

Notes on the Seders for 5780, in light of COVID-19 and other things

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I don't know exactly how to help everyone find what you need as we retell the story of the Exodus this year at our Seders. With fewer people together, with the challenges of online or phone links, with our own states of mind and soul, it's hard to spell out a method for finding wisdom in real time during our Seders.

But the story of the Exodus, and the rituals of the Seder, can at least offer us something to pack away for the coming days and weeks. We can remember things in the story or find new things, and they can be part of our provisions as we cross the Sea into the desert. In Jewish time, Passover isn't only about these two nights and days. It's also a kickoff to the period of *Sefirat Ha'omer*, the counting of days and steps toward the next major stop at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah.

So here are some thoughts keyed to different parts of the Seder. You can read them before Passover to prepare, or after the Seder when the rituals and story are fresh in your mind. You can read them by yourself or with people during the Seder. You can talk about them, or not.

Framing the Whole

1. Staying home this year for Seder is itself a demonstration of one of the fundamental teachings of the Exodus story. The Torah teaches that God cares about people in every corner and in every condition. The rest of the world thought at the time of the Exodus that you were abandoned by the gods if you were a slave or if you were far from the place your god protects. You were favored by gods if you were powerful or supported the powerful. But God chose slaves and exiles, people who were duty and used only for their labor. Moses proclaimed to Pharaoh: "With our young and with our old we will go." By staying home, we save lives because we imitate the God Who found us in Egypt.
2. The original Passover in Egypt took place in individual homes, hiding out together from the plague that was passing through. Blood on the doorposts and lintel, so the plague would pass over. The Torah says that "the whole congregation of the community of the Israelites" slaughtered the lamb the same night -- they were separate but in sync, and getting ready to emerge as a community in a new way.
3. Even our normal Seders are a kind of withdrawal or isolation. In biblical times and Temple times, the Passover offering could not be eaten even in one's home town. You had to bring the offering to Jerusalem -- either bring your animal, or set aside money while you were home to buy an animal there. Passover was a national celebration, outside, though there may have been a home component. We're not sure. When the Temple was destroyed, there was no way to be together. So the rabbis of the Mishnah invented the Seder at home. In a way, every regular Seder is a recognition of a loss of togetherness. A reminder of exile and diaspora that have become normalized as our condition. What do those things mean to us, teach us? I prefer the Seder to the Temple pilgrimages, or so I think.

4. Jewish history is long, and there were other times that Seders had to take place in hiding. During the Inquisition persecutions, in the camps during the Holocaust, in homes and prisons in the Soviet Union. Those times were forced by human hands; this is not. Still, we are not the first Jewish households who have made Seders in situations of dangers. We have so many reports of Jews in those places celebrating Seders with defiance, and seeing the overall Passover saga a story of hope. Hope not in the sense of optimism about an immediate outcome, but hope as a deeper confidence that right and holiness are overpowering.

Kadesh/Kiddush (pp. 3-4)

We begin Shabbat and festivals with Kiddush, which means not just “holiness” but separation. We will ourselves into a different kind of time. A break from the flow of the world. Even if we cannot disconnect for a whole day, we deserve this refuge in time. It gives us a chance to enlarge our view, to tell a big story that is not only the one in front of us and around us.

Ur'chatz -- Washing (p. 5)

This ritual might be jarring. Washing has become even more of a survival skill than it was before (it probably should have been a better habit all along). It may be hard to see washing as an act beyond the physical. There are customs in normal years that involve the host or other people washing your hands to serve you, to make you feel free. This year, we have to be more careful.

This first washing reminds us of how much water there is in the story of Passover. The waters where babies were drowned and where Moses was hidden. The waters that were turned to blood, or into hail in the sky. The Sea that split so we could be free. The miraculous sweetened waters we drank in the desert.

One midrash says that the Israelites sang their first song of freedom not at the far end of the Sea, but in the middle of it as they crossed and while they weren't sure if the Egyptians would catch them or not. So as you feel some water, or see the leader splash some on behalf of everyone, imagine going into the Sea, with both hope and fear, in the middle of the race to the far side where freedom and redemption are.

