



Lev Ha'inyan / לב העניין

"The Heart of the Matter"
«לב העניין»

Commentary on Issues in Jewish Education by Schechter Manhattan's Head of School

Dr. Steven C. Lorch

April 2008/ Adar II - Nisan 5768

Vol. 1 Number 8

Highlights

April 16 - Model Seder for Students

April 17-28 - Pesach Vacation

May 2 - Yom Hashoah School Program

May 8 - Yom Ha'atzmaut School Program

May 9 - Divisional Kabbalat Shabbat

May 15 - Kindergarten Siyum Aleph Bet



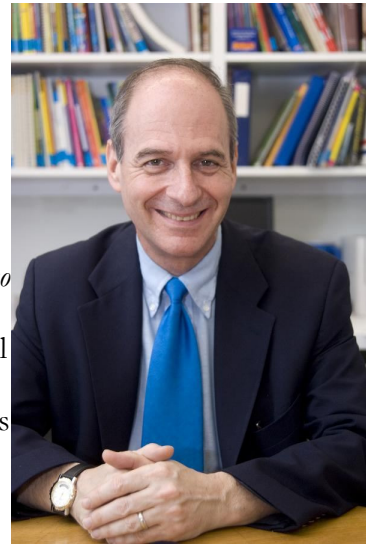
Questions? Contact
Lisa Stubbs at
communications@sssm.org

THANK YOU

The Freedom Survey

by: Dr. Steven C. Lorch

One of the special traditions that have arisen in our school at *Pesach* time is the Freedom Survey. Based on the tradition enshrined in the *baggadah* that "*B'chol dor vador chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza miMitzrayim*" (striving for freedom from oppression is a universal and perennial experience, and an essential part of the *Pesach* experience is to relive the exodus by appreciating its parallels in our day), it aims to make this point literally.



The survey, which is now being published for the eleventh consecutive year, consists of national and world events that occurred between last *Pesach* and this *Pesach*, some of which advanced the cause of freedom, and some of which set it back. By incorporating this catalogue of events in the *seder*, we re-experience the quest for freedom as a difficult enterprise whose outcome is by no means assured, just as the Israelites experienced the quest for freedom in the exodus. We thereby fulfill the requirement to "see ourselves as though we are just now leaving Egypt."

Reflections on Freedom Surveys 5740-5768

I was introduced to the tradition of freedom surveys in 1980, in my first year as head of school in my first school. At Akiba Hebrew Academy in Philadelphia, as I looked over some program notes in preparation for leading my first school-wide model *seder*, I came across a part of the program entitled "Freedom Survey."

When I inquired what that was, I was told that it's a special Akiba tradition in which the themes of freedom and bondage are brought up to date. With the guidance of a history teacher who served as faculty advisor, a group of students had spent all year collecting brief accounts of events that had transpired over the previous twelve months that had either advanced the cause of freedom, or set it back. At the *seder*, they made a dramatic presentation of some of these events, right at the point at which the *baggadah* reaches a climactic moment recalling the obligation, codified in the *mishnah*, that the exodus must be re-enacted and experienced afresh in every generation.

to our school
Family and
Friends, and to
our wonderful
honorees

Sondra A. Weiss
and Elisheva S.
Urbas

for celebrating
Schechter
Manhattan's 12
years of

**"Cultivating the
mind, hands, soul
and heart of each
child"**

at our 2008
Annual Benefit
Dinner

(look for event photos
in next month's issue!)

For
Information
about our
Application
Process

This innovation appealed to me immediately on a visceral level. Something felt right about it, though I couldn't put my finger on exactly what it was at the time. In the 28 years since, as I have adopted this tradition as my own and carried it with me from school to school, I've had ample opportunity to think it through over and over and come to appreciate the several elements that spontaneously attracted me.

Authenticity, and the Interplay of New and Old

The more accessible Jewish texts and traditions are, the more compelling they tend to be. The *haggadah*, and the *seder* it accompanies, have the merit of being accessible to all kinds of audiences. In particular, its traditional melodies, its symbolic actions, and its participatory process contribute to its popularity with young and old alike.

