

“Four Questions: Intimations of Flight”

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Prologue

This morning we're in prologue mode. With our youngsters, we “jumped ahead” to the holiday that begins at sundown just a few weeks from now. Why would we even talk about jumping ahead if we weren't tending to the “now” that is before the designated time on our calendar to celebrate this holiday? I speak of Passover, the observance of the epic story of the flight of the Jewish people from Egypt in the 15th century BCE.

In the same way that observers of Christmas observe Advent, so too might observers of Passover and all who honor this holiday mark a time of moving toward. When an event that rocks human history is about to happen, there are intimations. Sometimes we can feel it in the bones of our souls.

Passover is such an event. It is also the comprehensive term for a saga of liberation from oppression. How I would like to believe that it's “the good guys against the bad guys.” Surely anyone who enslaves another is not “good.” Nor are they irredeemably “bad.” It's just that sometimes in human history the “redeemable” part takes a while. Power rarely concedes power without a fight. Letting go in all its forms rarely happens without some serious hanging on.

This morning I invite us to ponder the intimations of flight that marked Passover. Before a pivotal event in our own lives—individual or communal—there are commonly inklings, even warnings, of our universe shifting, however large we conceive our universe.

Such soul-shaking happenings are the stuff of stories that call for telling and re-telling, sometimes from generation to generation. Such is the Jewish *Haggadah*, which means literally “the telling.” And such is the seder, which means literally “the order” in which the elements of the story are told. While the seder is the architecture of the celebration of Passover, the Haggadah is the collection of stories still ripe for embellishment. There are thousands of Haggadahs.

When any of us gather with family members to tell a story that happened “way back when,” the versions vary, sometimes significantly, with each telling. So too when the members of an age-old faith community gathered to tell a story that happened “way back when,” the versions vary with each telling. Our memories meld with our imaginations, which meld with our hopes and dreams, sometimes hopes and dreams that reveal what we *would have hoped for and dreamt of* were we present there and then. That this is so testifies to the richness and freshness of what presumably happened and what continues to happen across the landscape of human history.

Central to the core elements of the story of Passover are questions. Why? Who? What? When? And Why all over again. My favorite Haggadah—and I’ve only experienced ten or so—is the one I hold before you, *A Night of Questions*. Michael Strassfeld and Joy Levitt are both rabbis in the Reconstruction arm of contemporary Judaism and co-editors of this Haggadah. Joy I knew many years ago and can imagine her and Michael working with fervent scholarship, imagination, and love of the questions and the children who asked them as they created a treasure for our time. Thank you, Rabbi Joy; thank you, Rabbi Michael.

We as Unitarian Universalists honor questions. We encourage our children to ask them and then wonder why they never stop. So it would seem that a holiday in which children asking questions figures centrally would be magnetic for our “free-range UU kids” and our ever curious adults.

How, I wonder, might the questions central to all Haggadahs resonate when asked “early?” That is, how do the intimations of Passover, intimations of the Exodus, intimations of flight, hold such questions BEFORE their designated time at the seder table?

Prologue matters.

The signs are everywhere

Children absorb the unconscious of the adults who surround them. Such is the observation of 20th century psychologist and Jungian analyst Frances Wickes. Children sense the underground streams of what is happening around them and what is about to happen. When encouraged to do so, they ask every imaginable What? Who? Where? and Why? So imagine, just imagine what the Jewish children of ancient Israel were sensing and wondering about as their life in Egypt moved ever closer toward their exodus in those days just preceding Passover, the night when it became inevitable that they would take the hands of their mothers and fathers and flee the land of the Pharaoh, that iconic oppressor of the Jewish people.

What do I believe was in the very air they were breathing? How about a tumultuous blend of hope and trepidation, anxiety and anticipation that coursed through the psyche of their parents? Something was afoot. The time was near. Legend tells us that Moses had approached the Pharaoh again and again to let his people go.

Recall that Moses was raised in the household of Pharaoh. It wasn’t until he attained adulthood that he discovered he was a Jew. His universe shifted. He observed the hardships of the Jewish people with a surge of identification that was visceral. He was one of them. As long as they were slaves, so was he. But Moses had an “in” with Pharaoh, until, that is, he witnessed an Egyptian beating one of his fellow Jews and impulsively killed that Egyptian. Moses became for a significant time *persona non grata* in the land where he was raised. It was long after this that he presumably received a call from God to return to Egypt and lead his people out of their bondage.

