

Passover or Passunder?

Pesah was always intended to be a challenge – To our way of life and our values.

Egypt, the most advanced civilization of its time, was being challenged by a single man with a different way of looking at things. Akhenaten (1336 BC or 1334 BC) tried to replace the multiplicity of Egyptian gods with one Sun god. His revolution did not last long. But the message of Moses was much more than just changing the way people worshipped.

The Israelites had difficulty understanding him. Perhaps they thought Moses would simply lead them out of servitude. It took a long time before they could assimilate the idea of a nation with a mission – to be an example of caring human behavior under one universal God.

The first command to the Israelites concerning Pesach was to take a sheep, considered holy by the Egyptians, tie it up in public and display it with the clear intent to sacrifice it. Just imagine today, in India, where the Hindu majority treats the cow as sacred if a group of Muslims tied up cows to sacrifice them? There would be catastrophic sequences.

This was a brave challenge to the Egyptian hierarchy. It was also a challenge to the idea that only priests could sacrifice. Egyptian society so revered the priesthood that even Joseph had feared to confiscate their land during the great famine. Every Hebrew slave could now take on the role of a priest.

Then, they were commanded to daub blood on their doorposts as a public statement of defiance and commitment to the rebellion. Tradition says that many balked at such dangerous identification. There followed what might have been the first employment protest when they demanded financial compensation from their oppressors. This was all radical stuff. The night of the Exodus, they gathered as families to eat the roast lamb in a hurry along with bitter herbs and matzot. No leftovers. No pots to wash up. They left in their traveling clothes, staff, belts, and pouches.

From being a once-only occasion, it became an annual Festival. Protest identity and revolution gave way to establishing and maintaining a tradition. The Torah introduced a surprising idea: “When you come into the land which God will give you, you should maintain this tradition. And when your children ask you what this service is all about you should answer them” (Exodus 12.25 & 26). Here, you have the convergence of two ideas. The importance of teaching – of passing on a tradition. And, at the same time, validating questions – challenges that demand an explanation. How unlike other traditions that demand unquestioning obedience. And the implication that parents will know enough to answer.

Apart from the Temple sacrifices, the Pesach Lamb was, in practice, the most important mass ritual throughout the Temple periods. Everyone had to be

involved in the preparation and it was eaten together in families. There was no long, formal text, like the Haggadah we have today, until after the Second Temple was destroyed.

By then, the rabbis were accelerating the shift from a sanctuary-based religion to one where study and debate were the tools of survival. In this new world, the Biblical rituals were supplemented by Mishnaic and Talmudic dialectic, along with new customs, to make it all unusual and challenging. Remembering the past and looking forward to the future. This is where discussion and questioning all came into their own. But the priority, before sitting down, had to be human. To take care of the poor. To invite them in. To join together in looking forward to a New Jerusalem – not just back to Sinai.

The Mishna, some two thousand years ago introduced what we now call the Seder. The context was the Graeco-Roman symposium in which a meal was taken reclining on couches with little tables brought in by servants with each course. Reclining was a sign of status. It was the freedom to enjoy life. But, more important given its Athenian origins, was to stage intellectual presentations that were then challenged and debated. The discussions were interspersed with poetry and songs. And more wine than usual. Four cups (some say five). You could go on drinking right through till the last. All of this found its way into the Seder we now take for granted. At its core were the three priorities: Pesach, initially the Sacrifice (replaced by Torah), Matza (physical history) and Maror (the experience of oppression).

Since the symposium was not just to eat but to talk, the rabbis added a variety of innovations to get people to ask “why.” Washing hands before eating vegetables in saltwater long before the main meal. Literally, Hors D’oeuvres! Dividing a Matzah to hide for children to find. It is called the *Afikoman*, probably from the Greek for dessert of late-night revelry. And distributing nuts and candies.

I can’t think of any other ritual so focused on the mind of a child. It requires them to ask questions. After welcoming everyone, the child is expected to ask **the four questions**. Why is everything so different? But, according to the Mishna, if one asks any other kind of relevant question, one does not have to ask the four required by the Seder text. The whole point was to genuinely ask. It is not just as a formality.

