

Just Do It

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

“Just do it” is, of course, the slogan of Nike, Inc. But I think we Jews should adopt it. Let me explain.

Why is Pesah, Passover, so popular amongst so many Jews who have little interest in its religious life throughout the year? It is, after all, a festival that requires extensive preparation in clearing one’s house of all leavened products. It involves serious expenditure in stocking up with a complete range of kosher lePesah foodstuffs, most of which are quite unnecessary if one were to follow the letter of Jewish law rather than keeping up with the religious Smiths.

With the more comfortable Orthodox, Pesah is an occasion for an expensive pilgrimage to Jerusalem or to other luxurious destinations. That certainly takes care of much of the grind—but at the expense of intimacy, autonomy, and spiritual authenticity. And exotic as the Seder night might be, most people dash through the text or give up reading the Haggadah and cannot wait for the food. Communal Seders perfectly illustrate the lack of interest in the core of the Passover ritual that requires discussion and debate of historical, spiritual, and political issues. In many families, coming together is often an obstacle course of tensions and personal animosities, and younger generations disconnect from the religious baggage and personal histories of the older. These are the complaints of those who do participate. Sadly, most Jews are not even at the table.

“Just do it” can mean one of two things. It can mean that one should just forget one’s inhibitions, excuses, or apathy and get involved. Go to the gym, not just think about how beneficial it might be. Push oneself to work harder at keeping fit and healthy, even if it is often painful. Our modern-day slavery, our twenty-first century Egypt, is pleasure, self-indulgence, material comfort, and fighting to preserve our own against the rest—all for me and to hell with the rest.

The popular antidote seems to be an ideology of political correctness that is just as self-defeating, in that it too focuses on oneself and one’s received attitudes, with little concern for objectivity. It is secular dogma every bit as dangerous as religious dogma. The result is that very few people nowadays actually talk to people with different ideas or values or log on to opposing sites. Trump is right—one-sided, false news, biased reporting is the new norm. Not that his tweets are objective, either.

The Seder is designed to encourage discussion and debate, not simply to repeat clichés year in year out. Even those rabbis 2000 years ago who knew it all, differed on matters of law and politics, stayed up all night debating, exchanging ideas. If we don’t invite alternative views, there can be no genuine discussion. The Haggadah describes having different sons, different opinions, different generations. It is predicated on asking questions. As the

Talmud says, if one asks why, if one challenges the established mindset, one has fulfilled one's obligation and does not need to recite the traditional "Four Questions". They are there only in case no one asks anything else. One has to say, "I was there." To try to understand what slavery, persecution is like. It is better to skip the whole narrative and have one good existential debate!

There is another aspect to doing it. Passing it on. Letting others know what matters to you. The ceremony includes a range of items and rituals designed specifically to encourage children to ask why. Questions require answers, knowledge, study, to pass it on to the next generation. (As the other cliché says, "If you don't use it, you lose it.") The serve to educate, to stimulate. All things we might pay lip service to, but too often we hand over to others.

Being Jewish in any meaningful way requires action every day, not just special days. We might scorn petty ritual, an over-dependence on doing things by rote. But the alternative is abstract theology, accepting slogans and vague intentions instead of doing things. Judaism is a way of living, as opposed to a religion. It is a call to action, spiritual fitness. If anything, "just do it" should be the slogan of Judaism.

Thinking of others is difficult and often disruptive and painful. Once we are warm and safe, we no longer think of the poor, the hungry, the slaves, the refugees. I can't think of another religious ritual that says: "Reduce your pleasure because your enemies suffered; drink less wine because your freedom came at a cost." Humans drowned in the sea. They are still drowning. Never forget that. Never forget what slavery does to a person, how it dehumanizes. Never forget that so many others still are enslaved one way or another. You cannot fully rejoice in your good fortune unless you realize that others are without it.

"Just do it" can also mean that it is the act of doing that gets one further involved and ultimately enables one to enjoy and benefit from the immersion in what one does. It is immersion that is required to feel at home in any strange or different culture. The less one does, the more one feels alienated and strange. Actions lead to actions. Thoughts and intentions are too often dissipated and lead nowhere.

Why do so many Jews still keep the Seder ritual on Pesah? Precisely because it demands so much. It is because Pesah has so many things to do, because it is not easy. But the more one does, the easier it becomes. The more you have to pass on. The more you enjoy it. The more there is something worth preserving.

Do you sometimes wonder if it is really all worth it? Why bother? Who cares? The answer lies in the doing! On Pesah we are commanded to "just do it." That is the secret of Jewish survival. We and our children need to learn the lesson and remember why.