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A Moment to Focus

Shabbat Pesach (Exodus 33:12-34:26)

By Rabbi Lisa Edwards

I've taken to traveling light to avoid costly airline baggage charges. But my wife wisely reminds me that paying \$25 to check luggage costs less than a chiropractor visit.

My back already sore from a trip last week, I returned home in time to clean for Passover. I did what I do every year: contemplated how thorough our preparations would be.

What does God want of me in my observance of Chag Cheruteinu, our holiday of freedom? In what ways does the cleaning of our home — the painstaking and deliberate sorting and separation of foods and dishes, the meticulous preparation of meals, the careful designing of a seder — contribute to our feeling “as though we too had gone forth from Egypt,” as the haggadah instructs us? Does it sometimes make us feel the opposite — enslaved to tradition, to menial tasks, to tedious rules?

Traveling light is helping me. If I concentrate on my posture and position, I can lift my suitcase without harm. Focus is important, and the same is true with Passover. As the days of preparation folded into the holy days and the ordinary days in between, I've not been looking for shortcuts, but for opportunities to focus. I anticipated not the end of cleaning (or of the return to bread), but rather the opportunity to lose myself in the tasks at hand. I polished silver not because I think God needs a glistening fork (nor does Elijah look for the shiniest goblet), but because the polishing offers me moments of uninterrupted contemplation. Noticing my parents' initials on the handle of the spoon, lingering over the text and annotations of the haggadah yielded sweet memories and new insights.

The special Torah and haftarat portions for Passover offer a daily invitation to continue telling the story after the seder. On this, the Shabbat of Passover, we return to the Book of Exodus, not to the escape itself, but to the tenuous reconciliation just after the Golden Calf and the broken tablets. God instructs Moses, “[this time] you carve two tablets of stone. ... So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as God had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him” (Exodus 34:1-4). The first set of tablets was God's creation alone, the second set is the creation of Moses and God together, human and divine.

My parents, of blessed memory, certainly didn't engrave their initials in the silverware themselves, and when I gently polished the forks and spoons for our own seder, I don't imagine my actions or their utensils were quite on equal footing with Moses carving the tablets and going up the mountain to meet God again. Still, having just lovingly polished that silver while remembering my parents and imagining our guests around the seder table, I understand Moses and God a little better — the care, the wariness, the weariness, Moses' and God's growing desire to get it right this time, and to make a good impression on each other and the people still at the foot of the mountain. It is a moment of forgiveness and bonding, of remembering the past while embracing the future.

Jewish tradition speaks of several kinds of Pesach. Pesach Mitzrayim (the Passover of Egypt) happened only once, at the moment of the Exodus. Pesach Dorot (the Passover of Generations) is Passover as we know it, commanded by God to “observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time” (Exodus 12:17).

Just before the seder meal is served comes the section called korech, the sandwich of bitter herbs on matzah, with some adding charoset as well. This is the sage Hillel's interpretation of Numbers 9:11, which refers to yet another kind of Passover. God invents Pesach Sheni (second Pesach) in the second year after the Exodus, when some who had missed the Passover sacrifice asked if there was a way they could make up for the loss. God says yes, since they had a good reason to miss it, let them do it on the 14th of the next month instead, and “they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs” (Numbers 9:6-14).

Commentators note differences between Pesach Dorot and Pesach Sheni: Dorot is commanded by God; Sheni is demanded/desired by the people. Dorot acknowledges the act of liberation by God; Sheni celebrates the state of being liberated. Dorot tells us what to do; Sheni encourages us to question why and how to do so. How is this week different from all other weeks? Dorot tells me to clean the house; Sheni invites me to see my own reflection in my parents' gleaming silver.

May each day of Pesach inspire the spirit of Pesach Sheni in us all.
Chag Pesach Sameach!

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