The Freedom of Being Yourself

On the full moon of Nissan, when spring begins to caress the soul with its explosion of life, and the season of cold and rains in the Land of our ancestors gives way to another of completely blue skies, we celebrate the first festival of the year, for some the most important, because it gave origin to our people on the founding ideal of FREEDOM. We get together as a family and our Seder table becomes the altar through which we travel in time. We remember the Story, and as the greatest treasure in our possession, we bequeath it to our children, up to the Seder itself. They have a right and an identity, without guilt or shame. They have a right to feel proud of the values and traditions of their people.

Without the privilege of lineage or pedigree, in the middle of the nothingness of the wilderness, a group of former slaves imagined a better world: more just, more dignified, more sensitive. For me, this vision, together with an enormous conviction in their ability to fulfill these dreams and values in reality, is the greatest miracle, much more than the Burning Bush, much more than the Plagues, much more than the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds and than water from a rock. That these survivors found G-d in their lives is a miracle. And that they are our ancestors is a great source of pride, which creates a moral duty to retell the story.

Before we eat, and even after, so that our food has that special taste and that we are part of this reality show in which we stand as one of the freed Hebrews, we need to pass through a very complex order. Suggesting that one must strive enormously to be free: a striving that may take a lifetime.

Firstly, Pesach involves a very strict and detailed law. No other festival has so many directives or details. This is adumbrated in the halakhot pertaining to the Seder itself with its blessings and twenty steps. Furthermore, one must know what one can and cannot eat on Pesach, how to kasher the dishes, the cutlery and even the ovens, how many minutes does it take for flour to leaven and for matzah to still be kosher for Pesach.

Pesach would not be what it is just because of the legal erudition placed in service of the central idea. Paradoxical as it may seem, freedom needs laws, suggesting that without rules it is impossible to flourish. Pesach would not be what it is, if we only rely on what the law says. You would be missing the folklore and the legends, the traditional melodies and dishes that remain in our ears and our noses. You would be missing the four questions, the four sons, the four cups of wine, and the four verses of redemption. You would be missing the Seder Plate with its symbols, the tears in which we dip the parsley, representing the bitterness of a life without meaning or free choice, and the sweet paste of the apples that turns our delusions of grandeur into charoset and calls us to build our own freedom of being. If we only had the law, we would not say Dayenu (it is enough for us), since it would turn into a race for more or more. If we only had the law, we would not include the “Butterfly Effect” of a causality that we do not control, and that according to Chad Gadya, started inexplicably with a little kid that a father purchased once for two coins. If we only had the law, we would not know how to sing Hallel or be thankful, or interpret the bright lit eyes and the broad smiles when it comes the time to look for that last piece of Matza which we eat and whose finder gets a price.

What an awesome teaching to look for your own identity which is hidden somewhere like the Afikomen! And what an awesome custom of this magical night in which we showcase all of our pedagogical methodology to help us find who each one really is! All of this detailed law and this tremendous folk tradition combine to create a path into our most intimate roots. God willing it will not only be nature caressing the soul with its explosion of life in this spring festival. God willing, in this exercise of going back to Egypt, we will decide to continue marching towards Jerusalem, meaning: recognizing all the things that entice us which are still hidden within us, and go out searching for the freedom that will allow us to choose to be ourselves.

Chag sameach!

Rabbi Dario Feiglin
Congregation Amiha
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Translated by Rabbi Juan Majia
(Southwest Coordinator for Bein Hashanah)