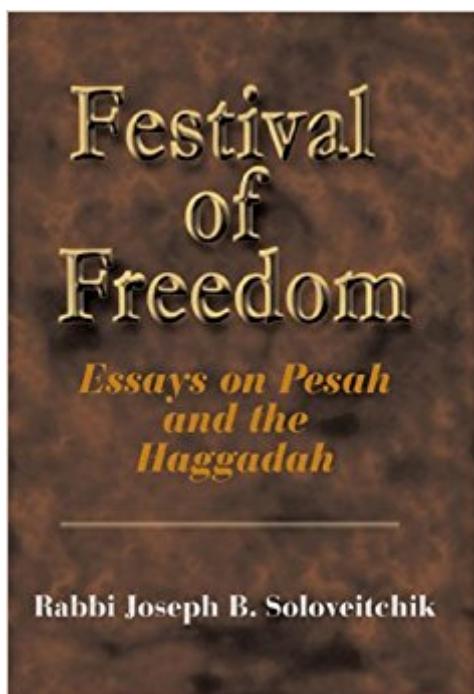


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# Festival Of Freedom: Essays On Pesah And The Haggadah (Meotzar Horav)



## **Synopsis**

Festival of Freedom, the sixth volume in the series MeOtzar HoRav, consists of ten essays on Passover and the Haggadah drawn from the treasure trove left by the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, widely known as the Rav. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, the Passover Seder is not simply a formal ritual or ceremonial catechism. Rather, the Seder night is endowed with a unique and fascinating quality, exalted in its holiness and shining with a dazzling beauty. It possesses profound experiential and intellectual dimensions, both of them woven into the fabric of halakhic performance. Its central mitzvah, recounting the exodus, is extraordinarily multifaceted, entailing study and teaching, storytelling and symbolic performance, thanksgiving and praise. In these essays, the Rav explains how the resonances of the Seder extend far beyond the confines of one night. As he sets forth, the Seder teaches us about the Jewish approach to the meal, Torah study, peoplehood, and the nature of freedom. Yetzi at Mitzrayim is not just the story of an event lying in the distant past. It is the doctrine of the Jewish people, the philosophy of our history.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Pesah is the Hebrew word for Passover, the Jewish holiday observed for eight days in the Diaspora. The festival commemorates the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. The Haggadah, literally the telling of the Passover story, is read at the seder on the first two nights of the holiday. Soloveitchik (1903-93) was one of the outstanding Talmudists of the twentieth century. In these 10 essays, he explains how the seder teaches us about the Jewish approach to the meal, Torah study, and the nature of freedom. In examining the various themes, Soloveitchik discusses nuances in the

biblical and rabbinic texts associated with Passover and presents a philosophical analysis of the nature of the Jewish community and its religious experiences. The editors of this book selected material from Soloveitchik's manuscripts from surviving tapes of lectures given in Boston and New York. These essays give new meaning to a historic ritual. George CohenCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Rabbi Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was not only one of the outstanding talmudists of the twentieth century, but also one of its most creative and seminal Jewish thinkers. Drawing from a vast reservoir of Jewish and general knowledge, "the Rav," as he is widely known, brought Jewish thought and law to bear on the interpretation and assessment of the modern experience. For over four decades, Rabbi Soloveitchik commuted weekly from his home in Brookline, Massachusetts to New York City, where he gave the senior shi'ur (class in Talmud) at Yeshiva University's affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), where he taught and inspired generations of students, among them many of the future leaders of the Orthodox and broader Jewish community. By his extensive personal teaching and influence, he contributed vitally to the dynamic resurgence of Orthodox Judaism in America.

## THE Rav.

Rabbi Josef Dov Baer Solovetchik Z"ts"l is one of the great Jewish teachers and thinkers. In this posthumously collected book of essays on the Festival of Freedom ( Passover) (Pesach) he explores the meaning of the Haggadah and the Festival as a whole. He opens with a report on his childhood experience of wonder and spiritual exaltation on two nights of the year, the night of the Seder Pesach and the night of Kol Nidre, Yom Kippur. He goes on to expand on the meaning of Pesach and of Seder night in relation to the concept of Hesed . The Seder night is as he understands it the night of our sharing with others, of our giving to others. The communal meal is a meal of celebration in solidarity. This going out towards others, this giving to others is the expression of our freedom. He also speaks of how the Seder and Pesach too have elements of Gevurah the inner discipline more associated with Yom Kippur. But this all in the context of our sanctifying ourselves and the night, of making the Seder celebration a reaffirmation of our Covenant with God and with Jewish community and continuity through the generations. In profound and moving essays Rabbi Soloveitchik explores central Pesach themes in the chapters titled, 'An Exalted Evening" The Seder Night' 'Slavery and Freedom' 'The Symbolism of Matzah' 'The Inner

Transformation on Pesah Night' ' Seders of Denigration and Praise' ' Arami Oved Avi: Jewish History and Destiny' 'The Plague of the Firstborn' ' Moses and the Redemption' ' Pesah and the Omer' ' Counting Time' This is a deep and moving exploration of the central meanings of Pesach. It is clearly and gracefully written. And hopefully each and every reader be able to find through it deeper connection and community with Jewish history and the service of God.