However, in every school I'd been in previously, and in too many families, a worrying phenomenon prevailed: generally, participants felt good about the external trappings of the *seder* - its foods, its songs, its camaraderie - but tended to be only vaguely aware, if at all, of its substance and significance. Eating *charoset* and hiding the *afikoman*, yes; the despair of slavery and the relief and exhilaration of liberation, not so much; and the sanctity of the Paschal ritual and the shame of heterodox origins, not at all, really. Revitalizing the *seder* and recommitting participants to it would require considerable resourcefulness.

Against this backdrop, the Freedom Survey seemed particularly promising. It had the potential to reconnect students and other *seder* participants to the classical roots of the ceremony on two levels: first, reminding us that the triumph of freedom over slavery is central to the experience; and second, attuning us to the multiple layers of meaning of the *seder's* script and stage directions.

On the one hand, the events of contemporary history took on heightened significance when refracted through the prism of the *seder* theme of re-enacting the exodus; on the other hand, the *haggadah* itself was reshaped and transformed in the searing light of the American hostage drama in Tehran and Natan Sharansky's hunger strike in Soviet prison. The two texts in which "*b'chol dor vador*" figure prominently - In every generation, one is obligated to see oneself as though s/he left Egypt, and, More than once did an enemy try to destroy the Jewish people; in every generation, enemies arise and seek our destruction, but God delivers us from their hand - resonate and come alive, thanks to the events recounted in the

Contact Dr. Cindy
Dolgin, Director
of Admissions
and Placement

212.427.9500 ext. 23
admissions@sssm.org

Freedom Survey.

Ambiguity and Complexity

The clarity and predictability of the structure of the *haggadah* and the order of its ceremonies have a tendency to promote complacency and self-assurance. Freedom triumphs over slavery. The trajectory of history is linear, leading from primitiveness towards progress. God is aligned with the Jewish people against non-Jewish adversaries.

The reality, of course, is not nearly as straightforward as the *seder* makes it seem. History is ambiguous and complex. Trends are not always what they seem to be at first blush. A single event can contain within it both roots of conflict and seeds of reconciliation.

The Freedom Survey, because it contains real events in all their messiness, is a welcome corrective to the seeming single-mindedness of the *seder*. In it, Jewish, world, and national events converge, implicitly making the point that Jewish destiny is not distinct or separable, but rather intimately intertwined with human progress and refinement. Events that undermine freedom are interspersed with those that promote it; what's more, many events are controversial and lend themselves to differing perspectives, some promising and others troubling. The concreteness of this contemporary tableau confronts the tendency to oversimplify the images of slavery and freedom that we encounter in the *haggadah*; both come in many guises, often masquerading as each other.

Taking Back the Night

The familiarity of the *seder* can dull our senses and mislead us into taking on predefined roles. Grandpa, or Uncle Morty, always leads the *seder*, and the rest of us assume familiar stances: spectator, or babysitter, or wisecrack, or kitchen staff. The comfort of childhood melodies, family traditions, unchanging texts, and well rehearsed topics of conversation discourages spontaneity and authentic inquiry. Unwittingly, we inure ourselves to the learning that might otherwise be accessible to us.

The rabbis' intent in structuring the *seder* was precisely the opposite. They built it to be a learning experience par excellence - multisensory, interdisciplinary, interactive, inquiry-based, and accessible on multiple levels. But that's not the way many of us experience it.

The Freedom Survey is an antidote to non-participation and torpor, both because of what it is and what it symbolizes. By its nature, it changes from year to year: none of the events of 5767 recurred in 5768, and none of this year's events will show up again in next year's list. It's egalitarian: no specialized abilities or knowledge is implicitly privileged in order to participate; everyone can read it and participate in exploring, extending, and adding to it. And the events it contains are excruciatingly human: unlike the *haggadah*, in which the role of Moshe and others is intentionally suppressed, it's very clear how, if we wish, we can be part of the solution, or, if we're not careful, part of the problem. We're thrust from the audience, or the wings, onstage, front and center if we wish.

