

From the Rabbi

Nisan 5777, March 2017

“Come On In”

I have it from a reliable source that the custom of opening the door near the end of the Pesach seder is “new.” By “new” I mean under a thousand years.

Furthermore, the idea of opening the door specifically “for Elijah” is *very* new, and probably American at that. Look, it’s nice to say we’re opening our doors to invite in the itinerant prophet of hopefulness, and it is fun for our children to watch his cup to see whether the meniscus of the wine goes down. It’s a kind of combination Santa Claus and Tooth Fairy for Jewish kids.

The clue to the “real” reason we started opening our doors toward the stroke of midnight can be found in a traditional Haggadah. There you’ll see the declaration we are told to direct out into the street. It’s not the beloved ditty *Eliahu Hanavi*. Rather, it’s this: *Sh’fokh chamat’kha el hagoyim asher lo y’da’ukha* - “Pour out Your wrath on the nations who do not know You...Pour Your anger over them,

and let Your fury overtake them...” It’s taken out of context from Psalm 79, probably written originally in response to the destruction of the First Temple. Let’s agree that it’s pretty brutal to stand outside and shout such vituperative words as if we were venting our anger at the entire world. And on the night of our most joyous family holiday no less! It doesn’t sound very Jewish, at least the kind of Jewish we want to identify with.

Who are we so angry at? The answer lies in the location of this strange passage in the seder itself.

As anyone who has conducted a seder with small children (or *for* them, as the case may be), the door-opening comes too late in the seder for children to see it. You have to move it up earlier in the program. But it really belongs near the end, which should be around midnight. It comes late because we hope no one is actually walking around out there by the time we start shouting an invocation for divine wrath to be poured out over the neighborhood like bitter wine dregs.

But now for the beauty part. Originally (if there is such a thing as “originally” when it comes to this holiday) we opened the door at the *beginning* of the seder! And what do you think we recited as we faced the outside world? None other than the famous phrase *kol dikhfin yetey v’yeykhul* - “Let all who are hungry come and eat!” And we declaimed this with a large broken matzah in our hands!

We still recite that line, of course. In fact, it is the tone-setter for the entire seder, ethos-wise. It is the embodiment of our belief that because we were treated like garbage, we need to ensure that *no one else* suffers such abuse.

But did you ever notice a certain irony in the performance of that endearing ritual? We say “let all who are hungry come on in,” but no one can hear us saying it. Our doors are shut tight. Maybe we go to the trouble of inviting a stranger or two to the seder in advance, but it’s unlikely that any passing vagabond will hear our generous invitation from the street and spontaneously knock on our door.

We used to say it at the open door precisely so that strangers would hear it and take us up on our offer. Then the world became dangerous for Jews. Despite the

adjuration from our early medieval commentators that we leave our homes unlocked on the seder night to demonstrate our faith in God's protection, we began to do the only smart thing. In other words, when passersby were still out and about on the eve of Pesach, we shut the door and threw the bolt.

Hours later, when potential anti-Semites had gone to bed, we opened our doors and spewed textual venom on them for forcing us to give up our beautiful custom of inviting the poor and the stranger to partake of our bounty. Hence the awful quotation from Psalm 72, "pour out Your wrath." That is to say, pour out Your wrath on those who would cause us to live in a world where the "reward" for openness was persecution.

Invoking the Kaplanian spirit, I propose that we go back to the old practice. After all, the custom we have now is a reconstruction that was borne of necessity. We wanted to declare the essence of our Jewish belief ("Come on in") at the start of our seder, but we stopped doing so to save our necks. Then we reconstructed by adding a passage expressing our disappointment with the way things were (a sort of liturgical protest, if you will). Then, in recent times, we further reconstructed

by keeping the late-night door opening but changing its emphasis to the upbeat theme of messianic redemption as represented by the folk-hero Elijah.

Now it is time to take that process one bold step farther. At my family's seder this year, I will invite everyone to walk outside with me and proudly declare that the Jews of America believe in a society that fearlessly opens its doors to the destitute of the world.

Our prop will be the broken matzah. No one will need a long explanation or commentary about what this ritual "represents." It doesn't "represent" anything, because it is not a displacement of our true selves into the ritual. Our actual true selves will be out there in the actual street, exposed to the elements of public opinion. Everyone will know what we mean, because we will be declaring our meaning loud and clear. So clear, in fact, that even *we* will understand it, not to mention our children for whom this will serve as the response to the only real question they'll ask us at the seder or otherwise.

That question is: Who are we really, and what do we really stand for? The answer: we stand for *kol dikhfin*. We stand for "come on in."

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