

PASSOVER

Scallions and Rare Silences

3.25.15

MY LOCAL JUDAICA shop sells the “feather set” we’re supposed to use to scour the house for *chametz* (leaven). No leavened dough or anything made from leavened dough is allowed in the house during the eight days of Passover, and therefore it all must be expunged. The chametz ban honors the Exodus story, when the ancient Israelites fled their Egyptian captors in such a hurry, they had no time to let their bread rise. To remember that escape, we swear off bread (or any dough that ferments), which means cutting down on carbs. (There’s an ongoing question as to the status of rice, but that’s for another book.) I toss all the half-eaten cereal and Ronzoni boxes in the garbage, feeling guilty about the waste. I could “sell” the extra chametz to a non-Jew and then buy it back after Passover (that’s the protocol for observant Jews), but instead I give it away to our apartment doormen, who seem slightly confused by all the Cheerios and Oreos, but appreciative.

Despite my intention to meet all holiday requirements, I am sheepishly skipping the full-kitchen purification that is routine for kosher homes. Since I haven’t been keeping kosher all year, it would feel like paying lip-service to *kasher* (make kosher) my kitchen now. But I feel

ashamed at the toil I'm avoiding, knowing that observant Jews are, at this moment, scouring, sweeping, and scorching their kitchens into Passover-readiness. The oven should be scrubbed and heated for one to two hours, with the top burners turned up till they're red-hot. The microwave should be cleaned and steamed. The sink should be sanitized, unused for twenty-four hours, doused with boiling water several times, then lined with foil. The fridge, freezer, closets, and table should be purified of chametz, vigorously cleaned. A separate Passover set of utensils, plates, and pans must be pulled out of storage and substituted—or the usual ones kashered, which is too elaborate to go into here. No wonder many observant families choose to go to a kosher resort for Passover week; the cleaning has been done for them.

My nod to kashering for Passover is to do *bedikat chametz* (search for chametz), the search-and-destroy mission, on the eve of the first seder, to find crumbs in the cupboards and shelves, using a candle to illuminate the farthest corners, and a feather to brush any stray bits into a spoon (made of wood so it can be burned later).

The shop's feather ensemble comes complete with white feather (bird undetermined), wooden spoon, candle, and printed blessing. I ask Molly to dust with me, and she's curious (and kind) enough to say yes. Having only done this once, when I was twelve, I've forgotten the technique. This year I want to get it right, so I read the enclosed instructions aloud with Molly. It's yet one more time that ritual brings my family together, and I'm actually moved by watching my daughter follow the directions on how to sweep and where. I light the candle and the two of us muddle through the task, half-giggling, half-somber. It's not easy to spot Oreo crumbs by candlelight, let alone scrape them onto the wooden spoon, but we put all the stray chametz we can find in a little bag and seal it. I don't burn the spoon as I'm supposed to, because I fear setting off the smoke alarm. Then we recite the enclosed prayer out loud (I do the Hebrew, Molly the English): *Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us by His commandments, and has commanded us concerning the removal of chametz.*

Of course my friend Rabbi Dov Linzer, Dean of the Modern Orthodox seminary, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, informs me after the fact

that we were supposed to recite the blessing *before* the search. Oh, well; chalk it up to learning on the job. Dov also sends me an additional passage we could recite in the future—what he calls the “belt and suspenders” of the chametz purge: *“Any chametz that I did not see and do not know about, let it be nullified and ownerless as the dust of the earth.”* This reminds me of the Kol Nidre declaration, how we nullified our vows before making them on Yom Kippur.

Parents are supposed to purposefully plant some crumbs ahead of time, so that the kids can root out the chametz like crack detectives. This holiday of Passover is indisputably oriented toward the younger generation. The Torah repeats and repeats: *Tell it to the children.* They’ll grow up to be the tellers. When the children disengage, we’ve failed the mitzvah. I seek to meet the mitzvah when I lead the family seder. I spend hours in advance of the holiday’s arrival, trying to come up with ways to keep the kids riveted. Even Chabad.org’s online Haggadah acknowledges the hurdles of boredom: “Jews have prayed for thousands of years. With time, however, despite those helpful preparatory rungs, fresh and focused praying sometimes grew stale and could even lapse into rapid reading by rote. Our people’s spiritual leaders labored to counter such an approach. . . .”

