

Post Seder Reflections

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An Article by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis (z"l)

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Passover celebrates the birth of the Jewish people. Observed in the home, one of its central aims is to induct the child into the extended family of the Jewish people. The family traces its spiritual identity to its slave origins, to the tribes whose family tree is enumerated in the opening chapter of Exodus. The Passover *Haggadah* is the family album of the Jewish community.

"On Passover," the author Israel Zangwill declares, "Jews eat history." Around the *seder* table everyone partakes of the symbols and substance of the family meal: the old and the young, the wise and the less wise. Both grandchild and grandparent taste the same bitterness of slavery, the salt water of the tears of oppression, the dry hard bread of affliction.

The narrative transmits the shiver of history to those who have forgotten or who never knew. History recalled gives rise to inquiry. The *seder* stimulates the child to ask the tradition four questions. The hierarchy of the "four sons" or "four children" in the *Haggadah* places those who cannot or will not ask at the bottom of the list. Children must be encouraged to ask not simply to gain information but because asking is an act of freedom. Slaves do not ask. Slaves lower their eyes, bite their lips and remain mute. If there is no one around the *seder* table to ask the questions, neither children nor wife nor extended family, the tradition calls for the one who is alone at the table to ask the questions of himself. The answers to the four questions are obliquely given in the *Haggadah*. Not the knowledge of the answer, but the courage of the question is praise-worthy. No one is too learned or too pious to be exempt from inquiry.

Passover begins at home, but it does not lock its doors to the world without. The opening sentence of the *Haggadah* calls for an open door for all people. "Let all who hunger come and eat. Let all who are in need come for the

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Passover.” The first wording of the invitation, according to the commentary of Rabbi Jacob Emden, is directed to non-Jews, to those “who are hungry for bread.” The second half is for Jews who need to celebrate Passover. Emden bases his interpretation on the Talmudic obligation to feed both the poor of the Jews and of the Gentiles, to visit the sick of both, to bury the deceased of both (*T.J. Demai 4:6*).

Those directed to recall their suffering in Egypt are biblically mandated: “You shall not abhor an Egyptian because you were a stranger in his land” (*Deuteronomy 23:7*). Why not abhor those who have ruled over your people with such a fierce hand? The rabbinic commentator Rashi, among others, explains that the prohibition is due to the appreciation that it was Egypt that opened its land to the Children of Israel when there was famine in the land of Canaan.

Evil must be remembered, but goodness should not be forgotten. A place in the *Haggadah* should be found for the exploits of Shifra and Puah, the two Egyptian midwives who defied Pharaoh’s edict to drown the male children of Israel in the Nile. The daughter of Pharaoh who violated her father’s decree to drown the infants and who reached out to save Moses is deserving of recognition.

In the synagogue, as well as in the home, the ethos of Jewish universalism is pronounced, especially during the last six days of Passover. A group of psalms praising God is normally recited on all the holidays, but on the last days of Passover some of the psalms are deleted. Who can sing of the idols who have mouths, ears, noses, hands, and feet but who cannot speak, hear, inhale, touch, or walk, while their worshippers drown in the sea (*Psalms 115*)? Who on these days coincident with the drowning of the Egyptians can praise God for his deliverance from our pursuing enemies while they met with such a tragic end (*Psalms 116*)? There is joy in the Passover victory, but no gloating. When the angels in exultation praised God, the God of Israel and of the world silenced them: “My children drown in the sea and you sing songs of praise?” The joy of victory is diminished and wine from the cups is spilled because the means to victory involved the death of God’s children.

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The cup of Elijah stands untouched. A nineteenth-century Hasidic rabbi introduced a ritual in which the cup of Elijah is unfilled. Passed around the table, every participant contributes some wine from his cup into the empty vessel. When the cup is returned to the one who conducts the *seder*, he proclaims: “Israel is not redeemed except through their own hands.” Passover is not only to remember yesterday but also to shape a better tomorrow.

Jewish universalism is rooted in native soil. It recalls the prophecy of Isaiah, who in God’s name declared: “Blessed be Egypt my people and Assyria the work of my hands and Israel mine inheritance (*Isaiah* 19:23-25). The God of Israel and the God of the universe are One.