



A Passover Question That Keeps Us Up All Night

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We can chart the last half century by the kinds of seder we have had. Fifty years ago, we celebrated an old-country model brought here by grandparents who davened it through in Hebrew from the Maxwell House Haggadah. Some of us remember it nostalgically, but in fact, we rarely got through it all. Attention lagged half way through. Color it in warm pastels of memory.

The next generation inherited the Seder without the old-country davening know-how. Unable to replicate the seder of their youth, and looking for something modern, the second-generation hosts bought new Haggadahs with up-to-date translations and explanations below the lines. They would go around the table inviting a different participant to read each paragraph of the English. This was even harder to sustain all the way through. After an hour, people quit and ate. Color it staid - and eventually, boring.

The most recent seder comes with fun and games: paper frogs and insects that get hurled around the table to elucidate the plagues, kiddy-style songs that confuse Passover for Purim, whatever it takes to appeal to the kids. Color it pediatric.

Baseball *maivins* this time of year will remember "Tinker to Evers to Chance," the infielder combination for the Chicago Cubs who are credited with inventing the double play -- guaranteed to end the opposing side's chances for winning the game. The parallel double play in Jewish life is "nostalgia to boring to pediatric." It will end our own chances for winning a game more important than baseball: the game of meaningful Judaism in America. Nostalgia, boredom and pediatrics have no staying power.

I am intrigued, therefore, by the seder that the Haggadah itself describes: rabbis so engrossed in the story of the Exodus that their students must interrupt them to say that morning has arrived. By the 1950s, so "ho-hum" had the seder become, that no one believed the account. Scholars suggested, therefore, that what kept them awake until dawn was clandestine planning for the Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome. The idea appealed to a post-war generation that had successfully fought Arab armies to produce the State of Israel.

But the theory is sheer nonsense; not a shred of evidence supports it; and elsewhere in rabbinic literature, we have a parallel story of other rabbis, long before the revolt, staying awake all night to discuss matters relevant to Passover. Once upon a time, then, the seder was a time that mattered. *Kol hamarbeh bi'tsiyat mitsrayim harei zeh m'shubach*. "Discussing the Exodus from Egypt extensively is praiseworthy," goes the Rabbis' sage advice - not because of a rebellion in the making, but because there has to be something better than nostalgia, boredom and pediatric Judaism.

Is there still anything relevant to Passover that might keep us up all night in animated conversation? Obvious candidates are things like world poverty and health care for the poor, but I have in mind a prior stage of conversation: just the elementary question of whether there is a question! And there I go back to the four questions that have been similarly watered down from the seder's original intent. Originally, there were no set questions that children memorized and parroted back. Instead, someone, not necessarily a child, would offer a single meritorious question that would fascinate enough to galvanize discussion. It would be invented on the spot, created out of the existential and historical moment. My question is, Why is there no such question anymore?

In part, the problem is that our questions have grown too large to tackle. What more can we say about world poverty? Never mind health care, which even Congress cannot discuss without incivility setting in. No one wants to dedicate the seder to perennial quandaries that have no solution, especially when they come with political land mines planted underfoot.

But Passover is not for solving problems, so much as raising ideas. Whatever the Exodus was historically, it later became an idea, the idea that God wants freedom in politics, history, society, and our own internal psyches. Surely everyone around the table has something worth saying about that....

This year, let's move beyond wasteful seder conversation dedicated solely to nostalgia, boredom and pediatrics. Let's go around the table and ask, "What question might keep us up in productive conversation all night long, if necessary?" We'd better have one; we no longer have a *tamid* to atone for us, if we don't.

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