I pore through books about the Haggadah and peruse various modern Haggadahs along with online build-your-own-Haggadah sites featuring readings and blessings you can customize. I’ve learned that a Haggadah is not fixed like the siddur—the daily prayer book—whose name, similar to “seder,” comes from the word “order.” Though the Passover seder does indeed have a specific order of rituals or tasks, “Haggadah” means “to tell,” and a telling is more open for creativity: what happens around the seder-signposts is fluid. I call Rabbi Arthur Green, an esteemed professor at Hebrew College in Boston, irreverent lecturer, and prolific writer. “The old-fashioned seder, where people’s grandparents mumbled through the whole book,” he tells me, “was in fact—even from the point of view of *halachah* (Jewish law)—a very bad way to do it. Because it wasn’t really ‘telling’ your child; it wasn’t really passing it on.”

Passing it on feels doable to me. The Exodus is an epic story of oppression, resolve, and deliverance. The problem has always been, at least to my mind, that somehow the storyline gets lost in the Haggadah; the seder duties (dipping parsley, asking four questions) do not follow the Exodus narrative. I therefore grew up without really grasping the full tale; so, just in case you missed it, too, here are my Spark Notes. (Skip the next four paragraphs if you know the story cold.)

The Hebrews were slaves under the cruel Pharaoh in Egypt. He decreed that every Hebrew baby boy that was born should be cast into the Nile. One particular boy (guess who?) was born soon after this decree and, to save his life, his mother put him in a basket among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. He was found by Pharaoh's daughter, who named him Moses (meaning either "drawn from" or "born from" the water). Moses's sister, Miriam, had been hovering nearby, and offered to find a nursemaid for the baby. Pharaoh's daughter gave her permission to do so but did not know that the nursemaid turned out to be Moses's mother.

Moses grew up privileged in Pharaoh's house, but he could not remain complacent about the mistreatment of the Hebrew slaves, whom the Torah suggests he knew to be his brothers. One day, when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, Moses killed the master. Realizing that he was now in deep trouble, Moses ran away to escape punishment, becoming a shepherd and marrying a non-Hebrew named Zipporah. One day, God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush and charged him to return to Egypt to save his people. Moses demurred, but God pressed, assuring Moses that his brother, Aaron, would assist.

Moses returned to Egypt and appeared before Pharaoh, demanding in the name of God to "let my people go!" Pharaoh flatly refused. So God sent the first plague: blood. The rivers ran red with blood, frightening the Egyptians. Moses repeated God's charge: "Let my people go!" Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused again. Another plague was sent, ten plagues in all, each one harsher than the previous. Pharaoh flip-flopped—relenting and reneging—until God finally sent the worst and last punishment: killing the Egyptians' sons,

a fitting cruel echo of Pharaoh's own decree, which had almost killed Moses at birth. To make sure the Hebrews didn't suffer this final plague by mistake, Moses instructed his people to smear lamb's blood on their doorframes so that God knew to pass over (get it—*Passover*?) their homes when the tenth plague struck.

The Israelites escaped en masse the next day, racing into the desert with few belongings and no time to bake bread, eating flat pita instead, which had no time to rise (today's matzah stands in for the Torah's unrisen pita). Pharaoh sent his army to chase the escapees. The Israelites kept running until they hit a major obstacle: the Red Sea. Just when they felt doomed, Moses lifted his staff, the roiling waters parted, and Moses guided his people through to safety. His sister, Miriam, led the women in a celebratory dance on the other side, as the Egyptian army, in hot pursuit, were swallowed up in the waves. The end. (Or at least the end before they get to Mount Sinai, but Sinai's not in the Haggadah.)

