Kadeish: Slavery and Time

After his escape from slavery, Frederick Douglass became the leading voice of freedom, both in action and in word. Reflecting on the condition of bondage, he lamented:

> *The thought of only being a creature of the present and the past troubled me, and I longed to have a future—a future with hope in it. To be shut up entirely to the past and present is abhorrent to the human mind; it is to the soul—whose life and happiness is unceasing progress—what the prison is to the body: a blight and mildew, a hell of horrors.*[1]

For Douglass, the deepest cruelty of slavery was not only the lash, but the theft of time. To be enslaved is to lose agency. And when there is no agency, there is no future—no arrow pointing forward. For the enslaved, time ceases to be a journey and becomes a cell. "Look how far we've come" cannot be spoken. "Here are our aspirations for the future" cannot be imagined. When every day is a monotony of misery, even the cycle of seasons is stripped of meaning. Slavery is not sanctity. It is monotony—time emptied of hope.

This is why, on the very threshold of freedom, the first mitzvah given to Israel in Egypt was not Shabbat but the sanctification of time itself:

> *And the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, "This month shall be for you the head of months; it is the first for you of the months of the year."* [2]

Freedom begins not with bread or land but with the power to shape time. The sanctification of months, the rhythm of Shabbat, the cycle of festivals—all flow from this primal act of redemption. From now on, time will not be endured; it will be celebrated and sanctified. No longer flat, it will pulse with electricity and the holy possibility of transformation.

Every Kiddush—whether at the seder, on Shabbat, or at festivals throughout the year—returns us to this truth: that redemption reawakens time. This is why the kiddush is always *zecher letziat Mitzrayim*, mindful of the Exodus from Egypt. To raise this first cup is to declare that our days are not monotonous but momentous, not stagnant but alive with promise.

Tonight we lift our cups not only in memory, but in celebration of this very moment—a dynamic, living step on our journey of freedom.

Kadeish.

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[1] *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855.

[2] Exodus 12:1-2, translation by Robert Alter.

Yachatz

Though seder tables today feature three matzot, the earliest sources required only two. The Talmud explains: unlike other festivals, where the blessing over bread is recited over two whole loaves, matzah is the bread of affliction. Poverty does not afford abundance, and so one of the two matzot, as a symbol of our affliction, must be broken:

> *Just as the way of a poor person is with a broken piece of bread, so too here it is with a broken piece.*[1]

Rambam and many early commentators codified this practice of using two matzot: one whole and one broken.

So why three matzot today? The custom developed to balance both truths: the broken matzah as commanded by the Talmud, and the two whole loaves required generally for festivals. Together they convey the paradox: this is both a festival of plenty requiring two whole loaves and a remembrance of suffering demanding brokenness.

The Ambiguity of Brokenness

Breaking the middle matzah while leaving two matzot whole becomes a ritual of ambiguity. On the one hand, it forces us to recall the pain of slavery, trauma, and loss. On the other hand, we place it alongside two whole loaves, celebrating our redemption in joy and abundance.

The seder embodies this tension throughout. We say early on, "this year we are slaves," even as we recline at tables adorned with fine china, delicacies, four cups of wine, and festive garments. Which is true? Both.

Through *Yachatz*, we learn: life is never linear. We are blessed and broken, free and scarred, redeemed and yet still burdened. The matzot, wrapped together under one cover, embody the complexity of our lived experience.

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[1] Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim. 115b.

Eating Matzah as Study

So what is matzah meant to teach? It is a ritual study in empathy. Its bland taste, its density, its flatness—all conspire to place us, even for a moment, in the posture of the poor. The bread of affliction is not designed for pleasure. It is designed for awakening—gut-level education that leads to action rooted in compassion.

The seder becomes, then, an exercise in cultivating not only Jewish continuity but moral responsibility. Matzah is a gastronomic curriculum in empathy.

Seder Discussion:

If the purpose of matzah—and of the seder as a whole—is empathy with those in need, that reframes what we are doing tonight. Is the seder primarily about Jewish continuity? About ritual memory? About cultivating compassion?

Ask your guests: What is the purpose of the seder to you? And how might it change the way you engage if you saw it first and foremost as an act of empathy?

Modern Slavery Stories—Read With Care

Before continuing, a gentle note: the next two stories are real, detailed accounts of human trafficking — one involving a vulnerable child, and one involving intimate-partner coercive control and sexual exploitation.

These stories are powerful tools for awareness and awakening, and for connecting the ancient themes of the seder to the realities of modern slavery. They can also be triggering, especially for those with traumatic histories — personal, familial, or communal; there are almost certainly folks at your seder who have experienced related trauma. Please consider context thoughtfully and, if possible, check in with participants in advance about whether this type of material feels supportive or overwhelming for them.

STORY 1: Flying Alone

Naomi, the co-founder of Mitzvah Matzos, narrowly escaped what was almost certainly an attempted trafficking incident.

As a child, she spent summers in Israel with extended family and flew as an unaccompanied minor. When she was nine, during a layover at Heathrow Airport, she sat with other unaccompanied minors in the designated supervised area.

A man approached the gate, claimed he was there to collect his "niece," and pointed directly at Naomi. Confused and alarmed, she insisted, "I don't know that man. He's not my uncle." Guards immediately intervened. The man fled before he could be detained.

At the time, the event was dismissed as bizarre. With adult understanding—and with what we now know about trafficking networks—it appears chillingly clear that this was an attempt to abduct a vulnerable child who was isolated, foreign, and unsupervised.

Seder Discussion:

Have you, or someone you know, ever experienced a moment that, in hindsight, may have been a near-miss involving exploitation, grooming, or targeting? What changed the outcome?