

Holiday Takes on Whole New Meaning for Russian Jews

Some of my earliest and most vivid childhood memories are of celebrating Passover, the festival of freedom, and sharing many Seder meals recounting the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt thousands of years ago.

The Passover Seder is filled with deeply symbolic and substantial religious meaning. We have many customs and rituals, and all Seder tables and meals have the same basic staples that are part of recounting the exodus. Indeed, Jews have an obligation not only to recount the Passover story, but also to experience Passover as if we left Egypt ourselves.

Recounting hundreds of years of slavery and suffering, and our subsequent redemption and return to Israel is less challenging in an age of visual aids like TV and the Internet, but actually feeling what it's like to be enslaved and then redeemed is no light task.

By the time I turned 12, the rituals of Passover and the story itself were well known. But as I started to prepare for my bar mitzvah, the exodus took on a new meaning, and would become more personal than I could imagine, as if I had personally participated.

Like most boys preparing for their bar mitzvah, I prepared for the better part of a year to chant a section from the Torah, standing before my family and congregation, and taking on one of the most sacred public responsibilities entrusted to a Jewish adult. I took it seriously. The words of the portion I read from the book of Exodus, 10:1-13:16, seemed distant, but connected me to my people, to our history and to what I would learn is our timeless struggle for freedom.

As God brought the final plagues to Egypt, Moses' divine

inspiration became a role model of activism and even civil disobedience. He stood against Pharaoh's authority for what was right, deriving no personal gain, and stuck with his mission and calling, leading the Jewish people to freedom.

More years and more Seders passed. The story remained the same, but each year, it renewed in me the connection to our struggle for freedom. Eventually, in 1982, I would become aware of a modern version of enslavement of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union and, remembering my bar mitzvah, I realized that my calling was clear.

With Moses as a model, I became instantly dedicated to the plight of Soviet Jews, standing against a distant, but no less tyrannous, authority. I adopted a Jewish family in Moscow who had been refused permission to leave, and persecuted as a result, and dedicated myself to winning their freedom.

I participated in massive rallies, lobbied Congress, wrote letters, called anyone who would listen, led protests and even engaged my university by making it a partner with me, as my college acceptance was based on an essay stating this was my mission.

Looking back, as a parent of children who are now as old as I was then, I am shocked at the things I did and got away with, and understand more now how uneasy my parents were at the time, particularly with my first visit to the USSR in 1985, alone. It's no less miraculous than the parting of the sea that I was not arrested on the spot and exiled to Siberia. However, for details, you'll have to wait for the book, or movie.

But to get to the punch line, I did get my adopted family out, and shortly afterward the Soviet Union crumbled and Soviet Jews who had been oppressed for decades finally had the freedom to practice Judaism openly, or emigrate, without fear of repercussions.

Always around Passover, I recall the story of my involvement with the Soviet Jewry movement. More than 25 years of history—and life—have transpired since. It seems like ancient history.

Each Passover, I hope I am giving my kids the foundational experiences that I had, that will always mean the story of the exodus resonates for all their lives. But I also want them to know the little bit of personal family and Jewish history in which their father participated.

It's not hard to speak in the present of Egypt being the bad place it was for Jews. In fact, the more time passes, the more it seems Egypt is returning to their heritage in that regard. But it is hard to impart the story of the modern enslavement of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union in an age where some of my kids, and many others of their generation, don't know what the Soviet Union was.

Nevertheless, the Soviet connection to the Biblical story is unbreakable. The lessons are similar and, in all cases, both the ancient and modern exodus serve as a milestone to pause and recount how important and precious our freedom is.

This year, for me personally, the two are even more connected. While we know the exact date of the Jewish people leaving Egypt (15th of Nisan), and I know the exact date that my adopted family left the USSR for good, this year the beginning of Passover coincides with another anniversary, not of families sitting around full tables, but of modern media telling the story, my story.

The significance of the exodus is both the story itself, and the recounting of the story. In that light, it's special to celebrate the 25th anniversary of this ABC news story on the eve of Passover, always being mindful and grateful for the freedoms we have, but never losing sight or awareness of the struggle to achieve and maintain our freedom.

As Passover begins, I extend sincere wishes for a joyous and healthy holiday, and my prayer is that we may always recount the biblical exodus and recall its significance even today, thousands of years later, as if we too left Egypt, and are on the road to freedom and redemption.

Jonathan Feldstein is the Israeli representative for the American Friends of Magen David Adom and the director of the organization's Heart to Heart initiative, a unique virtual blood donation program to bless Israel and save lives in Israel. Born and educated in the U.S., Jonathan emigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married, and the father of six. Throughout his life and career he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and share experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He can be contacted at FirstPersonIsrael@.