

Session 41
Vayikra (Passover) - Basking in the Light of Redemption
21 March 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BW2owpP71y4&t=2s>

Ari Abramowitz

Shalom! Am I on? Can you guys hear me? That's a big deal. Small successes. We have started and I remembered to unmute myself, so I feel like the rest is just details. Thank God, I actually am learning Zoom and how this all works. And I was feeling a little bit nervous, but I realized how not to look at myself, but just to look at all of you and look at all of your faces and really, I have to tell you the truth. I went from being a little bit jittery, a little bit nervous to being super excited just to be with you. And your faces are just shining this light and energy and I thank you because this is a big deal for me. You guys have been very supportive and I would read you all the words of support and the encouragement, but it would really take the whole time.

I just need to say that since my parents and my wife, I haven't encountered a more intense wave of unconditional support, and I can't thank you enough. I really think this fellowship would be worthwhile, even if we just tuned in and smiled at each other. I just, I can't wait for us to be together personally on our mountaintop in Judea. I don't know how that will happen, or when, but I know in my heart that it will and that this is really just giving birth to something greater. It's constantly on my mind, I'm not sure what it is, but I know that this is the beginning of something great. And it's such an honor to lead this fellowship with you because we're about to embark not only on a new book in the Torah, except for Vayikra, which I feel bad, there's so much to talk about, but I realized I really even barely touch on it because of the overwhelming nature of Passover.

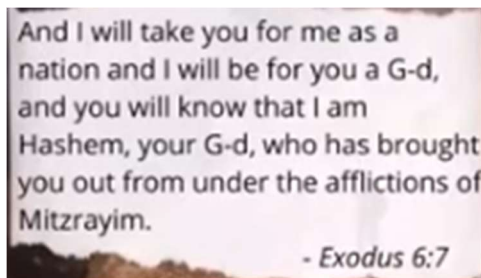
You know, it's one of those holidays that's so overwhelming that whatever Torah portion it coincides with, is sort of just steamrolled over. Although there's some real connections that we can talk about, but being that so much is on the line, the Passover is coming, I thought we would start, that we should start with a prayer.

Hashem, we are coming together now in hopes that You will see the sincerity of our desire to serve You and that You will help us cleanse both our hearts and our homes of chametz, not only the physical chametz, such as leaven bread and the other forbidden foods, but also the spiritual chametz, even more important in some ways. Such as arrogance and anger and control and whatever idols we may be secretly harboring in the inner essence and recesses of our hearts. Bless me, Hashem, by opening my lips and giving me the words to share the light of Your Torah and the insights that You bless me with leading up to this great and awesome Passover. Please, Hashem, put your words in my mouth. I'm already getting a little bit emotional. But You know, this Passover, Hashem is so overwhelming. Please allow my brothers and sisters, my friends and my family in this fellowship, to be vessels to receive the redemptive light of Pesach and

channel it to a world that needs this light right now more than ever before. And Hashem, before we begin, let me thank You for such incredibly beautiful souls in this fellowship. You see how much they hold me up and strengthen me and strengthen and encourage and bless us. Please Hashem, bless them. Bless them a thousand-fold.

Ok. It took a lot of soul-searching for me to decide what we were going to learn here today. I had to dig really deep because Passover is not just another holiday. It isn't just another event in Jewish history, in world history, which we're commemorating together. It's the birth of the Jewish people as a nation. In many ways, what Rosh Hashanah is, right? You remember Rosh Hashanah, we celebrated that together, what that is for all mankind, Pesach, Passover is for the Jewish people. It's a New Year for the nation of Israel. It's our national birthday and in so many ways you know, as Zachariah said, the righteous will attach themselves to the house of Israel on this day. This isn't just about the Jewish people. Here in Israel, around the world, the Jews in this fellowship...it's about everyone that's here together. For we are attached at a soul level. So, may Hashem bless you a thousand, a thousand-fold.

So, we see actually that Hashem really expresses that very sentiment of what Pesach really is in Exodus 6:7.



On Passover, Hashem forged us into a nation and the exodus from Egypt is so hardwired in our spiritual DNA. It's so fundamentally formed us and shaped us and defined us that I wanted to find my best, to share my heart on Pesach and not merely various topical ideas. You know, there's an idea of a dvar Torah, just a Torah idea. I didn't want to just do that, because the exodus from Egypt is so fundamental to our experience of our daily lives. When we say Shema in the morning and when we go to sleep at night, Shema... We cover our eyes and we say, hear o Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. We cover them so we don't see the multiplicity of this world and we know the truth. And every morning and every night we say that and from the Bemidbar, the final verse in Shema that we say, what brings it all together, that you may remember and do all my commandments and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God. That's what it all comes down to. That He brought us out of the land of Egypt, as a matter of fact, remembering that you were once slaves in Egypt, right? Remembering that is by far the single most frequently given reason for the mitzvot, for the commandments of the Torah. More

commandments than ever say, and you shall do this commandment because I redeemed you from the land of Egypt, so you can remember that you were once slaves in Egypt.

Because it's important to understand why all the studies and polls show that the Passover Seder is by far the most widely practiced Jewish tradition because it's not a mere religious observance, it is our fundamental national story. Think about this. There have been approximately 100 generations from the actual exodus until today, meaning that as families, we come together to celebrate the Passover Seder, usually there's grandchildren, parents and grandparents – three generations usually. If you're blessed you have great grandparents at the table. But three generations at the Seder together, there have been just over 30 rotations. I was thinking about this. I thought of 30 rotations, 30 cycles of three generations having the seder together since the actual exodus from Egypt. Let that sink in.

