

From Hardship to Redemption

Thought for the Day

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This is a season to be glad – we're officially two days into spring, trees are in bloom, birds are nesting, and at long last there's light at the end of the dark tunnel of the pandemic. As of yesterday, places of worship are open, albeit with restrictions on numbers and necessary measures such as masks, sanitisers, and social distancing to protect ourselves and others.

For the Jewish community this is particularly timely. Tomorrow night we begin to observe the festival of Pesach, Passover, which celebrates both spring and liberation, marking the beginning of the barley harvest in ancient Israel, and commemorating the release of the Jewish people from captivity in Egypt more than three thousand years ago.

The formal meal on the first night, known as the *Seder*, is full of symbolism that was devised by the rabbis of the Talmud to encourage children to ask questions, so we can answer them with the story of the Exodus. Everything we do, read, and even eat at the Seder is designed to remind us either of the bitterness of captivity or the joy of liberation. We eat matzah, unleavened bread, to remind ourselves that the Jewish people didn't have time to bake properly as they fled from slavery; bitter herbs to recall the cruelties they suffered; salt water to represent their tears. The hard, unflavoured matzah is also a symbol of hardship, but we eat it with wine, recline on pillows, and have a festive meal to symbolise freedom.

Freedom is the key theme of the festival, and the *Haggadah*, the order of service for the *Seder*, tells us to think of ourselves as if each of us personally had been delivered from captivity, been led from mourning to celebration, darkness to light, hardship to redemption. This year, that is more apt than ever as we remember those we've lost, and look forward to restored freedoms with hope.