When Mom handed off Seder Duty to me after my adult bat mitzvah in 2005 (she was a weary host and had earned a break), I was determined to accomplish one simple goal for my kids and their cousins, then ages four to eight: connect the story to the seder. I hoped the thirty-two relatives, from tots to tantes (Yiddish for aunties), would put the pieces together in a way I had not. To see, for instance, that Pesach means "pass over, to spare," and that the roasted lamb shank on the seder plate evokes the lamb sacrificed to smear its blood on our doorposts, signaling "Jews live here."

My childhood seders at my aunts' and uncles' were warm but uninspiring. We sat at the table and dutifully read through the Haggadah. There was little spontaneity. The only suspense was who would be asked to read aloud.

So I've tried, in the ten years since my mother passed the baton to me (after taking it from my uncle Bernie), to introduce at least one activity that captures the children's attention so they become *integral* players in the entire evening—not just to perk up during the four questions and "Dayenu," the centerpiece song that means "It would have been enough." One year, I invited the kids to each prepare a

section of the seder (the four children, the ten plagues) so they could explain it in a format of their choosing: poem, song, rap, PowerPoint, iMovie, art. Another year, I put each of the seder's fifteen steps (composed by Talmudic scholars in the eleventh century) on individual index cards with two-sided velcro, shuffled them, and asked the kids to work together to put them in the right order on a poster board I had bought (and decorated) from Kinko's. As the kids matured, I made these exercises more challenging—putting debate topics under their plates and giving them each one minute to argue their side. They loved the gamesmanship, and I loved seeing them own the story enough to dispute it. Example:

Resolution for Ethan (nephew) to argue: *"Resolved: Pharaoh can't be blamed entirely for sending each plague, because according to the Torah, God kept 'hardening' Pharaoh's heart."*

Resolution for Ben (son) to counterargue: *"Resolved: Pharaoh should be blamed entirely for sending each plague because he could have done the right thing when Moses first asked."*

This year, I'm substituting the debate questions with more general, accessible queries for the entire table. So, instead of writing on index cards, I'm placing blank 3 × 5 cards under each plate, along with a pen tucked near each fork.

I always take pride in setting the seder table, which I liken to a theatrical event that requires multiple stage props. That includes not just plates, silverware, napkins, and glasses, but the seder plate with each of its categories filled—*karpas* (parsley) represents the spring; a *beitzah* (charred egg) reminds us of the burnt offering brought in Temple days and symbolizes the cycle of the year; the *z'roa* (lamb shank) stands in for the ancient lamb sacrifice on Passover and evokes the tenth plague, which Jews were spared by smearing their lintels with lamb's blood; *haroset* (the mix of fruit, wine, and nuts) stands in for the mortar used by Israelite slaves to build Egyptian cities; the *maror* (bitter herb) conjures the bitterness of slavery; one more bitter vegetable (*hazeret*) underscores servitude and is usually represented by a romaine lettuce leaf, which isn't actually bitter and which a lot of

Jews leave out because it feels redundant to the maror; and finally the feminist addition of an orange, to symbolize the inclusion of women and gay people.

Each guest has a small bowl of salt water (the salt of our tears) in which we will dip the parsley and, later, hard-boiled eggs. There are stacks of matzah on the tables and, near the seder leader, a silk case for the *Afikomen* (special matzah). The last three years, I've also placed one scallion next to each knife because Rabbi David Wolpe mentioned—and I was delighted by—the Sephardic tradition of inviting everyone to (gently) thrash his or her neighbor during the chorus of “Dayenu” to recall the whips of the Egyptians.

This year, Molly has decided to take on the matzah ball soup assignment, and she chooses a recipe from Joan Nathan's *Jewish Cooking in America*. My teenage daughter has always been far more at ease in the kitchen than I, and after she shops for all her ingredients, it's strangely comforting to watch her mash the matzah meal, egg, and dill as I sit nearby at the kitchen table, preparing the seder ceremony on my laptop. We're often a team, she and I, whether we're choosing her brother's Hanukkah gifts and wrapping them, or setting a birthday table with confetti and silly hats. She's a celebrator and an organizer who cares about marking things in a big way. Observing her efficiency and energy, I am reassured that she will carry on the holidays when I'm gone.

