

The Four Cups

Tim Hegg • TorahResource

“Kaddesh, urechatz, karpas, yachatz...” Singing the ancient ritual, the seder begins again at our home as we celebrate *chag hamatzot*, the “Feast of Unleavened Bread,” *z’mān ch’ruteinu*, זְמַן חֲרוּתֵינוּ, the “Time of Our Freedom” or simply Pesach, פֶּסַח, Passover. Gathered around the table are family and friends, and we begin the seder yet another time, relating the story of God’s mighty hand of redemption as He brought us out of the house of slavery and made us free to serve Him.

Over the centuries the Passover Seder has grown with new and meaningful traditions, but the core of the celebration is very ancient. The Mishnah, for instance, lists all of the major sections of the Passover Seder used even in modern times.¹ So set is the framework around which the current Seder is sculpted that it is traditional to begin by singing a song made up of the first words of each section, a kind of “musical table-of-contents” of what is to come in the evening’s celebration.

This ancient “table-of-contents” sung at the beginning of the Passover Seder begins with “Kaddesh,” the first of four cups which all will drink at designated points throughout the seder. Why were four cups of wine deemed necessary for the Passover celebration? Other major festivals involve only the standard cup of wine at the initiation of the day as a sign of joy and sanctification of the Festival. The opening celebration of Passover, however, has traditionally incorporated four cups, not just one.

The answer lies in the keen perception of the Sages as they read the text of Shemot (Exodus), unfolding the whole story of the exodus from Egypt. Beginning with the premise that every word is of vital importance, and nothing is redundant, the teachers of old noted the remarkable text of Exodus 6:6-7:

Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. ‘Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Taken with the power of the four verbs which describe God’s activity in the exodus event, the Sages ordained four cups² in the meal of remembrance to commemorate God’s work. The Midrash on these two verses gives us the historical background:

There are four expressions of redemption: *I will bring you out—I will deliver you—I will redeem you and I will take you*. These correspond to the four decrees which Pharaoh issued regarding them. The Sages accordingly ordained four cups to be drunk on the eve of Passover to correspond with these four expressions, in order to fulfill the verse: *I will lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord* (Psalm 116:13).³

The Jerusalem Talmud expands on this:

Why do we have four cups of wine? R. Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Benayah, this refers to four stages in the redemption... “I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt.” Even if He had left us in Egypt to be slaves, He would have ceased the burdensome yoke. For this alone we would have been grateful to Him and therefore we drink the first cup. “I will deliver you from their slavery.” We drink the cup of salvation for he delivered us completely from serving them. “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm...” Because he confused them and crushed them on our behalf so that they could no longer afflict us, we drink the third cup. “I will take you . . .” The greatest aspect of the redemption is that

1 Tradition has it that R. Yehudah HaNasi compiled a written copy of the Mishnah around 200 CE, though it is also clear that the Mishnah underwent significant editing in the subsequent centuries. Whether what we now have as “the Mishnah” gives an accurate, historical account of such things as the form of the Pesach seder is debated.

2 There have been some who added a fifth cup to the standard tradition of four cups. Maimonides, for example, added the fifth cup and considered it obligatory [*Laws of Hametz and Matzah*, 8:10, as noted in Israel Ariel, *The Temple Haggadah* (Temple Institute, 1996), 59], on the basis that Exodus 6:8 adds a fifth phrase, “and I will bring you up.” This was interpreted as a promise to regather Israel at the building of the final Temple.

3 *Midrash Rabbah Exodus*, VI.4. Quoted from the Soncino Edition.

He brought us near to Him and granted us also spiritual redemption. For this we raise the fourth cup.⁴

While other explanations have been given for the four cups, the most common was to base the tradition upon the four activities of God as described in Exodus 6:6-7. Thus, the four cups represent God's saving activity, one cup for each of God's sovereign acts as He fought against Pharaoh and the pagan gods—four cups outlining the work of God on behalf of His firstborn son, Israel.⁵

While various names have been given to each of the four cups in various *haggadot*, the names usually associated with them are the Cup of Sanctification, the Cup of Deliverance (or Salvation), the Cup of Redemption, and the Cup of Hope (or Expectation).

The First Cup - The Cup of Sanctification

"I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians."

First in the list of God's activities in the exodus event is this promise to free the Israelites from the burden of the Egyptians. This burden was the slavery to which the Israelites had been subjected and the hardships this slavery produced. But it was more than the sum of the nation's woes at the hand of her slave-masters that necessitated God's intervention. As slaves of Egypt, Israel could not worship God as He had instructed her, nor as she desired. Israel's primary distinction was her worship of the God of her fathers, a worship which would cause the nations who saw her to marvel.⁶ But as slaves of the Egyptians, Israel was unable to worship God as she should. Her marked difference was clouded by her inability to live as God intended.