Nachshon, ben Abinadav, he's one of my favorite characters in the Torah. He seems like a small character, but our sages share about his heroism and his faith. They say that he was the one that went so far into the water that only when he went that far in that he would have drowned, there was no turning back. Only then, did God part the seas because it took everything from us, everything we had in order to put it in there in faith. And then God just does the entire thing. And so, let's say I was thinking Nachshon Ben Abinadav, the son of Abinadav, is a prince of the tribe of Judah, he experienced the first Passover with his children and grandchildren. He told them what happened to him. They were there for it. They saw it. Then, when his grandson was a father and a grandfather, he told of the exodus that happened to his grandfather, that he heard himself from the mouth of his grandfather. Then his grandson's grandson sat at his Seder table and heard his grandfather tell of the exodus that he heard himself from the grandfather who he heard it from. So it's not a tale. It's not just a religious story. It is our origin story. It has been passed down personally from generation to generation. That's why it's called Pesach, Pe is the mouth, sach, that speaks. The mouth that speaks.

Now, before I go forward, I want to share with you what's been happening to me leading up to this Passover and I want to give some very important context. And the truth is, I didn't know if I should share it because it's a little bit vulnerable but I just felt like I needed to because the journey up to this Passover has been a very real one and I'm not just talking about the last few weeks since Purim, but really since the last year, since last Passover and since last Purim. Because last Pesach was a very special one in my life and I imagine in all of our lives. There's an ancient 4th century Jewish teaching that when we die and leave the world, there are a number of questions that we're going to be asked, and one of them is ...did you eagerly anticipate redemption?

It's not a simple question, the question isn't, did you believe in redemption, but were you actively anticipating redemption? And when I'm asked that question, my answer will be, yes. There was one time thus far that I really, really, thought that the redemption was at hand and

that was Passover of 5780, this last Passover. And I know that predicting the exact date of redemption is not a highly recommended Jewish practice. It's actually highly discouraged because there's a danger in such a thing. And the danger is clear. If our very human and very fallible minds are wrong, then we may lose faith, just like the children of Israel did when they incorrectly calculated when Moses was supposed to descend the mountain. And they built a golden calf because of their miscalculations.

So I've always felt like we're in the days of Moshiach because it's not hard to...we're living in the days of the rebirth of the state of Israel, the in-gathering of the exiles, the revival of the Hebrew language, so many other prophecies, but this past Pesach, I really couldn't help it to feel that we weren't only in the days of Moshiach, but that they had arrived. Considering what's happening in the world, it was hard not to at least for me, because without going deep into it, there's an ancient and well recognized Jewish axiom...the acts of the fathers will be assigned for their children. And that the final redemption will mirror the first. And I wasn't alone in recognizing all the parallels between the redemption of Israel from Egypt and the very unique events that parallel that redemption, that we're playing out both in Israel and around the world the last Passover.

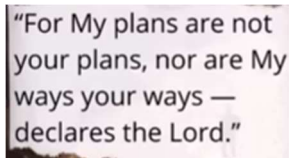
Just as in the first redemption, we were restricted to our homes. We were forbidden to leave because the plague was ravaging the world, ravaging Egypt at the very least, right? The first born were dying. The Ba'al ha-Turim, I remember this coming out and we're all sharing it, he was a great sage from the 13th century. He even went so far as to say that in the final redemption, we would be commanded to stay at home and eat inside, exactly as the health ministry ordered here in Israel.

There was this plague ravaging the world called corona, meaning crown, which seemed to be a thinly veiled allusion to the king of the world. And all of it seemed, felt like it was leading up to Moshiach. I even took my shofar, to just let you know how crazy I am, I actually think many of you may not think I'm that crazy, but my family definitely does, I took my shofar and I walked around the mountain and I was blowing it in every top of every mountain that I could go to. I was just wanting to bring that energy into the world. Maybe I was crazy, maybe overzealous, but I didn't care. At a certain time, you have to decide in your life, do you care to be crazy in front of man or in front of God?

And so, I just, that's what I felt I needed to do. And I remember sharing my thoughts with Jeremy and discussing all of this with him at length and while he agreed with me, he was a little bit more reserved. He said that he felt that perhaps this got the wheels turning, started some sort of process, but that it felt like it was simply too early for whatever lessons coronavirus were here to teach us, to actually take effect. And it seemed premature. And I heard his words and I tried to internalize them. And I tried to stay as humble as I could, to reserve some space

in my heart not to know. But I was very optimistic and indeed Pesach came and went and it was a special Pesach, but as far as I knew Mashiach had not arrived.

And I remember thinking the next day that perhaps I was in good company with the great sages of Jewish history who were sure one time or another that Mashiach was coming and they ended up being mistaken and it's not counted against them. The words of Isaiah chapter 55 came to mind:

A rectangular graphic with a light pink background and a subtle floral pattern. It contains the text: "For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways — declares the Lord." in a black serif font.

I felt in my heart that while I was mistaken regarding the details, I believed fervently that as Jeremy said, the process had been initiated and I felt overwhelmingly grateful that when I looked deep inside, my faith didn't waver. I had not repeated the mistake of the Jews with the golden calf. I merely just took my place among the many sages of Jewish history that including the revered Rabbi Akiva who thought that Mashiach was coming and he was mistaken.

So Jeremy was right, I said to myself, but the wheels are turning and the process was moving forward and I just knew it. And the energy of redemption was still in the air and not one day has passed since then where I didn't feel the energy of redemption growing more and more. And now, I'm going to confess that as this Pesach approaches, the anticipation in me again is growing more and more. Can I just see some heads, yes or no, if you're with me? Ok, so I'm not alone. I feel it in my bones and I feel the anticipation growing as Pesach approaches. And while I try to retain that humility of not knowing, there's only so much I can do. I'm only a person and I can't deny how I feel about the days ahead. This is how I make sense of it.

One of my beloved teachers, Rav Abraham Sutton, he points out that if we see the light of each year's Pesach coming from behind us, from that first Pesach in which the Jews were redeemed from Egypt, then the light will get more distant and more faint and weaker. Each year, we get further away in time. But if we see the light of each year's Pesach coming from up ahead, from the final redemption, shining into our lives, then it's clearly getting stronger and stronger each year. And so, that's how I understand this increasing light that I feel as we move through this spiral of time that I'm already feeling. That the light of the impending redemption is laying ahead.

