

**“Passover of the Future”**  
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Years ago at a friend’s birthday party I started a conversation with the man sitting next to me. I was a curious seminarian, he knew my friend from Jewish Day School, so naturally I began to ask him anything and everything about Judaism. I still remember him sitting on the couch telling me that his favorite Jewish holiday was Passover because it is a celebration of freedom, not just for the ancient Israelites in Egyptian bondage, but a hope for all humanity to be free in the present and future. For him this hope came with the reminder that somewhere someone remained in chains and it was and is our work to set that person free. Twelve years and many Passover Seders later, his words have remained with me.

We are fortunate in Cincinnati that there is an interfaith Seder held downtown at the Plum Street Temple, a wonderful opportunity for those of us who are not Jewish to learn more about the story and tradition of Passover. It is held on a yearly basis, and if you are interested I suggest you give it a try. The Hebrew name for Passover is *Pesach*, meaning “to pass over,” is a reference to the story of Exodus when God passed over the first born sons of Hebrews, but not of Egyptians. According to Exodus, this is the final plague that causes Pharaoh to set the Israelites free.

*Pesach* also refers to the lamb that was sacrificed in the Temple. Many scholars see this last link (sacrificing a lamb born in the spring) as evidence that parts of Passover come from pre-Israelite religions. There are other links as well? Why exactly does an egg appear on the Passover plate? Why are herbs on the plate as well? Certainly they are both part of the Passover *haggadah* (the story book used for Passover teachings) (herbs for the bitterness of slavery). But there is good evidence that some parts of Passover (lamb, eggs, herbs) were incorporated into Judaism from earlier “pagan Semitic” traditions. A parallel question is “Why do eggs and bunnies appear at Easter time?” Because Easter also contains parts of “pagan Semitic” traditions.

Passover tells the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, a story considered fundamental to the development of the Israelites. According to *Genesis*, Joseph (if you remember my sermon from February) was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. Believed by his family to be dead, he instead rose to prominence, power, and eventually freedom. When a time of drought fell across the region, his brothers came to Egypt seeking food for the family. Ultimately Joseph was reunited with his family and brought them and many others to live in Egypt. Since Joseph was friend to the Pharaoh his family and others who came with them were treated well. This ends the book of *Genesis*.

The next book, *Exodus*, begins “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” The story continues that the Israelites had grown too strong so the Egyptians forced them into slavery. The Pharaoh, still afraid, ordered that all newborn boys be thrown into the Nile. One mother, concerned about the safety of her newborn

son placed him in a basket and set him in a river where he was found by Pharaoh's daughter. This baby was Moses and the story tells us that he grew up in the house of the Pharaoh, not knowing the truth of his family.

Later Moses came to know the truth of his heritage, and after a meeting with God in the burning bush, returned to Egypt to rescue his people from slavery. Nine times Moses appears before Pharaoh demanding "Let my people go!" After each refusal a plague is visited upon the Egyptians; water turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, boils, thunder and hail, locusts, and darkness. At this point the Israelites slaughter lambs and celebrate Passover. They do as Moses commands and spread the blood of the sacrificed lambs on their homes, and when night falls, God comes passing over these homes in peace, but entering the homes of all Egyptians and killing their first born son.

At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the first born of the livestock. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. (Exodus 12:29-30).

The Israelites are finally free and partake of more celebrations. But once more Pharaoh's heart is "hardened" and he comes after the Israelites who are crossing the Red Sea. In a final act, the Egyptian army is drowned and Moses and his followers begin their wandering which will ultimately take the Israelites (but not Moses) back to the promised land.

As stories go, this one presents incredible drama; slavery, a mother forced to give up her son, a grown Moses breaking with the Egyptian family that raised him, Moses' journey back to his powerful God and people, plagues, the death of first born sons, the dramatic passage over the Red Sea, and the survival of the oppressed. It is an astonishing story. This story will be retold or re-enacted in song, word, and food in Passover celebrations all over the world this coming week. It is both a serious holiday for its emphasis on slavery, and a joyous holiday for its celebration of freedom and survival.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. stood up to the American government fifty years ago and said "Let my people go," we all knew what he was talking about. A modern day re-enactment of the Passover story for black Americans. This is a universal human story, adopted throughout time by the oppressed seeking freedom. Think of slaves in America singing "Go Down Moses." Think of Bob Marley singing "Exodus." So powerful, so true.

And I find the story deeply distressing because the God of this story frightens me. He almost kills Moses at one point (Exodus 4:24), and is only saved by his wife, Zipporah. Then, we are told that God hardens Pharaoh's heart, "The Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt . . . the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land." This may help those who need God to be all powerful, but it troubles me, even if this is a meta-story, it troubles me. God hardens Pharaoh's heart and brings suffering to all Egyptians? Wasn't there a nicer, less manipulative way to let your wonders be multiplied and to let your people go? What about innocent people who

suffered? The former Pharaoh's daughter seemed kind – she saved Moses. What about her?