Therefore God makes this first promise, that He would separate her from the burden of the Egyptians, and we know that His purpose in doing so was that Israel might worship Him unfettered. Each time the famous line is spoken, "Let My people go," it is followed with "so that they might serve me."⁷ "Serve" and "service" (עָבַד / עֲבָדָה) are common Hebrew expressions for "worship."⁸

Since the exodus became the primary and foundational expression of God's redemptive activity, we are not surprised to see that in the progress of His revelation He teaches us that, even as He chose Israel, so He has chosen each and every person who comes to faith in Yeshua. Paul speaks of this as he opens his epistle to the Ephesians:

Blessed be the God and Father of Adonainu Yeshua HaMashiach, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Mashiach, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. (Ephesians 1:3-4)

To be "holy and blameless before Him" is language of worship, for to come "before Him" means to abide in His presence, to be, as it were, engulfed in the glory of the Shekinah. The common terminology of the Torah describing the locus of the priests' work in the Tabernacle and Temple is "before the Lord."⁹ To picture the position of the believer in Yeshua as "holy and blameless before Him" is to speak in Torah-terms of the true service or worship of HaShem by those who are judged "clean" and therefore fit to come before God in worship.

Thus, the first cup marks Israel out as God's chosen ones, as the people for whom He will muster all of His omnipotence, and bring them out from under the burden of slavery, freeing them to worship and serve Him in spirit and in truth. And this is the same work He does for each and every child He brings into His family—He chooses them of His own sovereign will and sets about to free them from the shackles of slavery. This freedom from slavery is for this primary purpose: to worship Him as He intends. It is the calling of each and every child of God to be sanctified—set apart—unto God, to be given over to His worship and His worship alone.

4 Quoted from Eliyaho Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage* 3 vols. (Feldheim, 1988), 2.269.

5 Cf. Exodus 4:22.

6 Cf. Deuteronomy 4:5-8.

7 One time the phrase uses "son", "Let My son go," Exodus 4:23. Seven other times the phrase is the common "Let My people go," 7;16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7. But in each case the purpose is stated, "that they might serve Me...."

8 E.g., Exodus 3:12; 1Kings 21:3, etc.

9 The phrase "before the LORD" is found 61 times in Leviticus alone.

The First Cup of Passover, the Cup of Sanctification or Separation, reminds us of this crucial starting point of our salvation.

The Second Cup — Cup of Deliverance

“I will deliver you from their bondage.”

The First Cup was attached to the phrase “I will bring you out (אֶצִּי) from under the burdens (סְבִלָה) of the Egyptians.” It might appear that this second phrase simply reiterates the same thing with a few changes in the words: “I will deliver (אֶצִּיל) you from their bondage (עֲבֹדָה).” A closer look, however, shows that this second phrase gives additional insights. “To bring out,” found in the first phrase, implies a change of status. “To deliver,” found here in the second phrase, suggests that Israel is helpless to effect the change herself. The Hebrew verb אֶצִּיל, *nātzal*, often in the hifil stem (as here) means “to rescue,” “to snatch away.” One who needs to be rescued is someone who cannot effect his own deliverance—someone who must seek help outside of himself. Left by itself, the first clause could have suggested a picture in which Israel and God work together to extricate her from the burden of slavery. This second phrase, however, makes it clear that Israel was helpless, and needed to be rescued. Every time we raise the Second Cup of the seder and bless the Lord for our salvation, we need to be reminded that our deliverance was all of His doing—we were helpless to secure our own rescue.

Additionally, the word “burdens” of the first clause suggests that which is uncomfortable and wearisome. But the English “bondage” of the second phrase translates the Hebrew *‘avôdāh*, עֲבֹדָה, the common word for “work,” but a word as noted above which can also mean “worship.” Israel, imprisoned under the yoke of Egypt, was in danger of falling prey to her idolatrous worship.

This fact is made all the more clear when, after the exodus, Israel comes to Mt. Sinai as God promised Moses (Exodus 3:12). When Moses lingered upon the mountain, Israel, following the ways of the Egyptians, made a golden calf not unlike the idols they saw in Egypt. Israel had come to believe that other gods actually did exist, and that maybe, just maybe, they were as powerful as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or perhaps even more powerful. When Moses failed to return as soon as they thought he should, they supposed that the other gods had won the day, and that Moses, along with his God, had perished. What was left for them to do but show their willingness to serve these other gods?! And so they made the calf, declaring that the god it represented had, in fact, brought them out of Egypt. It is clear that this manner of thinking results from being influenced by paganism. Israel surely needed to be “rescued” from the “service” of Egypt, because the tentacles of idolatry had already entwined and penetrated her national consciousness.

