

Making Sense of the Passover Seder Experience

As you read this, you will be getting ready for your *seder* experience. More than any other Jewish holiday, this sacred encounter will engage the most percentage of Jews. People will gather around tables with a *Haggadah* in hand, reading and eating as they unpack the story from slavery to freedom. Sure, it is about our people's liberation from bondage. But beyond that and beyond the culinary delights and beyond the act of affiliation with tradition, this sacred encounter can be a personal encounter with faith and spirituality.

Seder means order. Our tradition uses this time to breakdown the experience and use the sacred drama to make us connect and feel. Our ancestors were embittered by their servitude to Pharaoh, eat bitter herbs. It was a painful experience, dip parsley in salt water to taste the tears. Certain communities would add hitting each other with scallions in order to feel the lashes from the taskmasters' whips. Our ancestors built the stone cities of Pithom and Ramses; play with *charostet* as a symbol of building. Eat roasted meats as if you were standing in the Temple courtyard. And there are plenty more that makes the *seder* a “drama-turgy” designed to make us feel!

The image of *seder* as a symbol of order is enhanced by the *Haftarah* reading for the intermediate days of the holiday. Our tradition calls for us to read Song of Songs. In chapter 7, verses 13 and 14, we read: “Let us go early to the vineyards; Let us see if the vine has flowered. If its blossoms have opened, if the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give my love to you. The mandrakes yield their fragrance, at our doors are all choice fruits; both freshly picked and long-stored... These have I kept, my beloved, for you.” At first glance, one might scratch their head as they struggle to see any Passover connection. But look again--- fruits and sweet tasty treats are set out for one's beloved. From the fields and orchards, the best of the best is laid out lovingly for another. This is a symbol of our relationship with God—loving partner whose care unfolds before the beloved with gifts.

Mandrakes, pomegranates, grapes--- are these metaphors? Of course! But don't read that line of text literally—look at them through the lens of how they are presented. Let me give you an illustration—many of us have a “junk drawer,” that space where you just

place “stuff” with the hope that one day it might be useful. Every-now-and-then, one has to rummage thru the drawer to find something. If some of you are like me, that encounter is followed with a pledge to organize it. If some of you are like me, you have a partner that craves the organization that a junk drawer lacks. Passover creates lovingly an order to our story. The history and nuances of experiences have cluttered up our story such that we need to unpack the narrative in order for us to embrace its significance. The Passover *seder* is a reliquary of sorts, a container of sacred stories that has been uncluttered in such a way that it is laid out like the mandrakes, pomegranates and grapes of the Song Of Songs’ description.

As Passover *seder* meals are so close at hand, let me encourage you to let the story unfold naturally and easily. Let the experience of the telling of our tale flow in such a way that one feels a kinship with the tale and our people. May the *seder* table be filled with incredible delights as if a beloved was setting forth delicacies for one’s true love. In that way, the Passover experience can be communal and personal at the same time.