But ultimately, I think there's another danger in spending too much time and energy predicting and speculating and even focusing on when the redemption will come. And the danger is that we may be wasting valuable time. I remember once a friend of mine was speaking with his rabbi about times and dates and redemption. The rabbi said, I don't remember exactly what it

was, I tried to remember exactly what it was, something to the effect of...there's God's business and there's our business. We should leave God's business up to God and focus ourselves on our business.

And I think that's true, because whether or not this Passover is the final redemption, it is still Pesach and no matter what, we have the unique and precious opportunity, even responsibility to connect to that redemptive light and harness it with every drop of strength that we have. And so, I thought that perhaps the way we can most take advantage of our time together in the fellowship today is to set intentions together. Intentions not only for the seder itself, but for the days leading up to Pesach, because although we may do the right actions, the right things in the precious days ahead, it would be a tragedy not to align ourselves to the deeper intentions. For there's a powerful quote that I often reflect on. I've probably shared this with you before, but as you know, I'm a guy that sometimes repeats myself. Rabbi Eliyahu Destler, he said that the greatest service of Hashem lies in the refinement of motivation. Again, the greatest service of Hashem lies in the refinement of motivation. Why do we do what we do?

Ok, so before I delve into my intentions and meditations, I want to open up the fellowship to my beloved friend and rabbi, Jeremy Gimpel, who's on the other side now. And I'm so excited to hear his beautiful and priceless thoughts on Pesach with all of you.

Jeremy

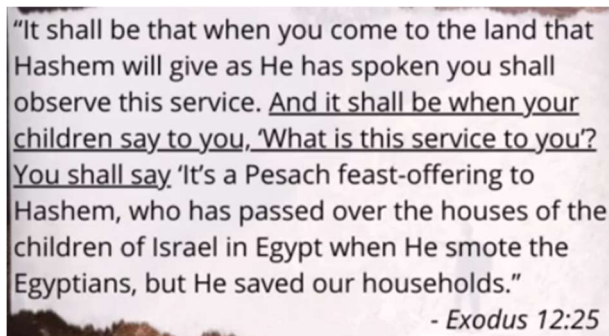
Shalom fellowship. I just love that Ari is leading us today. It's like the perfect way to begin the new cycle of the shalosh regalim. It's the week before Pesach and every week before Pesach my family and I, we go up north to the Land of Israel, and it's just the most beautiful time of the year. Everything is green after the rains. Everything is blossoming. There are flowers, the Sea of Galilee is right behind me. It's just the most marvelous time of the year. And this morning when I woke up, I was just praying for all of us and said, it's like traveling around all of the Land of Israel. I've been so isolated on our mountain, finally to be able to walk out into the Land and to pray for all of us from all over. It's just been amazing. It's like plugging into the energy and the life force of renewal in the Land of Israel. It's just the most marvelous time.

Anyway, you know every year we get ready for Passover and every year on the seder, we're reliving a moment, we're reliving the moment, the night before the great liberation from Egypt. And we're told to celebrate the Passover in a very specific way with a primary purpose. And the purpose is to give over the story of the exodus of Egypt to our children. But it's more than that. We're told we're not just supposed to tell the children the story. It's not so much just about the information as it is about the experience. Every year, we try to reenact, imagine as if it was us in Egypt and right now, we're on our way to freedom. When you think about it the Passover Seder, maybe other than circumcision, is the oldest surviving ritual in the western world, dating back 3,300 years ago with the children of Israel eating their last meal, preparing for their journey to freedom.

And every year since then, the people of Israel have celebrated Passover by telling the story over to their children until today and every year, at the end of the Seder, we say, this year slaves, next year free men. This year here, next year in Jerusalem. It's just mind-blowing, thinking of the centuries of Jews who finished their Seder that way and now this year, we're going to be in Judea, overlooking Jerusalem. That's just a one day walk from our home. It's like, how did Israel do that? It would have just taken one generation in thousands of years to have broken the chain. Just one generation had to mess it up. It's astounding. And to realize that before our very eyes, the modern state of Israel which is now emerging as a new superpower of energy, technology, and morality is the culmination of this 3,000-year-old process. It's just beyond reason. How did Israel do that?

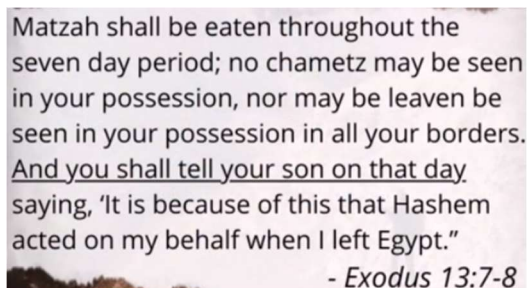
And so, what's remarkable is that you can see how we did it. Coded from the very beginning, Moshe gives guidance. He addresses the nation two times before they leave Egypt, preparing them, inspiring them, guiding them, directing them. I mean the exodus from Egypt is the greatest grassroots revolution of all times. And without telephones, the internet, social media, telephones...I mean those speeches that Moshe gave were more than just historic, they were the primary guides that mobilized a nation of slaves to liberate themselves from the oppression of the world's superpower.

