

Pesah 8 5767
Yizkor and the Seder
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Hag Sameah.

The Had Gadya is such a striking song. While there is much to say about this song that closes out our seder, the final stanza is the key. The angel of death, who has knocked off every person, animal and object over the course of some ten stanzas, is killed by God. We end the seder with unequivocal understanding that God has the power to overcome death.

During the seder last week, I was struck by the power of this song. While we had added many creative elements to our entire seder – from a conga line version of Had Gadya to frog prizes for asking spontaneous questions – there is a timelessness to the seder. It is as if the experience transcends any one time or place. As we retell our foundational narrative, we move beyond even ourselves and join with generations who, like us, have sat around tables and retold this same story and chanted the same prayers and songs.

While we open Pesah with the seder, today, the eighth and final day of Pesah has a different valence. The thrill of the matzah and even the Barton's Seder Mints have long worn off, and we yearn for leavened food. Many of us are counting down the hours until this ends – don't worry - only ten hours until we can eat our bagels! Of course, the last day of Pesah is also Yizkor – we leave the festival with a note of sadness and longing as we recall those who have left us.

Perhaps these two moments – the seder and Yizkor – share some themes, and some of our insights into the seder can inform our observance of Yizkor.

First, there is the Had Gadya itself – that God is able to transcend death and reach beyond it feels quite similar to this *Yizkor* moment.

Second, there is setting the table. As we prepare the seder table, we not only arrange all the unique foods on the seder plate, but we also pour a cup of wine that will not be drunk. *Kos Eliyahu* – Elijah's cup reminds me of setting a place for someone who is no longer alive. In fact, as Rabbi Jacobs taught last week, Elijah does not die. Like only one other biblical character – Hanokh – Eliyahu's end is different from most. He is taken to heaven in a chariot and horses of fire.

It strikes me that his death or non-death is a reminder of how those who have died continue to live on within us. The rabbis kept Elijah's memory alive by having him comfort us during stressful moments. Each Saturday evening, as we

say goodbye to Shabbat, we call upon him to strengthen us during the coming days of work. During the bris, we ask him to guard the baby (and maybe the parents too!), and we ask for his protective presence at our seder. This custom may have originated during blood libels, since often Jews were attacked on the seder night, after being accused of killing a Christian child to make matzah or wine. Elijah was needed for protection.

So, too, we call upon our loved ones to protect and shelter us during difficult moments in our lives. Often it is their memory and our memories of them that help us through challenges.

The rabbis also believed that Elijah would herald the arrival of the Messiah and, thus, he is associated with resolving irresolvable problems. For example, there is an expression in the Talmud when a debate between two rabbis or two opinions is not decided. It is left as a *תיקו* (*teiku*), which, although the scholars tell us it is a form of "teikum – let it stand," "stalemate," came to mean in the folk tradition an abbreviation for *Tishbi yetarez kushyot u-ve'ayot* – the Tishbite (Elijah) will resolve difficulties and problems."

Similarly, when we are faced with difficult decisions, we ask for help from our ancestors. Or we simply try to imagine how they would handle the same situation.

Third, the seder itself is a reminder of those who are missing. Since this is a meal that is spent with family, when someone is missing, their absence is felt most concretely. That is not to say that at other holidays we do not miss them, but the many hours sitting around the seder table heighten that absence.

Fourth, the *hazeret*. What is the *hazeret*? We actually mentioned it last week when we were studying the rabbinic text about *maror*. On some seder plates, we find *hazeret* as a separate category; it is the romaine lettuce that can be utilized for *maror* (along with horseradish) and is additional *maror* for *korekh* – Hillel's *maror* sandwich.

But, the term is fascinating. The word relates to the Hebrew for returning and repentance and the Aramaic word *hassa*, meaning compassion. When we turn to God, the Almighty turns to us. "When we offer God an aperture as narrow as a needle's eye, the Almighty reciprocates and opens a door as wide as a palace portal." But while it is normally necessary for us to take the initiative, in *Mitzrayim*, God compassionately bypassed this requirement. God initiated and accelerated our redemption.

Yizkor is a time of turning back. While many of us think of loved ones frequently, on this day, it is as if they are calling out to us to be remembered. This is a time set aside for us to allow them to return to us on a spiritual level.

