דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

A Noble Freedom

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> Many Virginians of middle and upper ranks aspired to behave like gentlemen. In the early seventeenth century an English gentleman was defined as one who could "live idly and without manual labor." The words "gentleman" and "independent" were used synonymously, and "independence" in this context meant freedom from the necessity of labor. (David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, 366)

To be a gentleman in colonial Virginia, one had to be free from the burden of working for a living. So important was this requirement that it was not unusual for these men to borrow heavily so as to avoid engaging in business (Ibid., 368). Of course, refraining from work by itself did not make one a gentleman or a lady; it required other valued aspects of a lifestyle of nobility, which included family connections, a certain education, and adherence to a specific code of honor.

On Pesah, we celebrate our freedom from slavery, but this is just the first part of *herut*: the "freedom" mentioned in the Haggadah (*hofesh*, a later Hebrew term for freedom, is today associated with both vacation and secularism). What were the next steps for the Israelites toward a freedom we can be proud of? Revealed law at Sinai; "choosing life" in the wilderness; establishing a polity and religious center in the Land of Israel; and developing the rich rabbinic culture that continues to evolve and guide us today.

We imitate nobles of the Roman era when we recline during the seder, and perhaps this is not only to signal that we are free from servitude. Although our ideals are very different from those of the Roman elite (or the colonial Virginian elite, whose "independence" relied heavily on the slavery of others), we declare at Pesah that we are a People that seeks to be defined by an aspirational set of behaviors and values.

Shabbat Hagadol
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שבת הגדול
מצרע תשע"ט

Passover After Pittsburgh

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

"Why is this night different from all other nights?"

Whether you are a twenty-something, a Millennial, a Boomer, or a member of the Greatest Generation; whether you are attending your first Passover seder this year or the latest in a long line of sedarim, chances are good that the discussion at your seder table will be different from all Passovers past. The Jewish community of North America has markedly changed since last Passover, shaken to its core by the synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh and a significant spike in anti-Semitic incidents in the United States as well as in Europe that seem part of a larger outburst of racism and prejudice. "Extremes of Right and Left Share Ancient Bias," declared a front-page story in the *New York Times* this week, the "ancient bias" being the one recounted in the Passover Haggadah. Pharaoh and his armies may have drowned in the Red Sea, as the Haggadah relates—but hostility to the Children of Israel lives on.

I wanted to know what younger Jews are making of the disturbing conjunction between the ancient Passover story and the news of the day. Would their celebration of a beloved family ritual take on new gravity? Would they look differently at Pharaoh, anti-Semitism, and the place of Jews in the world? I invited three students enrolled in JTS's List College to share their thoughts and feelings about Passover as the holiday approaches—a discussion that I recommend all of us have next week around the seder table.

"And the Egyptians did evil to us and made us suffer. They set upon us hard labor."

Not surprisingly, given the widespread popularity of Passover among American Jews, the students all said they love the family sedarim held in their homes; one of the things they like most is the lively discussion: "different perspectives," "huge arguments," the way one tells the same story each year but sees it in new and varied lights. Despite that variety of viewpoints, they agreed that the motives and

actions of Pharaoh and his people in persecuting the Children of Israel had never been a major topic of discussion at their sedarim. "It's always taken for granted that the Jews are going to win. So core points of the story are glossed over."

All confessed that they felt somewhat uncomfortable with the Haggadah's portrayal of the Egyptian people as worthy of destruction by God. "I don't feel guilty about it," one student said thoughtfully. "But I do feel uncomfortable celebrating the deaths and destruction of other people." The recitation of the ten plagues inflicted by God on Pharaoh and his nation seemed to accentuate the theme of vengeance, for all that the sages urged compassion toward the Egyptians who drowned in the sea and made ritual expression of that compassion a feature of the Haggadah.

Had Pittsburgh changed their attitudes in any way? "American Jewry now understands it is vulnerable," one student said, noting that her family—immigrants from a country rife with anti-Semitism—never had the illusion that Jews are safe here. The news of the shootings meant even more than it might have otherwise, another explained, because he learned of it when walking with his grandfather. It was not surprising to the student, even though he himself had never experienced anti-Semitism. Mass shootings are now common in America, and he had known at some level that anti-Semitism existed. "We're living with this extra thing we are carrying now." This shooting meant more than others, however. "I asked myself, 'What if this had been *my* Conservative synagogue?'" "I was frustrated by how little surprise I felt. Mass shootings are part of our culture."

"Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations that know Thee not."

I wondered if these students—all of whom possess a strong Jewish identity and are active in larger social causes—were thinking differently about non-Jews now than in the past. On the one hand, they agreed, "it's difficult to have a sense of empathy for people with sentiments of pervasive hatred . . . It's getting harder and harder to have empathy for them." On the other hand, no one they knew personally expressed the attitudes of the Pittsburgh shooter. Anti-Semitism, they believe, is a strand of the same hatred and violence with which other minorities are dealing in America these days. Their non-Jewish friends had expressed support after the shootings, even if not all of them could fully understand what it is like to be a minority.

One student noted that subjects like racism and anti-Semitism do not come up when playing basketball with friends. "It's not what counts" there—and that was

a good thing. None of their sedarim included recitation of the medieval prayer—a feature of traditional Haggadot—that God "pour out Thy wrath" upon Israel's enemies. It was less important to him that his non-Jewish friends "say X, Y or Z all the time" in response to anti-Semitic incidents, one student remarked thoughtfully, than that they "look past individuals, to the system that allows white supremacy to fester."

"This year we are slaves. Next year we will be free."

That was in fact the lesson of Passover, they agreed. "I do hope we are able to build a society where [events like Pittsburgh] can't happen." Rather than ask ourselves or others what we would have done if we had been living in the 1930s and 40s and faced Nazi persecution, the emphasis should be on what we are doing—and going to do—in America right now. Acknowledging one's responsibility to make changes in our society and the world is what Passover is about. The seder calls us to work for redemption, both individual and societal.

I had one final question for my students—and their answer saddened me. Did they expect to see an end to anti-Semitism in their lifetime? None of them did. I don't think I would have gotten that response from three Jewish college students in America a year ago. Nor would I have given it when I was their age, nearly 50 years ago. Mass shootings have apparently become a fact of life in contemporary America, as has the open expression of racism and all other sorts of hostility and prejudice. Suspicion of the stranger—every kind of stranger—has become alarmingly widespread.

"In every generation we must look upon ourselves as if we personally had come forth from Egypt . . . One must therefore sing before the Lord a new song."

I have new appreciation this year for the Haggadah's sober recognition of some disturbing facts of life in the world, then and now—the way minorities are often treated, and power abused; the enslavement of body and spirit; the grinding down of hope—and for the way it seeks to move us, seated around a table with family and friends, sated with good food and four cups of wine, not to dwell upon victimhood but rather to work for redemption.

"Next Year in Jerusalem," we declare at the conclusion of the seder—an expression of hope for a society free of anti-Semitism and all other forms of prejudice and persecution, and a declaration of determination that between this Passover and next we will stand up and do what we can to make that hope a reality.

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