And then there is the death of first born sons. It is terrible that we are told the Pharaoh orders the murder of all infant Hebrews. It's still terrible when God swoops down and does not pass over Egyptian households. Whenever I see this part of Exodus dramatized I find it chilling and unexplainable, even if this is a meta story. The picture of Pharaoh holding his dead son, just a boy, is as distressing to me as when Abraham offers Isaac, as when Lot offers his daughters to the violent townspeople, as when Joseph, the arrogant child is sold into slavery. All these children, pawns of the parents and God who believe they/he/she owns them. This year in particular, I can not get past this part of the story.

I love the story of Exodus. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." For me, like the man I met at that birthday party so long ago, this is the wonderful message of Passover. There are many exoduses I hope and work for in my life and in the lives of people I know and don't know. But not at the expense of children (or the vulnerable), who are not property, who are not dispensable. And I can't much respect a God who sees them as props instead of precious humans. So while I celebrate the exodus, I do not believe in, respect, or like the God of this story.

And so much of the story of Exodus was written to prove the wonder, the multiplied wonders of God. These were reasons for the orthodox or unconvinced to believe (in fear), to be faithful, to turn away from other gods - and this was written for an audience struggling to achieve monotheism over polytheism (this type of story would have been very common for its day). As a liberal religionist I do not believe in God because I am afraid (this is the antithesis of liberal religion), because I have been cowed, silenced, or otherwise intimidated. I do not accept this definition as part of the loving God I do believe in (who would instead have a preferential option for the vulnerable). And I go back to Moltmann who informs us that the things we believe we create in the present. For centuries, people have looked at this story, this meta, religious story, and seen affirmative reasons to abuse power and the vulnerable. As a person of faith I am offended by this usage and message. It offends me that anyone anywhere has to carry a dead child to prove a point.

There are many scholars who debate the historical validity of this story, for those of you who are interested. To begin with, the Egyptians kept records, many of them preserved, and there is no mention of plagues or an exodus, or even Israelites in Egypt. It is quite possible that this story was created as a model of both God's power and God's power to liberate, to save, his people which must have been very attractive in an ancient world more violent and unpredictable than what most of us in America experience today. Recently this has been a very contentious issue in the Jewish community, because there are those who are deeply challenged by the idea that God did not create the miracle of exodus, nor did he write the Ten Commandments that came out of the exodus.

The best that Passover has to offer is its reminder of freedom for all. As Rabbi Wayne Dosick writes

It is a holiday with great historical significance and continually unfolding meaning, for within the celebration of historical redemption is the hope and the

promise of ultimate redemption, the “Passover of the Future,” the time when all humankind will be redeemed to live in freedom and tranquility in a world dominated by justice, filled with compassion, and enveloped in everlasting peace.<sup>1</sup>

Last summer I went to visit friends, two rabbis, living in southern California. While riding in a convertible, one of my friends driving, the top down, the weather perfect, feeling absolutely content I noticed a gray ribbon. Like a breast cancer ribbon, only gray. I asked him what it meant. He said it is for the genocide in Darfur, Sudan so that we never forget that other people live in Holocaust and all must be set free. When the rest of the world attempted to turn away, Jewish congregations in America have done so much to offer aid and to publicize this genocide. As we rode on, my friend and I, I thought about Passover and its message that encourages white Jews in the United States to care about, at this point, mostly Muslim, black, Sudanese people living in another continent. This is the power of Passover and the universal message of exodus, the very best it has to offer.

Estimates indicate that somewhere between 50,000 and 400,000 people have been killed in the Sudan. The war began as a Christian/Muslim struggle and then ended in fighting between rebels supported by the government engaging in ethnic cleansing. Over two years ago our President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Reverend Bill Sinkford, was arrested outside the Sudanese embassy in Washington D. C., for protesting the genocide. As a congregation, we sponsored a refugee family from the Sudan, and continue to assist them. If you are interested in learning more, many UU congregations are also active in this cause. The web page of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, our humanitarian organization dedicated to social justice world wide is committed to this cause. We are desperate for Passover, for exodus, for freedom, that Passover of the future.

This year Passover begins tomorrow on Monday evening. I know where I will be, at a friend’s house re-enacting every plague in gripping detail to the delight of 15 shrieking children. My friends put on a yearly Passover extravaganza, complete with all ten plagues; cotton balls for lice, plastic frogs and bugs, stuffed cows with band aids to signify diseased livestock, and the highlight, a re-enactment of crossing the Red Sea complete with streamers, bubbles, blue curtains, carpet, and mist. Did I mention the shrieking children part? Lots of shrieking, running children learning the story of the Israelite’s exodus from Egypt. There will be a child friendly *haggadah* complete with the question “Why is this night different from all other nights?” (as we heard our musicians play this morning). There will be a heated search for the *afikomen*, prizes for everyone, and lots of unusual food, like chocolate covered matzah.

And I will laugh and sing, and say prayers in Hebrew to the best of my limited ability, and I will remember the price of freedom and the cost of slavery and I will remember Darfur and Cincinnati, our IHN guests resting on their cots, Afghanistan and Iraq, Palestinians and Israelis. And I will know that our work at First Church is good, and that every year is the year to create the Passover of the Future, and that no one is free when someone is in chains. Next year in Jerusalem, my friends. Next year in Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne Dosick, *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice*, 174.