

PASSOVER, THEN AND NOW
 Passover's Message and Its Relevancy to Today's World
 An Easter Sunday Message to the
 Fredericksburg Unitarian Church
 By Harvey S. Gold
 President, Beth Sholom Temple
 April 24, 2011

Good Morning and I offer you Roberta's and my best wishes for a wonderful Easter Sunday. I thank you for inviting me to speak on this very special day. I am humbled by the invitation.

My message this morning, about Passover, **Then and Now**, is not unrelated to Easter. In fact there is much in both the celebrations of Easter and Passover that have similar roots. For example, the Latin word for Passover is *pascha*, in Ancient Greek it is *paskha*, in Aramaic it is also *paskha* and in Hebrew it is *pesakh*. . In many European languages, the words for "Easter" and "Passover" are etymologically related or homonyms. The term "Pascha" from the same root, is also used by some in English to refer to Easter.

Easter is linked to the Jewish Passover by much of its symbolism, as well as by its position in the calendar, both ordained to be in the Hebrew month of Nisan. Easter is linked to the Passover through the Last Supper and crucifixion that preceded the resurrection. According to the New Testament, Jesus gave the Passover meal a new meaning, as he, during the Last Supper, prepared himself and his disciples for his death in the upper room (which is thought by some to be the first Christian Church). He identified the loaf of bread and cup of wine as symbolizing his body soon to be sacrificed and his blood soon to be shed. With an analogy to Passover, 1 Corinthians 5:7 states, "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed." This is an obvious reference to the Passover requirement to have no yeast in the house and to the allegory of Jesus as the Paschal lamb.

In the book *Origins of Pascha and Great Week* the Reverend Alciviadis Calivas tells us

“The prototype of Pascha (that is Easter) is the Jewish Passover, the festival of Israel's deliverance from bondage. Like the Old Testament Passover, Pascha (that is Easter) is a festival of deliverance. But its nature is wholly other and unique, of which the Passover is only a prefigurement. Easter involves the ultimate redemption i.e., the deliverance and liberation of all humanity from the malignant power of Satan and death, through the death and resurrection of Christ. Easter is the feast of universal redemption. The feast, however, must have originated in the apostolic period. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine otherwise. The first Christians were Jews and obviously conscious of the Jewish festal calendar. They scarcely could have forgotten that the remarkable and compelling events of Christ's death, burial and resurrection had occurred at a time in which the annual Passover was being observed. These Christians could not have failed to project the events of the passion and the resurrection of Christ on the Jewish festal calendar, nor would they have failed to connect and impose their faith on the annual observance of the Jewish Passover.”

St. Paul in 1 Cor 5:7-8 seems to indicate as much when writing to the Corinthians,

"purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth".

Finally, if as Reverend Calivas states, Easter is a celebration of the ultimate redemption, deliverance and liberation of all humanity then it and Passover have the same basic message. In spite of the differences in how and why each holy day is celebrated these words are, according to the dictionary, all synonyms for each other as are the words salvation, rescue, release, and emancipation. And that, my friends, brings me to the title of my talk to you today...Passover, Then and Now.

Passover commemorates the story of the Exodus, in which, as told in the book of Exodus, how the ancient Israelites were liberated from slavery in Egypt. It is a story that requires a strong belief in G-d and an understanding of what it means. And while Jews have told the story to their children for millennia, it still is hard from some to believe.

There is the joke about a little boy who returned home from religious school and his father asked, "What did you learn today?"

He answered, "The Rabbi told us how Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt."

"What did he tell you" the father asked?

The boy said, "Moses was a big strong man and he beat Pharaoh up using Kung Fu moves. Then using guided missiles he fought off the Egyptian army. Then, when it was safe he got all the people together and they ran towards the Red Sea. When he got there, he had the Corps of Engineers build a huge pontoon bridge that had a draw bridge in the middle. Once they got on the other side, they opened the middle of the bridge and their special forces blew up the rest of the bridge while the Egyptians were trying to cross."

The father was shocked. "Is that what the Rabbi taught you?"

The boy replied, "No. But you'd never believe the story he DID tell us!"

