

Freedom from what?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Pesach is such a magnificent archetypal Jewish celebration. It is true that it is based on a sad story of persecution, murder and suffering, but the way we celebrate it is anything but sad. The litany of the agonies of slavery which the Haggadah repeats is all but lost under the magic aura of lots of wine, strange customs, exotic food, fun for the kids, and endless debate and discussion. The only true remnant of servitude is the amount of hard work done by the women, who still take on the lion's share of the preparation.

Of course, that is changing. Pesach is now a time of mass Jewish migration. Traditionally-minded Jews head in vast numbers to Israel in imitation of the Biblical law that one should try to get to Jerusalem during the "pilgrim festivals" to celebrate with other Jews (they don't all go to Jerusalem, of course, and Eilat is hardly a spiritual destination). At the same time, equally large numbers of secular Jews leave Israel and go as far away as they possibly can from any religious reminder of the accident of their birth.

In the Americas, from Cancun to Miami, Palm Beach to Arizona, to every centre of Jewish life, luxury hotels offer the ultimate in exaggerated indulgence, religious refinements and strictnesses of Passover supervision, as well as galaxies of speakers, rabbis, entertainers, and clowns. One wonders whether any Jews stay at home, let alone how the heck they pay for it all. Pesach is a great experience, but an expensive one! And this is an interesting point: increasingly Jewish life, imitating Western capitalist societies, is becoming polarized between the wealthy and the strugglers. It is becoming unhealthily preoccupied with conspicuous consumption and exaggerated wealth.

How many people can manage to school four children, each costing \$20,000 per annum, with housing prices in Jewish neighborhoods rising, even as they fall in virtually all other areas? How many people can afford a week-long Pesach escape at \$10,000 a head? To be Orthodox nowadays involves buying expensive fur hats, human hair wigs, not to mention a whole array of special Shabbat-approved electronics. It is no wonder that someone recently told me that if you are Orthodox you cannot get a date in Manhattan unless you are earning \$250,000 per annum!!

It's not just the cost of being Jewish. Prices of basic fuel and foodstuffs are rising all over the world. The cost of meat, milk, cheese, and of course matza goes up each year. Even becoming vegetarian is not necessarily that much of a help any more, as the trend towards organic food virtually doubles the cost of a supermarket trolley. And it's not just food. Yet for all the trend upwards of the cost of living and the price of aviation fuel there is a constant to-ing and fro-ing that recalls the wildebeest migrations across the Massa Mara in Africa, as herds of the faithful follow their rebbes around the world as they visit outposts of support, family weddings, vacations, and jamborees. The money must be coming from somewhere.

The fact is that large numbers of Orthodox Jews are defying the stereotype of pious poverty, and are doing extremely well financially (usually the entrepreneurs, rather than the professionals). But living cheek by jowl with the extremely wealthy are those struggling to make ends meet. The amazing charity, that exceeds most people's imagination, does a tremendous amount to ameliorate the situation, subsidizing education and the cost of religious living for the large number of those who cannot cope. Perhaps we shouldn't be too worried if real estate billionaires, financial wizards, or simply welfare states (let's not mention welfare abuses) pour huge sums into our community.

Yet I worry. It is not just a question of where this will end, with constantly rising demands, the gap between those who have and those who do not, and the difficulty of finding a partner if one is not rich. It raises profound moral issues of conspicuous consumption and spiritual values.

Can there really be any moral justification for buying a car worth hundreds of thousands of dollars when one worth a tenth can do the job required just as efficiently? Can one justify the hundreds of thousands it costs to maintain a private jet? Should one be taking expensive vacations so regularly when so many can afford none? Is the tremendous gap justified morally?

The truth is that Judaism does not like or value poverty and does encourage people to be self-sufficient and not be dependent. But where does one draw the line? The Jewish religion does not advocate imposing economic systems or ideological fiscal solutions. History has shown how impractical and unreliable human economic theories have proved to be. Instead, it has insisted from the time of Ecclesiastes that one try not to fool oneself that money is more important than it is. The Mishna stresses the dangers of having too much and, indeed, defines a rich person as one who is satisfied with his lot. Being able to be modest in one's living is an important spiritual quality. Wealth does not bring happiness, even if it has significant material benefits. I have seen as much pain and unhappiness caused by wealth as I have seen caused by poverty. Besides, nowadays in the welfare world we live in there are safety nets there never were. But still, should we not be thinking about the millions of humans who live a life of intense poverty and deprivation?

I have a feeling that the real slavery we are suffering from nowadays is the slavery of materialism. Pesach is the right time to ask questions not just about being Jewish but about what sort of Judaism one should be living and whether slavery to the myths of materialism is not as pernicious as the slavery to idolatry was in its day. Matza is, after all, the bread of poverty as much as the bread of slavery.