

Corona and Seder-ing Alone

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The COVID-19 virus has at once made the world larger and smaller, connected and disconnected. A plague of truly Biblical proportions, we are united – arrestingly bound up – with all of humanity, while at the same time supremely isolated, as each of us hunkers down at home in an effort to thwart the pandemic’s rapid spread. Trapped inside, we must refrain from communal gatherings such as *beit kneset* that nurture our social and spiritual selves. Neither can we enjoy the physical presence or embrace of friends and extended family, nor can we commune around the table to share in meals. In this situation we have turned to the screens and the technologies that allow us to connect from afar, but we are keenly aware of the limits of those technologies.

The Passover Seder – one of the most widely-observed Jewish rituals – appears to be under threat. With each family and each individual home-bound, many of us feel great sadness and anxiety, as we fear the loss of the perceived essence of the *seder* – the familiar gatherings and the ensuant sense of togetherness, the extended friendship units that make Passover such a powerful conduit for unparalleled conversations of meaning and spiritual sustenance. Must *seder* suffer the same suspension that has been hoisted upon the entirety of our lives?

Zoom *sedarim* seem to offer the perfect antidote, the best available rebellion against the tyranny of COVID-19. We by no means underestimate the powerful, threatening, and potentially overwhelming sense of loneliness, isolation, and danger that so many of us are experiencing at this frightening time. This is so for all of us, but especially for the most vulnerable members of our communities – elderly who are entirely home-bound, and individuals suffering from anxiety or emotional and/or mental conditions that augment the sense of loneliness. But for the rest of us who do not fall into these exceptional categories, we’d like to offer a different take on how to *seder* during the COVID-19 pandemic. We genuinely believe that the unprecedented demands of our current situation present a spiritual opportunity, allowing us to access one of the deepest elements of the *seder* that early rabbinic sources sought to foster. *Seder-ing* alone or with the people with whom we are confined – and refraining from Zoom – may offer a rich and unexpectedly meaningful Passover.

The Beginning of Us

The Exodus from Egypt – or, to be more precise – the ritual observance marking the Exodus (in our days, the *seder*; in Biblical days, the eating of the Pesach lamb) becomes the very first Jewish communal act – and as such, it is constitutive of the Jewish collective. This would explain why even secular Zionism enlisted the *seder* as a method for fostering a Jewish collective sensibility. And it is for this reason that Rashi asks why the Torah begins with the creation narrative, rather than with the opening verses of Exodus 12, which could have offered a more logical starting point were the Torah all about the communal obligations of Israel. After describing the creation of an Israelite calendar in verses 1 and 2, Chapter 12 proceeds to describe the process of selecting and eating the Pesach offering:

(3) Speak to the entire community of Israel, saying: On the tenth day after this new-moon they are to take themselves, each person, a lamb according to their father’s house, a lamb per household. (4) But if there be too few in the house to finish a lamb, he is to take (it), him and his neighbor who is near his house, by the computation according to the number of people; each person according to what he can eat you are to compute for the lamb.

Verse 3 contains the two critical markers of the Jewish collective: the address to “the entire community of Israel”, and the observance of a shared historical consciousness played out in shared time, a communal calendar. But then the verses take an unexpected turn: Jewish communal sensibility will be formed not in the wide-open, but rather: in the confined spaces of homes – by

individual family units. The marking of the beginning of Jewish peoplehood – *us* – takes place not in the public square, nor even in a place of communal gathering such as the *beit kneset*. It transpires in the private domain.

Nuclear and Intimate

Thus far, we have established only why the *seder* takes place in the private domain, in relatively small units. But that, it seems, doesn't offer a reason not to Zoom each other together this year, so that we can have our normal *seder* of extended family and friends. But here we must note how the rabbis take this Biblical injunction and begin to fashion it as the ritual which will eventually become *the seder*. In the *Mechilta*, the earliest rabbinic midrash on the book of Exodus, the rabbis teach:

Suppose there were ten families belonging to one father's house. I might understand that in such a case only one lamb should be required for all of them. The Bible therefore states: "*A lamb per household [Exodus 12 3]*" (*Mechilta Parashat Bo, Parasha 3*)

The rabbis seem to know that we want to observe this moment that establishes the collective in the widest possible familiar circle, as a clan or extended family. But they go against that grain, emphasizing the Biblical command for each household, the nuclear family, to constitute its own unit.

