

Shabbat Shalom

I've changed my mind about something. I used to think the contemporary practice of putting an orange on the Seder plate was "silly"...a passing fad, placed on an age old tradition. I've changed my mind. And I hope this morning I will convince many of you to place an orange on your Seder plate, too!

In a few nights we're going to sit with family and friends and observe the Festival of Passover. We'll do it with a Seder, an ancient ritual that re-tells a very important story. It's the story of our people's enslavement about 3200 years ago in Egypt. It's a story of God's miraculous intervention in history and the redemption of our people. It's the story of freedom that we have told and re-told for thousands of years now.

And we're going to observe it the way our people have always observed it, right? No! Almost right. Because there was a time in our people's history when the celebration changed. There was a time when the Jewish people went through such a huge upheaval that just about everything changed. And during this time we had to do things differently. You see in the beginning, Passover was observed through sacrifice. No big deal. Not hours of meal preparation at home, no long lines at the kosher market, just purchase a lamb, bring it to the kohen, bring some flour, hyssop, and the kohen will roast the poor fellow and you and your family would be all the more well fed from that wonderful dinner in that City of Gold!

This all came to a crashing halt around 70 C.E. you know. The Romans had enough of our yearnings for independence and so for once and all they crushed us...killed thousands, destroyed Jerusalem, leveled our Temple, and sent the survivors into exile.

The big question was: Now what?

How do we live a Jewish life? How do we remain identified as a people without a land, where will we go on Shabbat morning? What will we do about Pesach? You can only imagine the questions.

So what happened? Well in short, new ways of being Jewish, identifying oneself as a Jew emerged. Led by Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai who said to the Romans: "Give me Yavney and its Sages." The Jewish people formulated a community based on study and learning. Amazing! They would keep alive and grow an identity based on study. And so the Beit Midrash and the synagogue became the focal points of the community. Even without land, without soldiers, we would survive.

Well, what does it mean practically? There's a great example in this morning's Torah reading which is about sacrifice. They are so distant and far from our lives. In the reading about a series of sacrifices to be offered on the alter in the Tabernacle, the Torah says, "This is the Torah of burnt offerings." The rabbis wondered why did God use the

word, Torah, which means teaching or instruction, rather than say “these are the rules of the burnt sacrifice.” The Sage Raish Lakeish posits, in order to teach that if someone studies the laws of an offering it is as if they had offered the sacrifice themselves. Raish Lakeish offered a remarkable notion and that is that study is vicarious action. Reading about something with enough imagination and identification constitutes doing it. Upon that idea, the power of the mind to create, the power of the mind to change, the power of the mind to inspire becomes as forceful as the act! It is upon this, that the enterprise of Judaism was able to withstand, not only its minority status, but incredible hardship. And so in the little town of Yavneh there began the development of a people, a nation with incredible brilliance and genius. We became rooted in learning, study, imagination and values.

And through the learning and imagination we remembered a past and we constructed a future. We created a body of rabbinic literature and through that, and our synagogues, we developed new forms for observance and celebration! The Temple was gone!

We created incredible literary forms. We created incredible legal documents. Literature was at the core of the Jewish community. Our children began to learn at the age of three and every child was a part of the experience of learning. It wasn't just about the memorization of facts, a repetition of verses from the Bible. There was a transformative type of learning that took place and we experienced it for generations and generations.

Talmud Torah, the object of study is not simply a matter of satisfying curiosity or expanding skill, but transforming ourselves. The object of the study was to bring us closer to God in righteousness and higher ethical living. Our study was about issues of behavior and human responsibility, taken from the lessons of the past, the examples of lives and historical experiences. It was an incredible dimension that was at the core of the Jewish people and Jewish tradition.

Talmud Torah is not just what we study, but it is also how we study. Over generations it created a Jewish genius. And it was at the core of Jewish life. To this day we read and study Torah as the centerpiece of Jewish worship and observance.

Now, the world of the Beit Midrash is far from our experience, but its impact is still felt.

And the Torah learning was always meant to move us into responsible living in the world.

This is Shabbat HaGadol and it lets us know that it will soon be Pesach. So get your goat and a bundle of wheat and matza...oh no! No, now for thousands of years we have observed the festival with the Seder. And at the center of the Seder is study.

We know it's filled with symbols and ritual that evoke not only the original story, but also the Temple's experience. But at the center of the Haggadah is study.

Most of us don't take those central verses seriously anymore. We've lost touch with how

to learn them and what they mean...But this morning I'm going to bring you to one of the sections...

Learning is what keeps me fueled as a rabbi and as a Jew. In preparation for a class I taught this week on the Haggadah, I learned some of these texts and I had an insight...and it moved me exactly to that space that exists between our learning and our behavior.

It is not just an intellectual curiosity, as I see it. It is related to the big issue of freedom.

