

Passover At Home

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

What do we mean by a family? There are so many new definitions and variations. Too often people who, for circumstances beyond their control, cannot offer a conventional family life feel somehow inadequate. It needn't be that way. I take my clue from Pesach.

Pesach is special in the sense that it the most home-centered of our festivals. The highlights of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipur are the services. But on Pesach the focal point is the Seder, at home. And, of course, completely cleaning out and preparing the house can involve lots of preparation beforehand.

It is true that in general Judaism gives us much more to do at home than in our places of worship. It commands all the laws and ceremonies that govern home life, from the kitchen to the dining room to the bedroom. At every festival, every Shabbat, we come together to eat in our homes. On Pesach the rituals of the Seder go a stage further than usual. They include complex combinations of different foods and ways of eating them. There is the obligation of studying together, getting everyone involved in asking questions, in trying to understand the significance of the ceremony and our very existence as Jews. No other Biblical festival involves the children, the whole of the family, in the readings and customs as does Pesach and the Seder night. But is it the family or the home that matters most?

At a time when we tend to talk about "family life" in all its varieties, it strikes me as significant that the Torah on Pesach talks mainly about households rather than family. Generally speaking, the language of the Torah describes the building blocks of a healthy moral society. We would expect it start with Mishpacha, family. Then would come the Beit Av, the extended family. From there we expand to Shevet, tribe, and finally arrive at Am, people. The implication would be that if we build healthy parts the sum of the parts will be a healthy one, as well. There are, incidentally, two exceptions to this sequence. In the Book of Esther, verse 9, "family" extends to "state and city". And in Devarim (Deuteronomy) 29, family comes after the individual: "A man or a woman or family or tribe."

Perhaps then it is not the family but the person. The relationship between individuals is the essential defining characteristic of family. If so, the conventional family is not the crucial building block of society. After all, there are plenty of unconventional families. There are single-parent families, couples of all varieties, families reduced by war, death, and sickness. What really matters is the nature of what goes on in those different structures and relationships. It is what goes on in the house, as a haven. The home is a place where there is security and love, an educational and moral laboratory. That is crucial for healthy human development.

What intrigues me about Pesach is the way the Torah in laying out the

festival and its obligations stresses Bayit, house, rather than Mishpacha, family, which doesn't get a mention. Passover is after all the first command that was given to the people as a whole. In Exodus 12:13 it says:

“On the tenth day of this month, every one of them shall take a lamb, according to each household of their fathers, a lamb per house. And if the household is too few for a lamb, let him and the neighbor near his house share it according to the number of the souls.”

It is the household that seems to be the essential element here. They come together not by family, but by household, and most importantly, the souls within. Each household had to put blood on its door posts so that the Almighty would pass over their homes and not kill their firstborn. That, of course, is where the festival gets its name. Passing over the homes.

There is a tendency in religions to downplay the issue of individuality in favor of conformity to the community. But there is creative tension between them. We need both to be balanced. We tend to be self-centered. It is the individual who makes up the community, after all. That is why our tradition forces us into communal association, concern for the welfare of the community, charity in all its forms, and communal prayer to counterbalance the solipsism. But on the other hand, without an individual experiencing the beauty of the tradition, without a personal, existential pursuit of a connection with God, we would be left with empty routines and just social affiliations.

That is why we have developed the idea of “Deveikut”, of reaching out to try to touch, feel close to God. Our mystical tradition has called on us to preface each mitzvah with a meditation on it with the words “Hineni Muchan uMezuman”, “Here I am ready and prepared to perform this act.” It is this personal commitment that lies at the core of our tradition, and it is this which is the essential building block, the atom of our structure.

That is why the Seder requires each one of us, as individuals, to imagine what it must have been like to be enslaved and then freed. But we cannot live only for ourselves, without a household, or without a people.

One is constantly assailed nowadays with the failure of families, abuse, cruelty, and violence. When relationships collapse suffering ensues. And one wants to shake people and ask them if they fully appreciate the consequences of their actions. But we can rebuild in different ways. We are redefining family here to mean something very different to the idea previous generations had of families. And that is all well and good, so long as the responsibility of caring human beings is preserved. In other words, no matter how we define families, what really matters is what is going on in the house, the home. Love and respect is what defines a good relationship. That is what children need, no matter what kind of home it is or who the loving caregiver is.

Happy Pesach.