



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Pesach 5770: Sustained by Justice By Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Each year, we gather around our *seder* tables, surrounded by friends and family, to recount the tale of our ancestors' miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery. As we read and debate our *haggadot* and look to the classical words of the rabbis and sages of old, it is worth stopping for a moment to examine the very first passage of the *seder* ritual.

Immediately after the introductory blessings for *kiddush* and *karpas*, we invite the hungry into our midst. Using the same Aramaic words that have been recited for thousands of years, Jewish families uncover the *matzot* and recite *Ha Lahma Anya*:

This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. All who are hungry, let them enter and eat. All who are in need, let them come celebrate Pesach. Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel. Now we are enslaved; next year we will be free.

What a strange opening line! *Ha Lahma Anya* refers to the *matzah*, but then goes on to address people who aren't even sitting at the *seder* table, who may not be Jewish at all!

Why start the *seder*, a chance to recall our history, with this stirring but unrelated call to feed the hungry? What does this have to do with Pesach?

There are two traditional ways of interpreting *Ha Lahma Anya*. The first interpretation notes that the text refers to bodily needs first ("all who are hungry") and to spiritual needs second ("all who are in need"). The message seems to be that one cannot be spiritually free unless freed from the debilitating plagues of poverty, hunger and illness. In the words of Mishnah Avot 3:17, "without bread, there is no Torah." Without material security, it is impossible to attain spiritual depth.

As is often true in Jewish tradition, the opposite interpretation also conveys a significant truth. Notice that in the last two sentences of *Ha Lahma Anya*, the order is reversed: first comes redemption ("next year in the land of Israel") followed by physical freedom ("next year we will be free"). It takes a liberated spirit to motivate people to fight for their physical freedom. It takes vision and insight to stand up against tyranny, whether from a powerful dictator or an irresistible urge. Liberation of the body requires integrity and authenticity, unencumbered by the blinders of convention or of cowardice.

These two views—that physical security must precede spiritual growth, and that a free spirit is the necessary precursor to any lasting physical liberation—both illumine important aspects of the human situation. And both interpretations confirm the sad reality that we are still in *galut*, still in exile. Not only because we don't live in a redeemed Land of Israel, but because the world is still so distant from the vision of the Torah, still alienated

from the attainment of harmonious and compassionate living. Too many go to bed hungry each night, too many still die of illnesses for which there are cures and too many suffer the deadening blows of bigotry and prejudice from their fellow human beings.

In this world of suffering, disappointment and pain, *Ha Lahma Anya* is a clarion call, summoning the Jewish people to our historic task—*le-takken olam be-malkhut Shaddai*—to repair the world under the rule of God.

All who are hungry may come and eat, but only if we live our lives and structure our society in such a way that the entire human family is cared for. Sadly, that is not the case today. In celebrating the liberation from Egyptian slavery, we need to look to ourselves, to recognize that we too often play the role of Pharaoh in the lives of others—as individuals by not welcoming those different than ourselves; as a community by not extending ourselves to the outcast, impoverished and hungry; as a people by not honoring other cultures and faiths as we would hope to be honored.

Ha Lahma Anya, with its call to care for all in our society, reminds us that our role models should be Moses, the passionate spokesman for the downtrodden and the outcast, and God, the redeemer of slaves and the untiring protector of widows and orphans.



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