

“There Will Be No Poor Among You: the Promise of Passover”

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My first Passover Seder still brings back memories. It was 1965, toward the end of my freshman year of college. Spring was just arriving in Michigan. A Jewish friend had invited me to the Seder at Hillel House, the Jewish campus ministry.

At that Seder, this WASP kid from suburban New Jersey had her first tastes of *matzoh* ball soup and gefilte fish - even as she learned never again to attempt drinking four cups of wine in one sitting! Far more important, the Seder gave me my first sense of the power of ancient story and ritual. This, over time, would shape my religious sensibilities in unexpected ways.

The spring of '65 was a powerful time for a Seder. Passover that year fell shortly after the historic events in Selma, Alabama. African Americans were conducting a voter registration campaign, and Martin Luther King, Jr. led a march from Selma to Montgomery. It was a spring of martyrs: three civil rights activists were murdered in Selma, including two Unitarian Universalists from the North, James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, and a young local man, Jimmy Lee Jackson. There's a memorial to all three of them at UUA headquarters in Boston.

But the spring of '65 was also a spring of hope, for the civil rights struggle was bearing fruit. In response to the events in Selma, president Lyndon Johnson addressed the nation, ending his speech with the words, “*We shall overcome!*” Soon afterward, Congress passed the Voting Rights Bill, guaranteeing the franchise to every citizen.

Our Ann Arbor campus had mobilized around the Selma events. Several carloads of classmates had driven south to march with Dr. King, and had recently returned. Some of the marchers were present at the Hillel House Seder. Many more of us had supported the marchers: staffing phone lines, and collecting money, clothing, and blankets. All this was fresh in our minds, as we lit the festival candles, drank the sweet wine, and broke the unleavened bread. The connections between the two freedom struggles – those of ancient Israelites and contemporary African Americans - were impossible to miss.

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The Seder is really a re-enactment, in the form of a meal. This week, starting Wednesday evening, Jewish families will once again re-tell the story of Passover: their slavery in Egypt, and their miraculous liberation. At the Seder table, they'll dip parsley in salt water, symbolizing the tears of enslavement and the spring of new life. They'll taste the sharp horseradish, representing the bitterness of slavery, and the sweet *charoset*, representing the mortar used by the Hebrew slaves, but also the sweetness of freedom. Most important, they'll break the dry *matzoh*, the unleavened bread that the Israelites took with them in their mad dash away from Pharaoh. At UUCD, next Saturday night, we, too, will have the opportunity to celebrate this ancient spring rite.

The origins of Passover are lost in time. Like most of the celebrations we know today, it almost certainly has pagan roots. Many scholars believe it's a fusion of two different festivals – one by shepherds, and one by farmers. The shepherds' celebration was *pesach*, the sacrifice of a young lamb to give thanks for the flock's fertility.

The farmers' festival was the *feast of the unleavened bread*. This involved clearing out the previous year's leaven – celebrating the earth's fertility by starting afresh. Many centuries later, these two ancient feasts were intertwined with biblical narrative and rabbinic tradition, to create Passover as we know it today.

Arthur Waskow, a Reconstructionist rabbi, suggests that the weeks before Passover are a good time to study its central themes – renewal, creativity, the meaning of freedom. We can ask ourselves, as individuals, “From what narrow place, what *mitzraim*, do I need to extricate myself this year?” We can also ask, from a more communal point of view, “What narrow places, what areas of unfreedom, could our society leave behind?”

Passover tells us that “freedom” is complex. It's spelled out in the *Haggadah* – there's more than one kind of slavery. The Hebrew people knew *physical* slavery in Egypt. But before that, we're told, their *souls* were in bondage – they knew nothing of spiritual freedom. Liberation takes place on different levels. And the process of freeing ourselves is never-ending.

The Exodus story also reminds us that the experience of freedom can be pretty scary. Sometimes, it can even make slavery look pretty good! Slavery can become very comfortable, and thus seductive. When people become anxious in freedom, they can easily turn back to slavery in nostalgia. While wandering in the harsh desert, they can long for the “fleshpots of Egypt” and wonder why they ever

left. Hence the rabbinic saying, “The worst part of slavery is when we learn to endure it.” And also, “It took only one night to get the people out of slavery – but 40 years in the desert to get slavery out of the people.”

