



Liliane Apotheker
ICCJ President

ICCJ – President’s Letter

Pesach 5784, April 2024

Dear Friends,

The holiday of Pesach or Passover occurs on the 15th through 22nd days of the month of Nissan according to the Hebrew Calendar. On the civic calendar this year, it begins before sundown on Monday April 22 and ends after nightfall on April 30. Jewish people will abstain from eating bread and any leavened products and will celebrate the Seder at home for two consecutive nights in the diaspora, only on one night in Israel. On the Seder night, Jewish families will gather around a festive table and a Seder plate with symbolic foods. Among them, of course, is Matza, the unleavened bread prepared in haste by the Israelites summoned by God to leave Egypt, *mitzrayim* in Hebrew.

Seder night is an absolute favorite in many Jewish families, a unique opportunity to celebrate a religious holiday primarily at home with friends and family, and to begin to instill in children a sense of their religious and cultural belonging to the Jewish people. It is an evening where memory is enacted in a dynamic way, the past and the present are seen as a flowing stream, a continuous thread of history, very much alive to us all. A question that a child is assigned to ask, *ma nishtana*, inquires, “how is this night different from all the other nights?” This introduces the narrative of the freedom regained by the Hebrew slaves of Pharaoh.

This year we will again examine how this night is different from all others. And many questions will be asked at our Seder tables. Since Pesach is a celebration of freedom, we will all think of the hostages who at the time of this writing are still held captive. There is no doubt they will be on all our minds, in our prayers, and in our hearts. We will ask ourselves how our lives have changed since October 7, and the painful reality that has emerged will be palpably felt.

The Hebrew word *mitzrayim* refers to Egypt of course, but in Jewish mystical literature it is derived from “m’tzarim” meaning “narrow straits”. There is no doubt that both in Israel and in the diaspora, we Jews feel in “narrow straits” right now; precariousness and vulnerability engulf us.

In Israel and Gaza, the war and its horrifying consequences do not seem to end, whilst in Israel fierce internal debates reoccur. In many parts of the

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diaspora Jewish people do not feel safe, in fact many constantly feel assailed by hostility. In countries with small Jewish communities, the nagging feeling of danger and fear is even more acute.

On this Seder night, we will be even more aware of the immense pressure that we are living under. We will seek to tell the story of the exodus in a way that is uplifting both for us and for our children. This narrative of freedom from slavery that the Jewish people have upheld faithfully for millennia has a universal quality, a story that many people around the world have embraced as their own. This fact itself should remain a source of inspiration to us all.

I wish those who celebrate it an inspiring Pesah that uplifts their hopes and convictions. May its celebration endow all Jews with a sense of freedom from the narrow straits that we inhabit for now and with the inner strength needed to confront our many questions.

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