

Allow me to begin by sharing a story that was related to me by my colleague, friend, and fellow Clevelander, Rabbi Antine from down the street. Morty and Sylvia, like many Jews of their generation, retired to Boca where they were enjoying their retirement years in the Sunshine State. A few weeks before Passover Morty called his oldest son David who was living in New York City. “David,” he said, “I have some important news to share with you.” Concerned, David said, “Okay, Dad, what is it.” “Well, David, your mother and I have decided that we’re getting divorced.” “Getting divorced?! But you’ve been married for 50 years! You just moved to Florida to enjoy the beautiful weather, to play golf, to relax. And you’ve got three children and six grandchildren...I just don’t understand...How can you be getting divorced?” “Son, I’ve made up my mind. Please don’t try to talk me out of it.” “Listen to me Dad,” David replied, “just stay by the phone. I’m going to call my sisters and discuss this with them. Promise me you won’t do anything until I call you back...just stay next to the phone.” “Alright, David, I won’t do anything until you call back.” Minutes later David had his two sisters on a conference call and he told them the news. Then he called his father back...

“Dad”

“Yes, David.”

“Dad, I just spoke to my sisters, and we decided that we’re all coming to Boca for Passover. Mom can make all of her wonderful dishes; you’ll have all of us and the six grandchildren at your table. We’ll do the seder just like we used to when we were kids, and hopefully you’ll remember why you got married, and you’ll decide to stay together. What do you say Dad?”

“Well, I suppose that’s alright son.” “Great, we’ll see you for Passover.”

After hanging up the phone, Morty yells out: Sylvia! Our scheme worked, the kids are all coming for Passover!! We did it!!

Now when you think about it friends, Passover is the consummate family holiday. Some people even prioritize family schedules over the holiday schedule...someone recently told me that last night their family was getting together for seder, because it was more convenient for out of towners to get together over the weekend than during the week when the seders fall this year! And for many, many years, Passover has been far and away the most widely celebrated Jewish

tradition and holiday...even more so than lighting Hanukkah candles or fasting on Yom Kippur. There is a power, a mystique to this holiday. It draws on everything that is beautiful about Judaism: ritual, creativity, song, storytelling, and of course food. The fact that it takes place at home means that it is by definition hospitable and warm. Synagogues often have to coax people to attend or participate; but no one has to be asked twice to come home for Mom's brisket or Bubbie's chopped liver. And let's face it, Passover allows participants to shape the rituals according to their own family customs and needs, and each one of those rituals comes along with an explanation and a step by step user's manual. The seder actually has a lot to teach institutional Judaism about how to create accessible, welcoming Jewish experiences.

I recall as a child that one part of the seder that absolutely mesmerized me; that totally captivated my attention and imagination was the whole drama surrounding the *cos Eliyahu*...the Cup of Elijah. Some adult would fill the cup to the brim, and of course I wanted to be the one to open the door for Elijah. And at some miraculous moment between the cup being filled, the door being opened, and me returning to the table, the wine from the cup would get consumed. I don't know who did it or when. I tried to keep my eyes on that cup, but some crafty and cunning adult managed to gulp it down every time when I wasn't looking. As a kid I believed with certainty that Elijah breezed through my seder as well as everyone else's, evaporating cups of wine as he went from house to house. It was awesome dinner theater.

Elijah, when you think about it, is an unusual character to be found at a Passover seder. Elijah lived many hundreds of years after Moses and the Israelites departed Egypt. Furthermore, the idea of an Elijah's cup at the seder does not appear until the Middle Ages! So the question is, just what is Elijah doing at our seders—besides entralling young children and causing them to speculate about disappearing wine?

By the way, that might be a good enough reason. The Rambam says "*tzarich la'asot shinui balayla ha'zeh she'yiru ha'banim v'yisha'alu...*" You have to do strange and unusual things on the seder night so that the children will notice and ask questions...Inviting Elijah to dinner and the whole spectacle of the opened door and evaporated wine certainly is strange and unusual. Historically speaking, however, it is likely that the custom of opening the door to welcome Elijah was a response to widespread myths and rumors about customs that non-Jews suspected of their neighbors during Passover, not the least of which being the blood libel—that Jews kidnapped

and used the blood of non-Jewish children for the preparation of Matzah. The fact that Passover and Easter fell so close to one another only meant that it was more dangerous to be a Jew in many places. As millions of Christians meditated on the death of Jesus, who was turned over to the Romans by a cabal of Jewish priests only tended to whip non-Jews into an unholy frenzy that often resulted in violence and destruction. Jews opened their doors to show their neighbors that nothing untoward was happening inside even as they placed their trust in God to protect them on that night when they first received divine protection on their way out of Egypt.

Furthermore, a longstanding tradition associated the redemption of Passover with the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people and the world. Just as the Israelites were redeemed in Nisan, the tradition taught that the final redemption would happen during this month as well. We just read in the Haftarah : *Hinei sholeiach lachem et Eliyahu Ha'Navi lifnei bo yom Adonai ha'gadole ve'hanora*, “behold I will send Elijah the prophet to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord.” This is why Elijah is linked with the messianic era. This is why when we sing Eliyahu Ha'Navi at havdalah each week we sing that he should come “*im mashiach ben David*,” along with the Messiah to usher in the final redemption of the world.

But there is one more somewhat less grandiose but no less significant outcome that is associated with Elijah the prophet. Recall that in the Haftarah, Elijah will reconcile parents with children, and children with their parents. What an astounding prophecy. Nothing can be healed on a global level until families are reunited; until generations are reconciled with one another. That's the first step toward a larger vision of peace and deliverance. And the place where that reconciliation is supposed to begin...is at the seder table. When young and old, children and parents, family members and loved ones dialogue and converse with each other; asking and answering deep questions about faith, identity, and meaning. When do we do this Elijah ritual? Toward the end of the seder...the idea being that the seder experience itself should create renewed connections and heal past wounds among the participants. By the time Elijah comes at the end, the process of reconciling parents with children, and children with their parents will already be underway.

So along with all the joy that I wish for you on this Passover holiday, I also bless you with the blessing of shalom bayit, of seders that bring about peace, renewal, and reconciliation in your families. As you sit with relatives and loved ones at the holiday table, may everyone realize the

treasure they have in one another and may the seder only draw you closer together in love and in friendship.