

PASSOVER: THE FESTIVAL OF INTERDEPENDENCE

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A MYSTIC INTERPRETATION

Jewish mysticism emphasized the power of the world below to give strength to the world above. The meditations before prayer and ritual acts were predicated on the firm belief that human beings are able to move the heavens. From the viewpoint of the *Zohar*, the Kabbalist text, a Jew is to relate the Exodus story on Passover night not only for himself, but to retell it joyously, fervently, with song and food and drink, in order to rejoice the Shechinah, the God who is in exile within us. "Rejoicing brings forth rejoicing." Laughter below resonates in the heavens above, and it is good to bring happiness to God. God rejoices in our joy and in our redemption as His own. He calls forth all His family above and declares: "Come and hear the praises which My children bring unto Me." Then the angels and supernal beings break forth into jubilation that the Holy One possesses a people on earth who have not forgotten to celebrate the joy of freedom.

What, for the modern Jewish sensibility, lies beneath the legend of angels and the mystic formulations of the *Zohar*? They mean to rescue us from the self-imposed chains of passivity, to remind us that actions produce other actions, waves upon waves of consequences flow from every stirring of the human spirit. We have powers within and between us, so the celebration of freedom is not simply an intellectual assent but a determination to change our lives. One does not need a prison not to act. Self-paralysis is subtler but heavier than chains. What fetters the human will is unconsciously disguised behind the gray wisdom of "realism."

The Jewish mystics insisted that through prayer, meditation and deeds we "build worlds." However removed we may be from their metaphysics, however odd the imagery of their myths, they remind us of the fervent faith in our people's capacity to affect the world. To lose faith in ourselves and in our task is to turn back to Egypt and away from the promise which redeems us from emptiness. "Ascribe ye strength unto the God" (*Psalms 68*). The "ye" refers to each of us who is part of the greatest Jewish community. They who separate themselves from the community reduce their own power to choose and weaken the strength of godliness in the world.

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The *Haggadah* of Passover characterizes the “wicked” as those who have denied the root principle of Judaism by uprooting themselves from the community. Un-belonging, they have abandoned the matrix out of which belief is born and nurtured. Only within community can the self be raised out of impotence.

A HASIDIC PRACTICE

No individual alone can fill the cup of Elijah. Together the cup of messianic promise can run over. In our home we follow a Passover custom introduced by Rabbi Naftali of Ropschitz who died in 1827. At the Passover Seder which he conducted the wine which filled the cup of Elijah was not poured from a bottle. Instead, the empty cup was passed around the table and everyone, man, woman and child alike, would pour some drops from his cup of wine into Elijah’s.

The symbolism of Rabbi Naftali emphasizes profound Jewish conviction. Patience is a virtue but redemption will not come by waiting alone. The *Talmud* boldly states: “Israel will not be redeemed except through its own efforts.” The rabbinic sages meant by this no slight of God. They sought to stress the divine power which lies in a people’s exercise of free will to live with purpose. Divinity is expressed through choices which are directed by wisdom and goodness. So a Midrashic legend relates that not until the tribe of Benjamin leapt into the sea was it split. Not until Moses stopped his prolonged crying unto God for intervention and turned to the people urging them to go forward were the first signs of redemption apparent.

Along similar lines is the rabbinic interpretation of a biblical verse which relates that Moses was told by God to case aside the rod and stretch out his hand over the Red Sea. This, in order to teach the people that reliance upon a miracle rod is misleading. It is no magic wand – that rod which turned into a serpent and turned the Nile into a reddish hue. Its earlier use was political, an act meant to impress the Egyptians who respected only the powers of magic. But Israel knows that divine power is not in the rod. The same rod which was used to smite the tyranny of Egypt led to Moses’ downfall when in a fit of frustration and arrogance he smote the rock to force it to yield water.

The cup of Elijah stands empty before us. It will remain empty until we each give of our strength toward the promise. Then our own cups will flow over with fullness of spirit, and we will grow closer to the Passover of the future. From darkness towards light, from bondage toward freedom, from emptiness toward meaning. *Chag Sameach.*