

What Does 'Dayenu' Mean Today?

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One of my favorite parts of the Passover seder is the singing that takes place after we finish eating. There are so many great, fun songs, from "Ehad Mi Yodeah" to "Chad Gadya." Perhaps my favorite song is "Dayenu." The words are fairly easy to sing in Hebrew, and the chorus is so catchy that even those who don't know Hebrew can easily join in. But beyond its functionality, the content of Dayenu (literally "it would have been enough") also carries a deep amount of wisdom.

Dayenu consists of 15 stanzas referencing different historical contexts the Israelites experienced, from slavery in Egypt to the building of the Temple in Israel. After each stanza, we sing the chorus, signifying that if this was the total of God's miraculous intervention into the lives of the Israelites, it would have been sufficient.

One of the primary purposes of the Passover seder is to make us feel as if we personally experienced the exodus from Egypt and the redemption from slavery to freedom. This is no less true for the way we understand the Dayenu song. Dayenu provides a powerful contemporary hashkafah (outlook on life), a call to mindfulness about the way we currently lead our lives. We live in an era when capitalism is our state (and increasingly global) religion. Consumption is unfettered by any internal sense of restraint, from the amount of soda we can drink to how much money Wall Street executives can make. We live in a world where it is okay that the richest 85 people in the world have total wealth equal to that of the poorest 3.5 billion people on the planet!

Dayenu reminds us that there is another way. Judaism offers an outlook on wealth, consumption, and sufficiency (sova) that is very counter-cultural. In Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers) 4:1, Ben Zoma teaches: "Who is rich? The one who is content with what one has." Even more austere, the Talmud instructs: "An individual who can eat barley bread but eats wheat bread is guilty of transgressing the law of bal tashchit (unlawful waste). Rabbi Papa states: one who can drink beer but drinks wine instead is guilty of transgressing the law of bal tashchit." (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 140b). Judaism is not, to be sure, an ascetic religion. We are encouraged to carve out occasions for excess, for enjoying the finer parts of living—on Shabbat, holidays, and other joyous occasions. But the wisdom of Judaism is that, if we want to experience delight on these special occasions, we also need moments of restraint. It is the juxtaposition of restraint and largess that creates a life of meaning.

Beyond the individual experience, we also are becoming increasingly aware of the global consequences of championing unbridled materialism over a sense of sufficiency. From income inequality to climate change, our refusal to entertain limits on what we do and how much we consume are wreaking destructive consequences. By returning to a sense of Dayenu, of thinking deeply about what is enough, we have the potential to change ourselves and our world. May we be blessed, on this Pesah and beyond, to replace the idolatry of consumption with an embrace of all that we have.

Hag Sameach!