

Metzora 5784  
Shabbat Hagadol

מצרע תשפ"ד  
שבת הגדול

## In Each and Every Generation

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Twice in the Passover liturgy we hear the phrase, “in each and every generation.” We are taught that “in each and every generation a person is obligated to see himself as though he had participated in the Exodus from Egypt.” On the other hand, we are reminded that “in each and every generation they arise against us to destroy us.” The consolation is that The Holy, blessed be God, presumably saves us from their hands.

This is a *d’var Torah* of despair and hope. I want so much to see myself as though I had left Egypt, or at least Gaza. I yearn for this, as I am horrified at the wanton destruction we are wreaking on the innocent Palestinians in Gaza. It recalls the Midrash in which God rebukes the angels for rejoicing as the Egyptians of yore were buried by the Sea. “My creatures are drowning, and you wish to sing!?!”

And I want so much to see our hostages return safely home from their captivity, their all too literal enslavement there. For this is a *d’var Torah* about my young cousin Hersh, who on October 7, six months ago, was viciously attacked by utterly evil terrorists as he celebrated his 23rd birthday at the Supernova Music festival. They blew off part of his arm, put him in a truck, and took him captive into Gaza. We pray he is still alive. We pray that he will return home.

But we know that Hersh and his fellow captives and their families will never be the same. The damage has been done in so many insidious ways, whether the loss of an arm, or the loss of innocence of so many young women now enslaved, or the loss of naivete of a generation of carefree Jews, or the loss of a (false) sense of invincibility for the entirety of Israel and the Diaspora.

I know enough about Jewish history to give credence to the Haggadah’s dour view, “in each and every generation they rise against us.” I even know that God has not, necessarily, saved us from their evil hands. The litany of destruction that began with Egyptian enslavement and has come full circle to Gazan captivity is a reification of what the late historian Salo Baron decried as “the lachrymose theory of Jewish history.” He insisted that we Jews were no worse off than others. And that there was so much to Jewish history beyond a vale of tears.

As a teacher of Jewish texts for half a century at JTS, I celebrate all that is good and right in Jewish history. I celebrate our culture, our literary genius, our joyous holidays. I rejoice in our State of Israel. I visit there often and marvel at its achievements. I am amazed that after many years, before October 7, we appeared to be living in peace with our neighbors in the region.

Alas, this was but a chimera.

I embrace our American Jewish community for its enormous accomplishments, even as I watch our numbers dwindle due to the mixed blessings of assimilation. I thrill to see how American Jews are comfortable in the corridors of power, even as I fret at the fragility of this moment.

I see European Jewry reborn and beginning again to flourish. But I know only too well, the cruelty and degradation my fellow Jews suffered there less than a century ago. That, too, was a literal enslavement from which God redeemed us.

This is my task on this Shabbat Hagadol, the great Sabbath before Passover. Before we reenact the Exodus at our families' tables worldwide, it behooves us to reflect this Shabbat on how we got here. The last century might have been the worst of all the preceding centuries of Jewish life. And, it might also have been the very best.

We can weep this Passover at the empty seat at our tables, the one where cousin Hersh should be sitting. And at the same time, we can rejoice for the extraordinary number of synagogues and the exceptional number of students learning daily about their Jewish heritages. We taste the salty tear-like water in which we dip the greens during our seder, our eyes water at the sharp bitterness of the horseradish we nibble. And then we praise the soup, the appetizers, the main dishes, and the sweet desserts (deserts?) that we shall enjoy. We wistfully sing an invitation to Elijah to join our seder, and we give lip service to the hope that the Messiah comes in his wake.

I would be thrilled to learn that there could be such a thing as a Messiah who will bring our salvation. But this Passover, I would sing a full *Hallel* to God, our Savior, if only I could welcome home cousin Hersh.