

As I read the April edition of Fig Tree Lit, my immediate attention was drawn to Robert Friedman's Q & A (probably because, as I sat eating matzah rather than my usual Sunday bagel, it was only natural to think about Passover). Starting with his premise that the text we read is the Haggadah, which means telling, and his reference to relating a story and a two-way street, I would like to offer commentary on his Q & A to relate it specifically to this time of coronavirus.

Q: How does the name of the text we read on Passover (Haggadah), the meaning of that word (telling) and the implications of the word “telling” give us comfort and a sense of the positive at this time of worldwide pandemic?

A: The word “tell” is a word that has connectedness implicit in it. One person gives something — words, instruction, meaning — to someone else. So, the very title of the book that we use at the Seder as the centerpiece of our celebration emphasizes something very positive, connectedness. And, what we are telling is a story, a story of a particular people and its founding. So, in that sense, it is a story of community.

But, it is a story that is much more than just the common story of a particular people. It is a story of freedom, of gaining dignity, of experiencing awe and wonderment, of the strength of families, of thanksgiving for blessings that are given, of rage against injustice. All these are goals and sentiments that do not describe one particular group of people, but that are common to all people of every faith, every nationality, every geographic area, every age in history. So, it is not just the act of storytelling itself that emphasizes the positive of connectedness. It is the very story being told that, while having elements of the connectedness of a particular group, in a larger sense has overwhelming elements of

the connectedness of all humankind.

There is another way in which recognizing that storytelling is at the center of the Seder should give us hope in this time when we could well dwell on despair. For, what is a story? “Story” is defined as “an account of imaginary or real people and events.” Whether relating to the imaginary or the real, it is something constructed and shaped by the teller. As such, it is a tribute to creativity, inventiveness and the grandeur of the human mind.

Finally, a story that becomes familiar can give great comfort. Just think of Goodnight Moon or any other story that your child can recite by heart because she hears it read so many times. For those of us who have heard the Haggadah from the time we were children, the Haggadah, in its own way, can give that same sense of comfort in the face of nightmare.

So, it is true that this year we missed the emotional support and connectedness that comes from being physically together, able to hug, to move easily from one group of people to another, to hear a joyous mixture of voices, to be together in a room resonating with the life-affirming hum of conversation, the overlapping sounds of disagreement and accord in a crowded space filled with love and friendship. Hopefully, though, even if a lot was missing from the Seder, it was and is possible to get comfort and a sense of the positive simply by thinking of the name “Haggadah”, its root meaning and what that meaning implies.