Passover, like many of our holidays, combines the celebration of an event from our Jewish memory with a recognition of the cycles of nature. As we remember the liberation from Egypt, we also recognize the stirrings of spring and rebirth happening in the world around us. The symbols of the foods on our Seder table bring together elements of both kinds of celebration. In earlier days, Passover combined the celebration of an annual harvest with a community festival

as well as a personal family service at home. As many Jews have become less involved and dependent on their own harvest, especially with the likes of Wegmans around, they have focused more on the meaning of the personal service. And, in earlier days, the knowledge of slavery of others around the world was often simply not known although the possibility was not overlooked. But, today the knowledge of what is going on around the world is unavoidable and so, Jews must recognize the need for the freedom of others. They must do this to preserve their freedom because we have learned that if others live in slavery, we too are not free.

Passover begins on the 15th day of the month of Nisan in the Jewish lunar calendar, the same Hebrew month that Easter is ordained. This is in spring in the Northern Hemisphere, and is celebrated for seven or eight days depending on where and who is celebrating it. But this is another story. However, no matter who or where it is celebrated, it is one of the most widely observed Jewish holidays.

The directive to all Jews to commemorate their release from a brutal slavery is told in the Old Testament narrative of the Exodus in which the Bible tells that God spoke to Moses and told him He would help the Children of Israel escape slavery in Egypt by inflicting ten plagues upon the Egyptians. Now, Jews have learned that when in difficult times, humor is the best resource. And with humor, contemporary comedians tell their version about Moses' conversation with G-d.

One such story tells that Moses was sitting in the Egyptian ghetto. Things were terrible. Pharaoh wouldn't even speak to him. The rest of the Israelites were mad at him and making the overseers even more irritable than usual, etc. He was about ready to give up.

Suddenly a booming, sonorous voice spoke from above:

"You, Moses, heed me! I have good news, and bad news."

Moses was staggered. The voice continued:

"You, Moses, will lead the People of Israel from bondage. If Pharaoh refuses to release your bonds, I will smite Egypt with a rain of frogs"

"You, Moses, will lead the People of Israel to the Promised Land. If Pharaoh blocks your way, I will smite Egypt with a plague of Locust."

"You, Moses, will lead the People of Israel to freedom and safety. If Pharaoh's army pursues you, I will part the waters of the Red Sea to open your path to the Promised Land."

Moses was stunned. He stammered, "That's.... that's fantastic. I can't believe it! --- But what's the bad news?"

"You, Moses, must write the Environmental Impact Statement."

But as Paul Harvey used to say, “Here is the rest of the story... With the help of Aaron (who incidentally was a better public speaker than Moses... in spite of what Hollywood and Charlton Heston’s performance tells us), G-d told Moses to tell Pharaoh that he and the Egyptians must free the Israelites. As we learn in Exodus, Chapter X, “Thus Saith the Lord, ...How long wilt thou refuse to humble thyself before Me?” **Let My people go**, that they may serve Me?” But Pharaoh became angry and increased the suffering on the Israelite slaves. Nine plagues were delivered on the Egyptians and still Pharaoh would not release the Israelites. The tenth and worst of the plagues was the death of the Egyptian first-born. The Israelites were instructed to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a spring lamb and, upon seeing this, the spirit of the Lord *passed over* these homes. When Pharaoh freed the Israelites, it is said that the Israelites left in such a hurry that they could not wait for bread dough to rise (or leaven). In commemoration, for the duration of Passover no leavened bread is eaten, and so it is called "The Festival of the Unleavened Bread" and the matzoh (which is unleavened bread) has become a symbol of the holiday. And, the instructions for keeping the unleavened bread as a special symbol of freedom is proclaimed in Exodus, XIII, “And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.”

And so it has been for millennia that Jews have, generation to generation, not forgotten their freedom from slavery. But the message of Passover extends beyond just remembering the exodus to freedom. In the ritual Passover service that has been handed down through countless generations, Jews are instructed to think beyond their own freedom. Following age old instructions on how to pass on the need for freedom, a special service, known as the Seder, a word derived from the Hebrew word for “order,” is held on the first night of Passover. The service is read from the book called the Haggadah, which tells the Passover story and the “order” in which it should be told. The service begins with the raising of the matzoh and proclaiming, “This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt; let all those who are hungry enter and eat; and all who are in need, come and celebrate the Passover. This year we are slaves; next year we will be free.” To modern Jews, this is not only an invitation to dinner; it is a welcome to all who seek freedom. It is an invitation to understand that freedom and redemption are inalienable rights and can and should be obtained by all who desire it. Later in the Seder the front door is opened to invite the prophet Elijah to join our *Seder*. In the Bible, Elijah was a fierce defender of God to a disbelieving people. At the end of his life, rather than dying, he was whisked away to heaven. Tradition holds that he will return in advance of messianic days to herald a new era of peace. So, at the Seder, we set a place and a glass of wine for Elijah.