As Molly chops, mixes, and boils, I put three index cards under each plate, knowing I plan to pose three hopefully provocative questions at four different junctures in the seder, all of which the guests will answer anonymously and place in a bowl. The plan is to read them aloud without knowing whose answers are whose. I figure it will be a safe way to be honest, not to mention a chance to get to know some of the seder-themed truths in the room.

The Haggadah I've used for the last three years is homemade—a collection of questions rather than readings, again with the intention of keeping kids engaged. When kids simply recite, they zone out. I know I did. So I've assembled a Haggadah that meets all the seder requirements, while inviting constant participation.

Why do you think the Haggadah invites both “all who are hungry” and “all who are in need”? What’s the difference?

Moses balked when God first asked him to lead; is it possible that a sign of great leadership is self-doubt?

The youngest guests are asked questions such as:

It’s hard to eat the bitter herb without making a sour face because it tastes harsh—on purpose. If you had to pick a food to take the place of maror and get the same reaction, what would you choose?

Guests don’t know who will be called on next, which keeps everyone alert. No mastery of Judaism is required; the point is not to highlight ignorance but to involve every participant. Each opinion is additive.

The evening arrives and we begin with our usual hugging and milling around, catching up loudly over wine and slivovitz, which is a tradition I stole from my sister Robin’s in-laws (it’s a liqueur that contains no grain, perfect for Pesach). After about thirty minutes, my family needs to be corralled forcefully into our dining room to start the seder, and they appear in good humor despite being packed so closely at three rented round tables. Each table has a designated candle-lighter, and we all say the blessing for lighting, a simple consecration that never fails to move me. There’s something about the quiet around the flames as they’re lit and seeing my family’s faces illuminated, knowing how many families are lighting candles within minutes of each other. I ask for a moment of quiet to remember those whom we wish were still at the table: My father-in-law, Milton. My mother’s sister, Aunt Betty, who used to host the seder. Her husband, my Uncle Bernie, who used to officiate in his kittel (white coat). Their son, Jeffrey, a social worker who died of AIDS. My dad’s mother, Grandma Esther, who used to dependably complain that the seder was too long.

I remind everyone that the rabbis say each of us is a Haggadah, a storyteller. That seder means “order” and we’ll keep to it, but the rest is ours to shape. I ask them to speculate why some say the Haggadah

itself represents survival. Why the children are the most important audience. Why we choose to re-live slavery. Why we retell the Exodus story publicly. Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote this about Passover: *"To be a Jew is to know that the task of memory is more important than history."* Is memory more important than history? The answers come fast and furious. Opinions are not hard to come by in this family.

Soon, I ask the first of my index-card questions. "Take out your pens and one index card from under your plate. Please write down an answer to this question—preferably legibly—and do not sign your name. *The Haggadah reminds us to remember the stranger because we were once strangers; name one time in the last year that you helped the stranger.*" It's not meant to be a guilt trip but to trigger awareness. Each guest unearths a card and pen, writes an answer. I pass a bowl and it fills up with the anonymous cards. I mix them up and pass the bowl around, then each guest reads one answer aloud.

I gave a dollar to any homeless person who asked.

I tutored a third-grader in math.

I sent a donation to a cancer research.

People are listening to each other, unsure what will be shared next. I can't explain why the engagement matters so much to me. Something makes me feel strongly that this holiday, probably more than any other, should capture what Judaism can be. A seder should amount to more than the joyful chaos of a family reunion; that can happen without Judaism. It should make Jewish kids want to be Jews. Because our heritage is spirited, intimate, binding.



Before we do the first hand-washing, I pose the question about water in the Exodus story—where does it figure in? One nephew answers that Moses was sent down the Nile River as a baby; one niece notes that the first plague—blood—turns the water red; another nephew

volunteers that God parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape; and Molly chimes in that Miriam led the people in dancing on the sea banks after they crossed to safety and then hydrated the Jews in the desert with her well as they fled to the Promised Land. The point is not to test knowledge, but to connect the dots. When we see the threads, the fabric feels stronger.

