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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Passover 2024

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An Author's Note:

October 7th represents one year since the Hamas attack on Israel and resulting Israeli military response in Gaza. This year, October 7th also falls during the Days of Awe, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, during which Jews are called to engage in *cheshbon hanefesh* or "Accounting of the Soul," during which we examine our actions and thoughts during the previous year and aim to do better in the coming year. In that spirit, my mind is drawn to a holiday earlier this year, Passover, my recollections of which I present here.

Passover 2024: We are not all Jewish, as many family members, including myself, have married non-Jews. Thirteen of us squished in together as the maximum capacity for my parents' dining room table, the window propped slightly open to let out the heat from the kitchen despite the fears of letting the street noise in. The patterned white-on-white tablecloth has been brought out for the holiday, our China pattern at each setting, white with a red rim at the edges. The festive foods smell wonderful: the Matzah Ball soup, Pot Roast, and various other dishes my mom has slaved over for days in a tiny New York City kitchen. At the center of the table, the colorful Seder plate with spots for each item: the roasted bone, the roasted egg, the celery and parsley, the Haroset made to look like brick mortar, the horseradish, and the saltwater. A cup

of wine for Elijah. A cup of water for Miriam. An orange, a modern addition representing feminism for some but more accurately stemming from queer Jewish concerns.

My father—the consummate seder leader, who looks forward to it every year, scanning the internet each year for supplemental readings—calls us together, noting that this year, we will do something different. He hands out some excerpts from the supplemental readings he has found and has us read them aloud, going one by one around the table, seder style. The readings note that just as on Passover we ask, “Why is this night different than other nights?”, so this year we must ask why this year is different from all other years. They remind us that it is a mitzvah to expound on the Passover story during the seder. They call us to work for a better world. They remark on the irony of celebrating freedom as our hearts break for the pain of Israel and the suffering of Palestinians. They suggest new rituals, such as while breaking the middle matzah in two, crumbling one half to recognize that the world is crumbling and leaving the other half whole to represent the hope of a world rebuilt. They offer prayers to recall that all humans are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of the Force that impels us towards goodness. They encourage us to engage in honest dialogue, to listen deeply to one another, and to share our thoughts on the war and on the campus protests. Drawing on the words of Interfaith America’s bridgebuilding curriculum, they implore us enter conversation in the spirit of curiosity, noting that we can disagree yet still respect one another’s views, noting that due to our love for one another, what matters to any of us matters to all of us. After these preliminary readings, my father announces, “Before we begin, let’s have an honest discussion about Israel and Gaza, with each of us expressing our own thoughts, uninterrupted.” So, we went around the table again...[i]

1. *I don’t know what to hope for anymore. I am convinced that the Zionist project is doomed. What started as a good idea, and did some good things, creating a modern society, has been done on the backs of others, and the voices that do not care about that are winning out. That is why I left Israel and why I can’t support it. But I can’t say I hate Israel. In fact, I still love Israel; I do. I grew up there, and I appreciate all it has given me. It’s complicated. It had high ideals for a modern democratic Jewish state. But it was also about power. It was also a land grab. And it is untenable. Since October 7th, it is only more so. On social media, when I express my views, I am met with vitriol by other Israelis. They say horrible hateful things to anyone with a critical view, and we are shouted down, called traitors. I can barely speak to my family members. I understand that they are traumatized by October 7th. But they are so caught up in their own trauma that they cannot see what is happening to the Palestinians. And even those who used to care no longer care. I don’t see any possible good end to this.*
2. *So much of Judaism to me is about social justice, the prophetic call to help the oppressed, Tikkun Olam. I want to join in shaping that better world. But I don’t know how. Everything I do angers someone. If I stand in support of Israel in this time of trauma as a Zionist, I am viewed as a racist and colonialist. If I stand against it in protest, I am viewed as a self-hating Jew and antisemite. If I go to sign a petition for a ceasefire, it calls the situation a genocide, which I do not believe it is. And even liking a Ceasefire Now meme on social media gets friends angry with me who believe Israel must*

