Thoughts on the meaning of Passover

These thoughts are adapted from an essay by Rabbi Prof. David Hartman (z”l), written in 2010.

As much as I am happy to be part of the Jewish people preparing for the holiday of Passover, I confess that I am bored by the atmosphere and the questions. I hope that Passover would mean more than spring cleaning, that we would at least attempt to take the notions of oppression and freedom seriously and examine how they were reflected in our lived reality.

But what do we talk about instead? In place of a holiday about values, Passover has become a holiday about recipes and halakhic minutiae.

Does this truly reflect what Passover is about? A memory of miracles? An obsession with rituals? Whatever happened to the dramatic, overarching themes of freedom from oppression, self-governance, and spiritual rebirth?

What is the holiday of Passover about? We all know the story of the Ten Plagues, the Exodus, the Splitting of the Red Sea. But what do we make of our inherited narrative, which we recount every year around the seder table? How do we understand its theological implications? What kind of God is the God of Passover? And what are we talking about when we talk about freedom?

Passover is meant to celebrate and sustain our deep yearning for freedom, not necessarily to show that God can change the order of the universe. Passover is a holiday that inculcates the belief that humanity will overcome oppression, that freedom will reign throughout the world. The faith that tyranny will ultimately be vanquished is deeply embedded in the significance of Passover.

Redemption is not otherworldly salvation at the end of time. It’s not the World-to-Come or Resurrection of the Dead. Redemption is an individual’s growth into a complete human being, a person who fulfills all of his or her aptitudes. Redemption is not an abstract philosophical or theological construct, but a fine-tuning of the human soul that helps us to love more and to be more sensitive. It creates a meaningful pattern of self-fulfillment.

It is the mission of these holy days to create conditions within human beings for their personal fulfillment. It is the purpose of the holidays to wake us up to our true capacities, to release the deeper ethical components of what it means to be a human being.

How do the rituals shape us ethically? How do the mitzvot propel us to become full human beings and reach our powers of ethical personality? In other words, how does Judaism impact us in the quest for human self-realization? How does our heritage foster patterns of living with the potential to redeem us from selfishness, narcissism, cruelty, and open us to a world of holiness.

That is the reason it’s incumbent upon us to try to keep alive the ethical implications of the Haggadah. If we understand and internalize the true message of Passover, we can develop a whole new response to those without power, and take seriously the opportunity to love the stranger as yourself.