

Antisemitism, The Seder, and its Life Lessons

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A mad gunman goes on a rampage in Kansas City¹. A headline in the Daily Mail on Friday screamed, “In a chilling echo of the Holocaust, Jews are 'ordered to register and list property' in east Ukraine after pro-Russian militants take over government buildings”². These are just two of the alarming events of the last week that can lead any one fearful of an exponential rise in anti-semitism to quake in their boots. The fact that none of the three victims in Kansas City, William Lewis Corporon, Reat Underwood and Terri LaManno were Jewish – and the fact that the headline about the Ukraine may not even be true as many believe it may be a hoax or another manipulative tactic of the Russian government – seems irrelevant to any one viewing the situation with common sense. The shootings all took place right outside of obviously Jewish buildings, and the fact that the Russian government is using stereotypical antisemitic actions in a political game demonstrate how pervasive, strong and yes, eternal seems to be antisemitism in all its guises.

Jews have suffered, been enslaved, been oppressed, faced prejudice and hate since, well, time immemorial. It is fair to say that Pesach, the festival we are celebrating this week, is a commemoration of the first known incident of antisemitism against an entire people. The Torah does not make the Egyptian enslavement of the Israelites ambiguous – it was the action of a Pharaoh who “knew not Joseph” and in the very first chapter of Exodus, he says, “Let us outsmart them so that they may not increase. Otherwise, in the event of war, they will join our enemies, fight against us and expel us from the land.” This fear and accusation of the Pharaoh was just about as groundless, random and based in beliefs as unfounded by fact as any antisemitic belief our people have been cursed with throughout time. When we celebrate Pesach, we celebrate liberation from that first act of prejudice against our entire people, as a people.

Sometimes I find it overwhelming to reflect upon how to respond

1 See <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/15/us/kansas-jewish-center-shooting/>

2 See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2607154/Jews-ordered-register-list-property-east-Ukraine-city-Donetsk-pro-Russian-militants-taken-government-buidings.html>

to the alarming and growing antisemitism in the world. It seems so unjustified, so mad, frightening, leaves me at a loss to know how to take it, or how to take action against it. I'm sure Jews have always felt this, throughout time. But perhaps it just is more shocking and even more disillusioning to reflect upon growth of this cancerous prejudice in the wake of all the positive strides that I believe had been made in the decades following the worst planned, systematic demonization, isolation and then destruction of our people that had ever taken place in our known history – the Holocaust.

In light of all this, perhaps there is something in our own tradition that can give us hope and an inkling about how to respond. After all, the oppression and prejudice has been ongoing throughout our history and yet we are still here. What is the key and foundation to our resilience and continued existence? Well, there are an amazing array of insights within the Pesach seder itself. This interactive, educational, multimedia, participatory evening meal must constitute among the most profound and fondest of any Jew's family memories. It certainly does among mine.

What are some examples from the seder of the hopeful and positive attitude that has permitted us to combat antisemitism by either not taking it on board or by remaining strong and resilient in the face of attempts to destroy us? There is the wonderful song, *Dayenu*. I have personal experience among my own family that the repetitive, bouncy tune of the chorus is one of the most memorable ways that children learn to love Pesach. One commentator points out that the whole idea that “dayenu – it would have been enough” is patently false. For example, being led through the sea would definitely NOT have been enough without the subsequent drowning of the pursuers, Pharaoh's army. Nevertheless, as Noam Zion and David Dishon point out in their Family Participation Haggadah, the song gives the sense that the Exodus unfolded in a number of steps, each of which was a miracle for which we are thankful. As they write, “The poet feels the living power of each gesture of divine favor, irrespective of the total result. Had You only done this and no more – it would have been enough for me to feel your divine love. The principle of “dayeinu,” of giving thanks even for the partial and incomplete, is crucial for living in this uncertain world in which few dreams ever come to total fruition. We thank God every day for the miracle of being alive.” In other words, the world is definitely not perfect, things are by no means perfect

for us, and are often terrible, but we can, and do, still give thanks for the miracle of life and the blessings that we do have.

