

Seeing the Symbols of Passover in a New Light

This year, our Passover *Seder* will most certainly be “different from all other nights.” Indeed, it will be different than any other Passover. On all other Passovers, we gathered with family and friends. On this Passover, we will sit alone or with loved ones with whom we share living space. On all other Passovers, we crowd around tables filled with good cheer, song and stories. On this Passover, we will do our best to connect with one another through the internet...doing our best to transcend the distances we keep in order to protect all that we cherish. On all other Passovers, we celebrated a feast for our redemption from oppression. On this Wednesday night, we will sit with mortal fear still hovering over our homes and community. This Wednesday, as we sit before the *Seder* plate and recite the *Haggadah*, our prayers for health and God’s saving grace will be born from our souls with added poignancy and conviction.

The night of the Passover *Seder* is always filled with great symbolism, and the COVID-19 crisis adds an even deeper dimension of meaning. Just as our ancestors were instructed to stay sequestered on that fateful night to avoid the tenth and deadliest of the plagues, so too are we staying inside, separated from others in order to avoid the modern plague. The Torah’s instruction on that *leil shimurim*, the night of guarding, resonates with modern relevance:

²¹ Moses then summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover offering. ²² Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel

*and to the two doorposts. **None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning.** ²³ For when Adonai goes through to smite the Egyptians, God will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and Adonai will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home. (Exodus 12:21-23)*

At first glance, this week's Torah portion, *Tsav* (Leviticus 6:1-8:36), does not seem to relate to Passover. For the most part, *Tsav* focuses on the rituals of the *Kohanim* (the Priests) as they performed the sacrifices and describes the ordination of Aaron and his sons. But look closer and we see that the *parashah* is filled with significance, especially for those of us struggling with the growing feeling of isolation, of having the darkness of anxiety close in around us. Consider these verses that begin this week's reading:

¹ Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: ² Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the burnt offering: the burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it. ---

⁵ The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out: every morning the priest shall feed wood to it, lay out the burnt offering on it, and turn into smoke the fat parts of the offerings of well-being.

*⁶ **A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, never to go out.** (Lev 6:1-2; 5-6)*

Just as the *Kohanim* were instructed to keep a perpetual fire on the altar, so too we are to understand the necessity of keeping the flames of faith and hope shining brightly in our hearts and in our homes.

The symbols of Passover remind us that every generation of our family has faced tests and challenges.

The bitter herbs (*maror* and *chazeret*) provide a palpable taste of the fear and agony suffered by those who came before us and of the pain that still afflicts so many in our own day. The bread of affliction (*matzah*) represents both a state of impoverishment, as well as the sudden opportunity and rush for freedom. And while the salt water represents tears, the green parsley represents spring and the renewal of life.

We tell the stories and share the symbols of our people's miraculous journey. During our feast of freedom, we lift up cups of wine to celebrate the fact that again and again we have faced oppressors and with God's help, we have not only survived, we have found creative ways to learn from the challenges in order to build a better and safer world.

Let the candles we light on Wednesday night be like the flames on the altar: fires of faith that reflect our eternal determination to live every day of our lives with a sense of blessing, joy and appreciation.

Susan joins me in wishing you and your loved ones a *zeesen Pesach*, a sweet Passover filled with meaning, love and faith that transcend the distances that separate us.

Chag Pesach Sameiach,

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