I ask for silence between the first hand-washing and the dipping and eating of karpas, which requires no blessing because we're about to eat a vegetable instead of bread, which does require a blessing. I never knew, till I researched it this year, that this silence was built-in. I'm aware of how rare silence is in the din of my exuberant family, and I make sure to honor two more silences later on: one between the second hand-washing and the blessing for the matzah, and another when we break the middle matzah to create the Afikomen, a word meaning "that which comes after" (i.e., "dessert"). The Afikomen is the half-piece of matzah broken off and set aside to eat at the end of the seder. I ask the table to think privately about when they've personally felt broken and also about who helped put them back together. I'm slightly amazed that no one balks and everyone seems to be actually thinking about someone who healed them. We talk about the Hebrew word for Egypt, *mitzrayim*, translated as "narrow place."

"Whatever it is that constricts you or enslaves you," says Rabbi Green, "you have to ask, 'What is holding me back, what is my inner slavery? What keeps me from being in touch with the deepest parts of myself, with the presence of God in myself, and how do I liberate myself from it?'"

One's personal "narrow place" may not be comparable to the narrow places of global suffering. But at the seder table, it's a small step to notice the pain close to home and then begin to fathom the struggles of populations far away.

I confess that I'm seldom galvanized by attempts to imbue the seder with contemporary issues. It's not that I don't feel compassion for the plight of sex slaves in Bangkok, or the poverty of Bengal. But I think there's something awkwardly heavy-handed about the way

these modern plagues are often brought to the seder table. I do ask my seder guests—as I know others have—to think about today’s Pharaohs, today’s blights. To speak their names. But I have yet to find the exercise that connects the headlines to the holiday in a way that feels organically powerful, not artificially political.

Green agrees. “To make it about the political stuff is too easy. It has to be about *us*,” he tells me. “I’m much more interested in spiritual liberation than in political issues. For me, it’s about inner freedom, the *mitzrayim* of the mind, and the Egypt of the soul. . . . You have to talk about the places where we are enslaved; that’s the real challenge.”

I love his words but can’t ask my family to name “the places where they are enslaved.” Our rowdy Passovers, for all their poignant moments, don’t offer the intimacy to share personal *mitzrayim*. And if I’m honest, I don’t relish being confessional myself. My “narrow places” were exhumed back in Elul.

We move now to the Maggid—the telling of the Exodus story itself, and instead of reading it aloud from the Haggadah (typically a choppy, confusing account), we either recount it without text (taking turns telling the story, passing it along when we get stuck), or we play the kids’ favorite game: “Speed Maggid.” I divide the room into two teams, and one brave volunteer from each team comes to sit in the front of the room with a low side table between them, holding two hotel desk bells (ordered on Amazon). I ask a factual question about the story and they compete to hit the bell and answer correctly. If the bell-ringer gets it wrong, the opponent has a chance to get it right. You get the idea. After five questions, we move to the next pair of opponents and the next five questions.

I worried in advance that my cousins would judge this game: “There they go again, that competitive family.” But on the contrary, everyone is maniacally absorbed—screaming, cheering, jeering. It’s hard to control, to be sure, but the game achieves exactly what I’d hoped: the room is energized.

- Who finds Moses and pulls him out of the basket—Pharaoh’s wife or daughter? (Daughter!)

- What does Moses say when God calls his name from the burning bush? (“Hineni”—“Here I am!”)
- Name the second plague. (Frogs!)

When it comes to Jewish knowledge, I’m pro-competition. It should be cool to know the name of the guy who, according to Talmudic legend, entered the Red Sea first (Nachshon).



The kids recite the four questions (“Why is this night different from all other nights?”) and read about the four children—the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the one who does not know enough to ask. This is honestly my least favorite part of the service, because the four questions have a tuneless tune and the four children are so befuddling. No amount of research or explanation satisfies me. The four children don’t relate naturally or obviously to the four questions or to the Exodus story as a whole.