“Let my people go!” he beseeched Pharaoh. “No, no, and no!” bellowed Pharaoh. Jewish scripture tells us that God intervened decidedly and dramatically on behalf of the Jews. Pharaoh’s refusal to yield to Moses’ pleas was God’s cue to visit upon the Egyptians a series of plagues, each calculated to weaken the Pharaoh’s iron will. From the waters of Egypt turning to blood to darkness throughout the land, nine plagues and nine refusals led to the tenth and most horrific plague, which marked the namesake of Passover.

Whatever happened, the Jewish people and most assuredly the children knew that the stranglehold of Pharaoh’s power was being met by cataclysmic consequences in some form. Just days before Passover itself, the intimations were there, however subtle or overt, intimations that their parents transmitted through their understanding of what was afoot and their attendant responses, responses for which the children were ready sponges.

The promise of liberation in any form evokes waves of anxiety, resistance, hope, and anticipation. What surely coursed through the psyches of the Jews still in captivity was the profound sense that *nothing would ever be the same!* How terrifying! How exhilarating! The signs were everywhere.

Hear again the lyrics of Jackson Browne, echoing retroactively, unwittingly, the intimations of exodus.

*Oh people, look around you
The signs are everywhere...
The road is filled with homeless souls
Every woman, child and man
Who have no idea where they will go...*

Four Questions: Intimations of Flight

Four questions and more, all posed by children, form the heart of the Passover seder. Yet Rabbi Michael Strassfeld tells us that these were “never meant to be anything more than examples of questions that could be asked,” and Rabbi Joy Levitt proclaims, “the whole point of the seder is to ask questions.”

Each of the four questions addresses a specific of the overriding question: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Each of the four questions contrasts what families do “on all other nights” with “what we’re doing on this night!” Hear the first question as an example:

“On all other nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread.
Why on this night do we eat only matzah?”

You perhaps know that there was a clear answer to this. The Jews were in a hurry. There was no time to let dough rise.

If this question were asked in those days leading up to Passover, the young questioner would have sensed the urgency at hand, embodied in what she and her family would and would not have for dinner. When encouraged to question freely, children are intuitive. Intuitive can easily pass for prophetic, but I'll stick with intuitive.

To name the other three questions is not the point, rather to hold up the profound understanding that this night would be different. In fact, each night *leading up to* Passover, each night that held "intimations of flight," was different from all other nights. The Jewish people were in a mode of spiritual and psychological crescendo moving toward Passover and flight. How readily a child might ask at any point: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" with variations on the four traditional questions of Passover itself.

I wonder. Would only the most intuitive, the wisest, the cleverest of children inquire about what was happening both on Passover itself and during the days preceding it? Rabbis Levitt and Strassfeld note in their version of the Haggadah that Jewish scripture "speaks about children in connection with the telling of the Exodus story, but nothing is said about the character of these children." It was, they explain, later rabbinic commentary that claimed these passages represented four types of children:

"One who is wise
One who is wicked
One who is simple and
One who does not know enough to ask."

We're not talking about four different children but characteristics of each and every child, each and every adult. Awareness can manifest as eagerness can manifest as a wise child. Alienation can mask as hostility can mask as a wicked child. Directness can mask as a simple child. Silence can mask bewilderment can mask as a child "not knowing enough to ask." Through all the questions infusing a Haggadah full of young questions, we're reminded that "these four children represent the different aspects of our selves," and that "we hear their voices and their questions as we tell the story of the Exodus."

Rather than perceiving these adjectives of character as judgmental, we can understand them simply as descriptive. As our children or any of us pose questions laced with intimations of liberation in whatever form, let's open our hearts and minds to what lies beneath the apparent motive and character of the questioner.

I wonder. When history is about to change course, does not every question posed in the prologue hold inherent worth and dignity? Let us celebrate this season of questions.

Amen.

Sources

Jackson Browne, "Rock Me on the Water," music and lyrics, 1972.

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Frances G. Wickes, *The Inner World of Childhood*, New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1927.