

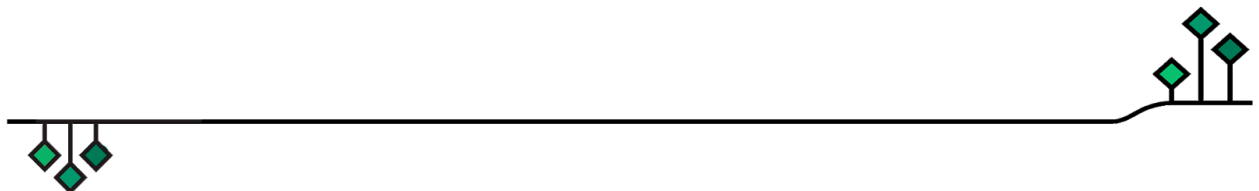
# You Are Not Free Until You Are At Home

*R. Yitz Greenberg – [ygreenberg@hadar.org](mailto:ygreenberg@hadar.org)*

## Parashat Va'Era 5781

In this week's Torah portion, the pace of Exodus liberation steps up dramatically. Moshe, in the cliffhanger at the end of Parashat Shemot, was demoralized by the Hebrew slaves' apathy towards their impending freedom. He was devastated by Pharaoh's tightening the screws on the slaves and increasing their suffering to crush Moshe's initiative (Exodus 5:6-6:1). The tyrant cracked down because he did not yet realize that with the new divine intervention in history, the age of unchecked, absolute human power was over. Pharaoh still thought that he was God. Thereupon the Lord unleashes the ten plagues which in a relentless sequence undermine Pharaoh's authority and break his arrogance as well as the Egyptian people's spirit.

But first, God proclaims the coming of freedom in four movements: "I shall **bring you out from under the burdens** of Egypt; and I will **save you from their bondage**. I will **redeem you** with an outstretched arm and great judgments and I will **take you to me to be my [covenant] people**" (Exodus 6:6-7).



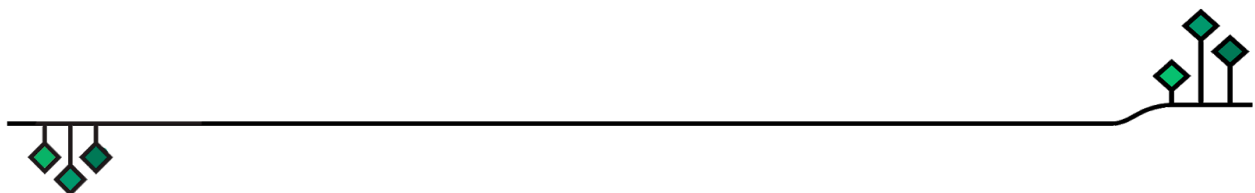
Various commentators analyze the four verbs of redemption as signifying the four stages of psychological liberation that a slave must go through to become a truly free person. To **“bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt”** means to undermine the self-evident superiority of the master which both the owner and the passive slave take as an unassailable given. When the authority of the master is broken, the slave begins to feel the injustice and wrongfulness of being enslaved.

**“Save you from their bondage”** means quite simply to stop the servile labor—to choose the work and do it for adequate recompense. Slave work conditions the slave to feel intrinsically servile and inferior. Stopping such labor triggers the beginning of a process of becoming a free laborer, that is, only working for dignified and personally chosen purposes.

**“I will redeem you with an outstretched arm”** means that the manifest divine intervention motivates the slave to move from accepting and obeying abusive humans. Henceforth the liberated slave will obey only humans who imitate God by acting as a just authority who respects their dignity as a free and equal person.

**“I will take you to be my people”** represents the fullest expression of achieving freedom. Liberty does not mean that one no longer obeys or one serves no causes. Rather, in the absence of external coercion, feeling that one is living in a state of liberty, one freely chooses to serve a higher cause that gives meaning and value to one’s life.

Jewish tradition recognizes the four stages of freedom with a ritual celebration. At the Seder, there is a well established custom to mark these four verbs of redemption by drinking a cup of



wine four times at strategic points in the Seder.<sup>1</sup> As it were, this constitutes reenacting the Israelites' ascent from the depths of enslavement to a people internally free and ready to go forth and live a life of liberty.

However, a closer look at the Torah portion shows that there is a fifth verb of liberation in the divine proclamation: “I will *bring you to the land*” (6:8) that will become the homeland and the heritage of the Jewish people. This stage is a necessary part of the liberation process, in part, because it fulfills the covenantal promise to the patriarchs that the land of Canaan will become a homeland and a place for the Israelites to flourish.<sup>2</sup> But the deeper point is that becoming a free person is not just a matter of no longer being ordered around by a master, nor is freedom achieved simply by making one's own life decisions. To become fully free, one must have a home, a place where one lives by right, where one's dignity is not dependent on the sufferance or tolerance of others. This frees me to be myself, to know what I want and act to accomplish it without fear of others or intimidation. Under these circumstances my activities reflect my choices in a state of liberty. Then every act in life—even taking on obligations—confirms and embraces my spirit of inner personal freedom.

