

Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS

Approaching Pesah, Part 2: Who Are the Children at the Seder?

Let me offer a few thoughts on the part of the seder that has continually enchanted me since I was a child. The Haggadah presents four “types” of children, labeling each and offering directives to the parents on how to respond to each type. This is based upon four verses in the Torah that instruct the Children of Israel to explain (to their children) the rituals of Pesah. The Haggadah assumes that if something is repeated four times, with different language, that there must be a reason: that there are different types of children, each needing a different response.

The section opens with the words “*K'neged* (concerning/against) four children, the Torah speaks,” with the word *k'neged* implying, at least in part, some critique of each child.

The *hakham* (wise) child asks about differing categories, different ways to structure and systematize all that happens, and parents are guided to give a full, exhaustive (exhausting?) analysis of all the relevant halakhot (laws) and texts. I have always felt a certain tongue-in-cheek quality to this response, almost as if to say, “You asked for it—here it is!—all the facts at full length.” But there is no emotional/spiritual connection with this voluminous material.

The *rasha* (wicked) child famously asks, “What is this service to you (*lakhem*)?” The question of the *hakham* is useless without the added experiential aspect brought by the so-called *rasha*. The rituals (with all the academic analysis) are *only* meaningful if they mean something to the people engaged in the ritual. This child *wants* to have his or her teeth set on edge, for that is, in fact, a sign of being emotionally and spiritually present. More than anything, at your seder tell your children, your friends, your companions what this does mean for you.

The *tam* (simple) child might be the deepest of all. For the same Hebrew root is applied (Psalm 19) to the Torah: “*Torat Adonai* temimah” (The Torah of God is perfect!). The ability to ask the shortest question, “*Mah zot?*” (What is this?), may be the most profound: it invites the widest response and offers the chance to respond with what matters most to the person answering.

Sometimes there is no way to put the inner question into words; we have all been in situations where we don't know enough to ask anything at all. The fourth child, who does not ask, need not be too young to talk, but represents those who cannot find their own voice, who cannot frame their own question. The challenge then for Jewish ritual in our times is to open the conversation with all present, with enough depth for the sophisticated, enough soul for the spiritually curious, and enough understanding and welcome for those who don't know enough (or feel comfortable enough) to ask questions.

In truth, we all have a little of each of these children within us, and the seder invites us all to explore not simply “our inner child,” but “our inner four children.” I hope the explorations are joyous, deep, and fulfilling at all the seders where you are gathered.

As always, I am interested to hear comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Tzav Shabbat Hagadol

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS, as a letter to Ethan Witkovsky's class at Temple Israel Center.

The Family Story

I knew I'd learn something important about Passover from talking to you about the seder. High school students have not failed me yet. I asked what part of the seder you most enjoy; whether any aspect of it bothers you; which piece of the Exodus story, if any, means a lot to you personally; and how, or if, you relate to the seder as a *religious* ceremony. The Skype connection we had did not quite work out as well as we had imagined it would, so I did not get to see your faces as you reflected on and addressed my questions. But I got your voices, loud and clear. Here's what I learned from what you told me.

First—not surprisingly—the thing you like most about the seder is the food. Eating, including finding and eating the afikomen (not exactly a tasty treat), heads your list of seder pleasures. The next favorite of the group: singing. One of you mentioned *Had Gadya* in particular, maybe because the singing is loud, even raucous, and marks the end of the formalities. It soon turned out, as you talked back and forth about it, that the pleasure you get from the food or the singing does not come from these things in themselves, but from the fact that they are done with the family, including grandparents. Several of you like the fact that your family has created its own Haggadah for use at the seder, or that you put on a skit or play, act out the parts, and give awards for the best presentation of the story. Someone else's seder features recitation of the Ma Nishtana (Four Questions) in all the languages known to people around the table. Your pleasure at these things was palpable, except for the person who is tired of being the youngest at the table and always having to sing the Ma Nishtana.

