

Spring Cleaning

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I've been cleaning my apartment in increments: a shelf here, a desk drawer there, purge a file folder or four. Part of it was tax-practical, to find my 2007 receipts so I could claim deductions for my freelance lifestyle—part of it was Passover, lurking as it does beyond the hamantashen. But in plumbing the depths of cabinets and drawers, there were unexpected finds. Earrings I bought on a cruise. Writing guidelines for Newsweek's My Turn column. The "Back to the Future" soundtrack CD.

Because I'm not what people would call a cleaning machine, the surprises break my stride, and I stop to think about the person I was in the moment when that item mattered. Somewhere within me, I know the solution is tough love—toss the folder and its contents without examining each paper. But to me, each paper is a chance to revisit a moment and a memory, which can help me better understand the person I've become today. But it's slow.

Passover doesn't seem to suffer from the same organization deficiency that I do. The order of events is laid out in a singsong sequence, nicely and neatly tied into a little package called the Haggadah. Easy, right? But way before the family sits down at the Seder to ask questions and tell stories about enslavement and redemption, the ritualistic preparation begins. Boxes come up from basements or down from attics, fill rooms until there's no room in the room (which would seem to mandate that we call the space something else—certainly not "room"). As boxes are unpacked, the house is in complete upheaval; appliances and dishes from the old kitchen are removed and replaced by more pristine, even more kosher versions of themselves. It recalls an old Steven Wright joke, delivered deadpan: "When I woke up, everything in my apartment had been stolen...and replaced with exact replicas." Welcome to Crazytown, population: you.

One of the annually anticipated Seder moments is an expression of gratitude to God that basically says, "All this for us? We're not worthy..." Dayyenu, the musical bane of the Seder's existence, is peculiar in its setup: it traces the steps of redemption, from Egypt toward residence in Israel. After every line, the poem notes that each step, on its own, "would have been enough." Most people challenge this. Would it have been enough that we had been redeemed from slavery and then nothing else? Of course not.

But one of the things that I learn from Dayyenu is that when you're going through something, you often don't stop to assess the context of each step within a larger, invisible whole; you can't, or you'll never make any progress. But in retrospect, in the retelling, you are able to see how each step led you forward. Relationships are like that—the entire talk therapy industry is built on that archeological process. In order to know who you are, you have to dig up the more ancient version of yourself and have it tested in a (carbon) dating lab.

Progress isn't easy, and sometimes it's hard to see where you're headed. But as many of us continue the spiritual or social wandering that leaves us feeling isolated, we are still part of a people who are – at least in the moment of the Seder—united in purpose, remembering our collective history and assessing our responsibilities to today's world. Passover reminds us that liberty is fleeting, your destiny may not be in your own hands, and you are part of something bigger—a responsibility, a people, a nation.

Jews have other designated times for breast-beating, but there's no question that a good, thorough cleaning once a year is a salient metaphor for introspection or self-evaluation. But Passover adds a layer of trying to see yourself in a personal relationship with the Jewish nation. Seeing yourself as if you were personally

redeemed from Egypt is method acting for the exhausted: the Haggadah tells you what your motivation is, in case your ability to remember your lines or form coherent thought patterns have been obliterated by oven cleaner fumes.

This annual physical for your living environment has symbolic benefits: it gives you the chance to reconsider your choices, revisit simpler—or more complicated—times, evaluate your future and chart your progress toward finally getting there. And maybe, for now, that will be enough.