

This past Monday night, I joined the Men's Club's Happy Hour – technically a Happy Half-Hour – and didn't know what to expect. I had a cup of wine at my side. What I found was a boisterous group of people hungry for social interaction. Of the many facets of the COVID-19 pandemic that are difficult, social isolation is one of the most glaring. Howard – Jake! – Jacobson, however, came to the rescue! Leslie Hartman's daughter, Melissa, sang "All of Me," "Someone to Watch Over Me," and "Blue Skies." Her singing moved each of us as we listened to her intently. For half an hour, we overcame our isolation and loneliness.

Passover is a time of year when we expect to come together in large groups with friends and family. How painful not to be able to participate in a seder with our family members *in person*. I'm aware that many of you will be holding virtual seders with your families. In fact, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) issued a letter recently permitting families to do just that. If these virtual seders will ease the loneliness that many of us may feel – especially those who live alone – then I fully support our congregants utilizing technology toward this end.

This year – for Aviv’s first Passover – Shiri and I will be holding a seder together Wednesday night and Thursday night. On the one hand, the absence of our extended families is a great disappointment, but that is offset by the excitement of celebrating the seder with Aviv for the first time.

While the Jericho Jewish Center is not holding a virtual seder, you may be aware that we have organized virtual worship services. Although we do not consider these meetings minyanim, they do offer an opportunity twice a day to transcend our isolation. As the virtual worship services got underway I wondered what is the incentive for congregants to join? Often, people will go to services because they want to make a minyan. If no minyan can be made, then what is the point? I was curious to see how participants would find meaning outside the creation of a minyan and the recitation of kaddish and kedusha.

Initially, when we began the minyan, participants were not used to the virtual medium, and background noise disturbed prayer. As the host, I decided to mute all the participants save the one leading the services. To my surprise, the participants rejected this approach. I wondered why. When I asked, they said, “We want to be able to hear one another recite ‘Amen.’”

The answer moved me considerably. The simple word “Amen” does have enormous power. When we recite brachot (blessings), seeking to bring God’s presence into the world, that objective is affirmed with the word “Amen.” For the sake of saying “Amen,” we have our prayer service. If any of the divine truths written in the siddur are meaningful to you, then you, too, may want to join us as we pray together each day – morning and evening – to say “Amen.”

In fact, “Amen” really means, “I affirm.” In spite of the difficulties imposed upon us by this pandemic, we still have many aspects of our lives worthy of affirmation. Passover is a moment when we have the opportunity to redouble our commitment to our religious lives. With so much of our lives restricted perhaps we can begin to shift the focus away from self-glorification and toward God’s glory. In truth, glory belongs only to God. This is probably the main reason why Moses is barely featured in the Haggadah. He only appears once. The Holy One took us out of Egypt and brought us to freedom – just as He does in each generation.

The Haggadah is in many ways a baffling document. If it’s goal is to tell a narrative, its selections are rather unusual. In truth, the Haggadah tells a selective story of how we became slaves and how we

become free. The frequency with which it cites rabbis belies its provenance. The Haggadah is a rabbinic document, and part of the purpose of the Haggadah is to teach those who read it how to think rabbinically. Consider the section of the Haggadah that interrogates the following verses: Deuteronomy 26:5-8. It follows the passage that begins, “Go out and learn what Lavan, the Aramean...” and precedes the passage that quotes the Book of Joel: “Blood and fire and pillars of smoke” (3:3).

Each of these four verses – five, six, seven, and eight – is dissected into several parts. Each of these parts is then further elucidated. In the elucidations, even more Biblical verses are brought. We tend to skim through these passages either because we want to get to the meal or because we don’t actually understand them. Admittedly, they are hard to understand. Once we establish that they are primarily pedagogical – introductions to the workings of the rabbinic mind - then we can warm to familiarizing ourselves with them.

The ultimate meaning of Passover is that God is intimately involved with His world. A god who created the universe but then was absent would be no god at all. The God of Israel – whom we seek to praise at the seder – is One Who Created the world and also possesses

an ongoing concern about it. In short, the God of Israel cares; He cares about us and our lives.

