

Rabbi Harley Karz-Wagman column Tribune Eagle
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Passover – Freedom Challenges our Status Quo

This week, Jews celebrate Passover, primarily with a Seder, a ritual meal, where we tell and experience the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the transformation from oppression to freedom. We read from a book, called the Haggadah, of which hundreds of varieties exist, with new ones created every year. Our story includes rituals -- eating bitter herbs to remember slavery, eating matzah to recall the rush to freedom, drinking wine (or juice) to feel the sweetness of redemption.

Each year, we retell the Biblical story, adding centuries of interpretations, to inspire us to work for freedom today. Every year, most of humanity lives, enslaved to “Pharaohs,” oppressed by political leaders or poverty or disease or abuse (domestic violence) or neglect (our lonely elderly), leaving them unable to make free choices. If one mind is a “terrible thing to waste,” then imagine the billions of minds, who cannot reach their potential, due to poverty and all forms of oppression.

Passover teaches us a remarkable lesson -- our status quo, with most people living in slavery, is not inevitable. (See Rabbi Irving Greenberg, The Jewish Way.) All people should be free, and we can cross the sea (our rebirth in springtime) to freedom.

Even those of us who enjoy political, physical, and economic freedom may be controlled by Pharaohs inside of us. Such internal

Pharaohs include our bad habits in eating, sleeping, or reacting to stress. We may struggle with addictions to drugs, video games, or pornography. We may live as slaves to our passions, such as greed, pride, appetite, and lust (Freud called them the “id”). These function as the *chametz* (literally, leavened, or risen grains, such as bread, cakes, pasta, vinegar, and beer). *Chametz* symbolizes our puffed up egos. We demonstrate our control over all those internal Pharaohs by exercising the discipline of not eating or possessing *chametz* for this week of Passover.

When are we free? We are free, when we make our own choices, based on the best that is within us, and then live out those choices. We become free, when we allow the God inside of us, our conscience, to determine our choices. Passover teaches us to exchange our slavery to those external and internal Pharaohs for freedom, for submission to the only Master who makes us free, the God within us. The freedom we seek is not the license to do what we want, at any moment, but to do what we should, to fulfill our responsibilities, to others and to ourselves.

You can learn more about Passover by contacting me at Mt. Sinai Congregation or visiting such web sites as:
www.myjewishlearning.com, www.urj.org, or www.uscj.org.

We might tell a real life story, based on Exodus, about two Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puha, who defied Pharaoh’s order to kill all Jewish baby boys. In 1941, in Nazi occupied Holland, on a Sunday morning, a visitor entered a Dutch Calvinist Church, a small church. He ascended the podium and read the story of the defiant midwives. He asked, “Who is today’s Pharaoh?” The congregation

replied, "Hitler." He asked: "Who are today's Hebrew babies?" They answered: "The Jews." He then asked: "Who will be today's midwives?" He left the church, with his question hanging in the air.

From this small church, seven families hid Jews and other resisters in their homes, saving them from certain death at the hands of the Nazis. The visitor, a minister, inspired other Dutch congregations, and became known as Fritz the wanderer.

May this Passover bring us the wisdom of Fritz, the courage of the midwives, and the chutzpah ("guts") to work for the freedom we all deserve.

Happy Passover.

L'shalom, Rabbi Harley Karz-Wagman