So look at what he says in each time that he speaks, Exodus 12:25:



"It shall be that when you come to the land that Hashem will give as He has spoken you shall observe this service. And it shall be when your children say to you, 'What is this service to you? You shall say, 'It's a Pesach feast-offering to Hashem, who has passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but He saved our households.'"
- Exodus 12:25

He doesn't really talk about freedom, or justice, or courage, or faith to free themselves from Egypt. He tells them, one day when we finally arrive in Israel, tell your children about the Passover feast. Look at the next speech he gave here in Exodus 13:7-8:



Matzah shall be eaten throughout the seven day period; no chametz may be seen in your possession, nor may be leaven be seen in your possession in all your borders. And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, 'It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt.'"
- Exodus 13:7-8

What are you going to do as you celebrate Passover for seven days eating matzah? Tell your sons and daughters about the exodus. Tell your children, pass on the memory. And look at Moses, for the third time in Exodus 13:14:

"And it shall be when you son will ask you at some future time, "What is this?" you shall say to him, "With a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt from the house of bondage".
- Exodus 13:14

Over, and over again, tell your children, tell your children, tell your children. The Jewish people, we see every world event in history through the prism of faith. And all of history is an ongoing interaction with heaven and earth. The prophets of Israel were the first people to see God in history. Israel was the first nation to see meaning in history and a future leading us toward a greater destiny. In that way, God has invited us as His image in Creation to be co-authors in writing history with Him. When we tell the story, we're accepting His invitation and preparing ourselves with our families to write the next chapter. And every holiday has a spiritual power to it, an underlying avoda, an underlying service.

Passover, we celebrate our freedom, but the ancient command from the very, very beginning was to tell over the Passover story to the next generation. We're commanded to remember the exodus from Egypt, all the time. Everything brings us back to this moment. But not only to know it, but to remember it. The word remember in Hebrew, it's *zakor*. It's mentioned 160 times in the Tanakh. There's no religious text in the world that has such an emphasis on remembering history as a religious imperative to an entire people as the Tanakh. Israel in some ways, are the keepers of time. The memory for the world.

And this year, we're remembering Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, who passed away this year, who this session is dedicated in his memory, inspired by his Haggadah. He points out that history is a story outside of us, literally His story. It's an event that happened to someone else, it's detached from me. Memory is my story, while history is information. Memory is identity. Memory is how the past lives on through me. On Passover, it lives on through us, to our children. The Haggadah starts from a single man's journey, following an inner calling to higher living and moral responsibility to a Promised Land to build a kingdom that will usher in a Messianic age where people construct a society that will inspire the world that honors the image of God in every human being. Sanctifying life, building families of love and trust, shaping communities by the principles of justice and compassion and living at peace with their neighbors. No people have ever taken on a greater responsibility and there's no people that's made that responsibility intergenerational mission that has lived on throughout all times.

Passover, the holiday of freedom, the holiday of family, is the holiday when our history becomes our memory. And in the ritual of the Seder, we enter into a relationship with God in time, in our generation and take a place in the unfolding story of Israel in God's plan for the world, in our time.

Dear fellowship, recognize where we are. We are so lucky to be where we are and who we are, in doing what we're doing in these times as we align ourselves with Israel's destiny. We are so fortunate. So, I bless you all with a beautiful Passover, filled with light and freedom and family. Knowing that wherever you might be around the world, this year, we're apart, but next year we'll be together in Jerusalem. Chag Sameach.

Ari

Shalom, can you hear me again? Shake your head. Ok, great. So first of all, beautiful, Jeremy. That was beautiful and if there's any message that Jeremy Gimpel is worthy to deliver, it's that one, because I want to bless all of you and all of us that you should have the transcendent experience to experience a Gimpel family Passover. The Seder at his table is so beautiful and so moving. It's quite possibly the most beautiful Seder I've ever seen. And as I'm hearing him speak and looking at all of your faces, I'm thinking that perhaps that's what we should plan for and we should do. That maybe that's the first time we should come together and we can all be together over Passover.

But that's what it's about, what Jeremy said. It's about passing it on to your children and understanding what the real nature of Passover's about. Because if I had to say, you know, at a core, we're talking about intentions. I think at the core, if I just say the most primal foundational service of Hashem leading up to Passover, and on the Passover itself, the service which transcends everything and includes all the others is the destruction of idols. The shattering of idols. Because sometimes, we think idolatry is a think of the past or relegated to places like in the Far East, like Thailand or India. But nothing could be more mistaken. Idolatry is alive today, perhaps more than ever. And I will be the first to confess that I too have my own idols. Even just today, leading up to the fellowship, I found myself struggling not to bow down to these idols. God forbid, to the idols in my own heart. Because I spent the better part of the past week really struggling. I really felt like this had to be a real thing, because I really struggled in coming together and digging deep for this...to find these deeper truths, that I've been experiencing, that I so badly wanted to share with you.

But I found that the more I tried to grasp them, as often happens with spiritual things, the more I tried to articulate them, and express them, they often escaped me. And I was left empty-handed. And there was a voice that was telling me to abandon pursuit and just share beautiful teachings that I've learned over the years about Pesach. But I couldn't bring myself to do it because I needed to share with you the deepest recesses of my heart. And I would rather fail trying to do that than succeed in sharing generic teachings about Pesach with you, which

although I'm sure they would be beautiful and true, it doesn't feel like that's what we're here for.

We're here to dig as deep as we can, to share our hearts with each other and leave it all on the table and so, I was up till 4 a.m. last night, writing and pacing and walking, sprinting over the paper and trying to capture this elusive light that kept slipping through my fingers. And I would take breaks and walk through the mountains of Judea and ask Hashem to allow me to put words to the momentary flashes of redemptive light that I've been experiencing. And it started coming together and I ended up falling asleep at about 4:30 in the morning and setting an alarm for 7:30 to continue the work.

And as I was sitting and writing this morning, things started to happen. The construction guy needed me to let him in for the cement truck. I needed to speak with the electrician because the kitchen light in our home short-circuited. Of course, on the day when we needed the light the most to search for the chametz. My air conditioning fell off the roof, into my aquaponics fish tank. There were so many distractions, that I started feeling this anger building up in my heart. And the more I tried to grasp these thoughts and express them, they just escaped me and it had me feeling just empty-handed.

There was a voice telling me, just to share with them the teachings. I just couldn't do it, and so what I ended up realizing... my beloved wife, Shayna, she was doing her best to clean our home for Pesach. And she asked me a simple question, and I furrowed my brow and I responded in a little bit of an impatient way and I could tell that she felt my internal anger and she felt so badly for asking me a simple question. And when I saw the hurt look on her face, that's when I realized, ok, here we go. The cleaning has begun.

