

## Passover in Miami Shemini 2004

The annual commemoration of our people's exodus from Egypt ended earlier this week. I hope it was a meaningful celebration for all of you, and that the telling of the story and the reenactment of the departure from *Mitzrayim* was a chance to place yourself into the story and thus to reaffirm our values. Some of our congregants were fortunate enough to travel to Israel for the holiday, fulfilling the eternal words: *BeShana Haba b'Yerushalayim* – next year in Jerusalem. I understand they had a wonderful time, and anyone who couldn't travel there for Passover is welcome and encouraged to join Symcha and me for our trip which leaves on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.

In contrast to the words, “next year in Jerusalem”, at the end of our Passover seders, after all the work was done, when I was growing up, my mother used to proclaim, “Next year at Schleider's” – the kosher caterer in Baltimore who sponsored a community seder.

This year our family traveled to be with our people, for the holiday. We went to Miami.

We were not the only ones with that idea. In fact, I was amazed by how many other Jews had the same idea. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that although the kosher restaurants could only serve clients on Thursday, Friday afternoon, Saturday night, and Sunday lunch, a total of 5 or 6 meals, despite all the work that goes into kashering a restaurant for Passover, a number of them were open. One hotel had a kabbalah conference, replete with special kabbalah matzah and even kabbalah water.

I enjoyed attending services at a number of different synagogues and congregations while I was there, as it gave me a chance to connect with other Jews, as well as to pray in different settings. Davening in another community always gives me the chance to feel that link to our heritage, to other Jews, to our history and of course, to the Almighty.

Some of the hotels in Miami Beach and elsewhere offered kosher for Passover meal plans, and were either wholly, or partially taken over for the 8 days by people who were observing the holiday. On Friday night, we happened to walk around in one of those hotels, and it was mobbed. The place was swarming with young people. Many were dressed in their Shabbat finest. And they were all clearly identifiable as observant Jews. The boys wore yarmulkes, and the girls, stylishly dressed in the latest fashions, all respected Jewish laws of modesty with their shoulders appropriately covered.

You may be wondering why I am going into so much detail to tell you about all this. There is a reason here. It has to do with how good it felt to see so many people taking observance of Jewish rituals seriously. So often I encounter Jews who do not change their dietary habits during the holiday. It was reassuring and inspiring to see so many people keeping Passover, and clearly committed to keeping the mitzvot gathered together in one setting.

At one point, my son, Ezra, turned and asked me if I thought this kind of scene could occur among non-Orthodox Jews. Do Reform or Conservative Jews take the holiday seriously enough to seek out a place where the laws of Passover are observed, he asked. Do they have the desire to go to the expense and bother of seeking out a place where they will find a community? His questions were extremely poignant and meaningful. It is the challenge I present to you today. In other words, what he was really asking, and which I in turn ask of each of us here today is: How strong is the intensity of the commitment to our traditions among liberal Jews? How seriously do we take the mitzvot? How important is ritual to us? How significant is it to us to be part of a Jewish community?

There are some among us who do strive to live by Judaism more than a few days each year. There are increasing numbers among our congregation who have started to keep kosher. More and more of our members have taken on the mitzvot of Torah study, as well as attending services on a regular basis – for our ultimate purpose, and part of our *raison d'être* as a synagogue must be to increase these numbers.

But unfortunately, the truth is that too many of us are too willing to compromise too easily. We rationalize and dilute the customs and practices, making excuses, and trying to convince ourselves, “well, God wouldn’t mind if we... (fill in the blank.)”

But the message of this week’s Torah portion is that God does care and that the mitzvot are for all of us, not just the elite, the leaders, or the select few.

We read in parashat Shmini about the ceremony of the consecration of the priests in the Tabernacle, and some of the laws which they alone must keep. But part of the radical innovation of Judaism, and its break with the pagan world, was the assertion that the ritual laws were not given only to the priests. For we also read in this week’s parasha of the dietary laws, which were incumbent upon all Jews, and which are part of the daily life of all.

Commenting on this week’s Torah reading, Rabbi Joseph Hertz wrote in his commentary to the Chumash, “The Torah takes the whole of human life as its province; in the eyes of the Torah nothing human is secular. It penetrates into the home of the Israelite, and aims at controlling even the most intimate relations of domestic existence.”

Hermann Cohen put it this way, “The Law of God embraces the whole of life with all its actions; and as none of these actions can be withdrawn from the unity of life, so can the Law be excluded from none of them.”

Recently, a prominent leader of the Reform movement said that the Conservative movement would disappear in twenty years. (I am somewhat concerned, especially, since I just signed a 22 year contract -- just kidding.) I believe he is wrong, because Conservative Judaism is right. It is right because it seeks to blend modernity and tradition. It is right because it upholds the centrality of halacha, while recognizing that it needs to continue to evolve. It is right, because it is historically honest in its approach to

Judaism and revelation. But it will last only if we are committed to preserving Jewish observance in our lives.

Tomorrow we will dedicate a Torah scroll rescued from the Holocaust with a series of educational programs geared to all levels, for children, teens and adults. In so doing, we recall the commitment of the generation that perished in the Holocaust to the ideals and ways of our faith. It is my hope that on Passover, and throughout the year, we will have the same zeal and passion for keeping the mitzvot as our more traditional fellow Jews. In so doing, we will come to know the true meaning of freedom and of the message of the Torah.

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