



April 26, 2016

PESACH AND FOREIGN POLICY

Without a doubt, *Pesach* (Passover) can be the most rigorously demanding of all Jewish holidays: changing dishes and utensils; scouring surfaces till they shine; eliminating a ton of different foodstuffs that don't pass muster. And then there's the *matzah* - nature's intestinal cement; the *maror* - herbs so bitter that they cause the eyes to tear and the nose to run; and of course, the *Seder* - the ritual meal that can be a cook's nightmare . . . a storyteller's dream. The *hagadah* - the booklet read at the *Seder* - is filled with prayers, songs, and historical tidbits . . . all demanding commentary, debate, and discussion. To me, one of the greatest things about all the tales and historical tidbits is how truly modern they are.



Take but one example: early on in the ritual, there is a paragraph detailing the gathering of 5 venerable rabbis observing the *Seder* in what we presume is a cave in the town of *B'nai Barak*. The text informs us they " . . . spoke of the departure from Egypt all that night, until their students came, and said: 'Masters, the time has arrived to begin the recitation of the morning *sh'ma*' (the Jewish declaration of faith). This tale is susceptible to innumerable commentaries or interpretations. The genius of the various interpretations is that they closely relate to the time, place and situation facing the various commentators. One of my favorites comes

from a *hagadah* published in pre-state Israel. The attendees are not rabbis, but military leaders. Their discussion is not over the Exodus from Egypt, but rather strategies for how best to defend Palestine. The "cave" is not a cave, but rather a bunker. The "students" are, in reality, combat soldiers who have interrupted their leaders *not* to inform them that the time has come to pray, but rather to

impress upon them that the time for debate is over; the time for battle has begun.

To my way of thinking, *Pesach's* overarching lesson is best summed up in a statement made shortly before the meal is served. To wit: *In every generation each individual is bound to regard him/herself as if he/she had gone personally forth from Egypt . . . that it was not our ancestors alone, whom the Most Holy redeemed, but also us.*" This lesson of freedom-versus-slavery is paramount in and for every generation - and for people of virtually every time, place and religion. It, like the tale of the rabbis in that cave at *B'nai Barak* is meant to be far, far more than a mere story; it is meant to be both a reminder and a motivator.

So where does foreign policy enter into all this? Well, as most people know, following the Exodus from Egypt, the former Hebrew slaves spent 40 years wandering the desert, preparing themselves for the day they would at last enter the land of *Canaan* - Israel. Now, according to rabbinic commentary, God's original intent was to have the motley crew of ex-slaves take a mere 7 weeks - not 40 years - from Egyptian exodus to entering the Promised Land. Why the change? There are numerous answers given across the generations, but one lesson threads its way through all of them: that it is far, far more difficult (though extraordinarily laudatory) to turn a slave into a free person than it is to turn a free person into a slave. My understanding is that God waited until there were fully two generations born in freedom before entering into *Canaan*. By the time of their crossing over the Jordan, there were but two people who went all the way from slavery to freedom: *Joshua bin Nun* and *Calev ben Y'funeh*. They would act as the "institutional memory" - as those who could be relied upon to remind people first hand of the horrors of slavery, the joys of freedom, and how hard it is to achieve the latter.

Over the past generation, American foreign policy has been led by a lot of people who claim to be devoutly religious. And yet, they don't seem to have learned - much less grasped - this truism: that turning slaves into free people is a very, very difficult and unbelievably slow process. In modern parlance, this slavery-into-freedom process is called "nation building." We tried it in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya with miserable results. Just as turning a free person into a slave is far easier than turning a slave into a free person, so too is winning a war far easier than winning the peace. A nation simply cannot commit itself - even along with a group of allies - to ousting a modern-day Pharaoh without first having a well-conceived strategy in place for what to do once the war is won; once the Pharaoh is deposed. We are finally, finally, beginning to hear from presidential candidates on both sides of the aisle who seem to recognize this ancient truth. For some, it is a way to both rationalize and support isolationism; for others it is

a lesson that those who refuse to learn from past mistakes are doomed to repeat them over and over again.

Indeed, we should never stop in our attempt to free the slaves of the world. But at the same time, we have to keep uppermost in our mind that a people or culture which have never experienced anything but oppressive oligarchy aren't going to make the sudden leap to democracy within a matter of weeks, months or years. As with the Children of Israel, it's going to take generations.

Years ago, there was an ad campaign for a kosher rye bread; their slogan was "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's!" Well, let's amend it to say "You don't have to be Jewish to learn the single-most important lesson of Passover . . ."

And now, having gone through this lesson, may I offer you a plate of *matzah*, some gefilte fish, a dollop of *khraim* (horseradish) and a glass of Manischewitz?

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