You got me thinking about how clever the Rabbis were when they designed the seder for us about 2,000 years ago. They wanted us to focus on some of the harshest facts of human existence (there is slavery in this world, and even genocide), face up to some of the hardest questions imaginable (why does God let this happen? why should we care about the oppression of the Children of Israel in Egypt 3,000 years ago?), and take on some of the most difficult work one could imagine (to *do* something about the suffering; to become agents of redemption)—and they figured out a way to make us *enjoy* the exercise and feel good about taking on the job we'd been assigned. The lessons of Passover come attached to good things like food, family, and talking in a relaxed way. The Haggadah text even frees us from the need to start conversation from nowhere or to suffer its descent into mere chitchat. We know the talk will end at some point, and that a good meal lies ahead.

When I asked what is most meaningful to you in the seder, someone mentioned Miriam singing at the shore of the sea: “I see a little of her in me, and of me in her. She has spirit.” Someone else said it bothered him that Moses tried to get out of the responsibility to which God calls him. The group then picked up on the Haggadah's intention to relate the events of Egypt to our own lives, to connect us deeply and directly to what happened there long ago. It wants us to identify with the heroism of the midwives, the exaltation of Miriam at the experience of salvation, the humanity of Moses in shirking a duty he knows will mean risking his life repeatedly and sacrificing it for the cause of his people. Once we come to identify with

the suffering of others, as well as with the redemption they have experienced, we are more likely to realize that, as the Haggadah affirms, “It was not our ancestors alone whom the Holy One Blessed be He redeemed, but we also were redeemed with them.” This seems to be working in your seders.

The text continues immediately so that as soon as we get that point, really take it to heart, we know—or should know—that we are “therefore obliged to thank, praise, glorify and exalt the One who did these miracles for our ancestors and for us.” You didn’t much want to associate your families’ seders with *religion*, which to you (I think the one who said these words probably spoke for all) means “praying and services.” The seder is rather the family “telling stories,” you said, and therefore is “not at all like Yom Kippur,” though you conceded upon reflection that these were *biblical* stories, and therefore “tied to religion.” Someone said the answer to my question depends on how one defines religion (true); he believes the seder *is* religious because he associates religion with community, family, food and singing. (Judaism has long worked hard at this association. A synagogue with bad food after services will not succeed.) I’ll give the last word on this subject to the person who in my view went to the heart of the matter. “For me, Passover is about the Jewish People: what we were able to do long ago, how we became our People. The amount of religiosity at the seder depends on how closely the Jewish People is linked to the Jewish religion.”

I like that answer a lot. Not because the Jewish People somehow takes the place of religion, but because the Exodus led the Children of Israel to Mount Sinai, where the Jewish People got its start at the moment of entering the Covenant with one another and with God. Think about it: the end of their *avodah* (slavery) to Pharaoh made possible their *avodah* (worship and service) to God. Freedom from oppression opened the door to the freedom, the ability, to do good. Indeed, it imposed that responsibility on them. Those who are liberated have the duty to liberate others. Those who have tasted redemption have the obligation to testify that redemption is possible in the world—and to help bring it about. That’s what we mean by witnessing.

Our sacred story, the Torah, recounts that God, for reasons the Torah does not explain (the mystery lies beyond human understanding, I believe), needs human partners to join God in performing this work of redemption. We know we are no longer slaves. “God has led us from slavery to freedom, from anguish to joy, from sorrow to festivity, from darkness to great light.” Here we are, you and I, sitting at leisure with our families and friends, pretty happy and well fed, enjoying the warmth of a home in which everything sparkles for the holiday. We know we have it good. What to do? “Sing God a new song—hallelujah.” This *is* religion, by the usual definition, hymns and prayers to God, but the seder also wants another sort of “new song” from us. We have work to do that only we can perform using all the abilities and tools at our command. We have to help redeem the world. Feast tonight. Sing your heart out. Then go out and do at least one act of justice tomorrow, and another one of kindness.

