

# Pesach 2009

Nothing typifies the ambivalence of Jewish life today more than the famous Midrash that is repeated in the Talmud:

Rebbi Shmuel Bar Nachman in the name of Rebbi Yonatan said, “[At the Red sea] the angels wanted to sing a song before the Holy One Blessed is He, but He rebuked them saying, ‘My handiwork is drowning in the sea and you want to sing to me?’” Rebbi Yose Ben Hanina said, “Even if He will not rejoice He allows others to.”(Sanhedrin 39b)

What is more important, a sense of humanity or national survival? This ambivalence is reflected in the fact that during the morning services during Pesach we reduce the number of Psalms of Joy, Hallel, from the whole collection to half. Similarly we tip or drip out some of our wine on the Seder Night when we list the Ten Plagues, precisely because our celebration was at the expense of others.

Despite all that the Egyptians threw at us and despite their emblematic role as cruel oppressors and child murderers, we are commanded not to hate Egyptians (Deuteronomy 23) and to feel a concern for all humans, given that we are “all God’s children”. It sounds rather un-Biblical or un-Jewish, given our constant battles to survive what the rest of humanity throws at us and our own amazing and consistent capacity to shoot ourselves in the foot (or rather the mouth).

The most obvious and common theme of the Passover Seder is freedom from slavery. This resonates because until relatively recently so many of us lived under some form of slavery—political, if not physical. The emergence of Jews over the past century from overwhelming poverty and disadvantage has changed most of us dramatically. Not only are we equal in rights and opportunities in the most successful parts of our globe, but we have our own land that is doing very well, in comparison to so many others. And Jews have power and influence way beyond it, though perhaps not as much as our enemies suggest. Sadly, as we know only too well, we are also experiencing a return to the antagonisms and enmity that existed before the Second World War and the Holocaust. While we must avoid the debilities of victimhood, we cannot ignore how we are regarded by so many.

If the traditional question at the Seder was always, “What is it like to be enslaved and then liberated,” now the question increasingly is going to be, “What does it feel like to be hated.” We might even add an extra one to the Four Questions, “Why do Europeans vote that Israel is the greatest threat to world peace today?” Even if many of the voters have been Muslims with a specific agenda, this still doesn’t explain the overwhelming size of the negative vote. What is it about us? Have we done more wrong than anyone else? Or is it just something non-rational about our very being?

So we may add an extra layer of interpretation to the questions of the Four Sons. The Wise Son will direct this question to humanity, "Why is hatred of the other so endemic?" He might suggest, in a mystical vein, that we are suffering because we have failed to live up to our own standards. The Wicked Son will phrase his question in terms of it being our fault for insisting on remaining clannishly distinct and contrary, too preoccupied with our own survival. He might even add we excite envy because we are so successfully adaptable. The Simple Son will ask what it matters, if he is living perfectly happily without being aware of any threat to him personally. And the Son who doesn't yet know there is a problem needs to be taught some history and answers so that he can defend himself when he goes to university.

The truth is, there is a universal and humanitarian spirit of the Torah and Midrash that we have failed to live up to in certain ways. Even the Biblical command to remember Amalek involves remembering, not hating. Hatred is debilitating, demeaning, and destructive, yet historical circumstances have dragged too many of us down into this black hole. Fighting for survival and delighting in it can never be at the expense of human sensitivity.

The point has been labored that the Torah tells us 36 times to remember what it was like to be slaves and thus to be sensitive to others. But have we paid much attention? Our religion has shifted its emphasis from humanitarian issues to increasing strictness and exaggerated refinement, increasing costs year after year till the burden has become almost intolerable. Kashrut, instead of being a service to the community, has become a massive profit centre and mechanism for social control. Consider how many people feel alienated or uncomfortable in Jewish communities because of their financial limitations. So if we haven't even been sensitive to the needs of the disadvantaged or financially stretched in our own community, how could we possibly have been sensitive to wider concerns?

Yet of course it would be unfair to suggest this is the only picture. For every Hassidic Master who makes use of a private jet there is another who enforces sumptuary laws that restrict excessive indulgence. Many dispense huge sums in charity. As with business ethics, the significant voices of the ethically aware are too often lost in the glare of financial crimes and failures.

Pesach is a time for us to reflect how fortunate we all are in one way or another. But such fortune must not blind us to the spiritual and financial needs of those around us. Eat, drink, and be merry, but don't forget to connect.