

## A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

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### Passover Calls to Us to “Do Something Great”



**M**y colleague Rabbi Annie Tucker of The Jewish Center in Princeton recently told this wonderful story about President Abraham Lincoln.

Apparently, “Lincoln would often slip out of the White House on Wednesday evenings to go hear the great sermons of Dr. Phineas Gurley at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. Lincoln generally preferred to come and go unobtrusively, so when Dr. Gurley knew that the President would be in attendance he left his office door open. Lincoln would arrive through a side entrance,

ensconce himself in the minister’s study, and listen quietly to Gurley’s words as they wafted through the walls.

“During the walk back from church one evening, an aide asked Mr. Lincoln his appraisal of the preacher’s sermon. The president replied that he had found Gurley’s words thoughtful and articulate, well-argued and deeply grounded in Scripture. ‘Then you thought it was an excellent sermon,’ confirmed the aide. ‘No,’ said Lincoln softly. ‘But you said that the content was superb,’ the aide protested, ‘that the minister’s words were delivered with eloquence and with grace!’

“‘This is all true,’ Lincoln replied. ‘But Dr. Gurley forgot the most important ingredient in a religious speech. He forgot to ask us to do something great.’”

As we approach the Passover holiday, we are focused on so many things. We clean the home. Take out the *hametz*. Buy new foods for *Pesah*. And cook, cook, cook to prepare for the *seder*. We gather around our tables and tell the story of the Exodus. We sing *Dayenu* with gusto. We celebrate the togetherness we feel with our family and friends. And we are grateful for our heritage as Jews, and for the freedom we enjoy in this great nation.

But something is still missing. It is the essential message of the holiday. “Do something great.”

Think about the recounting of the Exodus story in the Bible. The Israelites have been enslaved to a Pharaoh for over 400 years. They have suffered forced labor, privation and torture. Every means was employed by the tyrant and his society to break the people and its spirit. When it was still not enough, the decree came down to kill every male child at the moment of birth.

The Torah records that the Israelites cried out to God bitterly, crushed by their spiritual and physical burdens. And God heard them. God noticed. And God determined to act through Moses to liberate the people, and lead them from slavery to freedom.

Of all of God’s powers, we affirm daily in the thrice-recited *Amidah*, that God lifts those who have fallen, heals those who are sick, and sets the imprisoned free. Prophets and Psalmists affirm that God is on the side of those who are oppressed. God is with the hungry and the naked, with the homeless and the destitute.

And God, who set us free by removing from our people’s backs the burdens of Egyptian slavery, wants us to do the same for human beings in need. The message of Passover is “Do something great” to alleviate the burdens of suffering and privation, inequality and prejudice, fear and despair.

We open the *seder* with a call to action: “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” Telling the story is not enough. Doing God’s work, releasing the bonds that fetter the human spirit, must be our take-away from this great holiday.

There is so much need in our society of so much plenty, and so many ways by which we can “do something great” to improve our world.

This year, let Passover be a time that inspires us to be involved on behalf of those who are hungry and homeless.

Let us take up the cause of reducing the terrible scourge of gun violence in our midst. Let us take up the cause of protecting the earth and its ability to sustain life as responsible stewards of the environment.

Let us work to reform our immigration laws guided by the spirit of this nation of immigrants and not by punitive parsimony.

Let us be involved in eradicating the intractable prejudices that continue to darken the human spirit and separate us from each other, prejudices based in gender, race, religion and sexual orientation.

Let us work to make freedom more expansive.

I think that this is what Lincoln meant.

I believe it is what God wants us to do.

Think big. Think of others. Do something to make the world a better place for those who are suffering.

Heed the call of the ages. Do something great. Be emancipators of the human condition. That is what *Pesah* is all about.

Cindy and I, our children, and all the members of the synagogue professional staff join in extending to you our heartfelt best wishes that this festival season will be filled with joy and peace. May it be a time for expressing love to those who are dearest, and achieving reconciliation among those who have been estranged.

And during this season, when we remember our Exodus from Egypt, the most formative event in the history of our people, may we “do something great” and dedicate ourselves to expanding freedom, repairing the brokenness of our world, and extending the embrace of love to all God’s creation.

CONGREGATION  
ADATH JESHURUN



7763 Old York Road  
Elkins Park, PA 19027

215.635.6611

[www.adathjeshurun.info](http://www.adathjeshurun.info)