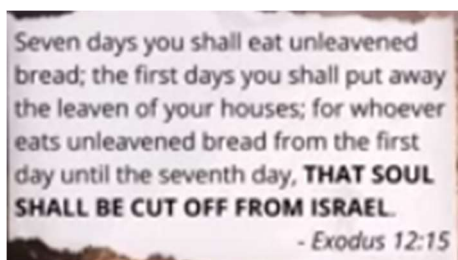
The cleaning has begun, it's not the floors that I needed to scrub it's my own heart because Maimonides expounds upon the words of the sages that says about anger – anyone who gets angry, it's as if they are worshiping idols, as it says, you shall not worship foreign gods or bow down to idols. That's what the sages of Israel literally say. What is anger really saying? It's saying, I know what should be happening here and what's happening here is not what should be happening here. But if we surrender to Hashem, and we recognize that He runs the world, not us, then we recognize that whatever is happening is exactly what should be happening and is perfectly orchestrated to give us the opportunity to come close to Him in the way that He wants. And in the way that He knows what we need. And if we really internalize that truth, then we just couldn't be angry.

And the preparation for Pesach itself is built for this simultaneous work. Because within our hearts and within our homes we need to eradicate every single drop of chametz. You know according to Jewish law, if you have a big pot of meat soup and you drop one drop of milk into it, the soup is still kosher. You can eat it because as long as the ratio of that drop of milk...we're

getting into the nitty gritty of Jewish law...it was more than one to the 60 of the meat soup, it's considered nullified and the stew is still kosher. But not with chametz. If you have a big pot of chicken soup and an infinitesimal crumb falls into it, no matter what the ration, the soup is considered chametz and it's forbidden. So the time leading up to the Seder many people, particularly wives, feel the pressure, serious pressure. It's been said that Jewish law, if taken in a certain way, can lend itself to OCD. You guys know what OCD is? Obsessive compulsive disorder. Well, that compulsion can manifest more on Pesach than any other time of the year. And it's not uncommon for people to take the directive to rid our home of chametz to the extreme and spend so much time and energy searching and cleaning that by the time the actual holiday arrives, they're a puddle of fatigue and exhaustion. And that's clearly not the goal.

And if we have our intentions aligned with a deeper mission, the internal and external search for chametz can actually energize us and inspire us and prepare us for a transcendent Passover, rather than the exhaustion and just being so wiped out that we fall asleep after the first cup of wine which is a phenomenon that has happened, that I've seen before myself. So the goal is to unify the internal and external searches into one and to strike that balance each of us on our own level of asserting ourselves as much as we can, while at the same time, surrendering and understanding that it's all in Hashem's Hands anyways.

To do this, we need to look deeper into what chametz is, not on a physical level, but the spiritual realm of what chametz is. Because in the material world, I don't remember if we mentioned this, chametz is any food product made from grains, like rye, barley, wheat, spelt, oats, anything that's come into contact with water and been allowed to ferment and to rise. Matzah is not chametz because it has been carefully and meticulously controlled to avoid leavening. But flour, pasta, cake, breads, anything that has those, even as a trace ingredient, is chametz and is strictly forbidden. The Torah tells us in Shemot 12:15:



The word in Hebrew is karetz (cut off). That's pretty serious. You can understand why people take it so seriously. But what I want to talk about here is the chametz on the spiritual level, right? The chametz represents what was most evil about Egypt. What Egypt represented at its core. Egypt was not just a nation steeped in idolatry, but their most powerful idols were very revealing. For what is one of the most greatest impulses in idolatry? It's the ability to create and to fashion and to design your own god in order to control that god, in order to be able to

control the world around you and control your fate. It gives you this feeling, this illusion of control. For if you were to create your own god, if you create your god, then you're in the driver's seat. You're not at the mercy of a power greater than yourself, but in creating and designing your own god in your deeper consciousness, you're declaring yourself the ultimate god and that's what the entire exodus was about.

God could have taken the nation out of Egypt in one swift plague, but it was not about the outcome, it was about the journey. And the ten plagues were about systematically disabusing, not only the Egyptians, but the Israelites of this illusion. Ridding them of this illusion, and not only ridding the Israelites, but the entire world of these illusions of control. To rid them of their belief in all other powers other than the ultimate one true power of the world – the God of Israel.

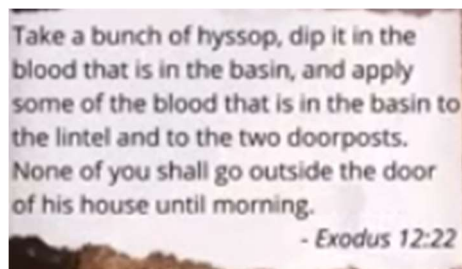
So back to chametz. Rav Kluger, he explains that it is not only that chametz represents puffed up arrogance, being full of hot air, as they say, but chametz also represents by extension, this idea of control. For arrogance and control are definitely strongly related to each other. For when making bread, he explains you can shape the bread, you can mold it according to your will, but not with matzah. Matzah remains simple and flat and humble, whereas chametz and bread represents someone that believes that they are ultimately in control of their lives. That's what chametz represents. That they know the way things should be. But matzah represents someone who is completely surrendering to Hashem's will, they are what they are. And it was that complete surrender which made the exodus so beautiful and sweet in the eyes of Hashem. It was that surrender of which Hashem spoke with loving nostalgia through the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 2, verse 2:

So said Hashem, I remember the kindness of your youth, love of your betrothal, you going after me into the desert, of an unsown land.

