

In Search of Our Passover

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Passover. Biblically, it refers to God's angel passing over the Jewish houses on its way to kill the first born son of every Egyptian family. To this day, first born Jewish men fast on the day before Passover -- as a way of thanking God for sparing them the fate of the Egyptians' first born sons.

This punishment of Egypt came only after God had tried many other plagues to get the Pharaoh to listen. He tried hail, locusts, vermin, frogs -- nine other plagues in all. But none of them worked. The Pharaoh still refused to let the Jews leave Egypt. So God sent His angel to start killing Egyptians.

And does anyone remember how the angel knew to pass over the houses of the Jews? Right, the blood from a sacrificed lamb -- the spring offering -- was placed on the doorpost. Blood became a critical part of the Passover ritual. Listen to this description of the Passover service during the 1st Century when the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was still standing:

"The Passover offering was slaughtered by the people in three groups. When the first group entered in and the Temple Court was filled, the gates of the Temple Court were closed. The priests stood in rows and in their hands were basins of silver and basins of gold. In one row all the basins were of silver and in another row all the basins were of gold. They were not mixed up together.

"An Israelite slaughtered his own offering and the priest caught the blood. The priest passed the basin to his fellow, and he to his fellow, each receiving a full basin and giving back an empty one. The priest nearest the Altar tossed the blood in one action against the base of the Altar."

And then the same thing with the second and third groups.

Now, I'm a pretty open-minded guy, but doesn't it seem a little odd to celebrate a holiday based on a story of mass murder and blood rituals? And then, to top it off, we had the reading from Rev. Weissbard -- a UU Minister -- which suggests that this above all other holidays is the one that UUs should celebrate!

What else is it about Passover that makes it worthy of our attention? Let's put the ancient rituals aside. Passover is not just a story about God's ability to punish His enemies. As we've heard this morning, it is a celebration of freedom and renewal. At Passover, we come together to celebrate our freedom and to pray for the freedom of others.

Perhaps unique among the Jewish holidays -- maybe of any religion's holidays -- Passover continues to evolve. During the Passover Seder -- the family service and meal which includes the telling of the story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt -- three matzohs -- the sheets of unleavened bread -- are set aside. This has been going on for centuries. But when I was growing up, I remember that one year we added a fourth matzoh. It wasn't our idea -- Jews all over the world were doing it. The fourth matzoh was the Matzoh of Hope for the Jews trapped in the Soviet Union who could not emigrate to Israel and could not even practice their religion. We added a special reading about the Matzoh of Hope and -- just like that -- it became part of the Passover ritual. All of a sudden, this story about slaves trying to break free from ancient Egypt became instantly meaningful and relevant.

I'm sure that during the Second World War, there were similar changes to the Passover Seder. And the same has been true for centuries. By one account, there are over 3000 different versions of the Passover Haggadah -- the book which contains the service for the Seder -- including one for Unitarian Universalists.

Now, remember, Judaism is not exactly your most innovative religion. Observant Jews still practice their religion as it has been practiced for thousands of years. Certain prayers are said at certain times. Rituals remain unchanged for centuries. Food, clothing, personal hygiene -- you name it and observant Jews can find a Biblical passage or interpretation which explains exactly how things should be done. So what is it about Passover that makes it adaptable, current, relevant to today -- even for UUs?

Let me put a different spin on that question: Why, in First Corinthians, does the Apostle Paul refer to Jesus as "our Passover" or, in some translations, as "our paschal lamb" who has been sacrificed? Paul then goes on with this powerful analogy, saying: "Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. Let us celebrate not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

What's Paul talking about here? Is he using Jesus's death to just refer to the Passover sacrifice? Slaughter Jesus and throw his blood on the altar. Are we back to the death and blood meaning of Passover? I don't think so. I think there's much more going on here. Paul is telling his followers that Jesus is the path to freedom. But he went on, and told them that they needed to "become unleavened" -- to become sincere and truthful -- in order to achieve that freedom.

The matzoh -- the unleavened bread -- is a very important symbol of Passover. It represents the haste with which the Jews fled Egypt -- leaving so quickly that there was no time for the bread to rise. So they made the bread without leavening, and allowed it to bake in the sun -- in sacks strapped to their backs. It's the bread of freedom. And it's the symbol that Paul uses: Make yourselves clean; make yourselves like the bread of freedom; and then you shall be free. That's the message I get from Paul.

That's also the message I get from the Last Supper, which was a Passover Seder. Jesus took the matzoh and said "Take, eat; this is my body." Jesus took the bread of freedom and said, here -- this is what I'm here for -- I will bring you freedom. I am the bread of freedom.

Hold on. This is getting pretty heavy. Somebody tell this guy that this is a Unitarian Universalist Congregation.

Good point. The title of my little tirade here is "In Search of Our Passover." For a Jew, finding Passover is easy. It starts in about a week, lasts 8 days, you eat some matzoh and other strange foods, see the family ... no problem. For a Christian, Paul tells you that Jesus is Passover -- the path to freedom. You take communion (eat some of that unleavened bread), become truthful and sincere, and you're on your way.

But we're Unitarian Universalists. How are we supposed to find our Passover? There's no special diet, no particular ritual, no magic formula. What's a UU to do?

Let me offer a few suggestions. First, cherish your freedom. Take some time out to remind yourself that you are free. That you live in one of the freest countries in the history of the world. That you can pick up tomorrow and move to another community without having to get the government's approval. That you can practice whatever religion you want, however you want, with whomever you see fit. That you have the right to say what you want in public -- even if it offends some people; even if it offends the very government that protects your freedom. Be thankful for what you have, protect it and guard it jealously. Our freedom is our Passover.

Second, fight for freedom. Fight against the people who would take away some of that precious freedom. Fight against book bannings and censorship. Fight against the tyranny of the majority. Fight for the rights of children, people of color, people with disabilities, people afflicted with AIDS, people who are different, people who advocate unpopular ideas. Fight for freedom for the people who live under oppressive governments, or no government at all. Fight hard for their freedom. For their freedom is also our Passover.

Third, advocate justice. Advocate justice in your personal life and in our public affairs. Treat your competitors fairly. Deal justly with your families. Advocate a fair trial for police officers who abuse their power. Advocate economic justice; for a fair opportunity for everyone. Advocate justice even when it hurts -- advocate justice for the child beater, the rapist, the murderer, as well as for the victim. Seek justice for everyone. For justice for everyone is also our Passover.

I know, it's not easy. What did you expect: Take two matzohs and call me in the morning?