

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



A Set Table

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For Parashat Tzav

I try to bless
 When I wear Your stars as my blanket;
 My winter coat when days are dark
 When life is a knife
 Resting on the altar of time.

I try to bless
 Because my bread is warm,
 And the salt at my table
 Is my reminder.
 Fine grains of labor and endurance.

When the smoke fills you
 When the fat is burned
 And the flour poured
 I have to ask
 Do you bless as well?

Your table is set
 Widows and orphans, your guests.
 If we could sit together,
 I know, I am certain,
 I would only be able to try.

 Shabbat Hagadol
 Parashat Tzav 5780

 שבת הגדול
 פרשת צו תש"ף


Passover in the Time of Coronavirus

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

What a difference a year makes—or a week, or a day. Last year at this time, reflecting on a period of rising anti-Semitism in America and Europe, I wrote that “discussion at your seder table will be different from all Passovers past.” This year, many of those discussions will happen virtually, and attendance at physical seder tables will likely be limited to close family or friends. Many people may be sitting at the seder table alone. The plague is upon us, striking every part of the world without regard to national border or religion. The holiday will not be the same, because we are not the same.

It has been my custom for a number of years to speak with students as Passover approaches, in keeping with the message in this week’s haftarah that God will “reconcile parents with children and children with their parents” before the prophet Elijah returns to announce “the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord,” (I encourage you to have similar intergenerational conversations at your seder.) Two List College students shared their thoughts on the meaning of the holiday with me via a Zoom call a couple weeks ago; several others had been scheduled to join us but were busy packing or already on their way home, JTS having announced the closing of its residence hall. My conversation partners expected to get on a plane soon to be with family. That was the aspect of Passover that meant the most to them, and they worried that the risk of infection might prevent grandparents from joining them at the seder table.

The section of the Haggadah dealing with the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians had always been “a really troubling part of the seder, really powerful,” the students told me. It would be especially so this year. Neither student was comfortable with the notion that God had intervened in nature to

bring the ten plagues as punishment for Pharaoh's refusal to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Their refusal to see the coronavirus pandemic as caused by God in reprisal for human wrongdoing reinforced that view. (Thankfully, I have thus far seen only one rabbinic statement that attributes the plague we are living through to divine wrath.)

I suspect that other responses to the seder may be influenced by the current pandemic as well. Discussing the so-called "wicked child," one student said she accepts the idea that some people are wicked but disagrees with the response recommended by the Haggadah: in her words, "isolation, or casting away." The other student, reflecting on aspects of Judaism or the Jewish community that she dislikes singled out "Jewish insularity" and "disengagement." Asked whether they believe the Exodus from Egypt was a historical event that actually happened in anything like the manner recalled at the seder, they agreed that it might have occurred—but that's not what matters. "I don't really care. What makes our narratives special is the values and lessons they teach us, the laws we gain from them . . . the moral takeaways and shared language." I wonder if this view too may have been reinforced by the current crisis. Some things matter less than they might have only a few short weeks ago. Other things matter far more.

One of my fondest memories of childhood seders was my mother's consternation—usually turning to laughter—at the passages in the Haggadah where the Rabbis multiplied the number of plagues. The Torah says that Pharaoh's magicians called the ten plagues "the finger of God," and that at the Red Sea the Egyptians saw God's "strong hand"—meaning that the ten need to be multiplied by at least five. And since each plague revealed multiple divine attributes, that number too should be increased. Rabbi Akiba reaches a total of two hundred fifty plagues on the sea, and his arithmetic leads directly to the singing of *Dayenu*. Even much less, we affirm, "would have been enough for us."

Though just as Jews are reminded in a famous midrash that God wept over the suffering of God's Egyptian children (BT Megillah 10b, BT Sanhedrin 39b), so we too should not celebrate their downfall with a full cup of wine or joy, it seems safe to say that we will consider the terror of the plagues differently this year. Our rivers have not turned red with **blood**), but the death toll in overcrowded hospitals is running high. COVID-19 is not carried by **vermin** or transmitted by **animals** or **flying insects**, but invisibly, silently, person to person. The **darkness** it brings on us is symbolic, and the

current plague **slays first-born** only in the sense that the virus strikes the elderly with particular virulence. My mind keeps conjuring up the pictures described in the Torah of Egyptians fearing to venture outside because of the hail and unable to "get up from their place" because of the **darkness**. I keep thinking about the scene from Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* in which an eerie cloud blows the tenth plague through the streets and into Egyptian homes.

Our plague, unlike the ten, does not distinguish among nations or religions. If on the one hand it has caused gates of entry to be shut down at virtually every national border, on the other hand it has strengthened the sense of global connectedness. We are all literally in this together, as members of the human species; we are battling the disease together, using scientific and medical tools that we possess, according to Judaism and other faiths, as creatures fashioned in God's image. The common struggle to save human lives, at great personal and collective sacrifice, testifies to worldwide respect for human dignity and worth.

From its very first paragraph the Haggadah seeks to expand our sense of the "we" who are enslaved this year but who next year, we hope, will be free. It urges us to accept responsibilities incumbent on us as part of that greater "we," both when we are trapped in the state of darkness and when we have gone forth into great light. "Not only our ancestors were redeemed, but we with them . . . let us therefore sing before God a new song." Parents turning to children and children to parents is one note of that song; recognizing our participation in larger wholes and greater causes than ourselves or our group is another; thankfulness for the food on the table and other daily blessings—which no one will take for granted this Passover—seems the very first antidote to isolation, the first step toward redemption.

May all our Passover celebrations be meaningful, and as joyful as conditions allow.

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