



The Second Half of the Seder: Passover Reflections on Healing, Hope and Redemption

Passover 5780 – April 2020

Every year, as Pesach approaches, I plan that we will go a little faster through the first half of the seder, and that I will serve a lighter meal, so that we can devote sufficient attention to the second half of the seder service. Every year, we linger over new and familiar interpretations of the early rituals and *maggid* / telling the story of the Exodus. Every year, I prepare all of the favorite dishes of the meal. So every year, we quickly “*davven*” our way through the last two cups, Hallel and the concluding songs, without stopping to examine the meanings of this rich liturgy.

That is unfortunate, because the second half of the seder is as ripe for interpretation, and has us much to teach us as does the part prior to the meal. The seder of our time is structured so that the first half fulfills our obligation to retell and to symbolically re-experience the bitterness of slavery and the wonder of God taking us out of Egypt. The second half of the seder has a different function. It is when we remind ourselves, and God, that redemption is not yet complete. There is much still to be done, but we express our confidence that redemption will come for our people and for our world. The first half of the seder is both our national story and a metaphor for our individual stories. “Each of us must see ourselves as if we had come out of *Mitzrayim* / the narrow place.” So, too, the second half is not just a national expression of longing, but it is also a promise of hope for each of our individual journeys through life.

The meal concludes with Tzafun as the hidden afikomen is revealed. Every seder ritual has many layers of meaning and fulfills multiple functions. The afikomen is at once the memory of the Passover sacrifice and a game to keep the children involved. It also offers powerful teaching about life. Each of us has times when we feel broken, yet without the broken matzah, our seder is incomplete. Each of us has times when we are lost, and long for someone to look for us. Each of us experiences God’s hidden face, but only in the searching can we have the possibility of finding God present in our lives again.

We follow the seder feast, as we do every meal, by thanking God for the food we have eaten. *Birkat hamazon* is an extended collection of blessings praising God who feeds all creatures, who gives the Land of Israel, and who rebuilds Jerusalem. It also includes many personal and communal requests for spiritual and physical nurturing. This prayer reminds us of the importance of gratitude. Sometimes we feel physically and emotionally nurtured and it is easy to sing *Birkat Hamazon*. Other times, we are so overwhelmed with suffering that we can not see beyond our distress. The discipline of a regular expression of gratitude can allow us to acknowledge that there are always blessings in our lives. This recognition can be critical as we struggle to climb out of the depths.

There is a phrase near the end of *Birkat hamazon* which takes on a special meaning at the seder. “May the Merciful one send us *Eliyahu Hanavi* to bring us the good news of salvation and consolation.” Although the *Kos Eliyahu* (the cup of Elijah) is a relatively late addition to the seder, it is beloved. Like many rituals, it has a double meaning. It looks forward to redemption, but it also provides a moment for the expression of anger and the desire for vengeance for all of the pain of Jewish history. Constructive anger has a role in healing, giving us the energy to move from helplessness to action. The desire for vengeance is a cry against injustice, and it demands appropriate action to set the stage for the redemption which Eliyahu will announce. There are different customs as to how the *Kos Eliyahu* is to be filled. One meaningful practice has each seder participant add wine/grape juice to fill *Kos Eliyahu*. In this way, we declare our intention to do our part to bring justice and healing to the world in anticipation of Eliyahu’s arrival.

Kos Miryam / the cup of Miriam, filled with water, is a new addition to the seder table. It represents the essential role of women in maintaining hope during the darkest days of slavery and for their actions during the Exodus. This cup can also be used to convey a healing message. In the Torah, Miryam is often associated with water. The midrash adds that a well of water, Miryam’s well, accompanied the people in the desert as long as Miryam lived. It was this well which sustained them in the dry places. Miryam devoted her life to care-giving. Unrelieved responsibility can take a significant toll on the caregiver. Perhaps this explains Miryam’s hurtful accusations against her brother, Moshe. God seems to punish her with *tzara’at*, a temporary skin disease. However, it might be that her enforced separation from the center of the camp was a blessing. Miryam needed to learn to take time for herself, and to allow the people to care for and to pray for her. Many of us are care-takers and can find ourselves overwhelmed. This year, at the seder, each person can take up *Kos Miryam* and pour some of the refreshing water from this well into your cup. Quietly, or out-loud, ask for a blessing, not for the world, and not for loved ones, but for yourself. Allow the others who are with you - in person, through technology, or in spirit - to care for you by responding “Amen”.

Hallel is a unit of psalms (Psalms 113-118) which is thought to be one of the oldest parts of the Passover evening ritual. The first two psalms, 113 and 114 are known as *Hallel Mitzri*, and are a poetic description and celebration of the past redemption, from slavery in Egypt. They are recited as the triumphant conclusion to the *Maggid* / telling prior to the meal. The remaining psalms look forward to future redemption, but tell a more personal story. The psalmist describes his suffering, despair, calling on God and being heard and he expresses the longing to come rejoicing into God’s presence. We often think of Hallel as a cycle of joyful songs, but it is much deeper than that. The joy of Hallel is the joy that comes after we face the void, after we are bereaved, when we return to the fullness of life, well aware of its fragility and preciousness.

The seder service approaches its conclusion with a collection of praises which are also found in the *siddur* as the introduction to the morning service. In language which is at once as intimate as our bodies and “as limitless as the sky”, we express our gratitude to

God for the many national and personal acts of redemption we have experienced. It is these past acts which God has performed that gives us reason to hope for a better future.

The songs which end the seder envision a world which has order; a world which despite its chaos and pain, will once again be the peaceful, merciful and just garden of God's original creation. The ancient rabbis created a seder service in which looking forward to the future is as essential as retelling the story of the past. Perhaps this year, especially, at my seder table and beyond, we will be able to devote ourselves to exploring the meanings of these texts and rituals of healing, hope and redemption for us as individuals, as people and for all of God's creation.

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