

Sharing the Vision: Thoughts for Passover

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By

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Early in the Haggadah, we read of the gathering in B'nei B'rak of Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon. "They were reclining and discussing the exodus from Egypt all through the night until their students came to them and said: 'Our teachers! The time for reciting the morning Shema has arrived.'"

This enigmatic story has intrigued commentators for many centuries. Where were the rabbis' families? Why weren't their students with them as they studied all night? What were they discussing about the exodus that could have taken so long? Since they were sages devoted to halakha, wouldn't they have known when it was time to recite the Shema? Why was it necessary for their students to come to inform them?

Perhaps this story is not presented to give historical details of a particular Seder; rather, it is interested in a much larger issue: how to balance two kinds of realities. One reality is what we see with our eyes. The other reality is what we dream with our minds.

These five sages lived in the generation following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. The Romans murdered many thousands of Jews; sold thousands into slavery; exiled thousands from their land. Jews in the land of Israel were living under an arrogant and oppressive Roman government. The situation was exceedingly bleak. Although these sages were associated with a religious revival in the Academy of Yavneh, the overwhelming reality for the Jews of that generation was torment, despair, a feeling that this might indeed be the last chapter in Jewish history. The eyes of the sages saw an ugly and depressing reality. But their minds perceived a different reality.

The Haggadah's story describes the rabbis as "mesubin," reclining. They were sitting in the posture of freedom, as royalty would sit. They lolled over a Passover feast as though they were noblemen. They studied Torah all night, as though everything was right in the world. Perhaps their wives, children and students had celebrated the Seder with them, but then went to sleep as the sages continued

their studies and discussions. The sages persisted in their analysis of the exodus and redemption of ancient Israel—and they dreamed of a new redemption. By their example, they were teaching: yes, the reality outside is frightening—but we are not afraid. We have a vision, we have a grander reality in our minds. We foresee a free Jewish people; we foresee happy Jewish families around their Seder tables; we foresee a flourishing of Torah study; we foresee the reconstitution of the Jewish State in the land of Israel.

The students witnessed their rabbis' sense of a larger reality. They said: Our teachers, we now see that there is a new dawn. It is time for the morning Shema, a time for recognizing the unity of God, and the eternal covenant of God with the people of Israel. It is morning. You have brought us through the darkness of night. We share your vision, your dream reality that will one day be fulfilled.

The five sages taught their generation—and all future generations—not to be deceived by the reality we perceive with our eyes; but to keep focused on the inner reality, the dream reality we perceive with our minds. This transcendent vision has been the hallmark of the Jewish people throughout the centuries. We have never let the reality of our eyes negate the reality of our dreams.

We look around our world today. With all our freedom and happiness, we cannot help but be deeply concerned and pained by the reality we see: anti-Semitism; threats to Israel; violence in our society; weapons of mass destruction; terrorism; breakdowns in families and societies. We see internal weaknesses within the Jewish people—assimilation on one side, religious extremism on the other. The story of the five sages reminds us to see a larger picture, a vision of a grander and finer reality that is yet to come.

Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer were of the older generation; Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon were of the next generation; Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was younger. The students who attended the sages were the fourth generation. When all the generations can view reality together and confront shared problems together, we are on the way to the messianic era. More importantly, when all the generations can share a dream of a redeemed reality, the sun will rise; a new day will dawn.

Rabbotai: the time for reciting the morning Shema has arrived.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)