

Erev Rosh Hashanah  
September 18, 2020  
Rabbi Jade Sank Ross

### **Destruction to Revelation**

For many years, my grandparents lived just 5 minutes from each other. So for Passover, my family would have a sort of progressive meal over the course of the two days of seder, beginning at one house, ending at another.

No matter how close or how far we live from family and loved ones, figuring out where to go for holidays is really challenging! Since getting married, Dan and I have judged each apartment we've moved into based on its spaciousness for accommodating a seder with both of our families together. This spring, we were finally prepared! We had big plans. The perfect space, a menu, invitations drawn up, but as they say, the best laid plans... Of course, as you know all too well, this Passover 5780, the nights of the seder were different from any other nights any of us have ever experienced.

I think it is helpful when we experience such dramatic upheavals, as we did in the spring of this year, to go back and imagine ourselves in the footsteps of our ancestors. Specifically, as I think about Passover, and I imagine the image of that holiday in ancient times, it meant gathering at a specific place. Passover is one of the *shalosh regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals when our ancestors were required to travel from near and far to the Temple in Jerusalem. This spring, we hoped that our family would travel from near and far to our apartment to celebrate Passover with us. And then we found out, The Temple was destroyed.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg explains that, "The Temple was central to Jewish religious life in a way that is hard to recapture today... [Our ancestors'] religious lives were illuminated only by those extraordinary moments when multitudes gathered in Jerusalem. There, in the awe of a Paschal sacrifice or at the Yom Kippur atonement ritual, they felt an emanation of divine force that showered grace and blessing on the people and made the Lord's power a stunning presence. For these people, after the destruction there was only emptiness."<sup>1</sup>

But we know what happened next. The rabbis reimagined Jewish life. As the Talmud tells it, "Before the Romans breached the walls of the city, Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai foresaw the fall of Jerusalem, and so he had himself smuggled out of the city and established a new center of Jewish learning."<sup>2</sup> At this new center, the rabbis built temples not of stones, but of words. They reinterpreted sacrificial practices into prayers. They turned destruction into revelation. They expanded the meaning of Torah contributing volumes to the Jewish canon.

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Greenberg, The Temple and Its Destruction, MyJewishLearning.com

<sup>2</sup> Gittin 56b

2000 years later, we thought that the beautiful seder that we had planned was destroyed. But, inspired by our ancestors, the same ancestors who crafted the *haggadah* to transform Passover for their time, we too created new rituals for this different night. We ritualized the *mitzrayim*, the unique narrow places, that we each found ourselves in this year, we found a new call to social justice in the words, “this is the bread of affliction, let all who are hungry come and eat,” we replaced the ritual hand washings with full 20-second, sudsy, renditions of *dayeinu*, we found the afikomen in a “Where’s Waldo?” puzzle and new symbolism in every item on the seder plate. With a simple copy and paste of the link, our Seder quickly grew to over 60 people. And we fit all of them comfortably into our two-bedroom apartment.

Despite devastating loss, deep despair, so much unknown and uncertainty, during this time of destruction, we have continued to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors. Andrew Silow-Carroll, Editor-in-Chief of the *New York Jewish Week*, wrote, “There is already an emerging literature on what the post-Covid-19 Jewish world will and should look like. Yehuda Kurtzer of The Shalom Hartman Institute of North America has called for ‘collective mobilization’ organized around ‘a coherent and clearly prioritized set of commitments.’ Jewish educator Larisa Klebe (a classmate of mine from Brandeis!) is urging the Jewish nonprofit world to address the inequities in a field where 70 percent of workers are women, and where “the majority of the highest-paying, highest-ranking jobs are still held by men...” Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz, research fellow at the Hartman Institute, gave a lecture on how the crisis ‘is highlighting race and class disparities in education systems, and the questions these disparities raise for Jews...’<sup>3</sup>

Yes, the destruction that we have witnessed feels overwhelming. We are, at times, left, like our ancestors gazing at the ruins of the Temple, with only emptiness. But like the rabbis who rebuilt the Judaism that we inherited, **we are rebuilding our temples out of bits and bytes and links and love.**

Look at what we have built for these days of awe! We might have thought that everything was destroyed, that the foundation of this day--gathering all together in one place--was impossible. But look! In fact, unlike in any other year we can all fit into the sanctuary together at once. From far and wide, we have come to this place, to this moment. We are sharing in the liturgy and the rituals that unite us in the sacred occasions of this day, redefining the traditions of past years to make them relevant for this moment. We have created a community that expands beyond walls, that is interconnected, interwoven and part of a global Jewish story.

During those 5 minute drives from seder to seder, we never could have imagined a Passover like this one. But this year, my grandparents no longer live five minutes from each

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Silow-Carroll, *The New York Jewish Week*, “Covid-19 Might Just Kick Us Into The Jewish Future.” April 21, 2020.

other. My grandmother lives on Long Island, my Bubbie and Zadie in the Hudson Valley, and Dan's grandparents, they live all the way in Charleston, South Carolina. We never could have imagined a Passover where it would be possible to get all of them together. But this year, it was.

**We too are turning destruction into revelation, redefining Torah for our time and adding our volumes to the Jewish story.**