Karpas -- Spring Greens (p. 5)

Rabbi Richard Levy, who edited this Haggadah, taught that the greens represent spring, and the sprouting of possibilities after the winter. He points to times of renewal in Jewish history, when our people seemed to be stagnant or threatened -- and the new fruit that emerged each time. Even now, new things are sprouting, and we shouldn't feel guilty if we are fascinated by them. Also, we might be experiencing the sprouting of dormant seeds in our minds. The pandemic makes it clearer where the people are whom we haven't seen before, who are now coming into our view like the spring blossoms. There are ideas that have been taking root or picking up nourishment in the recesses of our minds, and perhaps are beginning to show themselves.

Yachatz -- Breaking the Matzah (p. 5)

This moment is so ambivalent. I usually think of this as the breaking of the Sea, the opening to liberation. The cracking sound reminds us of things that are broken apart. The distance between the two parts of the middle matzah -- one of which will be hidden out of sight for a while -- reminds us of the heartbreaking distance between us, even if we are online together right now.

The Talmud notes that the Torah describes matzah as two things. It's the bread of poverty and slavery, and the embarrassment of being in those conditions. And it's the bread of escape and freedom.

Breaking can also be breaking what needs to be broken -- cracking open Pharaoh's oppressive system and the mindset of Egypt that enabled that system to go on.

Let all who are bowed by hunger come in and eat (p. 6)

This year, we can't even make the pretense of taking this literally.

So especially now if we're in a position to help people who need food, we have to do that through financial contributions. And remarkably, Orthodox rabbis have recognized that the need and hunger for connection is so great that for people whose wellbeing is threatened by being isolated during Pesach, it is not just permitted but imperative to use phones and technology to connect with them during the first days of the festival, which would otherwise be prohibited by Jewish law.

It is often pointed out that this passage is written not in Hebrew, the language of study, but in Aramaic, the common spoken language. What we are feeling now, even our feelings about the history we are retelling today, has to be expressed in the language we really use. The pious language of Sages and authorities can be distant. Mouthing their words is not all there is.

And as the text says quite simply: This year we are slaves, next year may we be free.

Four questions -- How different is this night! (p. 7)

You hardly need that to be pointed out.

Traditionally, these four questions were prompts only in the case when a child couldn't come up with a personal question. So any question, about the ritual table in front of us or Passover generally, are in order.

The Talmud says that if two Sages are the only ones at a Seder, they should ask each other questions.

Whoever enlarges on the telling deserves praise (p. 8)

Yes. But also, this year: whoever needs just to get through the Seder, to touch the essentials and not be overwhelmed by mourning for what there isn't, that person who shows up in any way for any amount of time deserves praise.

The Five Rabbis of B'nai Brak (p. 9)

The reflection in the grey box in my Haggadah is from Arthur Waskow's old Freedom Seder. He reminds us that in the middle of Roman persecution, the Exodus story was revolutionary. They were daring to plan for big change even against big odds.

Remembering the Exodus in the light of day and the dark of night (p. 10)

I started to think about Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's teaching after the Tree of Life shooting. The Talmud says Rabbi Elazar was a young man having a moment of feeling old.

He had previously been able to see the Exodus story as a daytime story, a triumphant march at high noon. A story whose messages were clear as day. The arc of history bending toward justice, after 400 years. Then Ben Zoma taught him that there is a night story too. Many Israelites in Egypt dealt with fear, pettiness, doubt of God and Moses. When they met Moses for the first time, remember, they dismissed him as someone who would make their lives worse by getting involved. For some, the legacy of Egyptian slavery is a basic suspicion of everyone and everything, anti-Semitism lurking beneath the surface.

What I taught after Pittsburgh is that I used to think that Jews fell into two categories: Jews who saw the world of light and possibility, and Jews who saw only the recurring dark of danger and persecution. The Tikkun Olam Jews and the Never Again Jews, to exaggerate. Now I think like Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. We need people who know that both are real -- possibility and anger. We need some who dare, from a foundation of hope, to be honest about darkness, to acknowledge its reality. Who ask in our light: what have I not yet done for those whose world is still dark.