This is the sixth of so-far eleven posthumous writings assembled, edited, and published by The Toras Horav Foundation based on writings the famed Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) did not publish. This volume contains ten essays on subjects such as the Passover Seder, slavery, freedom, matzah, Moses, the plague of the first born, and the biblical requirement to count the omer. The essays were collected from manuscripts and speeches written and delivered by the rabbi. They do not attempt to reveal the plain meaning of the Passover holiday and the various practices associated with it, but are homiletics, sermons that express the rabbi's view about the Jewish approach to eating, Torah study, peoplehood, and Judaism generally. Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that humans, animals, and vegetation eat, but: "Man must not respond to hunger in the same manner as the beast or the brute in the field." Humans must transform "primitive automatism into dignified activism" (1) be selective in what they eat, (2) realize that "eating serves a higher purpose," making it possible to recognize God's gifts and giving people strength to do the divine will, (3) eat with others and realize that people must share with others and show them respect, and (4) use the meal as an opportunity to learn. He writes that God has no need or desire for sacrifices. "God did not need the pascal lamb; He had no interest in the sacrifice. He simply wanted the people" to stop "insane self-centeredness," eat together, and learn to be with and work with others with a sense of "solidarity and sympathy." This involvement with others is why the Passover eve Seder meal begins with Jews reciting "Let all who are hungry come and eat." The learning aspect of the meal explains why the ancient sages "demanded that Torah be taught at every meal." Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that one reason for the Jewish custom to eat at the Passover evening Seder meal leaning on the left side is that, contrary to standing or sitting at attention, leaning symbolizes being at ease, relaxing, and freedom. It is "indicative of disobedience, of a courageous stand, of refusing to take orders, of rejecting the authority of man," and submitting ourselves to God, and working to improve ourselves and society. Yet it is not enough to feel and act free. Nor is it enough simply to recite the Haggadah at the Seder. People are obligated to act, to improve. The Torah "way of thinking and valuing manifests itself in action." The term "Seder" means "order" and denotes organization and structure. The term does not appear in the Talmud, which was edited around 600-700 CE. It highlights, as

Rabbi Soloveitchik taught, that the Seder meal was purposely and carefully organized to teach many lessons. The "Haggadah" is the book that Jewish families use during the Seder meal. It is filled with readings, songs, and practices that encourage participation and learning. Rabbi Soloveitchik sites Chassidic teachings and the thirteenth century mystical book Zohar frequently. He stresses his view that Jews need to have blind faith and they must sacrifice themselves and surrender totally to God. Thus he writes: "Matzah (the unleavened bread) is also called 'the food of faith' in the Zohar, for faith too is a matter of nullification (just as matzah doesn't contain leaven, so one nullifies his intellect and does not seek reasons, but rather believes the truth with pure faith)." Isaac's willingness to allow his father Abraham to sacrifice him in Genesis 22 is the paradigm of Judaism for Rabbi Soloveitchik. Although focusing for the most part on the Jewish Passover, Rabbi Soloveitchik emphasizes that "God loves all His children, Jew and gentile alike." All humans have "a common image - the image of God in which we are all created. Black, red, yellow, white - it doesn't matter.... Every human being is a child of God." All people should have freedom and seek improvement, which are the messages of Passover.

This book includes essays on the seder itself, the plague of the firstborn, the counting of the Omer, and a variety of related topics. Generally, the essays are not for beginners, and some of them presuppose a higher level of Hebrew and/or cultural literacy that I have (something the editors could have mitigated through occasional use of footnotes or endnotes). Nevertheless, I found this book to be useful pre-Pesach reading. A few points that grabbed me: 1. Discussion of why the Pesach seder is a communal meal. The author points out that "When man is engaged in a carnal pursuit such as eating, and his own need presses the most . . . the Torah expects of him attentives to the need of the other self. The norm of charity comes to the fore." (p. 24). 2. The distinction between Passover and Yom Kippur. Pesach is perhaps the most communal of celebrations, while Yom Kippur is the loneliest. On Pesach, we go out of our way to celebrate with others. On Yom Kippur, one moves "from without toward within, from community toward oneself" to a confrontation between a lonely individual and his or her Maker. (p. 30). Both are necessary parts of a religious Jewish life. 3. Why does the Torah emphasize both the Jews' history as nomads and their history as farmers? Because both have virtues worth imitating: the farmer's attachment to their land is useful under certain circumstances, and a farmer's tenacity is practice for the struggle to remain Jewish under often-adverse circumstances. But the nomad's willingness to surrender territory and move on may make nomads more hospitable, also an important virtue. 4. His explanation of the concept of Israel as the "Divine firstborn." Ideally, a first-born helps to teach younger siblings. Similarly, the Jews'

function (in an ideal world) is to "teach" the rest of mankind. Some quibbles: one or two of the Torah exegeses did not seem all that persuasive to me. And the author sometimes plays fast and loose with historical reality (at least about non-Jews) in his quest to make broader points. He writes: "the ancient pagan religions worshipped pleasure. Pleasure was the highest ethical norm for them." (p. 137). This seems like a rather broad generalization about a wide variety of civilizations, one that he does not support by any real evidence other than the fact that the Torah does NOT worship pleasure.

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