

Passover 2008

Passover, *Pesah*, is our festival of freedom. We go from the redemption from Egyptian bondage to true freedom at Mount Sinai, where we become the house of Israel by accepting the covenant to obey God's laws and bear God's standard. We reenact these beginnings at the *seder* meal where we banquet and retell our story through symbols. We recover our history and heritage, and integrate its feelings and messages into our own lives. Some of the motifs include: selfishness, pleasure, pace of life, poverty, war, and hunger. Yet the rabbis, in mandating our retelling the story, commanded us, "In every generation each person must perceive oneself as personally redeemed from Egypt." While the *seder* has been used for recovering addicts, minority solidarity, and a variety of other uses, it is useful to see how the rabbis saw it function in their generation and for us lest we lose the larger issues and timelessness only to the relevant and "in."

The sages saw such weighty themes as slavery to freedom, and redemption to revelation, and tried to make them familiar and relevant while preserving the Jewish and the timeless. In the process, they reenacted reality and made it higher. They started with the general Jewish penchant for teaching children and working with what people know, in this case, the Greco-Roman banquet or symposium (Plato), changing a known custom to a better one. They began with wine before the meal, *kiddush* (*yayin she-lifnei ha-mazon*), went on to the *hors d'oeuvre* (*gustus*), often vegetables (*karpas*, *hazeret*), seated, *yoshvin*, in an antechamber. They moved to the main course, eaten reclining, *mesubbin*, a festive meal, *shenei tavshilin* (two cooked dishes), including bread with meat/fish and wine, *pesah*, *matzah*, *maror*, *yayin she-be-tokh ha-mazon*, and dessert of fruit and delicacies. Then they went to thanks or grace, *birkat ha-mazon*, with wine, *yayin she-le-aḥar ha-mazon*. *Epikoman*, or *afikoman*, followed, more drinking and entertainment (*Hallel*, *yayin*). Accompanying throughout was discussion and philosophy (*maggid*). The rabbis ensured that their meal did not degenerate to lewd plays and drinking by stopping eating after the *afikoman* (so some still say the line, "in memory of the Passover sacrifice eaten when satiated," *zekher le-korban pesah he-ne'ekhal al ha-sova*, before eating it) so we reenact the retelling of our humiliation turning to glory, slavery to freedom.

Our sages adapted. They took the best: clothes, setting, food, atmosphere, discussion, etiquette, and wine. Wine blurs reality and is cumulative, but for a Jew it must never become out of hand. By blurring the Now, it allows for a higher reality. The rabbis started with the higher reality by beginning with sanctifying God by adding the joy of

limited wine, *kiddush*, and ending with redemption, *ge'ulah*. Suffering becomes freedom. The bread of poverty/affliction transforms into the bread of redemption. Redemption leads to revelation. We finish full and reflect. We are redeemed. We make our own reality. We express wonder, glory, joy, and exhilaration. We sing of blessedness and sanctity, Psalms of Praise, *Hallel*, which ends in our ancestors' and our redemption, as we also read in the *Haggadah*, "We sing before God a new song...and we will sing a new song of thanks for our redemption and for our spiritual liberation," *ve-nomar lefanav shirah hadashah...ve-nodeh lekha shir hadash al ge'ulatenu ve'al pedut nafshenu*. The rabbis want us to redeem ourselves to a higher reality with a *seder* constructed so we reflect on it and claim it for our own. *Hag kasher vesame-ah*, may you have a happy and kosher Passover.

-- Rabbi Michael Rascoe