

Temple Emunah Dvar

Passover 2015

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Hag Sameach and thank you so much to Rabbi Lerner and Mike Rosenfeld for inviting me to speak today. I'm so grateful that with all of my travels I always have a place to call home here at Temple Emunah with people who have watched me grow up. Thanks also to my family and neighbors for a wonderful seder last night. I'm going to talk today about my recent reporting trip to Zambia for Global Sisters Report, a Catholic news website about nuns where I work (in addition to the Times of Israel).

It started as a gesture of cultural sharing. In my work for the National Catholic Reporter's Global Sisters Report, I often find myself as a bridge between two cultures and religions. "This is Melanie," the sisters often introduce me during my reporting trips to Africa. "She's from the tribe of Jesus!"

As a real-life Israelite, often the first Jew that these sisters and people have ever met, I love the fact that I can shatter stereotypes and provide answers to some of their queries. I also appreciate that as I come from the outside to report on their work and their lives, they are excited to learn a little bit about my life and the place where I live in the Holy Land. It's a much more equal exchange than me just swooping in to probe their lives for my articles.

Each time I travel, I try to bring a little something from Israel – some halva from the shuk, some chocolate with pop rocks, or, when I traveled this time to Zambia in March, some matzah. (As an aside, I was also bringing matzah for the Jewish community of Zambia, a community

of about 70 people with roots in Lithuania and Eastern Europe, but I'll get to that later).

Many sisters have been to Israel on pilgrimage, so we have that in common. We can talk about the same sites, the same food, and the same crazy situations that arise when you smush three monotheistic religious holy sites into a square kilometer of stone buildings in the Old City of Jerusalem. Other sisters ask me in wonder, but isn't it a constant war in Israel?

But I don't expect the sisters to know much about Judaism. So when I came down to dinner one night at the convent with a box of matzah, I told them, "I brought some matzah to share with you. I thought I could tell you a little bit about how the Jews celebrate Passover."

"Oh, for the seder!" Sr Euphrasia said to me. "Excuse me?" I thought I misheard. "Yes, the seder, we hold it every year! Four cups of wine, four questions, salt water, you know, all of those things."

"Maybe you can help us," added Sr Gertrude. "How do you make your mixture for the mortar? Ours didn't come out very good last year. We use beets and raisins, but what else should we use?"

I had to crank my jaw off of the floor. It's funny, just when you think you're starting to understand spirituality, the way religion just takes you for a loop.

For the Jews, the seder is a ritualistic retelling of our history, a time when we tell the story of our liberation from Egypt. Among some Catholics, the Passover seder is a time to tangibly experience Jesus's last actions – to eat the same food he ate, to say the same prayers he said, to

hear the same story he heard. It's also an opportunity for them to explore Judaism as a precursor to Christianity, the roots of their own traditions.

And I took a look at the booklet that the sisters in Zambia use for their Haggadah. It was almost word-for-word like the red and gold Maxwell House Haggadah I grew up with, good to the last drop.

Sometimes, when we tell the Passover story and we cast ourselves as victims, we have the tendency to turn inwards, to vilify the "other" that enslaved us. For generations, Catholics did the same, lumping all the Jews together as killers of Christ (the Catholic Church officially moved away from this standpoint in the 1950s during the Vatican II council).

But we are living in an amazing reality these days, one where technology has opened doors to places we could have never imagined, where we are able to share the cultures and traditions of people around the world.

And so many people are taking advantage of that.

The sisters loved the fried matzah and my dad's specialty of chocolate-covered matzah, just the same way I loved going to a factory where they make hosts where I got to eat the rejects and finally taste what an unblessed host tastes like (the answer: pretty much like you'd expect, it tastes like a thin matzah). They make me their traditional dishes, nshima and fried caterpillars and cassava, and I can share traditional Jewish dishes with them. One of my favorite memories from the trip is teaching a bunch of sisters in veils and habits how to dance the hora. You can see a video of us singing hava nagila under a crucifix

after the holiday. Then they taught me how to dance to traditional music with my “bulkas” the Bemba word for “hips,” which, let’s be honest, is eerily similar to the Yiddish “pulka.”

I have also been blessed to visit Jewish communities across Africa during my travels. The quickly-growing Abayudaya Jewish community in Uganda, where I could close my eyes and feel like I was back in Temple Emunah since the prayers and the prayer books were the same. The Kasuku Jews in Kenya, struggling to shield their flame of Judaism among deep poverty and isolation. In Zambia, Simon Zukas is the leader of a 70-strong Jewish community originally from Eastern Europe, who fled persecution before WWII. Zukas was a seminal figure in the founding of the independent state of Zambia in 1964 and was one of the first white Zambians in government after independence.

Growing up in Lexington, I benefited from a strong and vibrant Jewish community in the greater area. My neighbors were Jewish, my friends were Jewish, we could go to the local Stop and Shop for even the most esoteric Passover items (until, at least, day five of Passover). Then I moved to Israel, where I wasn’t even part of a minority any more.

I have learned while visiting these isolated Jewish communities the struggles and also the joy of maintaining a Jewish identity in the midst of so many challenges. I am in awe of their creativity, and inspired by the dedication they show towards maintaining a Jewish life.

Both the Jews and the Catholics that I visit in Africa have taught me so much about the importance of spirituality. Humans look for a connection – to other people, to a higher being, to answers. Many times,

they find that answer in religion, with the comforting traditions and the community network.

As a bridge between the two cultures, I often find myself answering questions, explaining details to both sides that I never even knew that I knew. And I think all of us, including myself, come away from these conversations with a new appreciation for the shared flame of spirituality that unites all of humankind, regardless of whichever religion they practice.

As we open the door to Elijah this year at our seders, I hope we will open the door to many other things. I hope we will open the door to new experiences, to strangers from near and far, and to perspectives different from our own. When you open that door and let new light in, you may find, far from home and surrounded by a strange environment, that the least likely people actually love and celebrate the same things, like I found with the sisters and their seder.

Often times as I'm bumping along a red dirt road to another convent or another Jewish community, I think back to my third grade Hebrew School class and a song we used to sing, and I laugh. Because it doesn't matter – wherever you go, rural villages in Uganda and Kenya, or a convent on the border of Congo and Zambia, or a church or a synagogue in Lexington or Tel Aviv – wherever you go, there's always someone (or something) Jewish.

So I hope you'll sing this song with me as I end, and I hope you hum it going forward and think of the majesty of all kinds of spirituality and the connections we forge regardless of our differences.

So let's go:

Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish.

You're never alone when you say you're a Jew.

So when you're not home and you're somewhere kind of
newish

The odds, are, don't look far, 'cuz they're Jewish too!

Amsterdam, Disneyland, Tel Aviv

Oh they're miles apart!

But when we light the candles on Shabbes eve

We share in the prayer in each one of our hearts!

Thank you and hag sameach.