We followed God into the desert. The Jewish people had no idea how this journey was going to go. They didn't even have time to prepare provisions on the way. They didn't even have time for the bread to rise. Such was their level of faith in Hashem. That is why matzah is called the bread of emunah, the bread of faith. Because all of these things, anger, fear, and arrogance and control and domination...they're all different manifestations of the foundational quality of chametz, which as we said before is idolatry. And what is idolatry? It can be different for us at any different time. At any different moment, but at the core, it's any time you put any power in the world before God. Anytime you believe there's a power in the world that's independent of God. And so, these various qualities of anger and arrogance and control, they're all gauges that you can determine whether you have idols in your life.

So you know, it's interesting, before the first nine plagues, there was nothing that the children of Israel needed to do in order to be exempt and shielded and protected from the wrath of

these plagues. They just were, they just sat there, but the tenth plague, the children of Israel needed to take a very powerful and definitive action that would echo throughout history. And those Jews who did not have faith to take this action, well they shared in the fate of the Egyptians with their own firstborn meeting their deaths. We see it in Exodus 12:22:



And what blood were they dipping on the doorposts of their home? The blood of the korban pesach, their Passover sacrifice, a young lamb which we all know, the lamb was one of the primary gods of the Egyptians. Now think about it. For hundreds of years, these Jews were physically, spiritually and emotionally subjugated and enslaved to their Egyptian overlords. And now this one night, they needed to take the god of the Egyptians, slaughter it, put its blood on their doorposts and roast it whole, outside their homes. They couldn't cook it in the oven and say it was chicken. They needed to roast it whole, outside their homes, in full view of the Egyptians.

And at that moment, there was no standing on the fence, right? As Elijah said to the worshippers of Ba'al. You can't worship the God of Israel and Ba'al at the same time. It was that moment, at that moment, the Jewish people needed to decide not with words, but with bold actions, whether they're casting their lot with the Egyptians or the God of Israel. For if they sacrifice that lamb and put its blood on their doorposts and the redemption Moses promised did not happen, well, I think we all know what their fate would have been. Every single one of them would have been tortured and killed in the most heinous way. And that's why the Jews needed to take action, because the purpose of that plague was not only for the lamb idol of the Egyptians to be slaughtered and sacrificed before their eyes, but for the Jews to sacrifice their idol as well. Their idol of fear, their fear of the Egyptians which had permeated and infused their lives for hundreds of years. And when they sacrificed that deepest and most visceral idol, well, then the light of redemption could burst forth and they could be reborn as a nation, chosen by God to bring light to the world.

And that's what Pesach is really about. It's about redemption. But what is redemption? What does it look like? I find myself consumed with this desire for redemption. I think that's pretty clear by now. I'm consumed with the desire for the knowledge of God to cover the earth as water covers the sea, but often I take a step back and I wonder what this redemption for which I yearn and pray will even look like. How will it play out? Sometimes, I feel for a moment like I

get it, like I understand it. And then I dissipate and I lose it again. Ok, now here's the deal. Open your hearts please, because this is where things started getting a little shaky for me. Whether to really go into this, when I don't really know exactly where I'm going. But if you open your hearts and you're here with me, I want you to experience what happened to me just a few nights ago.

I had what I call a redemption moment, and I'm sharing with you, even though I haven't really worked it all through. So, it was this past Wednesday night and I had spent the evening cleaning and studying and preparing and thinking and as often I get my best Torah learning done late at night when there are no distractions, and then my eyes began to close and I couldn't fight off the sleep anymore. It was about 2 a.m., and I figured if I went to bed, I could get that minimal five hours I would need to function for the important tasks I needed to do the next day.

And right as I got into bed, my beloved little girl, D'vash, you remember D'vash, my yummy ball of honey, well she started to cry. And I looked at Shayna who was sleep deprived to begin with and I told her to stay in bed, that I would go and rock D'vash back to sleep, even though I knew it would leave me with even less sleep than I would already get. And she nodded and gratefully gave me a smile. And I went and I picked up D'vash and I started rocking with her in the chair. Now something you got to know about D'vash. She isn't a snuggler during the day. You have to get your hugs in the most deceptive methods possible, through real trickery. But it was late at night and she put her beautiful precious little head on my shoulder and she started to hum, and to rub my back. I'm getting emotional, and then the moment happened...that redemption moment. These moments, they tend to happen when I'm not expecting them, when I'm unexpectedly present. They can't be engineered. And it's a moment in which I'm overtaken with love and gratitude to such a degree that my eyes fill up with tears and I'm almost crippled with unbridled joy and indescribable gratitude.

And as I sat there feeling this wave of love fill me up and overtake me, I reflected on exactly why to the best of my understanding, I was feeling this elation. Why I was feeling this light of redemption at that very moment. Now I thought I would do something maybe unorthodox here. This is something that we don't do. Shayna and I decided early on that we're not into social media and we don't post pictures of our family. We feel like maybe it's like some people could look and feel lonely and feel bad and it just brings an energy into the world. It's just not something we want to do, but I wanted to share one of these redemption moments with all of you, it that's ok.

(video with D'vash)

Here we are with D'vash Esther and she's being yummy and sweet and she just woke up from her nap. And now we are going to connect D'vash Esther to mother earth, to mother Judea. For the first time, she's going to touch the ground in her home and we're so excited and we're

so grateful. Ok, put you on your back first, ok, yay! What, are you putting your fingers in your mouth? You're celebrating. (end of video)

Ok, Ben, thank you for editing that down a little bit. But as you can see, that was her first time, because I was wondering which video do I want to share with you. I wanted to share that video because that was her first time touching the earth of the Land of Israel and I felt in my heart that it wasn't just her, you know her name is D'vash Esther. D'vash means honey and Esther, like Esther from the Megillah. She's named after my wife Shayna's grandmother and her name was Esther Zesul. Zesul means sweet, so of course honey and sweet, so she was named after Esther Zesul who was a survivor of Auschwitz who despite the horrors and terrors that she experienced, she was still able to have a smile that just radiated and warmed the entire room. I felt like D'vash was touching the earth for the Land of Israel, not only for her, but generations and generation that were praying. And it was just so overwhelming for me.

