

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

DON'T
CENSOR WHAT
SCARES YOU

When I was growing up, my parents and I would spend the second Passover Seder every year at the home of close friends. It was an intense ritual: thirty to forty people, somehow always seeming to range in age from birth to near-death, with many from differing backgrounds and with varying degrees of Jewish knowledge and experience, each offering to the collective his or her own particular investment: fluency in Hebrew and Aramaic, mastery of various commentaries on the Hagaddah, insight into current events, comic relief.

My parents had become dedicated, beloved members of their modern Orthodox community, but neither had been raised in an observant home, and so neither had much to offer the group by way of formal religious knowledge. Until, that is, the year that my father stumbled upon “the karpas thing.”

It was a simple insight, but my father relished the moment each year when, prodded by our host as bowls of celery in salt water began being passed around, he could regale the crowd with what he believed was a singular commentary. The traditional explanation for dipping greens in salt water is that it serves as a reminder of the tears shed by our ancestors when they were slaves in Egypt. “But!” my father would say, his gentle doctor’s lilt turning uncharacteristically stentorian, “Rashi offers another explanation.”

Indeed, he does. Rashi explains that the word *karpas* comes from the word for fine wool, and that the ritual should be seen as a nod to Joseph’s famous coat, which had been dipped in blood by his brothers—the event in history that is, in fact, the natural beginning of the Passover story. Had Joseph not been abandoned in the desert by his brothers, he would not have made his way to Egypt, where he became Pharaoh’s adviser and dream interpreter (or, as I like to think of it, the first Freudian analyst in recorded history). Which is, of course, how he later became a magnet for famine-starved Jews, who would be warmly welcomed into Egyptian society for hundreds of years, until...they weren’t anymore. You know the rest.

My father found Rashi’s insight indescribably delightful—and ingenious. “It is a lesson for us all,” he’d pronounce every year, like clockwork. “Stories don’t always begin where or how we assume, or want.”

By the fifth or sixth year of this routine, my mother had enough. As the moment arrived and our host began giving the nod to my father—but even before the first celery bowl had been lifted—she blurted out: “Oh, God. Do we have to go through the same thing every year?”

Our hostess looked stricken. “Should we have used parsley instead?”

• • •

Here’s a game: If you were allowed to only keep one Jewish ritual, what would it be? It could be anything—fasting on Yom Kippur, refusing to intermarry, *shatnez*—but you have to choose only one.

My answer, in case you haven’t already guessed, is the Passover Seder, which I’d argue gives you more bang for the buck than any tradition, of any religion: a long drama that rivals *Game of Thrones*, with babies floating on rivers, sticks turning into snakes, plagues, a knock-out liberation scene, plus a formal Q&A session, a series of bizarre food items imbued with utterly ingenious symbolism, and more.

And yet, even with all this competition, Passover’s most inspired feature is still its meta-message: A group of people had a terrifying, transcendent experience together (the original “Where were you when...?” you might say), and they built themselves into



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAY ZUKERKORN

a cohesive religious and political entity by telling the story of that complex, painful, magical, problematic event over and over and over again. The point couldn’t be clearer: Narrative is vital to life—the



engine of progress, both for individuals and for civilization.

But what if the narrative, or a part of it, makes you uncomfortable? There’s certainly no shortage of triggers in this one. What then?

A few years ago, I attended a Seder hosted by a friend who, in her fifties, married a man who isn’t Jewish. Suddenly she found herself about to preside over a dinner during which the death of non-Jews is celebrated and Jews declare themselves “chosen”—all in front of her now-beloved non-Jewish spouse and stepchildren. Her first inclination was to replace the Hagaddah she had used her whole life with a more anodyne one. But, as she explained to me while we set the table together that night, she soon realized that doing so would actually subvert the entire purpose of the Seder, which is to challenge and engage. If she did not believe in or could not support one or more of these things, she should take the opportunity explicitly encouraged by the Seder to say so.

For her, a commitment to the tradition and its text went hand in hand with overtly rejecting parts of it, and doing so in front of her new family members made it even more memorable. “It’s not like we Jews have kept the whole chosen idea a secret,” she said, wryly. “I think it was meaningful for my stepdaughter to hear it

explained in historical context, and also frankly a relief to hear me say that I personally didn’t believe it.”

It’s worth noting here that there’s no dictate against *adding* anything to the Seder; in fact, it’s the whole point: talk, talk, question, question, talk. Do you hate the idea that innocent Egyptians had to be killed in order for Jews to be liberated? Say so. Disgusted by the commandment to “blunt the teeth” of a young boy for the crime of phrasing a question in legitimately skeptical terms? Rant away! (I do—every year.) Wonder what the meaning is of a story that begins not with enslavement by one’s enemies but with abandonment by one’s own brothers? Well, does my dad ever have a Rashi for you.

What you mustn’t do, though, is airbrush or censor or rewrite out of history the parts that make you squirm, or worse. This is an anxiety disorder. Though pandemic these days in American society, it has long afflicted this country’s Jews, whose solution to discomfort has often been humor—or lately, and somewhat more annoyingly, kitsch. Look, I enjoy a Ten Plagues manicure as much as the next gal (👉👈👉👈👉👈👉👈👉👈👉👈), but at some point you simply must engage with the ideas of dead babies, slavery, faith, and the excruciating choice between subservient survival and precarious autonomy.

This year, when we are instructed to feel “as though you yourself came out of Egypt,” do just that: Feel the feelings inherent in this whole story, inside of the context of your life, and this unsettling moment in history. Feel betrayal, feel threat, feel terror, feel budened. But also feel the relief that comes from choosing to not be alone in the world—and the promise that comes with believing in something.

—Alana Newhouse

Edible Icons I, 2015. By Judi Harvest. Each year for Passover, Harvest creates an edition of eighteen gold leafed matzot in lucite boxes. 7 x 7 x 1 inches. JudiHarvest.com.