

Rabbi Ariel Platt Passover Dvar 2022

I don't know about you, but when I am deep in my preparation for Passover, I tend to reflect on past Passovers (say that 10 times fast). Specifically the Seders I have participated in all of my ____ years. (Reminisce a little) Think about the Seders you have participated in. Historically, who has been around the table? At many of the seders I attended we would also invite people who didn't have a seder of their own, or non-Jewish friends who wanted to join us.

The Seder, I have found, teaches us to welcome others/strangers into our homes. In fact, we begin the Magid section by welcoming anyone who is hungry or in need, "Ha Lachma Anya - This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. All who are hungry - let them come and eat. All who are needy - let them come and celebrate the Passover with us."

Why? Why is this so important?

Throughout the Torah (and the entire Seder) we are often reminded that we were once strangers in the Land of Egypt. Exodus 22:20-22, "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me." Leviticus 19:33-34, "When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them. The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens: you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I Adonai am your G-d." To name a few.

As Rabbi Shai Held, puts it: "The Torah could have responded quite differently to the experience of oppression in Egypt. It could have said, since you were tyrannized and exploited and no one did anything to

help you, you don't owe anything to anyone; how dare anyone ask anything of you? But it chooses the opposite path: Since you were exploited and oppressed, you must never be among the exploiters and degraders. You must remember what it feels like to be a stranger. Empathy must animate and intensify your commitment to the dignity and wellbeing of the weak and vulnerable. And God holds you accountable to this obligation.' (Rabbi Shai Held, Turning Memory into Empathy).”

We are all vulnerable. And it is through that vulnerability that we should connect, not push away. The Torah/our traditions leave us with a powerful lesson. We must remember our History of being oppressed, so we don't do that to others, and we stand up for others.

The reason I am highlighting this today is, one this is fresh in our minds from Seder, but I also want to share with you an amazing opportunity that I am a part of. I am currently participating in a special Congregational Leaders Fellowship with Mark Schenerman at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies (ICJS).

The fellowship programs at the ICJS bring diverse participants together to strengthen their capacities as interreligious leaders in Greater Baltimore and surrounding counties. Cohort members spend a year in dialogue around issues of interreligious understanding and build networks of professional and personal connections.

The goal of the ICJS Congregational Leaders Fellowship is to build a robust, interreligious network of congregations that (a) maps onto and reflects the religious and social diversity of Greater Baltimore and surrounding counties; and (b) where religious and lay leaders are in relationships and partnerships with other congregations.

As part of the Fellowship each congregation must partner with a congregation of a different denomination, and create a meaningful project together that facilitate relationships between congregations. We have partnered with Faith Presbyterian Church on Loch Raven Blvd.

The theme of our Project is welcoming the stranger (which is why I am sharing this with you today) - Now here is where you come in. You play a very important role in the success of this project, the relationships we build, and the lessons we will learn. 2 parts: 1st) Learning - focusing on texts in our traditions about welcoming the stranger, as we welcome each other into our sacred spaces and communities, (Mentally mark your calendars - this will be taking place on June 19th/Juneteenth - commemorating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans) and 2nd) Broaden the idea of welcoming the stranger to refugees - do a hands on social action project helping Ukrainian refugees (or have a benefit).

This is another opportunity to live/experience one of our core Jewish values.

The best thing we can do for our world is welcome people, welcome others. By creating new relations, learning, and lifting those in need up. Broadway actress, Patti LuPone once said, "Smile at a stranger. See what happens." Please join us with a smile, and see what happens.

Chag Sameach!