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Fourth Year Sermon
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Parshat Bo

In *parshat* Bo we continue the Exodus narrative with the ongoing curse of the plagues. Each time Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh, God hardens Pharaoh's heart and the Israelites are not allowed to leave. In Exodus 12 God instructs Moses and Aaron about the preparation for the final plague, and gives instructions about commemorating the people's deliverance in the future. Each family shall take a lamb, or share a lamb with their neighbor; they shall slaughter it and place some of the blood on the doorposts and lintel of their house. Then the lamb should be roasted and fully eaten that evening, along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The eating of unleavened bread will continue for seven days, with the first day and seventh day designated as days of celebration.

In contrast, we read in *parshat R'eih*, in the book of Deuteronomy, a varied version of Passover. We are told that when it comes time to celebrate one must sacrifice the Pesach offering to God from among the flock and the herd in the place that God tells them. The location of the sacrificial offering has changed. No longer are the people to slaughter the animal in their home, they are now to take the animal to the shrine. Moses continues his directions by saying that no leaven may be consumed from that day and for a total of seven days. The first and last days shall be festivals and one is prohibited from work. This sounds similar to the story in Exodus but the ritual of placing blood on the doorposts and lintel of the house has been left behind. The story has changed from its first telling to its second because historical circumstances required changes.

The ritual of Passover continued to change and develop throughout the Persian, Hellenistic, Mishnaic and Talmudic periods multiple times and in multiple ways. The development of the seder text which is recognizable to traditional Jews today is first seen in sections of the Talmud, and then more completely in the works of Rav Amram and Saadiya Gaon who were writing in the ninth and tenth centuries. There used to be three questions and not four. The reasoning for various parts of the *seder* has changed. The *seder* was clearly modeled on the feasts of the Greeks and Romans among whom the Jews found themselves living. Elaborate banquets were common among the wealthy in Roman times and as much as we discuss the sociological worries of acculturation today, acculturation has always been an aspect of Jewish life. The rabbis created rabbinic Judaism surrounded by a host culture that was not their own. They created rabbinic Judaism in a land filled with people who saw God in a completely different light. They chose to design their ritual based on the aesthetic and religious values modeled by the Greco-Roman aristocrats of their surrounding culture. The rabbis recognized that sometimes one has to embrace knowledge from outside of the tradition in order to adapt the tradition to new realities.

Reform Judaism as a movement arose out of the Enlightenment as an acknowledgment of the role contemporary issues can have in the lives of Jews. The rabbis of old had a choice to make in regards to the celebration of Passover and made the choice to develop the *seder*. Their intuition of embracing elements of the secular world is a model for us today. If they had chosen to remain insular and not incorporate aspects of the secular culture it is possible the Jewish people would have been unable to adapt and survive until today. Their

choice led to Passover being the most celebrated holiday on the Jewish calendar - a meal of multiple courses, the focus of which is retelling the story God's redemption of the Israelites from bondage.

The Haggadah as we know it has been rewritten and, since the advent of the printing press, reprinted thousands of times in a variety of forms. With each rewriting the story of our ancestors is brought once again to the attention of a new generation. With each author hoping to recapture the imagination of those around the table the author or leader of the *seder* must ask themselves "how am I going to touch those here?" We then find ourselves asking, does it matter to all of the Jews who hold or attend Passover *seders* every year whether or not we are connected to the Pesach in Exodus? It is a multifaceted question, which we answer as both individuals and as communities.

The development of the *seder* over the course of history shows us that ritual is not static but rather, dynamic. The aspect of the *seder* we are attached to and shaped by is the telling of our history as an enslaved people being redeemed. The more important piece of the *seder* is that we tell our ever evolving story as the central part of the ritual. The *seder* constitutes a paradigm upon which to build. The story of the Exodus is an essential part of the creation of our Jewish identity. The question of historicity is subordinate. Ahad Ha'am, in his well-known essay on Moses, wrote that when he read the Haggadah during Passover that he cared not whether Moses the man existed. For Moses, in the history of the Jewish people and in the history of the world, existed. Ha'am continued:

The existence of this Moses, as an historical fact, depends in no way on your investigations. For even if you succeeded in demonstrating conclusively that the man Moses never existed, or that he was not such a man as we supposed, you would not thereby detract one jot from the historical reality of the ideal Moses - the Moses who has been our leader not only for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai, but for thousands of years in all the wildernesses in which we have wandered since the Exodus.

Ahad Ha'am explains the reason that the questions of whether or not the Exodus happened and why things changed from Exodus to Deuteronomy are irrelevant to our continued celebration of the *seder* and of Passover. They are the wrong questions. The question that we need to ask ourselves is: how can we continue to make our *seders* inspiring and encourage the continued creativity we have seen throughout the history of the Haggadah?

According to the Pew Study on Jewish Americans from 2013, "Seven-in-ten Jews say they participated in a Seder last Passover...And over half of Jews - including about one-in-five Jews of no religion - say they fasted for all or part of Yom Kippur in 2012." Yet, this includes the ever-growing number of personalized *seders*. *Seders* recognizing everything from modern-day slavery to the women's *seder* to the interfaith *seder* or the LGBTQ *seder*. The thing that all of these experiences of Passover have in common is the emphasis on storytelling at the *seder*. The reason that so many communities have adapted the Haggadah is because it is a format that helps remind people that they have a history, they come from somewhere, and that their current reality and story is a piece of an ongoing story. As we

continue to rewrite the *seder* what remains at the center is the central focus of cultivating empathy for those whose story we tell.

