

## Parashat Shemini – 4/16/04

Someone asked me this week how Pesach ends. Do we do a seder on the final night? Something else? The answer is: the last day of Pesach is a holiday on which many congregations recite Yiskor. But there is no home ceremony; no more seders, no more hunting for the afikomen, no more feasting. As TS Eliot might say, Pesach ends not with a bang but a whimper.

It's easy to understand the question. From the minute Purim ends until Pesach begins, the month is consumed with preparation. You find yourself in the supermarket pondering questions like these: Do I buy more pasta now or will I have to throw it out because I won't finish it before Pesach? When I finish the box of cereal, shall I buy more or just forget it until after Pesach? Then there is the physical cleaning, changing of dishes, thinking about the menu for seder and whom to invite, studying the haggadah. For a month, you work so hard – and then suddenly it's over.

That phrase describes more than Pesach: you work so hard – and then suddenly it's over. It describes how a bar or bat mitzvah feels after studying for a year, becoming bar or bat mitzvah, celebrating and then waking up the next morning, thinking: I worked so hard and now it's over. It describes how the traditional mother of the bride often feels after a wedding; I worked so hard and now suddenly it is over. But even beyond these one time life-cycle events, isn't this also a description of looking back from old age, isn't it a metaphor for life itself? You work so hard, and then suddenly, it's over.

How do we tolerate this seemingly brutal reality?

Some people find comfort in the idea of afterlife. In other words, it isn't really ever over. Life doesn't really end, it just changes form and location. You work so hard and it seems like it's over, but it really isn't. Oddly enough, even Jews who believe in a concept of afterlife don't seem to find comfort in thinking this way. The Jewish thinking goes like this: I believe in an afterlife, but I don't know what it is. In any case, God has put us here on earth to live this life as meaningfully as we can. Whatever comes later has no impact on what I do now. It will be what it will be.

Some people find comfort in living in the moment. My friend Maggy was that way. She seemed to be able to enjoy whatever came along that day. She would attribute her attitude to her practice of Dzogchen Buddhism and meditation, a practice which helped her pay attention and be mindful of each moment. Because of Maggy's attitude, she was able to enjoy all kinds of things she would have missed otherwise. When the Upper School at Pingry realized they weren't able to cheer without having an advisor for the cheerleading squad, Maggy volunteered to be their advisor. She didn't know

anything about cheerleading, but she figured that the girls did. They just needed her to be present. When the Middle School at Pingry didn't have a basketball coach for the middle school team, Maggy became the coach. I suspect she knew even less about basketball than she did about cheerleading, because she pulled Micah into the gym one day and asked if he would help her coach. Maggy didn't need to know anything; they just needed her to be there. When Maggy was dying of cancer, she said she'd like it if she went to her funeral and there was a goodie bag there. And so, after her memorial service, there were goodie bags holding two items; seeds to plant and bubbles to blow. Even in death, Maggy was present and brought comfort to those she left behind. The idea that you work so hard and then suddenly it's over never would have bothered Maggy because even in death, Maggy managed to live in the moment.

Some people find less comfort living in the moment and more comfort in planning for the future. Why does the Torah tell us v'higgadeta l'bincha, you shall tell the story of Pesach to your children? Because it is through our stories that we live on, long after our bodies have returned to the dust. You work hard and it's over for you personally, but you continue to live on in the stories of our people as they are told to the children who will tell them to their children some day.

So you work hard on Pesach and then suddenly it's over. That's good training for us. We learn that we can do it; we can tolerate working hard and knowing it will end. What helps us to do it is simple: we honor the past, we bless the present and we live into the future every time we tell the story. My friend Milly says that even after 50 years of making seders, she always forgets how much work it is. You can forget the work when you remember the love of those who came before, when you experience love in the moment, and when you know your story will be told long after you are gone. So how do you end Pesach? Not with a seder but with a feeling, when you can say, I've worked so hard and suddenly it's over, not just with a feeling of sadness and loss but also with a feeling of satisfaction, a sense of personal redemption and a feeling of hope that if you keep telling this story, someday when you open the door, Elijah will enter.