

Rabbi's Message
"Sucker Sermon"
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Passover Today

How can I help but discuss with my family at this year's Seder service those themes of the Passover narrative and ritual that are especially relevant to the Jewish situation today!

I will point out, first, how virtually miraculous it was that thousands of Hebrew slaves in Egypt who had no religion to speak of and no culture worthy of the name, retained for centuries, despite their economic and spiritual straits, the memory of a common ancestry and the promise of a future deliverance to a land that was their own. Is this not precisely what is happening behind the Iron Curtain? Hundreds of thousands of our co-religionists there — without any facilities for a Jewish education and with no religious commitment or orientation — know they are Jewish and crave to identify as such. They sing on a Simhat Torah of a Torah of which they are abysmally ignorant; they dance to rhythms that hail from a land they have been taught to despise; and, they yearn for brethren with whom they can hardly maintain even a free correspondence.

I will try to formulate the steps by which Pharaoh sought to reduce a prosperous Jewish community in Egypt's Goshen to poverty and slavery and ultimately extermination. Why was there no resistance? Did the gradualism of the maneuvers make our forbears unaware of what was being done to them? Did Jews even aid and abet the oppressors as Jewish communists did, and are doing in the Soviet Union and in Poland, and in America's New Left?

I will compare what happened then to what happened in Hitler's Germany. And I will ask questions about the contemporary situation in the urban crisis in the United States. Is a similar process taking place here? Or is America different? Can it be different? Must it be different?

My family will express optimistic and pessimistic views. But I will caution them in the Passover spirit to avoid one pitfall. Pharaoh's people were not villains. The Bible speaks of them respectfully. They appreciated

Moses and the Jewish people. They were as much the victims of their masters as we were. So Jews today must never hate the common man, black or white, Muslim or Christian. Altogether too often the common man is himself the pawn of the very malignant powers that would destroy him even as they destroy Jews. As we react to Pharaohs, Hamans, Hitlers, and their modern counterparts, we must not become obsessed with hate for those as innocent as we.

And I will talk of Pharaoh's intransigence which brought upon him the many plagues. Does it differ from the intransigence of the rulers of Egypt. Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia? What is there in human nature that hardens our hearts so that we continue to pursue courses of evil even to our self-destruction? Is Niebuhr right? Does being human mean that we are also incorrigible? This does not square with our Jewish commitment that man can become perfect — aye, even like unto angels.

The sufferings of our forbears in Egypt I will recount in great detail. Do my children really know the meaning of suffering? How much do they know of the holocaust? Jewish males Pharaoh hurled into the water. Will my children think — as I will — of the Jewish mother in 1943, who, when her three children were being taken by the Nazis to a death camp, pleaded for, and was given, the right to choose one who would live, and lost all three because all three begged her to choose them and she could make no choice? The covenant against genocide is still not approved by my own beloved United States — England is closer to its ratification than we. How deep is my family's awareness of suffering? Do they know the meaning of virulent racism — suffered by Jews and Blacks? And what can they do to alleviate suffering! Must one not start with a compelling commitment to the dignity and sanctity of every human being as a creature in the divine image? And may not this essence of Torah be the reason why Jews had to learn the meaning of suffering in Egypt before they could receive the Torah from God after their liberation?

With my family I will eat the bitter herbs and the bread of poverty. The

matzo is made in haste without the enrichment of leavening ingredients. Has our abundance made us callous to suffering? Have our riches dimmed our vision of the values that are eternal? Have they also weakened our commitment to worthy causes and goals, and helped to widen a generation gap as our young become disillusioned with us because we have become obsessed with things instead of ideals? And the matzo is instant bread — made in haste. How speedily we must seize any and every opportunity to free ourselves of pursuits that enslave the body and the spirit! Jews tarry in Poland and Iraq even when the chance to emigrate is forthcoming. Jews in Latin America and North America practice “brinkmanship” with respect to total assimilation and because of the fleshpots hesitate to make the kind of move that will insure the continuance of their family’s Jewish identification.

My people are not all alike — anymore than my family is altogether of one mind. And at my Seder we will consider the situation of our youth. So many are Jewishly illiterate and would welcome enlightenment. The state of Jewish education in our country is so tragic that I wonder whether our enormous resources will be brought to bear upon the problem. Some do not even know what questions should be asked. And others are rebellious, hostile, beyond description. They are not only disrupting college campuses but they are supporting Israel’s enemies! Do we disown them? Do we let the world know that we have given birth to so many self-hating progeny? Or do we try to persuade them with love and toleration? The editor of the traditional Haggadah urges the use of the rod. Do we have a better approach available today?

And we shall talk of the Paschal lamb. What courage our forbears had to be god-busters in Egypt and slay — before the very eyes of the Egyptians — that which was the deity of their hosts! Do we have the courage to blast and bust the false gods of our day? Democratic techniques in the United States are in need of revision. Even constitutional provisions require amendment. Will we fear to upset patterns cherished and viable in the past but no longer adequate for the present? Our culture, too, has its folklore. Capitalism has its folklore. Communism has its false prophets. Will we be courageous to expose pretenders to the throne of the right, the good, and the true?

For half of our Seder service we will ponder the situations of the moment —

sordid and depressing. We will ponder the challenges, the threats, and the dangers. But then we shall burst into song — songs of triumph, songs of thanksgiving, and songs of hope. For this is the “leitmotif” of Jewish existence — challenge and constructive, redemptive, response. We do not reconcile ourselves to defeat. We shall always prevail. We are an eternal people and our heritage has its timeless message. “Hallel” we shall chant, and in two parts. Before the meal we shall rejoice over the exodus from Egypt. After the repast we will chant the second part — with an eye on the messianic era and its abiding peace and justice. Each of four stages in our redemption from Egypt we will have toasted with a cup of wine — a fifth cup we will dedicate to Elijah and the redemption yet to come.

Or has it already begun? And are we as unbelieving as our forbears were when Moses appeared before them?

So many questions we will have to ponder this Passover. But the questions have at least one enduring answer — Am Yisrael Chai — our people live and will live forever!