But Yizkor does not allow us to be content with memory. We must act – the traditional formula for Yizkor insists on donating money to tzedakah on behalf of our loved ones, in that sense, hesed – acts of loving-kindness will be perpetuated in their name, and their souls will continue to do good and encourage goodness and compassion in others.

Fifth, the egg on the seder plate. The roasted egg was a symbol of the offering brought on all festivals to the *Beit Hamikdash* in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. But, the egg is not merely a symbol at the seder. It is the first course of the seder meal. Traditionally, we are supposed to begin the meal with a hard-boiled egg dipped in salt-water. Some of us like to mash up the yolk into the saltwater, break up the white and add broken up matzah, farfel, and parsley and make an eclectic egg soup. All right, maybe not all of us do this, but for some inexplicable reason, I love it.

Eggs connote birth and fertility and thus fit in well with the springtime resonance of Pesah. But they are also a traditional food eaten in a house of mourning. At the *seudat hav'ra'ah*, the meal of consolation eaten after the burial, we eat a hard-boiled egg. There is no definitive explanation for this, but I appreciate the notion that its roundness reminds us of the circle of life. We are comforted by the circle of life and its continuity even as we experience its fragility and broken-ness.

This notion of mourning links Pesah to Tisha B'av – the day of national mourning for the destruction of both of our Temples and other moments of national tragedy – on whatever evening the first seder falls, that is the night of Tisha B'av and, thus, we feel this strange linkage between the birth of our people and our national moments of loss. In 1943, the great Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began on the first night of Pesah. This is reflected in the Conservative Movement's Haggadah and others that add sections dealing with the Shoah, the Holocaust into the seder. How can we not remember our greatest tragedy, even at a feast of freedom? In that sense, the seder is akin to the wedding where, at the greatest *simhah*, we both break a glass, recalling our destroyed Temple, and explicitly state how we long for it. I often mention deceased parents and grandparents at weddings, since their absence is so palpable at such a *simhah*. Similarly, the joy of the seder must also recall our losses – both national and personal, as Yizkor does as well.

Sixth, *yahatz* – we take the middle matzah on the seder plate and tear it in two. While there are numerous understandings of this ritual, it has an association that recalls mourning. The tearing or breaking of the matzah is not unlike the tearing of our clothing or the black ribbon. It feels like a mourning ritual. The ripping acknowledges the tear in our hearts.

When I meet with families who have losses, I encourage them to tear their clothing instead of the black ribbon so they can truly experience the power of this

custom. Think about it – in the ancient world, most people did not have many sets of clothing. Their shirt was their only shirt. When they tore it to express their grief when they lost someone, they might be tearing their only shirt, and it remained a symbol to themselves and to others of their loss. After thirty days, the tear would be sewn up, but it would remain like a scar – less noticeable, but always there. Today, tearing an article of clothing brings about tears, and we need to cry to mourn. We break the matzah and save the smaller piece, the afikomen, for later – over time, our torn hearts get stitched up, the scars never fully heal.

All of this brings me to the final and most powerful connection between the seder and Yizkor. The origin and central commandment of the entire seder is the verse that reads: “*V’higaadta l’vinkha* – you shall tell it to your children.” We are all commanded to pass down the story of our redemption to future generations. That is why we eat all the special food and build the entire seder, so that the children will ask questions and otherwise be engaged by the process. All of this is founded on the understanding that we are linking one generation to another.

Through the seder, we connect to our spiritual ancestors by relating their experience. It is an extended exercise in passing an oral heirloom from one generation to the next – *m’dor l’dor*. We all try to incorporate elements from our parents’ seders and bring their stories to life by reenacting elements from their seders. I dress up like Moses, as my father did, and still does. In that way, I am linked not only to my ancestors who lived thousands of years ago, but also to those from more immediate generations.

Yizkor is no different. Today, we recall those from previous generations who have passed on and we reflect on our contemporaries – our spouses, siblings, and friends who are no more, and even, most tragically, children we have nurtured and lost. But it is through our recalling them that we bring them back to life in our thoughts – even if only for a few minutes.

Pesah asks us all to tie together different generations. In the words of the prophet Malakhi, whose prophecy we read on Shabbat Hagadol, the Shabbat just before Pesah: “*Hinei anokhi sholeiah lakhem at Eilee’ah hanavi* – 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.”

May the seder and its rituals, along with this Yizkor day bring us close to all generations, to all those we remember today and may these memories live on in our thoughts and in our deeds.

Amen.