Another positive seder example is the ubiquitous matza. We speak of it, eat it, point to it, hide it at many points throughout the event and throughout the week of the festival. We make jokes about it –its effect on the digestive tract, the monotony of it, the crumbs. A common Passover joke is: What do you call someone who derives pleasure from the bread of affliction? A matzochist. Yet, at the seder, it is still something fresh and meaningful. We introduce it by saying “this is the bread of poverty and persecution,” while adding “let all who are hungry come and eat.” Thus, we take the symbol of persecution and subvert it to a positive symbol of plenty – feeding the hungry and impoverished. One way our ancient rabbis analyzed the meaning of “lachma anya” – the bread of poverty – was to notice that “anya” did not only mean poverty, but also “answers”. The bread is a symbol over which, throughout the seder, many answers will be said. One of these answers, turning something negative into a positive, hopeful symbol – is the answer given to the “rasha”, the wicked child who asks “what did God do for *you*,” thereby excluding himself from his people. The answer is the line from this week's Torah portion for *Chol haMoed*, said while pointing at the matza, “For the sake of this God did so much for me when I left Egypt.” What more astounding example could there be of turning negativity into a symbol of hopefulness, and positive gratitude?

Matza is the bread of affliction, turned into the bread of liberation. We eat it to remember our liberation, leaving hurriedly, but nevertheless, coming out of slavery and into freedom. Another thing about matza – while we may not exactly enjoy eating it for an entire week, we still all eat it; rich or poor. Matza is the great equalizer, a great symbol of the equality and essential dignity of all. Again – what better symbol for the equality of man, and what better argument against the stupidity and injustice of prejudice and hatred?

Finally, there is the interesting custom of how we recite the ten plagues. One of my young congregants was bothered by all the violence, destruction and killing. Indeed, she noted, how could God, the ultimate example of all that is good and righteous, who hates murder, be the author of the plagues, especially the killing of the firstborn? I didn't have a good

answer for her. The plagues, above many of the other aspects of Pesach, do seem to be an example of a posturing God who displays His power, His strong arm, beyond what really seems to be required, just for its own sake. With regard to the plagues, we dip our fingers in the sweet wine that resembles blood. We take a drop *out* of the cup for every plague we mention – a symbol of a little bit of sweetness being removed from the world with each continued source of suffering for the Egyptians. This is thought to be based on the famous talmudic midrash, “God is not happy at the downfall of the wicked...When the angels tried to sing songs of praise to God at the Red Sea, God silenced them: My handiwork, my human creatures, are drowning in the sea and you want to sing a song of praise?” So, God's actions seem to be questionable. But what is *not* to be questioned is our reaction to them. We do not rejoice at the downfall of our enemies, as it says in Proverbs, “If your enemy falls, do not celebrate; if he trips, let your heart not rejoice.”

All this, it seems to me, points to yet another aspect of antisemitism and our response to it. The underlying message of all I've been saying above is quite simple: we cannot control other people. But we can control ourselves and our response to others. Continuing to show and be grateful for all our blessings, (the message of *Dayenu*), turning our food, even our food of poverty, into an answer and a means of feeding the hungry (the message of *Ha Lachma Anya*), granting dignity to all, rich or poor, one of the meanings of eating matza for 7 days, and recognizing the basic humanity of all our fellow humans, Jew and non-Jew, the control of our base emotions and seeking for vengeance or retribution (the message of our seder traditions for the plagues) – these are the messages and meanings of the seder, and beyond that, our entire Torah and its traditions. These are things we can understand and control. These are lessons for life and how to live it. We relive and repeat them every year at the seder. These responses establish the way we Jews have lived for thousands of years and why we still live and flourish today. They are not an answer to anti-semitism. Nor will they likely make it disappear off the face of the earth. But they are indeed likely to help us live, flourish and even prosper in spite of it for thousands more years to come.