



Half Hallel: Our Passover Challenge
Passover Day 7 5779
April 26, 2019 / 21 Nissan 5779
by Rav Hazzan Aliza Berger
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

When I used to sing competitively, I remember there was always this moment. I would go with my vocal studio to various competitions, which they always held in some university auditorium far away. After months of practicing and preparing, we would pile 4 or 5 divas into a small beat up car for whatever number of hours it took to arrive at the competition location. In the car, we would be singing vocal warm-ups, or blasting out musical theater tunes, or perseverating about which song we should sing first. (The way these competitions work is that each singer gets to choose their first piece, and if they choose wisely and the judges like it, they can ask for additional songs.) And after the anxious ride, and a quick change of clothes and a dash to the stage, I remember the feeling walking out in front of those judges. If you were lucky, they would let you sing your first full song, and then another. Sometimes, a judge would interrupt with a curt “thank you” and then leave you worried about what they didn’t like.

At the end of the day, they would announce the location of the results. We would get dinner and then camp out in that hallway, waiting for judges to post the results of the competition. And that’s when the moment would happen. Two friends would stand together watching the judge tape the list to the wall. Two friends would lean against each other for balance as they jumped to see the results. And then one exalted scream would be followed by a pitiful wail. For someone to win, someone else had to lose. That’s how competitions work. Sometimes performers were sensitive to this. They would temper their joy in the face of their friend’s loss. But often, the winners would be so exuberant that they overlooked the pain of their friends and competitors.

This moment isn't limited to vocal competitions, it happens to us all the time. We land the job of our dreams because the other applicants did not get it. We get the parking spot right by the door because other people didn't see it. We get a bargain because other people earn less for their work. We get to work faster in a sporty car because our vehicle emits harmful gasses into the environment. When we win, it almost always comes at a cost.

This is the lesson of the seventh day of Passover. We are taught that on this day in Jewish history, God led the people across the Sea of Reeds. It was a miracle of all miracles. We've just rehearsed the story at our Seder table. Our ancestors were desperate. The seas, which blocked their progress, suddenly split and allow them to cross onto dry land and towards freedom. They watch as the Egyptians pursue them, terrified that despite God's miracle, they will fall at the hands of the Egyptians. But then, just as the last Israelites are crossing the sea, the waters crash together killing the Egyptian pursuers and allowing the Israelites to go forward unencumbered.

Midrash explains that as the Egyptians thrashed in the waters, the angels began to cheer. They were so relieved that the Israelites had survived and so happy that the mean Egyptians were getting their just desserts. But God grew angry and rebuked the angels saying, "are you really going to sing praises to me while my creations are drowning?!" In other words, *are you really going to celebrate when you can see that your victory comes at a cost?*

This is why, our rabbis teach, we celebrate the final days of Passover in a unique way. On all other festival holidays, we recite a full Hallel in celebration for God's miracle. We are taught that our ancestors first recited the words and prayers of Hallel as they walked out through those parted seas on their way to freedom. But on the ultimate days of Passover, we only recite a half

Hallel. Why? Because we trim our celebration in remembrance of the suffering of the Egyptians and as a way to acknowledge that our redemption came at a cost.

This is the challenge of Passover. We call this time *Zman Heruteinu*—the time of our liberation, the time of our freedom. Why? It's not because our ancestors made it out from Egypt to Israel. That doesn't happen this week. But what does happen this week is that our people are freed from a state of mind. They are freed from only focusing on their success. They are freed from only focusing on their struggles and losses. They are freed from seeing only one side of the story. They are liberated. And as a result they can hold both struggle and joy, suffering and liberation.

This is our challenge too. It's easy for us to just focus on our struggles, on the challenges we face, on what we've lost. It's also easy for us to focus on our wins, on the blessings in our lives, on the gifts we've been given. What's hard is to hold the challenge and the blessings at the same time. To celebrate, to love, and to move forward in the face of adversity—that is the core challenge and opportunity of Pesach.

Today, we are going to do just that. I want to invite you to think of one challenge and one blessing in your life that you want to hold as we rise together for half Hallel.