

“Why is this Night Different?”  
Passover 2006

I love this time of year.

Our home resembles a military training base in preparation for a major maneuver. The operation begins every year right after Purim. The commanding officer issues strict orders. I will let you guess who the commanding officer is in our house. The orders are: “Passover is coming. You cannot buy anything at Giant. All open foods must be consumed first over the upcoming weeks.” And so our annual Operation “Finish all the Chametz” is launched. It entails a thorough, intense cleaning of the entire house, including cordoning off and restricting the consumption of food in certain areas once they are declared cleaned, inspected, and sealed as “kosher for Pesah.”

If your Passover preparation is not this intense, you are missing out. I highly recommend this approach for a few reasons.

For one, exerting so much energy truly enhances one’s appreciation of the holiday. You cannot just roll into the holiday, or show up for a seder, and expect it to have the same impact. Believe it or not, even though by now I have studied and learned most of what there is to know about the holidays, before every single Jewish holiday, I still set aside time every year to read either a new text, article or book, or to review and reread familiar material about the holiday. The mental preparation helps to put me in the appropriate spiritual frame of mind to be ready to celebrate the holiday.

The physical work we do for Passover serves this purpose and also helps to achieve one of the goals of Passover. It helps to put us into the story. We Jews relate to history in a unique way, unlike any other people. We do not just read about what happened to our ancestors in the past. We are commanded to tell the story as if it actually happened to us, as if we were actually there. As a result, on some small scale, the work we do getting our homes ready for Passover helps to heighten the sense of what our ancestors went through. We are transcended back to slavery in Egypt and the burden of the physical work the Hebrews performed. We also suddenly become a part of that chain of tradition of those who came before us who took the holiday seriously and who labored to prepare for it. I cannot help but think of my grandmother this time of year, and what she went through, and what she learned from her grandmother. It truly links us with the generations who came before us.

So by the time we sit down at the seder table, in our family, we are physically, mentally and spiritually ready – and also a bit exhausted. What a mechayeh!

And when we gather at the Passover seder, all of us will engage in the commandment of telling the story and recounting what happened to us when we were slaves in the land of Egypt. The Hagadah praises those of us who enhance and embellish the ritual. And so in that spirit, some people go all out to do so.

For many of us the Pesach Seder has become the most important Jewish experience of the year. It is the one time of the year that a family gathers together as a family, sits around the table and does something Jewish. Many of us have our favorite parts of the seder. For some it is the singing of Dayenu. For others it may be the four sons. But surely none is more important than the asking of the traditional four questions, which in some families goes something like this:

1. When do we eat?
2. How long will this take?
3. Do we have to read the whole thing?
4. Do we have to do it again tomorrow night?

The traditional four questions are known by their opening words, the “Mah Nishtana” – which is sung “Mah Nishtana Ha Laila Haze mekol haleilot”...

It is usually translated, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” I am partial to that translation, in part because it is the punchline to a wonderful joke about the time when the Queen of England performed a ceremony to anoint a number of individuals as knights. They are each to say a few words in Latin when they kneel and bow before her. One Jewish knight however is somewhat flustered and can’t remember what he is supposed to say. He blurts out the first non-English words that come to his mind, “mah nishtanah halailah haze”. The queen hears that he is not saying what everyone else has said and asks, “Why is this knight different from all others?!”

The truth is though that Mah nishtanah should really be more accurately translated, not “why”, but “How --- How is this night different from all others?” I became especially aware of this when I recently read a poem by the Hebrew poet Yehuda Amichai. In reflecting on the holiday evening, he poses the question, “Mah Nishtanah, What is different?” He responds to his own challenge, “Hakol yishteneh. Hashinui hu Elohim: Everything is different. God is different.”

And so let us truly reflect on the question posed by the Hagadah and our tradition. The eating of the marror, the reclining and dipping are meant to prompt us to ask the question -- How is this night different? So let us ponder, in what ways is it truly different from all other nights.

It is different because on this night, we are gathered together as a family.  
It is different because on this night, we are engaged in performing a ritual.  
It is different because on this night, we discuss what it means to be a Jew.

All too often, too many of us do not sit together as a family for our meals anymore. Psychologists tell us that one of the keys to well-adjusted children is the family meal, and the discussions that accompany them. As busy as we are, Judaism compels us to sit together at least once a week, on Friday night, when it is more than just a meal, but a chance to bring holiness and spirituality into our very homes.

On Passover we think therefore about what it means to be a family. There are those of us who will sit down to Passover meals, conscious of those not there to share the meal with us. Either they have passed away since the last seder, and so we will miss them, or they are separated by distance. The distance may be physical as people live far away and no longer live in the same community. Or it could be the distance of separation. There are families where siblings or relatives no longer speak or share meals together. All of these things come to mind on the seder night precisely because it is a time so focused on family.

Seder night is different because on at least this one evening we perform rituals, customs and commandments enjoined upon us by our faith. In so doing we are linked, at least for one night of the year to our heritage and people. Too few of us observe the traditions of Judaism on a regular, ongoing basis. This is most unfortunate for there is an intricate relationship between the rituals of Judaism and Jewish survival. Many of our ancestors who came to this country abandoned observance of Jewish rituals thinking them to be too cumbersome and concerned that it would thwart their entry or advancement in American society. We, however, are the generation who can rediscover and recapture much of what they cast away. By not eating hametz the entire week, we affirm our identity as Jews. Passover can be the entry point for a family to see the power of ritual and how the tangible act of performing mitzvot can both add meaningfulness to our lives and allow us to pass something on to the next generation.

Passover night is different from all other nights because it offers us the chance to engage in a serious dialogue about what it means to be a Jew. We sit down with a haggadah, a script, or text, and are encouraged to ask questions about the nature and essence of our history. We are thereby forced to encounter our tradition and to confront the messages of our heritage and see how much and what it can teach us. It is a time of year when we can have a discussion about the role of God in history and redemption. The story lends itself to a discourse about sophisticated philosophical and theological matters.

In recent years, it has become increasingly popular for families to come up with all kinds of ways to keep kids interested and involved in the seder. I am as guilty of this as anyone – We have a plague bag for the plagues, which we have used in the past. And I just purchased, although I have not quite figured out yet how I am going to use it, masks for the plagues.

But allow me to sound a note of caution here. We have to be careful not to go overboard in our effort to make the seder and Judaism “fun for our kids”. We run the risk of juvenilizing Judaism. My friend and colleague, from Baltimore, Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg but it this way, “if we make the Pesach Seder into another version of Romper Room, then consciously or unconsciously our kids are going to get the message that all this Jewish stuff is just for kids. And when they grow up, they – like us – won’t have to do much of it anymore,” and won’t have much to do with it either.

While we want our children to love being Jewish to insure our continuity, Judaism is not just for kids. It is a powerful and profound spiritual experience with deep philosophical

insights about life that is capable of guiding and teaching us at every stage of life. It should therefore be something children look forward to exploring as they deepen their understanding of it as they get older. We should make it accessible and interesting for our children and whet their appetite to appreciate it and to learn more about it. But let us not forget that ultimately, the seder, like Judaism is for grown ups as well as for kids. The seder offers a profound opportunity to engage in a discussion of the intricate and deep message of Judaism so that it becomes a learning experience for the entire family, not just for the children.

And finally, this night is also different because we are different and the world we live in is different than it was the year before. We are a year older than we were the year before.

May we be a bit wiser and knowledgeable about our heritage, a bit more committed to its survival, a bit more devoted to our tradition, and a bit kinder and gentler. May it be a time to bring us closer to our family, our heritage, to God, and each other.

Amen

April 1, 2006  
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