Four children of COVID-19 (pp. 11-12)

I spoke last week about the four children as paradigms for how we deal with COVID-19. To summarize: The wise one wants information and understanding, and uses them to act. We need as many of these as possible in our world. The Haggadah says: Give more, so they can understand and set an example and act and lead. At the same time, it is hard to be the *chacham*, because facing the pandemic with knowledge can be overwhelming, and prevent us from the hope and even joys that we need. The *chacham* needs not just our admiration but our support.

The wicked one rebelliously goes out unnecessarily, stands too close in the store, coughs. Online, the *rasha* dismisses the reality of the plague, or suggests this is all a hoax or a liberal conspiracy. We need to push back, but it's not enough to say with the Haggadah: Fine, carry this to its conclusion and you won't be redeemed in the end. Because the wicked one affects us. We have to confront and correct, speak out even to strangers.

But the *rasha* has real fears that are perhaps not even conscious ones, and a deep mistrust of knowledge and authority. Now is the time to raise up people of knowledge for their commitment and their devotion and their compassion. And to admire leaders who listen to people of knowledge, who acknowledge when they as leaders do not know enough, who admit error and correct, because of their dedication to the people who chose and elected them. Maybe a cultural change like this will have some effect on the *rasha*. As a person, this one needs comfort too.

The simple one asks simple questions and deals with the situation with minimal knowledge and inquiry. Or maybe the *tam* is someone who does not want to talk with the people cooped up together in the house, or about feelings and fears at all. Not everyone is a talker, and even those who are, not all the time. The Haggadah says: Give an opening, and say: With a strong hand God brought us out. Remind this one: There are people making mighty efforts to keep us safe, and trying to bring us out.

As for the one who cannot ask, maybe it's a matter of not knowing how even to begin to talk. Or not knowing which of the many questions the pandemic raises are appropriate to ask in the middle of the crisis. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev taught that this child is the most profound, recognizing that sometimes we are overwhelmed by questions. Our questions aren't just big ones about why this happens, why are some dying and some well, but new ones like what will it be like in the future to shake hands or hug, or to put a bag of chips out at a party. What will conversation be like when it's not the intensity of Facetime and Zoom? What will local community mean, and will we realize new connections to people whom we've discovered are part of our world?

It is all right not to be able to think about these questions now. It will be necessary to think about them eventually.

We are all some combination of these four children. That's why in this Haggadah, I included the graphic I did, where each person might be more of one, but still some amount of the others.

Stories/midrash (pp. 15-17)

The texts I included I think speak for themselves. The one about the midwives is about healers and life-savers at a time when death was everywhere. I included a midrash about Miriam, and it is about a perspective of hope. How was she so sure that Pharaoh's regime would crack? Hope, as I have taught a lot in recent years, is about a couple of things that we learn from the Chanukkah story especially. Hope is not a prediction. Hope is connected to purpose. Hope is something that is prepared for us, by ourselves and other people in better times or past times. Hope is the Exodus story itself, given to us as a description of reality in some deep sense.

A story not in this packet: When Joseph died before slavery began, he was buried in Egypt but left a secret code with his cousin Serach. When the time would come to return to the homeland, someone would recite the code and his bones would appear. Pharaoh, the midrash said, tried to bury Joseph's bones at the bottom of the Nile, New Jersey-style

concrete, because he knew about this code and thought this would prevent the Jews from every leaving. Serach lived for hundreds of years, and when the moment came to leave Egypt, she stood at the Nile and said the code, and up floated the container with Joseph's bones. Hope is something buried that you dig up -- something it's hard to find, always it's hard to conjure from scratch as you go.

Then there is the text about the first Passover, which I referred to above -- about being a community even when separated at home, hiding from a plague.

What do these stories teach us now?

The Ten Plagues (p. 17)

Oh, plagues.