Final Thoughts

The Freedom Survey is now not only an Akiba tradition, but a Schechter Manhattan fixture. Please join our extended family as many of us use it on *seder* night to increase our learning, enhance our experience, and re-envision our *Pesach*.

Freedom Survey 5768



In every generation, we feel as though we went out of Egypt.

In every generation, we feel as though we are becoming free.

Since last *Pesach*, many things have happened that make us feel freer. Some things happened that also make us feel less free:

June 14, 2007 - After weeks of fighting between groups of Palestinian security forces, Hamas takes control of Gaza. The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, who is from the rival group, Fatah, disbands the government of the Palestinian Authority, which had been under Hamas control, and appoints a government led by Fatah. Fatah continues to control the West Bank.

July 21 - *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final book in J. K. Rowling's seven-volume series about a youthful wizard, goes on sale at midnight in London and around the world. Within 24 hours, a record 8.3 million copies are sold in the United States alone.

August 1 - A bridge across the Mississippi River in Minneapolis collapses. As the bridge crumples, huge chunks of concrete fall into the waters below, and car drivers screech to a halt to avoid falling in. 13 people can't stop in time and are killed. Investigators discover that a flaw in the bridge's design caused the collapse.

August 7 - Barry Bonds breaks Hank Aaron's Major League Baseball career record of 755 home runs, and finishes the season with 762. However, his achievements on the field are shadowed by accusations that he used steroids, a performance-enhancing drug, and then lied in court about his use.

August 14 - Because of safety concerns, including lead paint and loose magnets, Mattel is forced to recall 19 million toys made in China, including Thomas the Tank Engine, Big Bird, Barbie, and Dora the Explorer. Mattel apologizes to its customers, but later apologizes to China for overreacting and damaging the reputation of toys made in China.

September 10 - General David Petraeus, the United States commander in Iraq, tells Congress that the "surge," which added 30,000 American troops in Iraq beginning in January, bringing the total to 160,000, has met most of its military goals, reducing killings of Americans and Iraqis. However, it has not met its political goals of increasing democracy and strengthening the Iraqi government. He says that the extra troops can come home by next July.

October 12 - Former Vice President Al Gore receives the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in raising awareness about global warming. Earlier in the year, he won two Academy Awards for his film, "An Inconvenient Truth," about the dangers of global warming.

November 27 - President Bush opens a peace conference between Israelis and Palestinians in Annapolis, Maryland. Also attended by the leaders of most Arab countries, it is the start of discussions that, it is hoped, will lead to the creation of a Palestinian state, peace and security for Israel, and an end to over 40 years of conflict.

December 27 - The former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, is assassinated. Two months earlier, Ms. Bhutto had returned from eight years of exile in London, and she was a leading candidate in elections for Parliament. The current president, Pervez Musharraf, is suspected of knowing about the murder in advance and supporting it in order to keep his grip on power. Two months later, Bhutto's party and another opposition party defeat Musharraf's party in the election.

March 10, 2008 - In Tibet, Buddhist monks and other Tibetans begin a protest against China's government, burning shops and cars. Chinese security forces respond with force, killing at least 10 protesters. China blames the exiled spiritual leader of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, for the violence, while the Dalai Lama accuses the Chinese of "cultural genocide" against his followers and calls on both sides to avoid violence.

March 17 - David Paterson, who was elected Lieutenant Governor of New York State last year, becomes the first black governor and the first blind governor in New York's history. He replaces Eliot Spitzer, who left office under investigation for illegal activities in his public and private life.

March 23 - Four American soldiers are killed by a homemade bomb while on a patrol in Baghdad. This brings the number of American troops killed in the five-year-old Iraq war to 4,000.

At this seder, we thank God for giving freedom - to the Jewish people back in Egypt, and to us and others now. We pray to God to help us, our brothers and sisters in Israel, all Americans, and everyone else in the world to be truly free.

When we celebrate Pesach next year, we will read a new freedom survey. We pray that next year's survey will list many things that make us feel freer and very few that make us feel less free.



Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan
50 East 87th Street
New York, NY 10128

Email: communications@sssm.org
Website: <http://www.sssm.org>
Questions? Call Lisa Stubbs at 646-472-5396

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