The plagues are much more fertile ground. Before we recite them in a singsong alternation of Hebrew and English, I ask a new question: Why do the rabbis say that the wine droplets we daub with one finger on our plates, one for each plague, symbolize the tears we shed for our enemy—drowned in the Red Sea after we crossed it? It’s an important idea that I missed growing up: that it took others dying for us to be freed. And however necessary those casualties might have been, they should give us pause, not cause for celebration. Another rabbinic reading: we take the wine drops from our cups to diminish our bounty a little bit, to honor the Egyptians’ suffering from the tenth plague. Even God, according to the Talmud, admonished his angels not to sing merrily when the Israelites made it to the other shore. “How dare you sing for joy when My creatures are dying?” (Talmud, Megillah 10b, and Sanhedrin 39b).

The Egyptians, our oppressors, were God’s creatures, too. I watch everyone at the table take that in. One relative counters that it’s perfectly understandable to feel relief and even joy at the death of those

who have killed or mistreated your family. Another says it's not just understandable but appropriate. But someone else points out that our escape required the death of innocents—the Egyptians' firstborn. And that it's beneath us to exult at the miracle of the parting Red Sea and then cheer when the same sea closes, swallowing up the army that pursued us. The idea of moral ambivalence feels Jewish to me: we don't celebrate revenge, even when we need to exact it.

Before we sing "Let My People Go," I remind the children that Dr. Martin Luther King invoked the Exodus when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. His words: "The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses stood in Pharaoh's court centuries ago and cried 'Let my people go.' This is a kind of opening chapter in a continuing story."

"A continuing story." We talk for a bit about how the story has continued. Then we sing the seder spiritual, which was actually written by African-Americans during the Civil War and adopted at seders in the early 1940s. It has always been my father's strong suit. He sings it in a booming, dramatic voice that brings me back to childhood.

We then hold up Miriam's cup—a modern addition to Elijah's chalice—because Miriam helped save our savior, Moses, when he was an infant.

For the second hand-washing before the blessing for the bread—or in this case, matzah—I leave the room to ostensibly and theatrically "wash my hands," so the kids have time to hide the Afikomen, which is my family's tradition and kind of lame, because what's the point of hiding something the leader doesn't have to look for? In our annual charade, the leader ends up pleading with the kids to produce the Afikomen and the kids demand a ransom. Other families make the leader do the hiding and the kids do the finding, though that can result in a ransacked home. In any case, it feels too late to change our Afikomen custom now, so I guess we're stuck with it.

Together we recite the blessings for the matzah and eat our first piece. In addition to the Manischewitz-brand matzah boards on the table, I've piled a plate of *shmura* (watched) matzah—the darker, grainier, homemade matzah—because it feels more Old World. It's baked from wheat that has been guarded from the moment of harvest,

to make sure it doesn't come into contact with water or other moisture, which would cause it to ferment and become chametz. I'm convinced this kind is more flavorful; but with matzah, it's all relative.

We eat the maror, the bitter herb, which has always been, if you'll excuse the sexist bromide, a moment that separates the men from the boys. Either you can take a hefty dose of the nose-clearing horseradish or you can't. I encourage my kids to eat enough maror that they feel it; if your eyes don't water, you've missed the point.

"Dayenu" ("it would have been enough for us") is the spirited high point of any seder, but we never discussed its lyrics when I was growing up. "It would have been enough." If God had *only* given us the Torah, had *only* given us Shabbat, had *only* delivered us from slavery, any one of those gifts would have sufficed. But there was always more. And then more. I ask the table, and especially myself: How many times have we focused on what we have instead of what we want? It may be a well-trodden idea these days, that noticing blessings makes you realize you are blessed. But so many times this year I have been reminded to focus on what's in my hands rather than what's out of reach.

The scallions are a hit. Everyone is free to flog their neighbors during the "Dayenu" chorus (only the chorus, or it's pandemonium), and it becomes a rambunctious battle royal. It's hard to describe the hilarity of watching my husband whip my second cousin or my son lash his aunt. The added ritual has now become a boisterous free-for-all.

