



Passover - The Festival of Freedom

"Freedom. Freedom is the most important thing!"



So exclaimed 91-year-old Blukha Yakovlevna Furman as we sat with her in Ukraine and asked her what was the most important thing in life. She told us of her father and brother who were taken away and killed, and of the long, hard years of forced labor she endured with her mother. She told us of her dreams for the future cut short by the horrors of the Holocaust. "Freedom. Freedom is the most important thing."

At Passover, her words resonate as we come together at the Seder table and celebrate our freedom, our journey from bondage in Egypt. We reaffirm what it means to be a people who have survived.

"We were once strangers in a strange land." These words from the Hagaddah guide us to be kind and generous, to help those in need, to set a place at our table for a stranger. For me, these words come alive whenever I visit our survivors in Eastern Europe. They tell me, "Be kind to people. Say a kind word, put a comforting hand on a shoulder. Do good deeds." All of them survived by an act of kindness from a stranger, and all of them know what it is like to be a stranger in a strange land.

This Passover, incorporate their stories into your family Seder, and make the story of our history come alive. We are asked to read the Hagaddah *as if* we too were slaves in Egypt. It may be difficult to actually imagine that. But it is not hard to imagine our people enslaved in the 1940s and still living in hostile environments.

A defining characteristic of the Jewish people is the integration of the self with the entity of Jewish history. We exist because we are much greater than ourselves. We exist because those who came before us survived.

Every Passover we emerge again as a free people, whether the history is yesterday or ancient. This Passover, please make a special donation to help these last survivors of the Shoah by showing them loving-kindness and material support. For we were all once strangers in a strange land.

- Zane Buzby

☆ *The Survivor Mitzvah Project* ☆

A Seder Reading

LEADER: Every survivor has a remarkable account of his or her experiences during the Shoah. Tonight we remember Fima Gilshteyn, who as a child went through the Holocaust. He knew bondage and then tasted freedom. Through his letters we learn his story.

READER: *"I recall that when I was a little boy, it was in the 1930s before the war, we lived in multi-family apartment – a shack like you can hardly find nowadays, but it had an attic where we kept two wicker baskets with all our Passover kitchenware, starting with small clay pots, bigger pots, dishes, spoons, forks, knives, etc. Before Passover, I would get all the kitchenware from those baskets, and when the Pesach holiday came to an end mother would wash it all, wrap it and give it to me to put away in baskets till next year. I recall the holiday to be very joyful. We didn't have enough food, but everybody was cheerful and friendly, and we shared what we had with kids in the neighborhood."*

READER: *"When the war began, we didn't know that Germans were killing Jews, and when we realized, we had no time even to take a spare shirt. We ran as we were. I don't want to remember the terrible sufferings I have lived through and I especially don't want such terrible suffering ever to be repeated. I have never told all of this to anyone. It is terrifying."*

READER: *"At the train station they heaped us on primitive platform cars, so many people that there wasn't room for a needle or a pin. The Germans pursued and shot at us. On the platforms we found killed and wounded people – the majority children and old people..."*

READER: *"We were sent to work in the fields for which they gave us 200 grams a day of kurmak (a partially inedible remainder of rice). We boiled and sprinkled in 2 or 3 tablespoons. This was all we had every single day. People were starving from hunger, were drying up and dying of hunger like flies. Our mother died at this time from starvation. She wasn't even 40 years old..."*

READER: *"My sister and I became ill with Typhus... they gave us 400 grams of bread. In this way we survived... And when we came back to the place where our home was, we found only ruins. The Germans had destroyed our town to rock and stone. ...Only two or three houses were left from a hundred. It was impossible to find anything from our old possessions."*

LEADER: Gone were the baskets of Passover dishes; gone was the home he grew up in. Gone was the family who so cheerfully celebrated the Holiday of Passover. May we always appreciate our freedom and remember Fima Gilshteyn this night and always.

Your support and generosity have brought joy to elderly survivors in Eastern Europe. You have made new Passover memories for them, ones of friendship and hope.

Augment your Seder– visit the LETTERS section at www.survivormitzvah.org to print more stories of survival and hope.