

Are You A Passover or Purim Jew?

Passover 2013
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Having recently returned from a congregational trip to Krakow, Warsaw, Prague and Berlin, I still have images emblazoned in my head of the infernos of destruction we witnessed, of the towns that were once thriving, teeming centers of Jewish life, and which are now *Judenrein*, lifeless shells, without any Jews. Prague was once the center of great Jewish learning, populated by scholars and thinkers. Now it's synagogues are museums. Prior to World War II Krakow and Warsaw were cities where Jews contributed to the arts and cultural life of the city. Today you have to look to find remnants and echoes of its glorious past.

It is difficult to find places of hope amidst the ashes – yet we learned of a program in Poland to help educate young Polish students about what happened to the Jews who were there, about the life that once was. Children study about the Jewish community and history, and also participate in experiential exercises which force them to encounter the part of the population that has been decimated, to see the shadows and hear the voices that are no longer present. The program was started by a non-Jewish Pole who was a member of the Polish Parliament. When he came to Israel he was shocked to see how Israeli legislators greeted their German counterparts warmly, while he was ignored. He came to learn it was because of the perception that Poland had still not come to terms with its participation in the Holocaust and had not taken responsibility for its role in the liquidation of its Jewish population, and decided to do something about the situation.

Inasmuch as this is Shabbat HaGadol, the Sabbath before Passover, my thoughts of the visit there permeate my Passover preparation this year. We also visited the Warsaw Ghetto, the site of the courageous uprising against the Nazis led by 23 year old Mordechia Anieliewicz. The fighting broke out on the first night of Pesah, 70 years ago.

In light of all the persecution and destruction, I also cannot help but think about a story, a joke that could only take place in Europe, and at this time of year. As you know, prior to the Holocaust, Jews were frequently converted against their will. In one town, the king had forced the Jews to convert, but after he died, his son allowed the Jews to revert to be Jews again. The town's rabbi was very excited to hear the news, and ran home to tell his wife. "Bracheleh," he exclaimed, "I have great news. The new king has said we don't have to be Christian anymore. We can go back to being Jews." His wife let out a sigh, expressing her disappointment. The husband was puzzled, and asked his wife what was wrong, this was the moment they had hoped would come. And she said, "He couldn't have waited until after Pesah."

To appreciate this joke, you have to understand the extent of preparations necessary to get ready for Pesah. In my house growing up, and in my home today, as well as in many homes, it is like a military operation. You have to divide and conquer, setting out which areas of the house to kasher first, to rid of hametz – and by the way, you mustn't forget to get rid of the chametz in your car as well.

I was speaking just yesterday with one of our members about the preparations. He asked me about something he had not heard of before called *mehirat chametz*, whereby you sell the leavened products in your possession to a rabbi who sells it to a non-Jew so that you are not in violation of the commandment not to own any leavened product during the holiday. Being a lawyer he was intrigued by the whole process and thought it was absurd to hear that rabbis would be buying and selling bread. I told him, “Don’t knock it. This is how I make a living.” (Just to reassure you, the funds donated for this mitzvah are contributed to a worthy and needy cause each year.)

With all the work that goes into Pesah, I want to ask you a question this morning and suggest you may even wish to discuss it at your seder: Are you a Pesah Jew or a Purim Jew? On Passover we work hard to relive the experience of slavery and have stringent rules about what is permitted and what is forbidden. On Purim, we celebrate and party and are allowed, some would even say, commanded to get drunk so that we cannot tell the difference between Haman and Mordechai. But this is not what I am referring to. The holidays appear to be very different, yet they share at the core a fundamental command, *Zachor*, to remember.

My friend Yossi Klein HaLevi of the Hartman Institute wrote a brilliant article a month ago in which he describes the difference between a Pesah Jew and a Purim Jew. After touring North American Jewish communities he commented on the different outlooks he encountered on his speaking tour.

He writes, “Visiting an Orthodox community, I find myself back in the 1970s and 1980s, before the first Intifada convinced a majority of Israelis that the occupation is a mortal threat to the Jewish state; instead, right-wing American Jews will insist, Israel must continue building settlements and creating facts on the ground. And when I visit a liberal community, I find myself back in the 1990s, before the second Intifada convinced that same majority of Israelis that a one-way peace process is a mortal threat to the Jewish state. Left-wing American Jews will insist, a peace agreement is always within reach and just a matter of Israeli will.”

He concludes that “most Israelis agree with the left’s anxiety over the occupation and with the right’s anxiety over a delusional peace. For most Israelis a Palestinian state is an existential necessity that would save us from the demographic threat to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state — and also an existential threat that could turn greater Tel Aviv into the next Sderot.”

Amplifying the dilemma, he notes that when Israelis are asked whether they support a two-state solution, over 70 % of Israelis respond affirmatively, and when asked whether that same two-state solution would bring peace, over 80 % say no. “In other words: Israelis want to be doves, but reality forces them to be hawks.”

What does this have to do with Passover and Purim? HaLevi says that we can understand the dichotomy because we Jews are commanded on both holidays *Zachor*: to remember. During Passover we remember that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and during Purim we are commanded to remember what the Amalekites did to us. The message of the command to remember on Passover is: to

have compassion and not be brutal towards others. The message of the command to remember on Purim is to remember how the tribe of Amalek attacked us without provocation while we were wandering in the desert. In other words the essence of this command to remember is: Don't be naive. There are those who are out to annihilate you.

HaLevi suggests the conflicting dichotomy represents the agony of the dilemma facing Israelis and something that is often beyond the grasp of most American Jews. He writes, "Passover Jews" are motivated by empathy with the oppressed; "Purim Jews" are motivated by alertness to the threat to Jewish existence." And the part that is often difficult for us to appreciate is that both of these conflicting notions are essential parts of who and what we are, and of how we must act. Jewish history demands that we heed both of these voices, conflicting as they may be. By remembering our past, and of the call to recall both aspects of our history we have a sense of our identity, of who we are, and appreciate the challenges confronting us as we face the future.

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