

But the painful part of Song of Songs is that it's... The truth is, at the end of the Song of Songs, is that the lovers constantly miss each other. It's unrequited to some extent. It's... I went looking for you, but you weren't there. It's like that scene from Dr. Zhivago. It's painful. This longing and... There's something that is in Passover that remedies that, that Shir Hashirim doesn't fully invite.

There's something in Shir Hashirim, in the Song of Songs, as beautiful as it is to sing and to read, that doesn't fully capture all of Passover. It's true, Rabbi Lau. It's true what he said, that it is... There's a quality of beginnings in Passover, of newness, of freshness, of lovers, who are looking for one another, of the lost object that we're seeking, we're seeking, we're seeking.

But if that were all Passover was, it would be less than what it is. Passover is not only the holiday of lovers and longing. It isn't only the holiday of leaving, but also of resting, of beginning a process, of locating and deepening. It isn't just the excitement of the first five dates, the first month, maybe even the first year of romance, but the steady invitation to endurance, to longevity, to posterity.

It's a remarkable thing, this Passover business, because as I said, it starts with that urgency to leave. The great Rabbi Tzaddik HaKohen of Lublin, the great Hasidic sage of the latter part of the 19th century, he writes, Rabbi Tzaddik Rabinowitz writes, in the beginning, the first Torah in his book, the holiness of the righteous. He said, That when we start our spiritual path, we have to do it the way that they left Egypt. We have to do it like with, I'm all in. Oh, it's exciting. I'm rushing to shul. I'm rushing. It's exciting. I got myself new paraphernalia. I'm going to wear it. You know, I'm going to wear my new talis. Have you seen my new book? You know, I'm all excited. I just took a course. I just started a job. Everything begins with that, with that excitement, with that, oh, it's so precious. It's Pesach mitzrayim. It's leaving Egypt.

And he says, He says, the energy sometimes to leave what was, an old pattern, an old job, an old place, requires the kind of skipping and jumping that Passover represents. The window opens, and I jump. Because if I wait for a moment, I might not have the courage anymore. The opportunity presents itself. I met her on the train. If I don't say, hey, would you like to go? You know, hey.

I remember those days when I was in my 20s. Many a fantasy about my wife who was on the one train on the side. You know, is that the one? And, oh, I missed the opportunity. Thank God, Ariel. Thank you, thank you. There's a moment, a window opens, and we say, now's the time. Carpe diem, carpe momentum. Let's go. But then Rav Tzadik says, you know, but. We'll get to the but.

This quality of leaving Egypt and the quality of shiur shurim, the quality that isn't yet the longevity, is so beautiful. There's even a rabbinic phrase that says, People have heard of shmur matzah, to watch over matzah. The Torah says, watch over the matzah. And the word

matzah is also the same word, it can be read as mitzvot. Matzot, mitzvot, same letters. The rabbis say, don't just watch over matzah, watch over mitzvot, good deeds and good actions, because they too can ferment. You can also wait too long on a good deed and say, you know what, I'll get to that next week. You know what, it's 18 minutes for matzah to rise.

18 minutes, if you have a thought, I'm going to do a good deed. If you have a mitzvah that comes to your hand, don't let it rise. Leave Egypt, leave the narrowness of your own ego and concerns, transcend your own ego and do it. I want to do a good deed, do it. Don't wait. Don't wait. Marketers know this. Sign today. Only today. Free until the end of the day. They know that we procrastinate. Mitzvah ba'al yadcha tachmitzana. It's a love relationship with a moment. Don't let the moment rise or leave. Grab it.

That's great. That's a kind of spiritual practice that all of us should engage in, but it's not enough, because Passover has not only that moment, but it has the other quality, which is long distance running. It's the long seder.

How many of you know that of all three pilgrimage festivals, there's only one that gives you a second chance if you miss it? Talk about timing. Passover and Shavuot and then Sukkot, three of the pilgrimage festivals, of all three of them, all of them equally important, only Passover with its focus on timing had an escape clause for someone who in the second year, you know, I made it out, I rushed my way out in the first year of Egypt, and in the second year I couldn't make it, you know, because I was on business, I was away somewhere. We have something called Second Passover, Pesach Sheni, a holiday that focuses on grabbing the moment, gives you another chance if you miss the moment for reasons beyond your control, as if to say that you can always start again, and you should always start again, as if to say that if you did start something, don't leave it until it's done, as if to say that mature love can weather many storms, as if to say that the real product of your leaving Egypt will not just be that you left Egypt, but you know how to return and leave again differently, as if to say that Passover and its liberation promise is incomplete if all you know how to do is start exciting relationships and leave them for another one.

There is great wisdom in knowing when to leave something, but it takes great courage to stay with something that will come back and change and be different. It says in Rav Tzadik, And after you've left what you've left, go slow now. Take your time, have patience, deepen. When the moment seems darkest, that's when potentially the most light is revealed.

I love this Torah because of course it makes sense then that Passover would be the holiday that we would begin a 49-day journey on because we don't believe that Passover alone should stand alone, romance alone should stand alone, but that there's a responsibility to see it through, to move it through. So I'm holding up that Torah tonight, and I'm asking each of you tonight when you go home to ask yourselves a couple of questions tonight over your dinner table, over Kiddush, say, When in my life have I felt the first kind of Passover where I left in a rushed way and needed to? And where in my life have I gone back and gone slowly in similar places? How have I learned that? How did I know? You might want to share on whatever level you might want to share on, but you might be surprised to find out from people how they left different places and how they wish they had left different places or how they stayed in certain places and were thankful that they stayed in certain places.

This whole business of Passover and lovers is remarkably, powerfully intimate for all of us because we know this. We know this dance. We know this excitement, and we know this deepening. We know Pesach. So timing is super important. Timing is absolutely necessary.

Rav Nachman of Breslov says that to become a real master of walking, of halacha, is to know when to run and when to return. So let me ask you. Is it time to run or is it time to stay? Should you stay or should you go now? You'll find out tonight. Nobody can answer for you. If you feel like dropping me a line and telling me what you thought, I'd really love to hear from you.

Let's rise for the counting of the Omer and Aleinu.