

Rabbi Lewis' message for April 2007

It begins the day after Purim. Although Pesach is still a month away, it begins to occupy our thinking long beforehand. Shall I buy that box of cereal now or will I have to throw it out if I don't finish it before Passover? When will I do my Passover cleaning, shopping and cooking? Where will I have seder this year? Whom should I invite? Which haggadah should I use? What recipes should I use if I have guests who are vegetarian, ovo-lactarian or vegan?

Passover confronts us with a question we struggle with on a daily basis: How do we plan for the future and yet not miss the holiness of the moment? The answer seems to be built into the process of preparation. If you plan for the future, then when the moment comes, you will be able to be fully present. If you don't plan for the future, you won't be ready when the time comes. So we find ourselves in a state of getting ready, at least in the concrete ways we prepare for Pesach. We have to be careful not to use these preparations as a distraction from paying attention to our spiritual readiness. We don't want to work so hard that we miss the holiness of the moment.

Pesach offers us an opportunity for holiness on three levels: spiritual, physical and moral. In that holy moment, we can redeem ourselves from our human imperfection on every level. Spiritually: we relive the experience of moving from slavery to freedom, from avdut to herut. We are required to personally relive that experience. Physically: we eat only foods particular to Pesach. We actually digest our experience of freedom. We have an awareness throughout the holiday of thinking before eating, of elevating the act of eating to a different level. We rid our bodies and souls of the hametz, the inflation of the ego and the material.

Morally: we are obligated to let all who are hungry come and eat.

And we are obligated to give. While tzedakah is always a mitzvah, it is felt that on Pesach particularly no one should go hungry, and so we make a special Pesach gift called Maot Hittin.

Ironically, it turns out that it's our most human struggles that even allow us to be holy. The rabbis point out that angels can't ever become holy because they aren't human and don't know what it is like to live with imperfection. Holiness would be meaningless to the angels; it is only meaningful to human beings. Angels can only be angelic; human beings can only be holy in humanly ways. At seder, we remember that we are priests in our own homes, our table is our altar, and prayer replaces the ancient sacrifice. We are holy and human, in all our imperfect glory. On this coming Passover, as we retell the story at our seder tables, may we all achieve the goal of being present in that holy moment.

Hag sameach v'kasher.
Rabbi Ellen Lewis