We complete the first part of the seder in about seventy-five minutes, and then it's time for the meal. As I pass the hard-boiled eggs around and the kids start ladling and distributing Molly's matzah ball soup (delicious), it's gratifying to hear guests tell me that they'd lost track of the time. Not because a seder should feel short for brevity's sake, but because the reality of ritual, I've come to believe, is that duration is not a value in itself and can be a deterrent. Boredom is often considered a bad word in Jewish life—rarely confronted. But I think it's worth noticing and countering, especially for kids. Because when they're intrigued (and kept busy), they stay.

The meal is the easiest part. My family is like so many others: loquacious and loving. We're glad to be together this way, and it shows. We pick up where we last left off, no matter how many months have elapsed. And despite my stress (hosting is stressful: the spills on the floor, the chair scrapes on the walls, getting the coffee urn out and realizing I forgot to buy half-and-half for Mom), I try to tell myself not to worry about whether the macaroon crumbs are being ground into the rug, and instead notice that the seder is alive and bubbling the way it should be, that Dave is catching up with my second cousin, and Robin is grilling Ben on his girlfriend, and Dad is answering Molly's questions about her history reading. I also overhear some ribbing about the Speed Maggid winners. The buzz is satisfying.

Of course it's challenging, as always, to round up everyone to resume the seder after dessert. I can't continue the proceedings without the Afikomen, which the children will only produce in exchange for cash. After the typically heated negotiations, I proffer some single dollar bills and hand one to any guest under eighteen. I'd prefer to link the bartering to some kind of tzedakah in which one dollar goes to the child and the second dollar to a charity of the kid's (or the whole family's) choosing. But I know my family would roll their eyes if I tried. Too self-conscious. The Afikomen is soon back in my hands and we can get to the third cup of wine.

The Afikomen is supposed to be the last thing we eat, which is not realistic in a family that keeps picking at the desserts until they walk out the door. Mom's matzah-brickle (a variation on butter crunch made with matzah, caramel, and chocolate) is addictive and gets devoured even after we've downed the last cup of wine.

This year, despite waning attention spans, I hope to make Elijah—the prophet for whom we open the door toward the end of the seder—much clearer to the kids than he was in my childhood. Most Jews I know would be hard pressed to explain who Elijah is or why he comes to the seder at all. So we talk about how Elijah was considered a macho prophet who challenged the worship of a pagan god; how he is supposed to be the harbinger of the Messiah, who will arrive only when the world is healed and when we've done our part to heal it. We

talk about how he's the only major character in the Hebrew Bible who never actually dies; instead, he ascends to the heavens in a chariot. We discuss how there are two Jewish rituals at which Elijah always shows up: every seder and every bris. But most importantly, I want us to focus on the rabbinic idea that Elijah *needs us*. He needs us to open the door for him so he can symbolically enter, just as he needs us to help fix the world so the Messiah can arrive.

There will be no Messianic time—no perfect world, nor even an *improved* world—without our participation. That's why some have introduced the ritual tradition of each guest pouring a drop of wine from our cups into Elijah's: to symbolize the cooperation it will take to heal what's hurt. It's mushy, maybe, but what else is Passover about? If we don't use the seder to think about what's left to repair and who is still enslaved, aren't we just revisiting a folk tale every year? The story has to make us care, and even act. "Next Year in Jerusalem," which we will exclaim as the last words of the seder, has to mean, in addition to the literal aspiration, "Next year in a better place." A kinder place.

But the seder doesn't just end with a message of repair; there's a message of revenge, too. My childhood seders left it out, even though it was there—in the Haggadah we used at Uncle Bernie's table. It's the prayer known as "Pour out your wrath," a plea to God to punish our enemies. I could skip it, because it's not the warm Passover message I want people to take away. But I also don't think the Haggadah should let us off the hook. People don't retain what's oversimplified; they retain what's challenging. If I've learned anything this year, it's that the thorns in the Jewish story—the intolerant Maccabees in the Hanukkah battle, the wholesale slaughter of non-Jews in the Purim story, and now this aggressive prayer—all make the tradition so much harder and so much richer.