The Passover's story objective is to create links between the chains of the generation. We relate a narrative about a people held in chains that God liberates in order to make a people. To be a people, one must contain generations. The pitting of generations against each other is the opposite of what Elijah – the star of Passover – adjures us:

“Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction. Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord” (3:23-24).

We welcome Elijah between Birkat Hamazon and Hallel. We have drunk the third cup. A cup for Elijah is poured, placed at the center of the table, and the door opened. We recite, while standing: “Pour Your anger on the nations which do not know You and on the kingdoms which do not call Your name. ‘They have consumed Jacob and destroyed his dwelling place’ (Psalms 79:6-7). ‘Pour Your anger on them, and let Your anger overtake them’ (69:25). ‘Pursue them with anger and destroy them from under God’s heaven” (Lamentations 3:66).”

This extraordinary formulation is composed of three verses – two from Psalms and one from Lamentations. The themes of destruction and anger are unmistakable. Elijah, therefore, presents a double message on Passover. One message is directed to Israel and the other is directed toward the nations. God adjures Israel to seek reconciliation between parents and children. In contrast, God, in His anger, destroys the nations that do not know him.

Elijah is, therefore, in one context the symbol of reconciliation and in another context, he is the symbol of vengeance. Reconciliation and vengeance co-exist within the complex figure of Elijah, whom we welcome to our seder meal. In opening the door for him, we commit ourselves to reconciliation. As for vengeance, we waive our right to a vengeance that can be executed by man. That right is reserved for the holiday of Purim in the punishment visited upon Haman as detailed in the Book of Esther. On Passover, God executes the vengeance, not human beings.

Ironically, Passover is the most particular of holidays, but it has become universally known. The paradigm of moving from slavery and oppression to freedom has become the operative paradigm within Western civilization. No other narrative has had the impact on such a

disparate group of societies across time as the Exodus. It is a paradigm that can also speak to us all in the age of COVID-19, for one of the great enemies of freedom of full human self-determination is sickness and disease. As medical advances have been so successful in relieving humanity from the oppression of illness, we are now suddenly struck with a virus that weakens our confidence that alone we can conquer disease. On this holiday of Passover, as we go through the seder, we recognize how Pharaoh represents many forms of oppression, and disease is one of them.

Once again, we are reminded that we cannot only rely on ourselves. We have to place our trust in God as well. Only through His guidance can we turn the corner and put this ugly chapter that has frozen us in time to rest. The seder then becomes an opportunity to re-learn or learn for the first time that we need Him. We need Him because He desires us and our service. The seder is the opportunity to gird ourselves during this challenging time as we try to restore normalcy in abnormal times.

The final point about Passover that deserves mentioning is the role of Jerusalem as destination. Early on in the seder – just as the magid – gets underway, we declare our intention to be brought into the Land

of Israel. The Land of Israel is the Promised Land. To illustrate the paradoxically universal character of the journey toward the Promised Land, I turn to a modern rock-'n-roll song by Bruce Springsteen. In "The Promised Land," Springsteen sings:

"The dogs on Main Street howl 'cause they understand  
If I could take one moment into my hands  
Mister I ain't a boy, no I'm a man  
And I believe in a promised land"

"The Promised Land" speaks to the frustration and restlessness about being restricted – by youth, by expectations, by the parochialism of one's environment. The howling dogs represent both restlessness and yearning. The plea to be recognized as a man, not a boy, speaks to the difficulties of coming into one's own as an adult. The image of the Promised Land is a time where "one moment" is in one's hand.

In spite of the restrictions and the isolation; in spite of the loneliness, restlessness, and disorientation we are all experiencing, we have a moment at the seder to take "one moment" into our hands, connect with the Holy One Blessed Be He and advance ourselves, our people, and all humanity, one step closer to freedom and the Promised Land –both in its specificity and symbolically.