Yet the rabbis do not stop there. They offer two alternatives to the nuclear family unit, all the while refusing adamantly to extend the circle to the larger family unit:

"*he is to take (it), him and his neighbor*" [Exodus 12 4] –

Rabbi Akiva says: from where do we know that if a person wants to have his Pesach offering on his own then he is permitted to do so? As it says, "*he is to take (it)*"

Rabbi Yishmael says: from where do we know that if a person wants to enrol others on his Pesach offering then he is permitted to do so? As it says, "*he is to take (it), him and his neighbor*" (*Mechilta Parashat Bo, Parasha 3*)

Rabbi Yishmael reads the verse in a way that redraws the lines of the household – and the Passover observance: it is not about blood relations, but rather about intimacy and proximity. If a person wishes, they may invite someone else – *anyone else* to join them. But the truly radical move belongs, as usual, to Rabbi Akiva, who reads the verse to open up the possibility that the individual may have the Pesach offering – and, by extension, observe the *seder* – by themselves. This is not merely unexpected or unfamiliar: it is subversive.

Why would Rabbi Akiva stake out such an extreme position? Let's begin with the obvious: Rabbi Akiva understood the plain meaning of the verses that aim to establish the size of the group based on the number of people joining together to eat a lamb. So when he suggests that the individual may eat the Pesach offering alone, he's not endeavoring to find a solution for someone with an enormous appetite. More importantly, Rabbi Akiva was not living during the modern age, when the individual's autonomy is a supreme value. So he's not advocating the atomization or privatizing of communal religious practice in an effort to meet the norms of his day. Rather, he's saying something profound about the way that – or, better still, the *locus where* – Jewish collectivity is formed: in the consciousness of the individual.

No Herd Mentality, No Oppressive Freedom

In his masterpiece *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr grapples with the most vexing of questions: if the individual shows such inspirational ability to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of acting out of moral agency, why does the collective have so difficult a time doing so? In two important senses, Rabbi Akiva's position in the *Mechilta* seems to pre-empt Niebuhr's quandary, prescribing a method for fostering communal consciousness that places at its center the moral capability of the individual.

In the first sense, we can say that by insisting that communal belonging transpires within the individual, Rabbi Akiva offers a vision of communal cohesion that rejects the herd mentality. The moral failure of a community occurs at precisely those moments when the individual ceases to think autonomously, sacrificing the dictates of her conscience on the altar of the existent communal norm. For Rabbi Akiva, the individual's sensibility becomes the birthplace and source of communal consciousness.

But Rabbi Akiva's insistence that the individual can observe *seder* alone offers an additional answer to Niebuhr's concern. If the cornerstone of the building of Jewish historical memory is the Exodus from Egypt, then the central, hallowed space of that building is the unrelenting command, worked and re-worked throughout the Torah, that because the Jew knows what it was to be a stranger in Egypt, she must act with moral sensitivity and compassion towards the stranger. A Jew's new-found freedom must not and cannot become a source of oppression of others, or else they have betrayed Jewish collective consciousness. Thus at the heart of our communal identity is the command aimed at the individual moral conscience. This ethical excellence may well become the trademark of our people as a group – but the starting point of that path lies hidden deep within the recesses of the individual. Rabbi Akiva's insistence that the individual can eat the Pesach offering alone finds a foothold in the verse, but its true religious telos reaches the highest and widest aspirations of Jewish peoplehood.

Seder-ing Alone

How will this *seder* be different from all other *sedarim*? For some, it will be different because they will link themselves to others electronically. But where many find a restriction, we see deep spiritual possibility. By conducting *seder* at home, with our family or even by ourselves, we can explore in new depth what we as individuals are capable of achieving as the constitutive locus of Jewish collective consciousness.

At the same time, we may be forced into the narrow straits of a powerful discomfort of having to speak and lead where we are normally silent or acquiescent. No one can do the work of leading the *seder* for us – framing the questions, suggesting themes, offering inspiring interpretations. We will hear our own still small voices. We can give them much-needed airtime. If we have until now been the passive recipients of *seder*, this night will be different because there will be no one else to shield us from our own responsibilities, dreams, and inadequacies.

The Talmud (Pesachim 116a) even goes so far as to say that when a person eats alone during the *seder*, she must ask herself the Four Questions. Our inner dialogue, the deep questions that we so often leave silenced or unarticulated, are waiting to emerge. From them – and only from them – can the larger Jewish narrative be woven. This year, let us not be enslaved to our pre-existent sense of the conditions of a meaningful *seder*.