

Drink the first glass of wine!

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Source: Rabbi Alex Israel (Director of Pardes Community Education Program)

The seder opens with kiddush. This is certainly unremarkable after all, kiddush is the opening act of every shabbat and holiday meal. But kiddush - a ritual sanctification of wine - has an intimate and unique connection to Pesach's central theme: freedom. How so?

As Israel was about to be released from slavery, G-d instituted a new calendar: "This month shall (mark for you the beginning of months; the first months of the year for you." (Exodus 12:2) Why is this the first mitzva (commandment) communicated to a free nation?

A slave's time is not his own. He is at the beck and call of his master. Even when the slave has a pressing personal engagement, his taskmaster's need will take priority. In contrast, freedom is the control of our time. We determine what we do when we wake up in the morning; we prioritize our day. This is true for an independent nation, Israel should not march any more to an Egyptian rhythm, celebrating Egyptian months and holidays. Instead Israel must forge a Jewish calendar, with unique days of rest, celebration and memory. Controlling and crafting our time is the critical first act of freedom.

Kiddush says this out loud. We sanctify the day and define its meaning! We proclaim this day as significant, holy and meaningful. We fashion time, claim ownership of it, and fashion it as a potent contact point with G-d, peoplehood and tradition. This is a quintessential act of Jewish freedom.

Today, we often feel short of time; that time controls us. Kadesh reminds us that true freedom and self-respect is to master and control time for ourselves, to shape our life in accordance with our values.