

# Lessons of Passover

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Source:

## 3 Counterintuitive Lessons From Passover

- [Rabbi David Wolpe](#)

A man in a desert alone is not free

**1. You are an Egyptian.** The Passover story is of a people liberated from slavery. When we celebrate Passover, we naturally identify with the Israelites, the oppressed, and not Pharaoh, the oppressor. But the Egyptians of the Bible also had to make ethical decisions. In our lives, we are constantly surrounded by those who serve us – waiters, clerks, housekeepers, hotel maids, bag boys, people who sling peanuts at the ballpark. Obviously they are not slaves, and we are not oppressors. But they are in our economic power for a moment, and how we treat people who serve us is a powerful indicator of our moral posture.

I counsel people who are dating to pay attention to how their date treats the waiter. Passover is a reminder: No amount of money entitles one to be a jerk. Don't only identify with the oppressed. Remember what it is like to be an Egyptian in the Passover story.

**2. Elijah isn't here, so you have to be.** Each year we open the door for Elijah, who in the Jewish tradition is the herald of redemption. Traditionally it is the youngest child who opens the door. As adults watch each year, an interesting transition takes place. At first, the child believes Elijah might walk in the door. Then year after year, the belief diminishes, and until a still younger child comes along, the tradition becomes rote. Children grow too old to believe redemption will walk in the door.

While that seems a sad coda to a beautiful dream, it has a powerful positive dimension as well. In the absence of supernatural redemption, we are responsible for the uplifting of those who are fallen, feeding those who are hungry, comforting those who are bereaved. Our responsibility is greater in the absence of a messianic presence. A Hasidic rabbi who once claimed that everything had a good dimension was asked: "What about atheism?" His response was that when someone approaches us for help, we should all be atheists – not believing there is any supernatural help. The burden and the privilege of helping is ours.

**3. Freedom is not the absence of obligation.** The famous Passover phrase, "let my people go," is abbreviated. The full sentence is, "Let my people go that they may serve me." Here we see Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between being "liberated from" and being "liberated to." To be liberated from oppression is the beginning of freedom, not its end or aim. True freedom is abundance of opportunity, not absence of obligation. A man in a desert alone is not free. Standing in a developed society with a thousand obligations but also a million possibilities, that is freedom.

Passover encourages us to understand that our lives are not about sloughing off responsibilities. Service to God, to one another and to what is best in ourselves – those are freedoms. They enable us to maximize the capacities of our own souls.

Tomorrow, people will sit down to seders all across the world. There is a deep lesson in the ceremony: We are responsible for the choices of power. Until the day when redemption arrives, we have it in our hands to mend this broken world. And true freedom is also found in service, in uplifting obligations, and in celebrating together the gifts we have been given.

