

Seder

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Every time we sit down to a meal, according to the Talmud, it is an act of religious celebration. The ancient Temple sacrifices were not just a matter of formal communal gifts to God. They were also a system of getting everyone, priest and lay, rich and poor, to share food. Originally all slaughter for food was sacrificial. Only later did it move beyond the sanctuary.

In this day of restaurants and hotels, the idea of sharing ones daily meals has been largely lost. Traditionally every meal had to be shared with the poor, the needy, and travelers. At every meal we were supposed to thank God before and after. At every meal we were expected to study something. Every meal was a symbolic reenactment of a sacrifice on the altar. In fact only on Shabbat and festivals is all of this normally observed nowadays. But at the Seder on Pesach we really "make a meal of it".

There are the rituals and blessings and customs and, indeed, peculiarities that serve not only as symbols but also as reasons to ask and to challenge. Uniquely amongst religions and customs comes this insistence on everyone participating, of not just sitting passively, but questioning.

The Talmud mentions the questions, four in the Babylonian and three in the Jerusalem, that have to be asked. But interestingly it says that if you were to ask any other kinds of halachic or religious questions you would not need to ask the formal ones. It's the idea of asking that trumps the text. The four sons who ask theirs are emblematic of different approaches to religious issues and identity. Rebbi Elazar Ben Azaria represents the rabbinic dialectic but also the challenge to authority. He played a crucial part in the rebellion against Rabban Gamliel's authority. And the rabbis in Bnei Brak remind us of Rebbi Akiva's controversial support for the Bar Kochba revolt against Rome. All of these are expressions of individuals asking and questioning at different times and under differing circumstances.

The Hagadah gives different types of answers. One, "We were idol worshippers" saw us as having broken with idolatry: spiritual freedom. The other "we were slaves" talks instead about the physical freedom from oppression, slavery, compulsion. One is personal, the other personal and national. But the text was only the intellectual hors d'oeuvre. Scholars and students spent the rest of the night in debate and discussion, not just of religious matters but of political issues and the steps to be taken to free one from the cultural and physical slavery of later oppressors. Greece, Rome, Christianity, and Islam.

Equally unusual is the emphasis on involving the children in a religious and educational experience. They are also encouraged to ask questions (rather than "be seen and not heard"), to search for the hidden Afikoman. It was for them that the popular mittel-European folk songs were adapted to the Hebrew or Aramaic.

But in my experience most kids and many adults have nodded off long before they get anywhere near the grand finales. Over time more was added to the Hagadah that might have resonated with mystics or scholars but that now simply leaves most moderns bemused, frustrated, and longing for it all to end as soon as possible so as to get on with the food and drink.

In religious homes time is not an issue. The interest in analyzing the text, bringing other sources and debates from classical Jewish rabbinic literature to bear on complex questions, or coming up with one's own solutions are all part of traditional table talk under normal circumstances. This is all the more relevant on a night when the greatest of rabbis and their students went on debating and arguing until dawn.

But outside of a traditional religious household, most of the text of the Hagadah has become alien and irrelevant. There have of course been all kinds of creative solutions, from a secular Israeli harvest Hagadah to the inclusion of a wide range of quotes, articles and poems dealing with human rights issues and the wider question of slavery and freedom. And all that is to the good. But, even so, I suspect most guests at the Seder find it hard going and, any way, year after year it all loses its novelty.

It is my belief that the Talmud was aware of this problem and that most people were not scholars. That was why the Talmud says that you should at least say "and God brought us out," and again says that "every person should try to imagine that he or she has escaped." We need to imagine, to place ourselves in history. That, they are saying, is the essence of the Seder. They knew that most people would not have the patience to read every word and pay attention all the time. They would need a minimal alternative. Otherwise, why would Rabban Gamliel say that to fulfill your obligation you only have to talk about Pesach, Matza, and Maror?

So if you find yourself amongst or hosting a reluctant group of participants, I suggest paring down the Seder to the core paragraphs and blessings and allowing all the guests to talk freely about their own personal experiences and voyages, of "servitude" and freedom, at home or at work, of being forced to do what they did not want to, of all the issues of personal integrity and morality that lie at the core of Jewish life.

If our freedom from Egypt, whether it was historical or symbolic, was for us as a people to live ethical lives and to set a moral examples (even at election time) I suggest we have plenty to discuss. For that matter so do our rabbis, too many of whom this past year have found themselves accused and convicted of a range of crimes that call their moral integrity into question.

If the Seder Night on Pesach is to be more than an empty ritual, we really need to take it seriously and personally and not hide behind an impersonal text. And if the evening leaves a bitter taste in one's mouth, or a dry one because it had encouraged us to be self-critical, then it will have been worth it, instead of being an experience of ploughing through a text that we read and then ignore for another year.