

From the Rabbi

Pesach 5776/April 2016

“In a Good Hour”

Some years ago, a prominent Conservative rabbi in Los Angeles unintentionally caused a storm when he said in his Passover sermon that even though there is no historical evidence for the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, nonetheless that story shapes the collective psyche of our people like nothing else.

It was a storm for those Jews who either literally believed in the historicity of the Exodus or who at least wanted their rabbi to keep the myth of literal belief alive. What the rabbi would no doubt want his flock to know – and what I definitely want to say to you as Pesach once again approaches – is that the notion that an ancient people has continued to tell that mythic story and utilize it to configure the very core of their identity *is* historical. We’re historically real; our telling of the story is true; and the truth of our telling it is remarkable.

In other words, we are both an ancient people and a modern people, and there is unbroken continuity between the two. More important, the literary

ruse that forms the seder narrative, namely that Jewish parents are expected to coax their children into asking “what is this?” in order to convey the thrust of the Exodus tale is in fact not only literary. It is also *literal*. Parents really do this! They really do stage seders in their dining rooms or converted living rooms on the night of the vernal full moon in order to pass on this strange and wonderful concept:

*We were slaves in Egypt. We cried out to God. God heard our geschrei and sent Moses to bring us forth from that place. The Pharaoh resisted. God produced plagues to convince him to relent. Only the death of his own son could cause him to budge. He let us go. But we didn't leave until we had roasted a lamb, painted its blood on our door in full view of the Egyptian public and our own Hebrew neighbors, and eaten the lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs in a pre-departure ceremony that went deep into the night toward dawn, and that we would replicate each year at this time.*

What else gets transmitted at that annual meal? Many spoken words, no doubt, but more importantly, many *unsaid* messages. Many formative memories that can never be recorded except in the *haggadah* of the mind and heart.

For me as a new mourner, those spoken and unspoken memories have been flooding my consciousness for the past month. At our seders, there will be much talk of our children's "bubbe" and the many years she made the trek to be here with her beloved grandchildren. Our kids, now grown and pursuing their own adulthoods, will no doubt continue the narrative of reminiscences they began at her graveside thirty days ago. I imagine an oral family *haggadah* emerging at the table, filled with humor and reflection and the "Torah" she taught us through her words and her struggles.

My own most poignant Pesach memory of my mother will come after the meal is over and everyone has gone home or to bed. That was the time when she and I would stay up until well past two a.m. washing the glasses by hand. "They can't go in the dishwasher, Les," she would always insist, and that was the opening for us to repair to the kitchen and begin our hour of washing, drying, and schmoozing. Every water glass, wine glass, Kiddush cup, and Slivovitz shot glass had to be done separately. She dried each glass in a way only she could, with her long-fingered mottled hands.

It made for plenty of time to recall the seders of my childhood and hers; to catch up on the rest of the family and remember those of blessed memory; to critique the kids' present courses of action as their young lives were rapidly unfolding; and simply to be together in a way that would inevitably end. We both knew it. She would say so, though I would not. "I'm getting old. I'm already old. I'm *old-old*." Indeed she was. And indeed that precious chapter has now concluded.

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When we hear of good news on the horizon, like the impending birth of a child or an upcoming marriage, we say in Hebrew "*b'sha'ah tovah*," or in Yiddish, "*in a gute sha'a*." Literally, "in a good hour," though it more idiomatically means "at an appropriate time in the course of life." Our mom died *in a gute sha'a*, for sure. She was 93. She lay in her own bed, unattached to tubes and wires, cared for by hospice professionals and surrounded by us, her children. Her family photos adorned the walls and shelves around her. Shabbat morphed into Saturday night and onward toward dawn. Our songs and poems multiplied like the words of a hodgepodge family seder. We held her long-fingered hands. We left her for a good hour or so. She died. We returned to finish the "seder," singing and reading and talking to her even as she passed to a place whose very

existence we can't vouch for, much like our ancestors going forth from Egypt to a promised land of doubtful veracity.

Only now, as the seder approaches and I personally set the myriad glasses on the table, do I realize that the *gute sha'a* was the good hour we spent in the kitchen in the middle of the night, as dawn approached and we washed and dried each glass and recounted our own version of the miracle of our Exodus from Egypt. In that retelling the story is absolutely true, and will become ever more true with each passing year.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

She died *in a gute sha'ah*, as they say, "in a good hour," i.e., at an appropriate time and place in her life.