

Play the Freedom Game!

Discuss the following scenarios (each person at the table should take a turn reading one out loud). Decide which of these people are free and which are enslaved. State your case and open it up to others for their opinions. Remember – no matter how heated things get—absolutely no food fights allowed!

- 1 I am a convicted felon serving a 5-year sentence for armed robbery. When I get out I am going to steal cars – less chance of getting caught.
- 2 I am a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag for the “crime” of practicing Judaism. I just celebrated a secret Seder in my cell, consisting of smuggled matzah, fermented raisins, and the parts of the Haggadah I memorized before being imprisoned.
- 3 I work long hours to pay the mortgage on my new house, including many weekends and travel. It’s worth it because my kids will get all the things I didn’t have growing up.
- 4 I was shot while running on the campus of Kent State during the race riots in the 60’s. I am a quadriplegic, can’t feed, clothe or wash myself, yet I feel that being shot was the best thing that ever happened to me. It made me realize that life is about more than being able to move your arms and legs. I was running but I didn’t know where I was going.
- 5 I am a recent immigrant to the United States, and I want to be a doctor, but I don’t know how to read.
- 6 After my last girlfriend dumped me I am so afraid of rejection that I am not even going out.
- 7 I am a successful surgeon, working 80-hour weeks at the hospital. My colleagues think I am a dedicated professional. The truth is, I avoid going home to my wife because relationships and intimacy are difficult for me.
- 8 I live in a bad section of Harlem and come from a family of drug addicts. I am struggling to keep a B average in High School. My friends are pushing me to sell drugs, but I refuse.
- 9 I am the Chairman of one of the largest corporations in America. I am 80 years old and still go to work every day. It makes me feel alive.
- 10 I am one year out of law school and I hate the profession. I want to quit but I am paying off \$150,000 in loans.

As you can see, the concept of freedom is not so black and white. At the same time, most of us know intuitively that freedom is the ability to do what we truly want to do in life. The challenge is that not all of us know what that is. This takes wisdom.

The Torah states that the truly free person not only seeks wisdom but also applies it to life. This is one reason why Jews are known as People of the Book. May we all be blessed with the opportunity to explore the wisdom of our sacred books in the coming year and set ourselves free!

Adapted from the original "Freedom Game" by Rabbi Stephen Baars.

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The Journey to Freedom



Chometz vs. Matzah: The Freedom of Simplicity

Nearly every Jewish person knows we don't eat bread (chometz) on Passover. We are supposed to get rid of chometz before the holiday and even go so far as to declare it as worthless as the dust beneath our feet.

That's quite a laundry list of expectations. Why do we need to go to such lengths with regard to chometz and what does it teach us about the journey from slavery to freedom? Bread carries a lot of weight in our lives. Not only is it the staff of life, it is synonymous with earning a living and represents all our worldly aspirations. Consider this idea the next time you walk by one of those exquisite bakery windows. Everything looks so amazing! Yet, very rarely do these goodies live up to our expectations.

The same is true with much of the material world. We get drawn in – with an assist from Madison Avenue – by the flashy exterior, only to be left holding a somewhat empty bag, our expectations only partially fulfilled.

And then there's matzah, which is bread in its purest form. No fluff, fakery or illusions. The ultimate value purchase.

For 51 weeks, we gaze into that perfect bakery window, hungry for the goodies it has to offer. Then, on the 52nd week, we get back to basics. We break free of the illusions that sometimes beckon us to indulge and in so doing enable ourselves to reenter the world of chametz on our own terms – free to seek the things that stand the test of time.



The Four Sons: Apathy vs. Engagement

The wise son. The rebellious son. The simple son. The son who does not know how to ask. Clearly the wise son has earned most-favored status.

But which son causes us the most heartache?

If you chose the rebellious son, you're not alone. After all, who wants to raise a rebel? However, if the rebellious son is so difficult, why not mention him last? Why should the rebellious son get second billing, while the child who does not know how to ask (perhaps through no fault of his own) finds himself dead last?

The answer is that on Passover we are concerned with the journey from slavery to freedom. Yes, he's full of chutzpah. But the rebellious son's challenges show us that he is at least engaged in the conversation.

The son who does not know how to ask is a different story. He knows the story of the Exodus. He just does not care enough to ask what it means to his life anymore. Instead, he goes through the motions, keeps his mouth shut and tries to stay out of trouble. In essence, he is a slave to his own apathy.

Free people care about issues. They are not afraid to argue, even if they ruffle a few feathers along the way.

The greatest pain to a parent is an apathetic child, and the most difficult child is the one who refuses to ask questions. For this child, we need to inspire and challenge him, before he becomes the fifth son – the one not at the Seder at all.



Dayenu: Gratitude is the Key

Consider the following phrases: No. More! vs. No more! Notice how everything depends on where you put the point.

A free person appreciates what he has. A slave always wants more. A free person sees life as full of meaning and purpose. A slave sees futility. All of his work goes to someone else, so why

should he show appreciation?

That is exactly the message of Dayenu. God raised us up from the depths of slavery to become a light unto the nations. Each step along that journey is cause for song and celebration.

Instead of looking to God and demanding more and more, when we sing Dayenu we declare, "No more, God! What You have given us is enough! We are overwhelmed with Your generosity!"

Most parents want to give their children the best of everything. But if children start to take things for granted and become demanding, good parents know they have to pull back.

So too with us. When we count our blessings – when we say dayenu – God is only too happy to shower us with more.



Afikomen: Savoring the Taste of Freedom

If you attended a Seder as a child, you probably have fond memories of "stealing the Afikomen." In some families, the kids steal the Afikomen and need to be bribed to give it back. In others, the parents hide the Afikomen, the kids scramble to find

it – and still need to be bribed to give it back!

Either way, the Seder is not complete without that Afikomen. Why all the intrigue and negotiations?

After all the cooking and cleaning and preparations, after all the words and songs of the Seder (and after all the matzah we have already eaten!), how do we know if we have successfully completed our journey?

The Afikomen.

More than a broken piece of matzah, the Afikomen is really a mirror.

A slave tastes his matzah and remembers the bitterness of bondage, of toil without purpose, of never having "enough" to satisfy his desires.

A free person lifts the Afikomen to his lips and savors every last morsel of his good fortune. Rather than craving a world of cakes and delicacies, a free person eats the Afikomen and dreams of a future free from the pull of unnecessary distractions and knows he can pursue what his heart truly desires.

The Afikomen is the last thing we taste at the Seder. As we prepare to re-enter the world of chametz at the conclusion of Passover, we are able to once again enjoy the taste of chametz, spiced with the flavor of freedom.

May you enjoy a joyous and meaningful Passover!