How this same picture fits each and everyone who is born from above! Our bondage to sin has left us unable to rescue ourselves. We simply cannot find our way to freedom because we are shackled by the chains of self-centeredness, which is idolatry. Our only hope is that One stronger than our fetters should come in and deliver us from our prison. Paul speaks of this when he writes in Colossians 1:13-14:

For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The Second Cup reminds us, then, that we were in great need of deliverance, for our own idolatry so shackled us as to be unable to effect our own rescue. God’s deliverance was (and is) our only hope. Understanding the Second Cup in this way makes it clear why Luke begins his report of Yeshua’s last Passover seder with the Second Cup (Luke 22:14-17). He wants to emphasize that Yeshua is our Deliverer.

The Third Cup — the Cup of Redemption

“I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.”

In this third phrase, attached to the Third Cup, we have a most important word—an additional insight to the work of God in the salvation of Israel, a salvation which became the eternal paradigm for God’s full plan of salvation for sinners. Even as the first verb, “bring out,” was amplified by the next verb, “to deliver,” so the concept of “deliver” is narrowed and described further by the central word in this phrase, “redeem.” For while “bring out” could imply the mutual efforts of Israel and God, the word “deliver” makes it clear that the rescue

of Israel from her bondage was entirely God's work. What the word "redeemed" now adds to the picture is that this deliverance was brought about by the payment of a price within a family setting.

The concept of "redemption" in the Hebrew scriptures is primarily represented by two words, *gā'al*, גָּאֵל, the word in our present text, and *pādah*, פָּדָה, likewise rendered "ransom" or "redeem" by the translators. The Greek word *lutron*, λύτρον and the verb which underlies it (*lutroō*, λυτρόω) translate *gā'al* (גָּאֵל) 45 times in the Lxx, and *pādah*, (פָּדָה) 42 times. This same Greek word is used to convey the idea of "ransom" or "redeem" in the Apostolic writings.¹⁰ So what is the difference between *gā'al* and *pādah*, especially since the Lxx translators seem to consider them fairly synonymous?

The primary difference is that *gā'al* is regularly found in the context of familial relations, while *pādah* simply means "to ransom by payment of a price" without reference to relationship. Morris notes about *gā'al*, :

The word has about it a family air, and this is never quite lost in the various shades of meaning which it ultimately embraces.¹¹

Thus, *gā'al* is used of redeeming a family member, often from slavery.¹² Further proof of this familial aspect of the word is the fact that it often means the "avenger of blood."¹³ The avenger of blood, by very definition, was someone near of kin.

Thus, when the word *gā'al* is used here in our text, it emphasizes the very important fact that God viewed Israel as family when He set about to redeem her. Israel did not become "family" through His redemptive acts—Israel already was family—Israel was God's firstborn son.

But equally important is the manner in which this phrase describes God's redemption of Israel: He redeemed Israel "with an outstretched arm and great judgments." What exactly is meant by this picturesque language, "with an outstretched arm?"

The phrase is found 16 times in the Tanakh,¹⁴ the majority of these being in Deuteronomy. The phrase is almost always used in connection with the exodus event, and is in parallel with the idea of unmatched power and greatness. Even in the text at hand, the phrase is linked with the idea of "great judgments." The "hand" or "arm" is symbolic in Hebrew for "power" generally, and thus an "outstretched arm" pictures power at its zenith—extreme power. This metaphor is used in connection with creation,¹⁵ divine judgment,¹⁶ and especially in connection with the exodus.

"Why," we might ask, "does redemption require such extreme power?" In fact, this becomes the point of the metaphor. The redemption of Israel from Egypt is no less an act of sovereign power than is the creation of the universe. Only One able to speak the worlds into existence could ever have redeemed Israel from Egypt. Redemption is, in the final analysis, the greatest display of God's omnipotence, for it is ultimately the victory of good over evil, the conquest of righteousness over unrighteousness.

But there is one more aspect of the word *gā'al* which must be considered here. The word itself always implies the payment of a price in order to effect redemption. If we were to ask what price was paid in the creation event, the answer would be none. Though the creation was an expression of God's "outstretched arm," it was done without apparent cost to the Creator. But redemption, while requiring the same extension of God's power to effect, requires payment of a price—redemption cost God something. Here, of course, we come to understand the necessity of the Pesach lamb, whose blood was applied to the door in order to effect the protection of the Israelite family, and ultimately their redemption out of Egypt. The cost to God is nothing short of the giving of His own life (as symbolized in the slaying of the lamb), for redemption requires the payment of a price, and by the very standard of His justice that price is life-for-life.