And so, there I was, right, sitting with, cradling D'vash the other night and I so want to share some background. Shayna and I were married two and a half years ago, but we actually went on our first date 14 years ago. Yes, 14 years ago. That means our first date was 12 years before we actually got married, so what happened? Well, the way I make sense of it, looking back, is that it was like when the paratroopers, that miraculously conquered and liberated Jerusalem and the Temple Mount in 1967. And at that moment, when they were on the Temple Mount, what did they do? Rather than build the third temple right then, they ran to pray at the Western Wall, an outer retaining wall, the Western Wall. Why? Why did they do that? Why didn't they build the temple? Because they didn't have the eyes to see it. They weren't ready for the Temple, the Jewish people weren't ready for the Temple. The nation of Israel wasn't ready for the Temple. There was still a journey of growth that needed to happen.

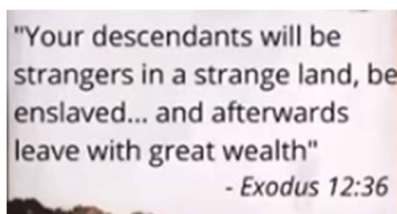
And that's what happened to me on that evening of my first date with Shayna in 2008. I simply wasn't ready. I didn't have the eyes to see that I was sitting next to my wife, my soul mate, the mother, please God, of my children. I needed to experience the pain and the heartache and the tears, the pain of divorce and suffering, the pain of growth that I would have to endure to become the person I needed to be in order to be able to be married happily with my beloved wife, Shayna. I think if we married then, I simply wouldn't have had the kaylim, I wouldn't have had the vessels to be able to harness the light.

And as I was sitting there rocking D'vash in my arms, I realized that without that journey of pain and suffering, I would not have achieved the pain of the refinement, and the purification that I needed to endure to arrive at that moment. This moment of unbridled redemption. Without that pain, I wouldn't taste the joy. And at that moment, I found myself really grateful to everyone along the way, even those who at the time caused me tremendous pain and anguish. For without those people in those events I would never have been able to be the person I

needed to be, to contain and experience the redemptive light that I felt at that moment, holding D'vash in my arms, while my beautiful, holy wife slept soundly in the other room.

At that moment, I saw the journey of Israel through the horrible slavery of Egypt. Through different eyes, for I realized that without the devastating torment, without the devastating torment of Egyptian slavery, there would have been no redemption. The sages of Israel actually call Egypt during the time of slavery a smelting pot, a kiln, a refining fire, within which the nation of Israel entered as a family of 70 souls and emerged from this kiln, from this refining fire, as a nation forged in suffering and refined to be an *am segulah* – a precious chosen people who are now able to empathize with the suffering of slavery and persecution and bring a message of freedom and kindness and compassion to the world.

Because as we know, Abraham was promised in Exodus 12:36:



And now, we can understand that the wealth the children of Israel left with, was not just physical riches and gold, but even more so, the great wealth was the refined people they had become. The wealth which was painful growth that endured. Now they were a nation that was ready to shine light and love. Yes, there was a journey ahead of them, but it got them that far. It refined them to that degree. And in that way, it's possible to be grateful for the hundreds of years of persecution and slavery in Egypt. For without it, there would be no redemption to be had. Which brings me to our fellowship right now, which brings me to all of you, which brings me to the plague of corona.

Because when corona entered the world last Purim, it was scary and it was painful. People became sick and were suffering and they died. And I remember this all happening, I'm sure all of you do, as if it was yesterday. The dark, mysterious energy entered the world and really took over on Purim, the holiday in which the hidden light of redemption shines, right? The holiday that we spoke of before, when good flips to be bad and bad flips to be good. It was on Purim that this energy spread like wildfire. It disconnected and isolated us from each other and we ended up celebrating Purim alone and in our homes. Many of us fragmented and afraid. Purim is the last holiday you spend alone in your home.

And what was this energy called? As we spoke about before, it was called corona, right? The crown, in my mind is a clear reference to the King of the world who was wearing that crown who was behind it all. And I remember feeling that behind all of this, through this horrible and

devastating virus the light of Mashiach was entering the world, but I couldn't understand it rationally. I couldn't understand it intellectually. I couldn't understand why. See for thousands of years, the Jewish people, we've been praying three times a day – May our eyes behold Your return to Zion. And growing up in Houston, saying those words, I remember thinking that we were praying and saying, when redemption comes, Hashem, may we be there to see it. But now those words have illuminated in my eyes in a completely different way. Now I believe we're saying, Hashem, give us the eyes to see that redemption is happening now. Just give us the eyes to see it.

And when I look at corona through redemptive eyes, I can begin to see how indeed it was true, that through the plague or corona, the light of redemption has begun to illuminate the entire world. At least to start with, at least on a personal way, I can say that for sure because of without corona, we, all of us would not be here today. This fellowship would simply not have happened because corona came to our mountaintop in Judea, and it was scary and it felt like it was severing us from our mission of making Judea a global destination by bringing people, by bringing tourists, by bringing people throughout Israel, physically from throughout the world to this mountaintop, to experience the holiness and to shift the world's perception of Israel to being an international capital of spirituality and transcendence. What would be, how would we continue this mission? How would we survive without tourists? How would we even sustain ourselves? None of this was clear and it was from that darkness that the fellowship was birthed. It was from that darkness, that the light of the fellowship has illuminated not only my life and my mission, but undoubtedly has begun to illuminate the world in other ways that we don't even know.

Because for me, this fellowship has been in a very real way, a type of rebirth. You can ask Shayna, it has changed me. It's the light and the love and the questions, and the blessings, that you bring into our lives. All of you. It's just magnified and amplified and refined my life's mission in the most fundamental way. And I feel so grateful to all of you. And it needed to happen. It needed to happen when we were home, when we were in our homes because that's when rebirth happens. Rebirth happens at home, because when we're out in public, engaging the world, we're subject to the power and influence of expectations of the world. But when we're at home, we're able to look within, to connect in a deeper and more authentic way to our inner essence and to make ourselves into a mikdash so that Hashem could dwell within each and every one of us.

