

April 2019 Message from Rabbi Dubin

Dear Friends,

When I think back at the benchmark memories from childhood, a few stand out:

- I remember the tether-ball game that I **almost** won against the best player at my day camp
- I remember the exasperation on my mother's face that time I walked barefoot on the streets of New York City the day after we had returned home from having spent the summer, as we did every summer, with my cousins and grandparents in Maine, where I pretty much **never** wore shoes
- I remember my interview for 1st Grade (that's right, I had to interview for a spot in the first grade!) when, for the life of me, I **could not** figure out how to use two straight lines to get three squares from a rectangle
- I remember the disbelief that I felt when I, as a 2nd Grader in Hebrew School, learned that Israel was just 26 years old

But my single clearest memory comes from March 26, 1975. That night like the 15th of Nisan every year, I had been looking forward to driving out to Long Island to experience Passover seder at my aunt and uncle's home with my extended family. I was excited to see my Uncle David's antique car, I was excited to see the ocean, and I was excited to sing the songs of Passover. But I was **especially** excited to receive my present when Elijah came bearing gifts to our seder (my Uncle Larry used to dress up and appear as Elijah when we opened the door for the prophet). That is, I was especially excited **until** I started itching.

At first it wasn't so bad, but before long, I just couldn't stop. It turns out I had contracted chicken pox. And so had my older brother. My parents and my sister would still go (otherwise, how would my grandmother have gotten there?), but my brother and I would have to stay home with the babysitter and skip the seder. I was devastated. Passover always has been – and I'm guessing it always will be – my favorite holiday. Friends, family, a great story, matzah ball soup, and a good excuse to eat as many eggs as I want. What's not to love about that? As an adult, though, I now have an even greater reason to love Passover so much, and it's one that I never quite got as a kid. The festival of Passover (which begins this year on Friday evening, April 19) is a holiday known by at least four different names:

- Chag HaMatzot (Festival of Unleavened Bread), which serves the purpose of bringing biblical history alive for the participant
- Chag HaPesach (Festival of Paschal Offering), which serves the purpose of emphasizing our gratitude to God for the miracle of salvation
- Chag Ha'Aviv (Festival of Spring), which serves the purpose of marking the season

- Z'man Cheiruteinu (Time of Our Liberation), which serves the purpose of celebrating our divinely ordained national destiny

Yes, Passover is many things. One thing Passover is **not**, however, is *Chag Moshe* (Festival of Moses). In fact, Moses, Moshe Rabbeinu ("Moses, our Rabbi" as he is referred to by Jewish tradition), the obvious hero of our story, is not only not made the focal point of the Haggadah, he's not even mentioned (except for one brief instance in one passing prayer). And so we ask, "Why? Why is the single most important person in the entire 4000-year history of our people, the one without whose leadership we may well have never managed to leave Egypt, absent from the telling of the story?" The obvious answer is that just as the Torah keeps Moses' burial site a mystery, lest we should be tempted to deify him at the grave, so too, the Haggadah keeps Moses out in order that we should not be led to assume it was through the miracle of this human being rather than the miracle of God that our people were freed. On this topic, the Jerusalem Talmud (Horayot 3:47, column 1:5) states: "When God wanted to remove Israel from Egypt the Holy One did not send a messenger nor an angel; the holy One, blessed be God, came directly, as is written, 'And I passed through the land of Egypt on that night (Exodus 12:12).'" So yes, this would be the obvious answer: By removing Moses from the Passover story in the Haggadah, the rabbis were protecting us from falling into the trap of crediting Moses for the miracle rather than God. But the obvious answer is not the only answer.

As you read the telling of the story this year, pay extra attention to the beginning of the final part:

"...In every generation each of us is obligated to see ourself as having ourself come out of Egyptian bondage."

That is, we are cautioned to think of liberation not as something that happened to those people back then, but rather as something that each of us today continues to experience. Were Moses to be the focal point of our story, we would be tempted to think of redemption not only as something that he (as opposed to God) made happen, but also as something that happened 3400 years ago and therefore now is ancient history.

We cannot let this become the message of Passover, because Judaism is not a religion of yesterday only. Judaism is a religion of ongoing revelation; it is up to each of us in every generation to participate in the discovery and telling of our story. Moreover, it is up to each of us in every generation to feel the pain of the experience that we suffered in Egypt, because if **we** don't, if we fail to internalize the pain of bondage, we risk looking the other way when others experience similar pain.

When I was a child, Passover was my favorite holiday because it was fun, it was exciting, it was an excuse to be with family, and it was a great story. Now, as an adult, it is my favorite holiday for all these reasons, but also – and especially – because it

challenges me to experience the suffering in a very real way, a way that will call me stand in the breach and make sure I do all I can to ensure that no other person will ever have to go through the same torment as I. As an adult, Passover has become my favorite holiday because as I see it now, Passover, when celebrated fully, has the potential to harness the energy and efforts of every celebrant – in concert with God – to accomplish nothing less than world redemption itself. So I ask again, “What’s not to love about that?”

Chag Pesach Sameach,
Happy Passover,
Rabbi Dubin

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