- continue until the hostages are home. But liking a post about bringing the hostages home has other friends accusing me of spreading Zionist propaganda. I just want peace. I want everyone to live with human rights, opportunity, and a sense of security. In this situation, I don't know where to begin.*
3. *All I can do is hope for a ceasefire. This killing has gone on for too long. Over 30,000 innocent Palestinian lives have been lost. This is not the way. This has to stop. But I don't trust either the Israeli government or Hamas to secure a ceasefire. Neither has anything to gain. Netanyahu's interests are served by prolonging the war, and as for Hamas, a ceasefire will make them irrelevant.*
 4. *Let's say it plainly. This is all Hamas's fault. They are evil. We need the hostages returned. We need the media to acknowledge the atrocities Hamas committed. The rapes, the murder of babies. I am sad that Palestinian civilians are being killed, but that is also Hamas's fault. They are the ones using Palestinian citizens as human shields. Every time the media covers this as if Israel has no reason for what they are doing, are not being forced into these attacks by Hamas, I want to scream. Every time they gloss over the atrocities on October 7th to jump to the Israeli military attacks on Gaza with no context, without explanation, I want to pull my hair out.*
 5. *I am afraid of how I will feel reading the Passover story this year. This will be the first time that I will identify more with the Egyptian taskmasters than the Israelite slaves. I am not sure I am prepared for that. I know many of you do not agree with me, but Israel is perpetrating a genocide on the Palestinian people. I can point you to scholars of genocide who have written on this and have come to that conclusion.*
 6. *Israel matters to me. I can't abide being told that Zionism is racism. I listened to a podcast where the person being interviewed made that statement, and defined Zionism as wanting all of the Biblical land and wanting to remove all Palestinians from the land, and the statement went unchecked by the interviewer. Zionism is not colonialism. It is a belief in a Jewish homeland. It is our ancient place. It was a place of refuge for those fleeing Europe during and after the Holocaust. And we know what that means: my parents survived the Holocaust, but some of our other relatives didn't. And some of our relatives survived by getting to Palestine. Israel continues to be a place we can go, no questions asked, if and when genocidal antisemitism rears its ugly head again, and antisemitism is on the rise. What happened on October 7th was the largest attack on Jews since the Holocaust. What is the government supposed to do? Hamas has to be stopped. I hear people saying it shouldn't be done this way, but is there another way to eliminate Hamas? If so, why isn't anyone naming another way?*
 7. *I don't know that I have it in me anymore to care about the Palestinians. They elected Hamas. They support Hamas, and that makes them a community of terrorists. I am done trying to help people who just want to kill us. They rejected every deal along the way. The Israeli military is doing everything they can to avoid unnecessary deaths, to evacuate people. I support the IDF and donate to the groups treating soldiers. I have half a mind to go over there and volunteer with the Israeli army myself.*
 8. *I can love all of you and disagree. I have expressed my opinions to many of you already in other conversations. We agree on many things and disagree on others. I too care about Israel. I think it is in Israel's best interest not to use these military tactics. Beyond the*

obvious humanitarian issues, it alienates Israel from the rest of the world and makes it harder for anyone to support Israel. Do I have a plan for what they should have done instead? No. I am not a political or military strategist. But even on October 8th, when the Israeli military hadn't struck yet, everyone knew what was coming, when that could have been a time for grieving. Maybe martyrdom would have done more for Israel than revenge, retaliation, self-defense, or whatever we are calling this. Maybe it could have brought the world to its side to generate a coordinated response against Hamas.

9. This did not begin on October 7th. This was not an unprovoked attack. This began long ago, not only with the occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967, but with the forcible taking of Palestinian land in 1948 after a vote in the UN that no Arab member nation agreed with. Of course what happened on October 7th was atrocious, and a source of trauma that we all need to grieve. But people want to avoid the context, want to act as if there was no reason for Hamas to be as frustrated as they are with the open-air prison that is Gaza. They have no other recourse, and they had lost the attention of the world. Look at the situation in the West Bank. Palestinians are being terrorized there by angry settlers, and the government, police, and military are doing nothing about it. While everyone is focused on Gaza, there is yet another land grab going on in the West Bank.
10. Right now my concern for the hostages takes priority. But the best way to see them returned is unclear. Is it through military actions, from which we have seen some of them rescued? Is it through temporary or longer ceasefires, which have also led to the return of hostages? We don't know how many are alive or how they will ever be able to resume a normal life, but we can't lose our sight of them. I am moved by symbolism of the hostages. The posters with their faces. The empty chairs at the table. When those on the far left deem those symbols as "Zionist propaganda", I have to wonder whether they have completely lost the ability to empathize.
11. I think the message we get from the Torah, and the message we get from events today, is that we can be simultaneously both the oppressed and the oppressors. We can be oppressed as slaves in Egypt and then oppress the Canaanites when conquering the promised land. We can oppress the Palestinians even as we are oppressed by Hamas attacks and by Antisemitism worldwide. Every group can be both oppressed and oppressors, even in the same moment.
12. What bothers me about the protestors is that they have no understanding of the situation. They couldn't even find Israel on a map. They don't know the history, the context. They just want to be activists. And they are only targeting Israel, which is clearly antisemitic. You don't see them protesting about human rights abuses in Sudan or Myanmar, only Israel. Why is Israel always held to a special standard? But those congressmen who called in the University Presidents out of so-called concern for antisemitism on campuses do not make me feel better. They have their own Christian Zionist agenda, and while they back Israel, they do not really care about Jews. These were the same people saying there were good people on both sides in Charlottesville as those protestors chanted "Jews will not replace us." Nowhere feels safe right now as a Jew, not the right, nor the left.
13. I do have hope. Maybe this will finally be what will bring the parties back to the table to

figure out a peaceful way forward. Other Arab states are beginning to recognize Israel and its right to exist. This is part of why Hamas did what they did, knowing that as the world comes to recognize Israel, they will lose power. I hate the idea that the events of October 7th can finally lead to the two-state or one-state solution that we need for peace to take place. But after Israel militarized and securitized for so long, thinking they could push the Palestinian issue out of sight, they now realize they are still vulnerable. We need a political solution. This may finally restore those prospects.

My father thanks everyone for participating. We are all grateful to have been able to express ourselves and listen to others without having shouted one another down or coming to blows. We begin our Seder.

Notes:

[i] Here are the perspectives from the table. The dialogue may not be exact, but the sentiments are represented to the best of my ability. Some are recombined or incorporate views based on other conversations with friends and family around that time.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2024/10/passover-2024/>