

Rabbi Uhrbach's Pesach Message 2017/5777

The Passover haggadah envisions four types of children at the seder table: the wise child, the wicked child, the simple child, and the child who does not know how to ask. The intention is surely not to encourage us to label or pigeonhole people with cartoonish over-simplifications. We do that all too well on our own. Indeed, I hardly need point out that we will encounter these four children this year at a time of profound, and dangerous, polarization -- many of us will experience that polarization at our own seder tables, within our families or circles of friends. Rather, the haggadah describes four children -- four ways of asking (or not asking) questions, four ways of making sense of the world -- to encourage us to see all four children as aspects of ourselves and those around us.

In that spirit - and as fodder for your seder conversations -- I'd like to offer a riff on the four children, centered around four different "take-aways" from the haggadah, or four different ways we might experience the Passover seder: as a ritual of responsibility, of resistance, of response, and of resilience.

The Seder as a Ritual of Responsibility

Pesach is certainly a festival in which we are called to embrace responsibility -- from the sometimes overwhelming plethora of ritual obligations, to the implications of our story of being redeemed from slavery. A wise person seeks to understand the nature and nuances of his or her responsibilities, in order to be able to fulfill them. Who in the Exodus narrative takes responsibility, and how? Who fails to do so? What does the haggadah teach us about our responsibilities as human beings, as Jews, as American citizens? What responsibilities come with having experienced degradation and oppression? What responsibilities come with being free? What and who do you feel responsible for and to? How do you decide what to do when those responsibilities conflict? What is the nature of our responsibility to both the past and the future? What responsibilities do we share in as part of a people or society? What responsibilities do we bear alone? A wise person considers such questions.

The Seder as a Ritual of Resistance

Pesach is very much a festival about healthy and unhealthy resistance, both of which tend to be labeled "wicked." The story we tell is about healthy (holy!) resistance to oppression, immorality, injustice, and abuse of power; it's about refusing to accept the traditional, existing order as inevitable or right. Indeed, the telling of the story itself -- with intentional and extensive elaborations, new interpretations, questions and challenges -- is itself a ritual of resistance; we resist narrowness, arrogance, complacency, routine, the fantasy that any story can ever be only one story. At the same time, that very same story is also about unhealthy resistance -- a "hardened heart" -- in the form of stubbornness, arrogance, the unwillingness to learn or change, the inability to admit being wrong, the unwillingness to revise one's story or change one's mind. In what ways are we the wicked child, resisting challenges to our ego, authority, worldview, or comfort? What are we refusing to learn or take in? On the other hand, what forms of resistance are important for us to embrace this year, even if doing so may result in our being called "wicked"? What norms need to be challenged -- in our personal lives and relationships, in our religious tradition, in America, in Israel? What tendencies or characteristics within ourselves do we need to try harder to resist? What societal trends, values, and structures do we need to resist, and how might we do so? Perhaps most importantly, how can our seder this year help us become more discerning about when resistance in others or ourselves is actually wicked, and when such "wicked" resistance is precisely the Divine call in our midst?

The Seder as a Ritual of Response

With all of its questions, the haggadah isn't so much about teaching us answers, as it is about teaching us the need to respond. Responding doesn't always demand great wisdom, knowledge, power, resources, or planning. And very often, it's just not that complicated. There's a need, a cry, a call; what is demanded of us is simply that we respond. We bring food, or open our home, or listen attentively. We offer support or compassion. We're simply but fully present.

Who in the Exodus narrative responds? How, and to what kinds of demands, requests or needs? What kinds of demands and needs can we be more responsive to this year? What keeps us from doing so? When do we engage in over-analysis or complication as a defense mechanism, to avoid seeing or responding to a need? How can the haggadah help us regain moral clarity and simplicity, and respond in more straightforward, direct ways?

The Seder as a Ritual of Resilience

Sometimes we can feel so overwhelmed, frightened or confused, that it's difficult even to articulate what we need, or how to journey forward. Sometimes the challenges we face seem so vast, deep-seated and intractable, that we don't even know where to begin to make a dent. In such times, tapping into our own resilience is essential. The Passover seder itself is a remarkably resilient ritual: it has thrived and been observed in times of peace and of conflict, in freedom and in oppression, among the most and least connected and committed Jews. Why do you think that is so? What does it offer that makes it so sustaining? How can your seder this year help to open the wellsprings of resilience within you? What examples of resilience are present within the Exodus narrative itself? We celebrate the coming out of Egypt, even though that step was but the beginning of a long journey into an as yet unknown future. What roles do gratitude, joy and celebration -- even though a "redemption" may be incomplete -- play in building resilience? What are the characteristics of stories which build or undermine our resilience? What changes can we make in the way we tell our own stories, or our national narratives, to help us be more resilient in facing challenges and uncertainties?

I pray that our seders this year will help each of us to rise to our responsibilities with greater wisdom and fortitude, to have the courage and insight to know what to resist and how to evolve, to become ever more sensitive and responsive to need, and to renew our faith in resilience -- within ourselves, our relationships, our people, our countries, and the human spirit.