Unavoidable Meanings

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Source: me

Pesach is many things to many people. Its customs are familiar and can be viewed with many lenses. The symbols are universal and are subject to almost any reading: social justice, class, the Holocaust, Middle East politics, American politics, agriculture, the environment, the list is endless, and the proliferation of interpretations is evidence that this is fertile territory.

A few things – maybe only two – about the holiday are unavoidable, as in, Pesach wouldn't be Pesach if not for these things. One is symbolic/metaphorical, the other is cultural. The most important theme of Pesach is freedom from slavery. The holiday commemorates the time when the Hebrews were freed from slavery in Egypt. We eat unleavened bread, which is cheap road food. The charoset symbolizes mortar used by the slaves to make bricks. Every symbol is meant to remind us that these people were slaves. Slavery – actual, physical forced labor – provides a vivid frame of reference to talk about all other kinds of oppression: colonialism, the 1%, governments, mental illness, bullies, crime, the criminal justice system, corporate welfare. Pesach is the holiday where we openly celebrate the oppressed, the underdog. So, unlike other more nationalistic holidays like Hanukah, Pesach is really a day for us to remember the oppressed.

The cultural aspect of the holiday that is unavoidable is that it is Jewish. For most non-practicing, non-believing Jews, Pesach is the one annual event where we remember our Jewishness. We observe the customs. We sing in Hebrew. We eat traditional food. We inhabit the world of our ancestors, both known and unknown, recent and ancient.

All seders are the same at their core, and every seder is unique. Seders are both modular and constant. They have a dual nature. Seder means "order," implying that there are rules, but the order goes only so far. This is a holiday that celebrates freedom after all. So interpret each ritual and symbol in your own way.