So, as we open the door for Elijah and prepare to drink the final fourth cup, we read the prayer, *Shfoch Chamatcha*, added to the Haggadah in the eleventh century, words that many Jews excise or ignore, words based on Psalm 79:

Pour out Your wrath upon those who do not know You and upon the kingdoms which do not call upon Your Name. For they have devoured Jacob [meaning Israel, or the Jewish people] and laid waste his dwelling place (Psalms 79:6–7). Pour out Your fury upon them; let the fierceness of Your anger overtake them (Psalms 69:25). Pursue them in indignation and destroy them from under Your heavens (Lamentations 3:66).

Though I'm not an eye-for-an-eye type, I respect that this prayer was added in the Middle Ages, a time when Jews were horrifically persecuted. I'm cognizant that Jews, in generation after generation, had reason to invoke this appeal for payback, when anti-Semitic cruelties were unceasing. Today, the language feels antiquated and coarse—not the Jews we want to be. Yet this past year, many argued for exactly this kind of retribution during the summer's 2014 Gaza war, when Israel struck back hard in response to Hamas's rocket fire. Was Israel's response the equivalent of pouring out God's wrath? Does bloody retaliation have a place in the Passover message? Rabbi Green chooses to include the controversial section in his Haggadah every year, "though some of my guests are scandalized when I do," he admits. "It's a piece of Jewish history; I think we have room to be angry at what was done to us."

But he stresses that we have to turn the same mirror on ourselves. "It's not just 'Pour out your wrath upon the gentiles'—it doesn't say that. It says 'Pour out your wrath upon *those nations who have not known you.*' Sometimes we Americans or we Jews or we Israelis act as if we don't know the will of God. Then *we, too*, deserve that wrath."

At our seder, the family reflections are robust, with even some of the avowed pacifists in attendance defending the prayer, others disgusted by it. Once again, I sit back contentedly and let the seder be just as messy and lively as it should be.

I restore some order so we can drink the last cup and end on a cheerier, less militaristic note. We lift our glasses and recite the wine blessing in unison—one of the few prayers the entire room knows by

heart. We then sing all the seder standards: “*Chad Gadya*” (One Kid), “*Echad Mi Yodea*” (Who Knows One?), “*Eliyahu Hanavi*” (Elijah, the Prophet). The tablecloth is stained, the rug sprinkled with matzah crumbs, everyone looks sluggish. But we’ve made a Passover and fulfilled the mitzvah: “On that day, tell your children. . . .”



Rabbi Arthur Green

ON PASSOVER

I've come to the conclusion there's only one mitzvah Jews are really committed to, and that is the mitzvah of "You shall teach them to your children." We have a sense that we have this legacy that we have to pass on. We got it from our grandparents; we've got to pass it on to our grandchildren. And if we don't do it, we have a terrible sense of failure. Even when the thick soup of tradition has been watered down to nothing, when people have no idea what they're supposed to be passing on in terms of content, there still is this sense that I've got to tell the story.

The whole seder for me is the tension between "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and now we're free . . ." and "This year we are slaves, next year may we be free." The seder lives in the tension between those two things. On the one hand, we're the most fortunate, liberated Jews in history; for God's sake, look at our tremendous privilege and freedom. But on the other hand, there are lots of things that enslave us. We have to liberate ourselves from so many things to be really spiritually free. And so we live in that tension between "Yes, we are free" and "No, we still have to become free."

Rabbi David Ellenson

ON PASSOVER

Every year of my childhood, Passover would always begin with my father, my brother, and me, along with my uncle and my cousin, walking to the home of a neighbor of ours, Mr. Brenner, for a private minyan. All the boys and men in this community would come together and daven Minchah (afternoon prayer)

continued





and Maariv (evening prayer). As a boy growing up, it never seemed odd to me that it was only the men who went to this, and then, when we'd come home, all the women would be waiting, particularly my mother, and they would have prepared the whole seder. I bring it up because I think about our Passover today, and the fact that my wife, Jackie, leads our seder so fully and remarkably. My sister and my mother were very strong people, but in this one way they were sort of disempowered. The contrast of my childhood tradition to my family's today is significant.

