Confronting Our "Mitsrayim"--Thoughts for Pessah

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All of us are deeply concerned by the Covid 19 pandemic. We worry about health…physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, financial etc. Most of us are sheltering in place; our world is contracting.

The ancient Israelites were enslaved in *Mitsrayim*—the Hebrew name for Egypt. The word *mitsrayim* comes from the root *tsar*, meaning "narrow and confined." The Israelites were not only in physical servitude, but they suffered from the psychological pains of being in bondage. They lacked freedom to go where they wanted when they wanted. It was a depressing, anxiety-ridden time.

We now find ourselves in a modern-day *mitsrayim*. We are dealing with the narrowing of options and with confinement.

Rabbi Benzion Uziel, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, offered an explanation of the Korekh "sandwich" eaten during the Seder. This custom goes back to Hillel the Elder who used to put together the matzah and maror and eat them together. This was based on the verse (Bemidbar 9:11) that instructed people to eat the Pessah offering with matzah and maror.

Rabbi Uziel noted that the matzot were eaten after the Israelites left Egypt, and are therefore a symbol of freedom. The bitter herbs, maror, are eaten as a reminder of slavery in Egypt. We eat both of them together to remind us that freedom and slavery are intertwined elements of life. We always find ourselves between exile and redemption. But even at a time when we are experiencing the bitter herbs of life, we should be awake to the possibility of redemption; we must maintain hope.

Today when we are in a sort of *mitsrayim*--when our lives are increasingly confined and narrowed-- we need to strengthen ourselves as much as possible. Each word of comfort and consolation is helpful. Each prayer to the Almighty is important. We need to reach out as often as possible to relatives and friends, to those who may be feeling excessive isolation and loneliness. We push back at the powers of *mitsrayim* by trying to enlarge our lives through communication with others (while strictly observing the social distancing rules). Phone calls, emails, online interactions help bring light into our lives.

This year's Sedarim will indeed be different from all other Pessah nights. We pray that the Almighty will give strength and wisdom to all the health care professionals and scientists who are working so diligently to combat the pandemic. We pray that the Almighty will bless all of us with all manner of good health. We pray for a speedy end to this world wide plague.

May we soon emerge from this time of *mitsrayim* and may we soon enter a period of freedom and redemption.