You can’t do that on an empty stomach. I’m serious: if you are starving, or without clothes, your first duty is to provide these basics for yourself and your family. Those of us who don’t have to worry about these things have the operating equipment we need for the work of redemption. We have a story to carry forward. We have an instruction manual (the Torah, as interpreted with all the Jewish-human wisdom and knowledge we can bring to it). We have ancestors with whom we can identify—and descendants who are counting on us. We have God’s help. We can be confident that the acts of justice and mercy we do are performed in partnership with the Highest and Holiest Being we can conceive, even if we do not know how this works. The Torah gives us this assurance.

Last but not least—and first in the pleasures of the seder, yours and mine both—*we have our families*. Do you think you’d be able to love anyone or anything without the love stored up in you, thanks to infinite acts and expressions of love given you by your family? You can see love circulating around the seder table, if you look; or should be able to see it unspoken but no less present for being wordless. Love reverberates in the “*she-he-hey-*

anu” the family recites. It echoes in the way your family deals with the “Four Children” passage. You can taste it in the chicken soup made by your grandmother (or according to her recipe). It is there in the corny stories told by your uncle for the umpteenth eye-rolling time. It resounds in the recital of the Hallelujahs. Thank God, we say in response to all the goodness on view at the seder. Thank God. The love, and only the love, makes acts of redemption possible.

May Passover be good and sweet for all of us.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS.

Stoking the Perpetual Fire of Freedom

As we approach the festival of Passover, the domestic excitement and drama increase. This anticipation is seamlessly reflected in Parashat Tzav. Our Torah reading continues the theme of sacrifices that stands at the core of the book of Leviticus. The opening of the parashah describes the details of the burnt offering or *olah*. Leviticus 6:2–6 legislates, “The burnt offering will remain where it is burned on the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it. The priest will dress in linen raiment, with linen breeches next to his body . . . the fire on the altar will be kept burning, not to go out . . . A perpetual fire will be kept burning on the altar, not to go out.” How does the description of the burnt offering connect with and echo the festival of Passover?

The biblical observance of Passover was radically different from the one that has become familiar to us over the last 2,000 years. According to Exodus 12, the Passover rite revolved around the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb—a ritual that continued until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. God commands Moses and Aaron to speak to the Israelites and

“say that on the tenth of this month [of Nisan] each of them will take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household. But if the household is too small for the lamb, let him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby . . . the Israelites will slaughter it at twilight [on the 14th] . . . They will eat the flesh that same night; they will eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs . . . You will not leave any of it until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you will burn it. This is how you will eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in hand.” (Exod. 12:3–11)

For generations, until the sacrificial rite ceased, Israelites would follow this biblical ritual. Sacrifice came to be replaced with learning, and through learning we aspire to the same goals—nearness to God, closeness to community.

That said, the similarity between Leviticus’s more general description of the burnt offering and Exodus’s narrative of the Paschal lamb is striking. To begin, both texts underscore the element of time. Exodus 12 narrates a very specific prescribed timeline of events, and both passages mandate that the ritual is concluded by daybreak. Secondly, Exodus and Leviticus focus on the precise manner in which these sacrifices are to be consumed, and clothing plays a significant role. Just as the priest dons ceremonial clothes for the occasion, so too does the Israelite dress for the part. The external harmonizes with the internal as both body and soul engage sacred time. Finally, the perpetuity of the act also connects these two narratives. Leviticus speaks of stoking a “perpetual fire,” while Exodus declares that the Passover celebration will be observed “as an institution for all time, for you and your descendants” (Exod. 12:24). As we approach Parashat Tzav (this coming Shabbat), and our seder table (the following Shabbat), let us be attuned to ritual and raiment, to time and transcendence, and to community and continuity. Attention to all of these foci enriches the Passover and our Jewish journey.

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