The first answer to the Hagadah’s questions of why this night is different is that once we were slaves. We were at the lowest level of human society. If we have risen, it must be because of some unique historical fate. And had we not been taken out by God and history we would still be slaves (or peasants) in Egypt. Later the Hagadah will answer that we, too, were once idol worshippers. Our difference as a people was not just social and historical but also theological. It was not genes, but ideology, that distinguished our nation from another.

The theme of questioning continues with the five rabbis in Bnei Brak two thousand years ago. They were all authorities from different locations and backgrounds. A cross-section of Jewish life. Aristocracy, wealth, poverty, a

priest, a levy, an Israel and a convert. The study of Torah enabled anyone and everyone to rise. The story makes a political, as well as a social, point. How to respond to the Roman occupation? Akiva (the only one who actually lived in Bnei Brak) was martyred for supporting the Bar Cochba rebellion in 134 AD – all the others disagreed with his position. Later generations, living under Christianity and Islam, will have identified with what they had to endure. And the Hagadah reminds us that, in every generation, a new kind of oppression and Jew-hatred continues to fester. And yet we survive. Is it miraculous because God protects us or because we are so committed and stubborn?

If those rabbis, who knew so much, went on debating and arguing so should we. And be flexible and tolerant enough to cope with disagreements. The improbable scenario of pupils coming to remind the great rabbis not to forget that it was time for morning prayers sounds like rudeness and zealous piety. It is unbecoming of students who would normally sit at the feet of their masters. Yet, in the context of subversion, this is crucial. Students had the right to challenge. That, too, is an important message of the Seder. Of course, when much of the current Charedi rabbinic leadership are dramatically failing, we might well ask how they can justify themselves. I hope they do that at their Seder nights.

The four types of child who ask, continue the question of education. Four different minds and attitudes. Each to be addressed in an appropriate manner. The wise/ learned one. The bad/negative one. The one who is neutral (originally the stupid one). And the one who does not know what to ask. Perhaps he is a literal child or someone brought up in a different world who has never seen it all. Different minds and different attitudes require different responses. That, too, is radical.

We celebrate our deliverance. But lest we rejoice too much, we pour out wine from our cups while we list the plagues that struck the Egyptians. This is done in recognition of other human beings who have suffered. What an amazing nod towards the universality of mankind – which should not be forgotten in our joy.

Much of the rest of our current Seder was added later. It is taken up with different debates between the rabbis over matters of law and interpretation. Rabbinic dialectic and theology. Is there a life after death? Elijah and messianic deliverance? Topics for discussion rather than obligations. The format we have today is medieval.

The meal then proceeds with the well-known, specific obligations to eat the Matza, Maror, Charoset, the main meal and more cups of wine. All interspersed with poems, lessons, psalms of joy and deliverance common to all festivals. Grace after meals. And, finally, adaptations of Medieval folk songs from across the world. "Green Grow the Rushes Oh!" "Who knows One!" "My father's little Goat." Life is not only about the serious but the fun, too. For adults as well as kids. And, as always, one should note that there are many variations of customs, names, measures, the lot! Another lesson both in humility and the capacity in our tradition for variety and difference of opinion.

For many, it is just too much. I do not advocate following the text slavishly (unless you want to of course). Particularly if many present have no background. Regardless, everyone can ask questions and discuss what freedom means. What being Jewish means nowadays. To question the terrible harm we are doing to the world. Yet also challenge much of accepted secular morality too. We need to engage not bore.

The Hagadah was designed to challenge conventional attitudes towards life and religion. I believe this was the intention of the rabbis of the Mishna and those who came after them, in compiling the Hagadah we have nowadays, to be disruptive, to disturb our habits of action, thought and even authority. To stress the freedom of the individual to be autonomous. Yet to commit to God as well as to our community. Which is why I call it subversive, undermining. The right to be different.

But then, the question is: why in recent generations of religious inflexibility, we have deviated from this tradition? It seems to me it is because we have lost confidence. Over the millennia, we have been so battered by hatred and oppression, by humiliation from people and religions who thought they were more advanced and wiser, that we have become both insecure and overprotective. We have had to fall back on ourselves to protect our own spaces from intrusion from the outside. This kind of siege mentality is what restricts challenge and non-conformity. We might have escaped the slavery that was imposed from the outside but we have succumbed to a kind of internal slavery of the mind. One which the Hagadah demands that we reject.