Thus, to the First Cup, which symbolized God's choosing of Israel for His own, is added the Second Cup, emphasizing Israel's utter helplessness to rescue herself. To this picture is now added the Third Cup and the

10 λύτρον is found in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45. λυτρόω is found in Luke 24:21; Titus 2:4; 1Peter 1:18.

11 Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1965), 20.

12 Cf. Leviticus 25:25-26, 48-49; Numbers 5:8.

13 E.g., Numbers 35:12ff; Deuteronomy 19:6ff; Joshua 20:3ff.

14 Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 11:2; 26:8; 1Kings 8:42; 2Kings 17:36; 2Chronicles 6:32; Psalms 136:12; Jeremiah 27:5; 32:17, 21; Ezekiel 20:33-34. In Jeremiah 21:5 the phrase "outstretched hand" is also found.

15 Jeremiah 32:17.

16 Jeremiah 21:5.

idea of God as Father paying the necessary price to redeem His firstborn son. The picture turns from mere legal transactions in freeing a slave, to the heart of a Father toward His own children, and His willingness to pay the necessary price to have them back, even when that price is most costly. That price was nothing less than the giving of His own dear Son, Yeshua, emphasized by His identification with the Third Cup as symbolic of His own blood shed for the redemption of sinners (Luke 22:20).

The Fourth Cup — The Cup of Hope

“Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God.”

The Fourth Cup is connected in the traditional Passover Seder with the coming of Elijah the Prophet. In modern times, the Fourth Cup is filled, and the door opened “for Elijah.”¹⁷ Also connected with the Fourth Cup is the reciting of Hallel Psalms (Psalms 115-118) and the Great Hallel (Psalm 136).

Connected as it is with the fourth phrase of our Exodus text, the Fourth Cup takes on the character of hope for a future when all of Israel is in the Land, her enemies are subdued, and peace reigns. The calling for Elijah emphasizes that such a peaceful scene can only be fathomed in connection with the coming of the Messiah.

What the Fourth Cup adds to the picture of the first three is that redemption, while securing the freedom and safety of Israel, does not immediately place her into the realm of eternal peace. She is redeemed from Egypt and given her freedom, but now she must make her way through wilderness and foreign lands before she reaches the Promised Land. Redemption guarantees the final destination, but the journey is still necessary.

What is more, the history of Israel shows that from the time of our exodus out of Egypt, never has the nation as a whole willingly worshiped God as He desires. Early in our trek to the Promised Land we demonstrated that we were not free of our idolatry. And our history, illustrious as it may be at times, is strewn with waywardness and rebellion. We have not wholeheartedly, as a nation, fulfilled the words of this Fourth Cup, “I will take you for My people, and I will be your God.” While this has certainly been true of individuals in every generation who have made up a believing remnant,¹⁸ the nation as a whole has never been characterized by genuine worship of God. It is to this that Jeremiah points in his “new covenant” prophesy.¹⁹ For there is coming a time when all of Israel, from the least to the greatest, will “know God,”²⁰ terminology which must mean “have genuine covenant relationship with God,” not merely have intellectual knowledge about Him.²¹

This Fourth Cup, then, envisions the time when true Israel and all those who have attached themselves to her via faith, will worship God in truth, and will be known in every way as His people. This final cup reminds us that our redemption is not fully realized yet, and though we enjoy the realities of it in the present, the future still holds our full and final redemption.²²

Summary of the Four Cups

The Four Cups of the Passover Seder, based upon the verses from Exodus 6:6-7, paint this picture for us:

First Cup — God chose us to be His holy (separated) people. To accomplish this He promised to unburden us from our enemy’s entanglements.

Second Cup — God teaches us that we cannot effect our own release, and that in our helpless state we must trust in Him and in Him alone for our salvation.

Third Cup — God further reveals to us that His sovereign work of salvation necessitates both divine power and payment. Our salvation would cost Him dearly, even the life of the Lamb.

Fourth Cup — God lets us know that the redemption which is ours is still not fully complete. We must await the future with hope of Messiah’s coming, for He alone can transform us fully into the holy people He has ordained us to be.

¹⁷ Chaim Raphael, *A Feast of History* (Gallery Books, 1972), 67.

¹⁸ Cf. Isaiah 10:22, and compare Romans 9:27.

¹⁹ Jeremiah 31:31ff.

²⁰ Jeremiah 31:34.

²¹ For the use of “know” (יָדָע) in a covenant sense of “have loyalty to the covenant,” see H. B. Huffman, “The Treaty Background of Hebrew יָדָע,” *BASOR* 118 (1966), 31-37 and his further note in *BASOR* 184 (1966), 36-38.

²² Note the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:20-25.