

The Passover Story

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Passover celebrates the redemption of the Jewish people. According to the biblical story, the Jews served as slaves in Egypt, where they built storehouses and palaces for Pharaoh. Pharaoh made their lives miserable by setting strict taskmasters over them and by decreeing that all newborn Jewish boys be killed.

Through Moses, a son of an Israelite slave raised by Pharaoh's daughter, God redeemed the Jewish people from slavery and led them through the wilderness for forty years on the way to the Promised Land.

To many, the biblical story of Passover today represents all liberation struggles, past and present. Every year at the Seder table, as we tell the ancient story, we also remember the liberation struggles still under way and commit ourselves to these struggles.

To Consider- Exodus / 2:23-25 תינש

*The children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried,
And their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage.*

*And God heard their groaning, and God remembered the covenant
With Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.*

*And God saw the children of Israel,
And God took cognizance of them.*

How do we apply the idea of a covenant to our modern society? What does it mean that first God heard and then remembered; saw the children of Israel and only then became aware of them?

There is a link between hearing and remembering, seeing and knowing. Tonight, let us listen to each other's stories of immigration and remember our historical journeys to be free. Let us look around at this diverse, multifaith community gathered for the Seder and know our current covenant, our responsibilities, to ourselves and to each other, to ensure our entire community is free.

God's concern for justice grows out of His compassion for man. The prophets do not speak of a divine relationship to an absolute principle or idea, called justice. They are intoxicated with the awareness of God's relationship to His people and to all men.

Justice is not important for its own sake; the validity of justice and the motivation for its exercise lie in the blessings it brings to man. For justice, as stated above, is not an abstraction, but a value. Justice exists in relation to a person, and is something done by a person. An act of injustice is condemned, not because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt. What is the image of a person? A person is a being whose anguish may reach the heart of God. "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to Me, I will surely hear their cry. . . If he cries out to Me, I will hear, for I am compassionate." (Exodus 22:22-23, 27).

When Cain murdered his brother Abel, the words denouncing his crime did not proclaim:

"You have broken the law." Instead, we read, "And. . . the Lord said: What have you done?

The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." (Genesis 4:10)

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was one of the greatest Jewish theologians and activists of the 20th century. A professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and author of numerous books and articles, he was deeply involved in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. A famous photo (shown left) captures Heschel walking arm-in-arm with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama.

Their work for civil rights and social justice strengthened the connection between the Jewish and African American Communities. Remembering the story of the Jewish people and past struggles to overcome oppression, Abraham Heschel and other Jewish leaders recognized their obligation to be aware of others and their ongoing struggles for freedom.

It is in this same way, that we remembering the compassion shown to us by God in the

Passover Story, we commit to work for a more just world, free from all forms of captivity.

To Consider-

While the Temple stood in Jerusalem (before 70 CE), Jews celebrated Passover by slaughtering, roasting and eating a lamb. This ritual served as a reminder of the night before the exodus from Egypt when, according to the Torah, the Israelites slaughtered and ate lambs and spread the blood of these lambs on their doorposts as a sign to God not to slaughter the firstborn sons in these homes.

The lamb eaten during Temple times was to be consumed completely. As most families were not large enough to finish an entire animal by themselves, families would join together and share a lamb. This ritual thus emphasized the need for community - no individual or family could celebrate Passover alone, but rather needed other families to make their celebrations complete. Similarly, we celebrate Passover by coming together in community, sharing stories and traditions and committing ourselves, as a community, to working toward liberation for all who are oppressed.

This year parts of the #blacklivesmatter supplement will be incorporated into the Haggadah as part of that continuing work, committing ourselves to end oppressions.