And so, we entered our homes isolated and alone and in all that darkness behind the scenes, sparks of light. Each and every one of you, all of us came together in the most powerful way. I still remember talking to Jeremy about...like who are these people, where are they coming from? We were not doing any real promotion. I mean, Jeremy was doing a great job, but it was just like, it was so clear that Hashem had opened the floodgates and these people all came in. And then once we started like, whoa, let's really grow this thing. Let's market it. That's when

everything stopped. That's when it was like, Hashem said, whoever's there is who is there. And it is an absolute wealth of these sparks of beautiful light, every single one of you. 56:20

And it was because of corona and I know that in my heart, we're still in the early stages of this fellowship. There's so much growth that lies ahead, there will be realizations and paradigm shifts that will evolve us to grow closer together to love each other even more, to connect and hear each other more, to interface more, to shine even more light and love to the world. But the beautiful thing, the redemptive thing is that what we're doing here is not about an outcome or a destination. The redemptive light we experience here is in the journey itself. I really hope I'm expressing this because I feel like even now as I'm trying to share it, it is slipping through my fingers.

But Hashem I'm doing my best here and I'm going to try to bring it together because I think that the mistake I made last Passover is that I was focusing on redemption happening almost like an external force. Something that would happen to us and the world in which we would be spectators or receiving this light. Whereas what Pesach is about is us being a part of the redemption, bringing about that redemption by unreasonably seeing the world through redemptive eyes. By sacrificing our idols onto which we cleave.

The stories that we tell ourselves, that we're victims of tragedy and the stories and tragic stories and those paradigms of understanding of our journey that we cleave to. That we feel like we need to hold on to, to have the world make sense. The primary directive of Pesach is that in every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as though he or she personally left Egypt. For me, looking back at the pains that I've experienced in my life throughout my journey, all the way to the plague of corona, I can now see that it was all completely necessary and was for the absolute and ultimate good. And without all that pain, there would simply be no redemption.

When King David, he prophetically expressed in Psalm 126, one of my favorite Psalms, he says, that when we return to Zion, we will be like dreamers, our mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongues filled with joy. He was talking about the times of redemption when we would be able to look back at all of our pain and our anguish and be grateful for it. Even perhaps while we were still experiencing it. For without that suffering, we would not be able to truly experience the joy and the love and the redemption that we're already starting to feel right now.

What does King David say, he who sows with tears, reaps with joy. And without those tears, there wouldn't be the joy. And on the night of Pesach, Hashem shines the light of redemption into the world, allowing us to sit at our table, to our Seder tables and regardless of the situation or the circumstance, to experience true freedom, true royalty, by seeing the world through a lens of expansiveness and blessing and divine guidance and love.

I don't remember whether I've shared this Torah with you, but it's something that I say to myself very regularly because I love it when you read a verse your whole life a certain way and then you're introduced to a different way of reading those same words and it shifts the whole thing. So, what does King David say? From the metzar - from a place of narrow constraints. And by the way, metzar comes from the word Mitzrayim – Egypt, it is that place of constraints. So king David says from the narrow constraints, I call out to you Hashem, and answer me from a place of expansiveness, from a place of abundance. And I always read it that way. And then Rav Biederman said to divide up the words differently. He says – I call out to you, Hashem, from a place of redemption, and then Hashem answered me.

You are already now in a place of abundance. We're already in the place of abundance right now. We think it's constraints because we're not looking at it through Seder eyes, through Passover eyes. But we're already in that place of abundance because it's on a continuum from slavery to redemption. Not only in history, but in our own lives. And on the night of Seder, we're able to realize that slavery and redemption, joy and pain, it's all one continuum, without one, there could not be the other and we're able to truly experience the power of living in the times of Mashiach right now, even before Mashiach comes. We can feel it and live in those times. At that moment.

Hashem, please bless the holy souls in this fellowship, each and every one that I've met, Hashem, has arrived in this place right now because of their absolute willingness to shatter their own idols, to faithfully and to courageously follow You into a desert that was not yet sown. Bless them, Hashem and bless all of us. Bless the whole world by shining the light of clarity and love and redemption so that we can see it with our eyes and experience it with our hearts and be funnels for it, be vessels for it. And that all the pain that we've endured, all the tears that we've shed, can be elevated and transformed to joy and to laughter as we converge both spiritually and physically, please God, to Your holy mountain in Jerusalem.

And just as corona spread throughout the whole world from one person to all of mankind, so too, let Mashiach come and let the light of redemption, the knowledge of Your truth and love, the knowledge of Your goodness, let that spread through our little fellowship to the ends of the earth. So that nation will not ever lift up a sword against another nation. We will never learn war again. Hashem, one last prayer that I was thinking on the way here, that I really want to request, because we've been meeting here together, Hashem, for nearly a year now and we're trying, we're trying, we're trying. But without You, actually moving forward, without You taking that initiative and doing it, it's all for naught. Just as Nachshon went so far into the waters, that only when he would have drowned, the waters parted. Please Hashem, part the waters of redemption. It's all in Your Hands, everything we've done is for You and a desire to come close to You. And please, bring redemption. We need it now more than ever.

So, my friends, allow me to bless you.

Aaronic blessing

May God bless and protect you. May He shine His face and His light and His countenance upon you. And may He give you peace.

Thank you, my friends, thank you so much. This is, this was, I already miss you. I feel like we're just ending now and I already miss you and I really want to encourage you to please reach out to me, to my email address – ari@thelandofisrael.com. To my WhatsApp, let me tell you my WhatsApp, I don't know how to put the Israeli number in your phone, but it's 011 972, that's how you dial Israel, 972 54 646 2082. Send me your questions and your thoughts and I love hearing your voices. I would love seeing your faces and I love you all so much.

Shalom, Shalom.