First of all, God does not choose individuals to kill by plague. Didn't in the time of the Torah, doesn't now. Full stop.

If there is culpability associated with the COVID-19 plague, the people who are responsible are not the ones by and large who are dying.

Death is real, but God does not have a deputy who is an angel of death in a punishing way. That's metaphoric. We could talk about how, that's a whole theology paper.

In the Torah, some of the ten plagues affected everyone, Israelite and Egyptian alike. Obviously the tenth plague could have, or else why would we have had to hide in our homes? Some of the plagues, like darkness, only affected certain regions.

It's been said lately: We are now the Egyptians, all of us. There's a lot to unpack there. What would you say? There is one way that we are for sure, if plagues are associated with responsibility -- this plague has something to do with human action. As we expand human development to areas and animals can no longer stay away from us, some of their diseases jump to us, and that is one of the things that happened with coronavirus.

Plagues present us with an extreme version of the limits of our control, and with an extreme version of magnifying our vulnerabilities. Those are both physical and moral vulnerabilities.

But no one should say that any individual is sick or dying or has lost someone because they individually deserve this.

This is what makes the plagues such a hard part of the story for me every year -- how to square the God of liberation and the God the plagues narrative.

Dayenu -- What Would Be Enough (pp. 18-22)

Again, maybe what to say is only the obvious. What seems like enough right now, for each of us to do and have, and what seems like we are not doing enough.

Maror (p. 24)

The Exodus story in the Haggadah oscillates, between reminders of redemption and reminders of bitterness. Once again, a reminder to us now not to forget those whose lives are especially embittered in this time -- whose already existing difficulties are compounded by this added risk to physical and mental health, family stability, and income.

Resilience stories and creativity stories are everywhere, in regular media and social media. Maror stories are real and we have to open our ears and hearts to them as well.

Eating a Feast (p. 30)

We deserve joy, we deserve rest and respite, we deserve to celebrate. We deserve to eat this feast.

Birkat Hamazon (pp. 31-36)

There are songs in our liturgy that describe the world as perfect and the divine as powerful and good. The blessings after a meal are like this.

These are not delusions. I think we sing such songs not because they describe the world, but because it's good to say and sing those things out loud, not just think about them. These are human dreams, built out of our words, our pictures, what we know. Everyone deserves these moments of being transported to a glimpse of the World To Come. Everyone deserves to see that that world is a song composed from the same words we use every day, just arranged in their most beautiful patterns.

**Ki Gavar Aleinu Chasdo -- For Your Love/Devotion is Overpowering
Open for Me Gates of Justice -- Tzaddikim Enter There (pp. 40-41)**

The first is one of my favorite lines in one of the shortest psalms. Overpowering love is not quarantined in this time. Maybe the people who are outside taking care of us, feeding us, keeping us powered, do not think they are doing it out of love. But *chesed* is the Torah's meaning for love as action, not love as feeling. The psalm says the response to *chesed* is *hodu* -- the word is a command that means both give thanks and acknowledge! Overpowering love acts, we should name as many of as we can. *Tzaddikim*, how do you even translate that -- they don't ask to be named and counted, but we have to know to see them too.

Min Hametzar -- From the Narrow Place (p. 41)

Here we are, doing Seder in a narrow place. *Yah*, the name of God in this verse, is both the shortest sound and the most unbounded sound we can make. The divine fits into the smallest space, and spans the largest.

Adir Hu**Chad Gadya -- Then Came the Angel of Death (pp. 42-54)**

It will be hard to sing the final verse of *Chad Gadya* this year. It may be hard to sing this entire beloved song. Maybe the thing to do is to put it earlier, to sing Adir Hu as the final song. It's not only a beautiful melody -- it's also a litany about divine power-and-devotion.

Or some of us will keep the songs in the order they are. And sing our way through the Angel of Death the way Jews always sing of outlasting and overpowering every threat. This is after all the story of the Jews. The ever-dying people, as Simon Rawidowicz famously described us, who use that as energy to figure out how to keep going.