

Weekly Shabbat Message from Rabbi Rheins

Why This Night? Why Us

This Shabbat coincides with the first night of Passover. The joining of these two holy days elevates our appreciation of the Sabbath's expression of the sacredness of time as well as Passover's exploration of our quest for freedom from oppression. As Jews, we feel most keenly the pain suffered by victims of terrorism and religious intolerance. At our Passover *seders* we recite, "*Avadim ha'yinu*, "we were once slaves." We are reminded that our ancestors suffered terribly and that we should be sensitive to the suffering of those around us. The reading of the Haggadah reminds us that freedom is gained after struggle and sacrifice. We also take note that in every generation there arise new Pharaohs who conspire to spread hatred.

So, in keeping with this night of questions, let us ask again, "Why is it that Jews are so often the targets of those bent on evil?" Surely, it is because the ethical and moral ideals of Jews and Judaism stand in direct opposition to evil. Jewish prophets and sages have enlightened the world that there is but one God, the Creator of all life, who unites us all in a family of life. Tolerance, respect, justice, peace, compassion, charity and love are the bedrock of Judaism's vision for the world.

It is almost as if movements of fanaticism and intolerance know instinctively that they will not succeed unless they first crush the Jewish faith. No doubt, this is exactly why America, too, is targeted by rogue nations and violent groups. We who stand for a just and open society based on ethical, moral and democratic ideals are obstacles to those bent on terrorism and hatred, whether they be of the extreme right or the extreme left.

In the Mishnah, Rabbi Gamliel taught that whoever does not consider the meaning of *pesach* (Passover offering), *matzah* and *maror* has not fulfilled the purpose of the *seder*. Commentaries in various Haggadot and Rabbinic literature explore the meaning of God's "passing over" the homes of the Children of Israel when punishment was meted out against the Egyptians. They relate the eating of *matzah*, unleavened bread, made in haste, to the food of the poor and oppressed (*ha lachma anya*).

Other commentaries, namely the Zohar, glorify this humble food as celestial bread which served as an antidote to Egyptian bondage and corruption. We taste the *maror*, bitter herbs, to recall the pain of slavery and yet we lessen their bite with sweet *charoset* to remember that we have always overcome pain and disappointment, and, with God's help, we have always returned to our Promised Land.

Note that the purpose of Passover is not just to remember what happened long ago to our ancestors. Rather, we are to consider how WE have personally experienced God's blessings of freedom and redemption. Therefore, it is most appropriate that this year, when we discuss the miracle of our redemption from Egypt, we should also relate how fortunate we are to live in freedom. Likewise, we should add prayers to God for the protection and well-being of American and Israeli soldiers who are on the front lines

against terror. Let us give thanks for the men and women who protect our communities as police officers, firefighters and first-responders. Let us set aside some of our bounty and blessings for those who devote their lives to defending ours. As we enjoy the peace of Shabbat and the message of freedom on Passover, let us give thanks for those who guard our gifts of freedom.

Shabbat Shalom v'Chag Sameiach,

Rick

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