We can find many excellent contemporary examples of the importance and role of storytelling in helping to shape who we are as individuals and as members of our larger society. We know that an author has succeeded in their mission when we are moved to laughter or to tears by their words. The characters on the page are no longer ink and paper but rather living and breathing inside us and with us. Many of you know that I am a great lover of Harry Potter but few know that I wrote a college admissions essay about the impact the books had on my life. The impact J.K. Rowling's writing has had on people both young and old has been profound. The world J.K. Rowling created has been the basis of thousands of pieces of fanfiction long before the movies were made or the theme park was built. Fanfiction is written by common people who use characters and worlds published in books, TV shows and movies as jumping off points for their own inventive narrative. The advent of the Internet has given authors of fanfiction an unlimited pool of potential readers.

I first discovered Harry Potter fanfiction in eighth grade as I anxiously awaited the fifth Harry Potter book. As I reflect back on it now, I recognize that I was immediately indoctrinated into what I was and was not willing to read based on my sense of canon. Early on I only read stories that involved the generation of Harry's parents. I enjoyed these stories because they did not conflict with the canon that I enjoyed. There are a wide variety of genres that fanfiction can fall into and those genres can be quite distinct from the

original work. You might find romance, action-adventure, horror; two completely separate universes being brought together or retellings of a storyline with an alternate ending. Even within the great expanse of what the fanfiction community creates, there are always boundaries as to what is acceptable. Fans will not read things that clash with their view of the canon. I, as an example, was uninterested in reading stories where Lily and James did not eventually get together. I quickly learned that I enjoyed stories where Sirius and Remus had a romantic relationship, something that is not part of J.K. Rowling's canon but that authors made plausible for their readers. I also learned that some authors of fanfiction are genuinely terrible writers. Others have become published in their own right, such as Cassandra Clare. Fanfiction did not begin with Harry Potter, nor did it begin with Star Trek or Lord of the Rings; rather, it has been a part of the history of people since we have had texts with which to interact.

I would like to suggest that there is something to gain by thinking of our Haggadah as the fanfiction of our people. We have remodeled the *seder* in every generation based on the canon's core characters and plot. The need to be creative is fundamental to our survival as a people. The Haggadah has become a place where we express our story and our creativity. The opportunity to be creative with our story has granted us the ability to continuously adapt to our ever-changing lives in a fulfilling way. When we recognize the impact the Haggadah has had on us as a people, we recognize that we all have a responsibility to the tradition to be ever creating fanfiction of our story. If we do our job right, we will return, year after year, to inspire another generation along with ourselves.

As a collector of Haggadot, I have found that they are an excellent way to establish community identity. For generations having a Union sponsored Haggadah has been the way that Reform Jews identify themselves as different than Conservative or Orthodox Jews. By using the same Haggadah regardless of what part of the United States they lived, Reform Jews felt a sense of community and common understanding with other Reform Jews.

Today things are different. The Union for Reform Judaism has multiple versions of the Haggadah that they advertise without a particular edition being given Movement wide approval. This is a balancing act in which we all participate. How far away from a canon text can we stray before we no longer recognize ourselves as part of a tradition and a Movement? The ease of making your own Haggadah at haggadah.com means that one can personalize their Passover *seder* experience from start to finish. Last Passover I did a Haggadah workshop with my congregants in Michigan where I walked them through a variety of published Haggadot as well as online supplements from various organizations including T'ruah, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, and RitualWell. This evoked a discussion of how to include our modern experience of persecution in the *seder* while balancing the challenge to make the Exodus relevant to us today. Personalized *seders*—or, if you will, *fanseders*--keep the relevance close to home.

The evolution of the *seder* is about more than our shared history, it is about the evolution of us as individuals. The historicity of the *seder*, our connection to the Exodus, has evolved over time and continues to evolve through our writing and rewriting of our story through the Haggadah. As educators, which many of us are, we have a wonderful opportunity to

rethink how we teach our students about Passover and the Haggadah. If we were to hand our students the charge to write their own fanfiction about the characters and experience of the Exodus – what beautiful new understandings would we have of our history and tradition? It is important to distinguish for our students and ourselves that fanfiction is not midrash. Midrash has different goals than fanfiction does. Midrash is interested in working within the structure of the tradition for the benefit of the tradition. Fanfiction is about loving a story so much that we do not want to let it go but would rather continue to evolve the story ourselves.

I would like to conclude with a piece of fanfiction.

Miriam awoke to cries coming from beyond the houses of the Israelites. She struggled to hear what the voices were saying over the wailing of other voices. As she stumbled out of her bed she realized what the wailing was over. “All the firstborn boys have died,” she said aloud in shock. After nine other examples of God’s power, she somehow had doubted this last plague would come to fruition. How could God have killed all of those innocents along with the guilty? Who was this God who was redeeming her people? What had her brothers gotten the people involved in? She stumbled to her door and opened it. A door dripping with blood. She found that every Israelite door had women standing at them, some with tears pouring down their cheeks, and all were looking toward the Egyptian homes with shock on their faces.