A third truth emerging from the Passover story is this: Freedom is different from our modern views of it. The freedom for which the Israelites struggle is not individualistic. It doesn't mean the absence of restrictions, or the ability to do whatever we please. Rather, it's the freedom that comes from living in right relationship – a freedom that comes from being in harmony with nature, with other human beings, and with the divine.

In the Hebraic view of the world, freedom is bound up with a deep sense of obligation. Those who have been freed from slavery must remember those still in chains. The *Torah* repeats it, over and over:

“You shall not oppress a foreigner, for you know the feelings of a foreigner, having yourselves been foreigners in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23: 9)

“When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them...you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19: 33-34)

“Always remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 16: 11-12)

Buried deep in the Hebrew soul are memories of bondage and liberation. And buried deep in the Hebrew Bible is the theme of justice for vulnerable people: You shall not oppress the foreigner, the widow, the orphan, or the poor. If you do, your society will come to grief – if not sooner, then later.

We've no doubt heard the New Testament saying attributed to Jesus, “The poor you have with you always.” This is often used – incorrectly, in my view - to justify economic inequality. But the Hebrew Bible also has a saying about poverty. When Moses gives his farewell speech to the Israelites, just as they're about to enter the promised land, he says, “There will be *no poor* among you, provided you keep the commandments.” In other words, “If you live in right relation with your neighbors, then no one will be in want.”

The prophets envisioned a society in which wealth – meaning land - was distributed evenly. Each family was given a plot of land - to feed itself, and to pass on to future generations. The song in which “every one 'neath their vine and fig

tree, shall live in peace and unafraid” captures the vision. If, for some reason, a person *lost* their land, a portion of the communal yield was set aside for them.

The Torah also contained safeguards against some people piling up great fortunes at the expense of others. Usury – which at that time meant *any* charging of interest – was forbidden. It was unthinkable, furthermore, for ancestral land to be mortgaged, let alone foreclosed. Every seven years, debts had to be canceled, and if anyone had become a debt slave, they had to be released. Finally, if despite these safeguards a family did lose its land, it would be returned to them in the Jubilee Year, every 50 years.

In the prophetic vision, the poor were placed under God’s special protection. A society’s worth was measured by how it treated its “little ones” – its *anawim*. The “holiness” of a people didn’t depend on how devout they were, or how ritually correct. Their greatness didn’t depend upon military might, or magnificent buildings, or great cultural achievements. The only question that mattered was this: How have you treated the most vulnerable among you? How have you cared for the poor in your midst?

All of this is as relevant today as it was 3000 years ago. At a recent UUA General Assembly, the preacher at the Service of the Living Tradition spoke prophetically of the growing gap between rich and poor – indeed, the gap between the super-rich and everyone else! Afterward, some people sputtered in indignation at the preacher’s “socialist” sermon. But anyone who has studied the Bible could respond without missing a beat, “Socialist?!? Are you kidding? That sermon was straight out of the Hebrew prophets!”

This is not to suggest that we should adopt wholesale the biblical system, which was meant for an agrarian, patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the spirit of Passover speaks powerfully to some of the issues our nation faces right now:

- Our immigration crisis.
- The decline of family farms, and the takeover of farmland by agribusiness.
- The sub-prime mortgage fiasco, with the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many.
- The conflict between Main Street and Wall Street – which David Korten calls a disparity between real wealth and “phantom wealth.”
- And the obscene disparity between the rich in this country and everyone else, especially the very poor.

The promise of Passover is the restoration of community. Passover harks back to a time “when we, too, were strangers; we, too, were poor.” It reminds us that all of us are dependent on wealth that we did not create. It bids us cast our lot on the side of compassion.

And Passover promises that all is not lost. It proclaims that there is a holy life force afoot in the universe – call it spirit, God, or history – and that it’s forever in struggle against death and despair.

Passover tells us, in the words of Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” And as long as we remember that, we’re never alone. “Our redemption is bound up with the liberation of people everywhere.”

I invite you now to break unleavened bread with me. As the *matzoh* is passed, please break off a piece and then share it with your neighbors. When the bread has been distributed, I’ll say a blessing, the ancient Passover prayer.

This is the bread of affliction,
the poor bread, which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.
Let all who are hungry come and eat.
Let all who are in want share the hope of Passover.
As we break bread here, we join with people everywhere.
This year we celebrate here;
Next year in the promised land.
Now we are still in bonds;
Next year, may all be free.