Around the world, tens of millions of people every year try to emigrate at great cost and danger to make a better life for themselves and their families. They are seeking a home, a place of personal security and freedom. There is almost no reverse flow to lands of oppression or places where individuals are not secure in their rights. The climax of the migration process is where the immigrants attain citizenship, the right to be in the country.

---

<sup>1</sup> The existence of the four cups in the Seder dates at least back to the Mishnah (Pesachim 10:1), early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE at the latest. The first source to identify these cups with the four verbs of redemption in this verse is the Jerusalem Talmud in the late 4<sup>th</sup> to early 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Abraham: Genesis 15:18-21; Genesis 17:7-8; Isaac: Genesis 26:3-4; Jacob: Genesis 38:12.



The Bible's narrative shows the indispensability to liberation of the final stage of building a homeland. The march of the liberated Hebrews through the desert was hampered by continual regression to slave psychology, manifested in difficult situations by failure to take responsibility,<sup>3</sup> by blaming others instead of taking remedial action,<sup>4</sup> by giving up quickly in the face of difficulty.<sup>5</sup> Even the next generation did not become fully free until they fought for a homeland and went on to build it. One can compare here the experience of African Americans in the United States. Given emancipation by President Lincoln, their freedom was confirmed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. But they were given little or no chance to build a free home, a place where they had equal rights and opportunity. The continuing discrimination, the semi-servitude of share cropping and not owning the land, the systemic degradation of Jim Crow laws, lack of access to empowering education, and lack of personal security meant that psychological ravages of slavery continue to afflict their community and families.

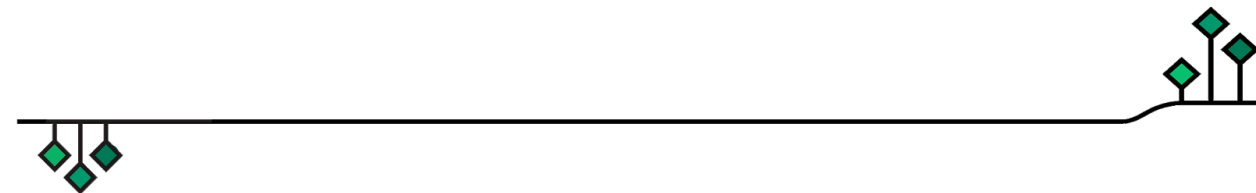
The importance of attaining a homeland was epitomized by a significant tradition—recorded by the Talmud and practiced into the middle ages—to drink a fifth cup of wine at the Seder.<sup>6</sup> This was a celebration of the divine promise “**I will bring you to the land.**” Yet this custom—which was never the dominant practice—mostly died out. Given the state of exile of the Jewish people I assume that it was too painful to dwell on this subject. It could well spoil the Seder's spirit of rejoicing at the Exodus.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Exodus 15:23-25 and Numbers 16:6-7.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Exodus 16:2-4 and Numbers 11:4-7.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Exodus 14:11-12 and Numbers 14:1-4.

<sup>6</sup> See Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 118a. For more historical background on the fifth cup, see Joshua Kulp, *The Schechter Haggadah* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, Jerusalem: 2009), pp. 175-176.



After the state of Israel was established in 1948, Rabbi Menachem M. Kasher,<sup>7</sup> a great scholar and anthologist of Rabbinic literature, edited an *Israel Passover Haggadah*.<sup>8</sup> In it, he proposed to adopt the custom of drinking a fifth cup of wine at the Seder in commemoration of the fifth Divine promise to the Hebrew slaves—which was now being fulfilled in the recreation of a Jewish state in Israel. Sadly, in my view, Kasher’s proposal met with no official rabbinic support and little popular response. However, my family and I were moved by this idea and adopted it for our annual Seder.

Seven decades later, it is even clearer that creating a Jewish and democratic state—a home where being fully Jewish in private and in public is by right—has impacted all Jews everywhere. In no small measure, the Israeli model is nurturing a free Jewry throughout the world—and not just in Israel. We should adopt the custom of a fifth cup at the Seder to express our gratitude at being alive in an age of restored Jewish sovereignty and dignity. We are not just free at last. With restored sovereignty, “Never Again” now means we can defend ourselves if that freedom is challenged.

---

<sup>7</sup> 1895-1983.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kasher, *Israel Passover Haggadah* (Jerusalem, New York: 1992), translated by Rabbi Dr. Harry Freedman.