For Jews through history, freedom and peace have been an ongoing battle and an ongoing goal for themselves and others still in bondage. The Pharaoh was not the last tyrant to take away their freedom. As the world has evolved through the millennia, a long list of tyrants have come and gone and Jews themselves have experienced repeated slavery throughout history. But, the thirst for freedom has never died and for each tyrant the memory of the Pharaoh brought renewed struggles, another exodus, and the continued telling of the first struggle to be free. As modern Jews celebrate Passover, there are references and even discussions about others who today are held in one type of bondage or another. Bondage has, and continues to take many forms; from persecution, prejudice and withholding freedoms to total slavery. In addition, for modern Jews, there is also the recognition of a personal slavery of the individual him or herself. In a modern

more contemporary Haggadah, incidentally written by my wife's cousin's son, there is the passage,

“Tonight we gather together to celebrate Passover, our holiday of freedom. We will eat a great meal together ... and tell the story of our ancestors' liberation from slavery in Egypt. We welcome our friends and family members from other backgrounds to reflect with us on the meaning of freedom in all our lives and histories. We will consider the blessings in our lives, pledge to work harder at freeing those who still suffer, and begin to cast off the things in our own lives that oppress us.”

Each Passover, in the order of the Seder, after a few preliminary prayers, the question is asked by the youngest at the service, מָה מְכַל הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מִכָּל הַלַּיְלָוֹת הַנְּשֵׂאֵת תַּגְּהָהּ הַזֶּה “Why is this night different from all other nights?” And then, the story of Passover is told. It is appropriate for the youngest to ask the question so that the message is passed to still another generation. And even more, the service recognizes that the story of why this night is different from all other nights may not be understood by all children of the next generation.

Passover, like many of our holidays, also combines the celebration of an event from our Jewish memory with a recognition of the cycles of nature. As we remember the liberation from Egypt, we also recognize the stirrings of spring and rebirth happening in the world around us. The symbols of the foods on our table bring together elements of both kinds of celebration. In earlier days, Passover combined the celebration of another harvest with a community festival and the personal family service at home. As many Jews have become less involved and dependent on their own harvest they have become focused more on the meaning of the Holy Day. And, in earlier days, word of slavery of others around the world was often not known. But today the knowledge of what is going on around the world is unavoidable and so Jews must not fail to recognize the need to free others. They must do this to preserve their freedom because we have learned that if others live in slavery, we too are not free.

So, is this message of freedom and redemption for Jews alone? I strongly believe it is not. I believe Passover's message is a message for the world, for people of all faiths. For, while Passover has spoke to a single people, its message is for that people each year to remind the world that we know well what slavery is and we imbed this information in the minds of our children and instruct them to work to abolish it. It is the hope that by passing this message from generation to generation one day all people will be free and the plea; “Let my people go” will no longer be said or sung by anyone. And that the messages of redemption, deliverance and liberation from both Passover and Easter, each in their own way will bring personal and collective freedom to all who cry out for it.

In our Sabbath service there is a prayer, that perhaps reminds us each week of the message of Passover. The prayer pleads:

Disturb us, God; ruffle us from our complacency;

Make us dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with the peace of ignorance, the quietude which arises from a shunning of the horror, the defeat, the bitterness and poverty, physical and spiritual of humans.

Shock us G-d, deny to us the false Sabbath which gives us the delusions of satisfaction amid a world of war and hatred;

Wake us, O G-d, and shake us from the sweet and sad poignancies rendered by half forgotten melodies and rubric prayers of yesteryears;

Make us know that the border of the sanctuary is not the border of living and the walls of Your temples are not shelters from the winds of truth, justice and reality.

Disturb us, O God, and vex us; let not Your Sabbath be a day of torpor and slumber; let it be time to stirred and spurred to action.

To this I say Amen and wish you a Shabbat Shalom... a Sabbath of Peace.