The text is *Aramei ovade avi*, My father was a wandering Aramenian...Remember that text? With just a few people he went down to Egypt and he sojourned there. There he became a great nation, mighty and numerous. The Egyptian's dealt harshly with us and oppressed us and they opposed hard labor upon us. The text is at the core of the Hagaddah. It is outside of the ritual and it was meant to inspire interpretation. The text continues, "And we cried out to God, the God of our ancestors. And Adonai heard our plea and saw our affliction, our misery and our oppression."

Then comes the Midrash. God saw our affliction, what does that mean? There is a discussion that took place amongst the ancient rabbis. "*Vayar et Onyeinu.*" *Onyeinu* is typically translated as "our affliction" and it comes from the Hebrew word *oni*, which means persecution. But we learn that "*ona*" refers to sexual intimacy. When talking about the persecution, the text was referring to aspects of the Egyptian task masters' decrees to control the sexual lives of our men and our women. It begins as you know with the decree of birthing, that all baby boys born were to be killed. It continues later on as slavery becomes even more oppressive when men and women were not allowed to sleep together. The Hebrew men were to sleep in the fields and the women were to sleep in their cities to decrease their offspring and undoubtedly to separate the Hebrew men from the Hebrew women and allow the Hebrew women to be available for the Egyptians.

We learn a couple of stories about the Hebrew women of ancient Israel. One is we learn about Shifra and Puah, the courageous midwives who were willing to risk their lives and save the lives of the male babies. The rabbis teach us that later on the women would bring food to their husbands and bring them comfort when they were sleeping in the fields. The women would say that they won't succeed in subjugating us! In the end we will be redeemed by God. The Hagaddah teaches us that in spite of the decree, the men and women would be together and would have children. Through the merit of the righteous women of that generation, the Hebrew people were redeemed from the Egypt.

In this learning there is something that struck me powerfully. I learned this week that President Karzai of Afghanistan has agreed to a Sharia law, which stated that married men were allowed to have non-consensual sex with their wives. Rape, in essence was legalized! Two weeks ago I read an article in Foreign Policy magazine which said that men in Somalia were defending religious law by shooting women whose ankles showed below their coats. And just this morning there was a story of a seventeen year old Moslem girl stoned to death in Pakistan, in that infamous valley, for allegedly refusing to marry an older man.

Our learning comes from life, but leads us back to life in very interesting ways.

I have a theory about the great liberation movements of the twentieth century. Those movements included workers rights and labor movements, the suffrage movement, the civil rights, the feminist movement, and gay rights. In each of those movements Jews played a disproportionate influence. In disproportionate numbers we were involved and were the leadership of those movements. I don't say this because of chauvinistic Jewish interest, but rather, I have come to believe that it is the "Passover influence" that did that. When I say the Passover influence, I refer to a story, a history and the message of freedom that we kept alive and forced an internalization of the value of freedom and the obligation to do something about it; to work for human freedom!

This brings me back to the text that I spoke about. The words "*Et Onyeinu*"... "our affliction." As we learn the text we understand the rabbis understood that it had to do with intimacy between men and women, reproductive rights, and the absolute immorality of sexual control by an outside party; be it an oppressive government or a fundamentalist religious party. That is part of the definition of being a slave. You lose procreation rights. You lose the rights to determine the fate of your own body. You lose the right to be with whom you choose. That we see as part of the story of slavery.

Years ago we learned of the custom of putting an orange on the Seder Plate. It was a sign of women's liberation. In the beginning, I thought it was a little bit faddish, now I have come to understand it differently because of the nature of the world that we live in and because of this ancient text.

Here's the origin of the practice. Dr. Susanna Heschel, the daughter of the late, great philosopher and teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel was sitting in on a conversation that a great scholar from the Jewish Theological Seminary was having with her father and the scholar said mockingly that women would become rabbis when there is an orange on the Seder plate! Well women are rabbis! And in many places there is an orange on the Seder plate today.

As a result of my learning and the realities of the ongoing persecutions in this world, including the subjugation of women, I now affirm the orange on my own Seder plate. I believe it is a symbol of the frontier in human rights that we need to fight for.

We have achieved so much in our own Conservative movement, but we know that the challenge runs much deeper in this world. The oppression of women by religious fanatics and all religions, the oppression of women in primitive countries is a great stumbling block to human freedom.

We have learned a lot from this tradition and in our learning we must grow to understand that true freedom will be realized when all men and women are free.

I close with the words of the Hagaddah, "In every generation - *L'Dor Vador Chayav adom*, a person is obligated to see themselves as if they were personally went out from Egypt

It is then that we develop the empathy that is necessary. When our people went out from Egypt there was great celebration. Women danced and sang; perhaps it is because they knew of their responsibility for this great moment! They knew the role they played in the freedom of our people and the freedom of all people.
And I to that I say "Amen."

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