



March 2021 – Nisan 5781

Dear Friends,

I remember last Passover. It was our first pandemic holiday observance, and we were overwhelmed, unsure, and either alone or with many fewer Seder guests than usual. Yet, for those of us who could, a remarkable thing happened that first Seder night. There was a palpable unity of Jewish peoplehood, memory, and destiny as so many responded with creativity and videoconferencing to enjoy their Passover Seder celebrations.

We often speak of the unity of our people. Rarely do we actually feel it. All too often our religious, political, cultural, and personal differences divide and weaken us. Last Passover, I sensed we truly were one in spirit and dedication to our people's master story and visions of justice, goodness, and freedom.

I participated in two Zoom Seders last year. One was our Congregation Beth El synagogue Seder Starter. One was with my family spread over four households. I'm sure many of you had similar experiences. I know of families and friends who gathered from all corners of the world for their first *Sedarim* together. I know of pictures around an empty table representing those who should have been present in person, not by video. If you weren't able to gather in such a virtual way, you were with those of us who could in spirit and the bonds we shared as the Jewish people's storytellers.

And now it's pandemic Passover II. With vaccines available, we sense we are at the beginning of the end to this pandemic. At least we all hope so. Months of separation and precaution await us still. We hope not many more deaths or much more illness lie ahead.

Re-telling the Passover story this year, I can't help but wonder how similar to, or different from, last year's Seder celebrations this year's will be. A few more of us together than before? Most of us still separate making use of Zoom? Zoom was new to us last Passover and now exhausts us.

I wonder what will be new and enduring from this year's Passover experience. Just like I wonder what new from our entire experience of stay apart months, more than a year now, will endure and become part of how we live tomorrow.

I want to read our experience into that of our Israelite ancestors. They, too, sensed they were at the beginning of a very long end to their enslavement. At least they all hope so as they begin journey to freedom.

Remember how it unfolds. God commands the Israelites to take the blood of a lamb and put it on their home's doorposts, as we read, "And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you; when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."

It is interesting. The focus of that commandment is on the people performing it. Rashi and other Torah teachers imagine the blood was placed inside of the slave's huts or homes, only for them to see. Think of that. Try to imagine the courage it took for a group of slaves to defy their taskmasters and anticipate better days. Or, try to imagine how this act portrays their openness to God's call, to accept the responsibilities of their impending freedom.

Now think of us. Think of what's been going on inside our homes. Perseverance to keep ourselves busy and healthy. Patience to manage children and school, partners and work. Anxiousness and we long for the freedom of normal days. Angst as we worry about the passing of precious time, days, weeks, and months we will never get back. Sadness in confronting illness and death. Hope in looking forward to our impending freedom. Of course the Israelites placed the lamb's blood inside their homes. Inside is where we live and strive, sleep and dream.

For those of us who could, a remarkable thing happened last year. Separated from one another, we joined together as one whole and holy people. I believe then we shared a palpable sense of unity and togetherness as the Jewish people. So may it be this year, with renewed optimism for the future and deeper appreciation inside our homes for the freedoms we seek and cherish.

Robin and I wish you a sweet and Happy Passover.

*Hag Sameah!*

Rabbi Ron Shulman