

## “Passover and the Challenge of Liberation”

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### Reading: By Irving Greenberg’s The Jewish Way

Passover is the ultimate attempt to involve people in the experience of Exodus. On the yearly anniversary of its occurrence, the entire Exodus from slavery to freedom is recreated in song, story, food, and dress so that it is experienced as an actual happening. Although some models for reenactment are found in the Bible, it is left to every generation and every family to create the total experience. Everyday, homey aspects of life – food, table setting, cooking, dress, conversation, singing – are shaped and fused to create a transcendental reality. What could be frailer than flesh and blood and the gossamer thread of words? Yet together they establish a foundation so powerful that it can carry the weight of the centuries-old drive to perfect the world.

### Sermon:

Like all religious stories, the story of Passover is one where we, as Unitarian Universalist, have the freedom to question some of the foundational assumptions. For instance, we can question the accuracy and historicity of the events retold, recorded in a text handed down and redacted as it was through the centuries. So whether or not this time of year is truly the anniversary of the Jewish people’s fleeing the bondage of Pharaoh, or there were seven plagues or six or none at all, or whether Moses as he was depicted even existed in history are all truths that are up for questioning here. But what, for me, is magical about this way of being in relationship to the stories we were raised with or around is that it doesn’t rob them of their power. We can say and believe, as I believe is the case, that these stories like others were told and retold because they captured if not an historic event, then an event that recurs with different proper names and nouns throughout history.

Today’s story, the Passover story, is the story of a people’s liberation from slavery – the slavery of body and spirit and mind, all of which are often required to keep a people enslaved. It is a reminder of what it takes to be free, how precious freedom is, and how easily we fall back into enslavement of one kind or another and at what peril. “The goal,” Irving Greenberg writes, “is to go back thousands of years and to experience, first, the crushing bitterness and despair of slavery and, next, the wild, exhilarating release of freedom.”

A good Jew does some preparing for the Passover holiday. He or she begins a month before the holiday studying the laws and procedures, gathering the foods for themselves and money to give the poor so that they may also celebrate the holiday properly. The preparation also entails certain rituals like the cleaning of the house of *chametz*.

*Chametz* is simply the five food grains (things of wheat, rye, spelt, barley and oats) that have been allowed to ferment. Cleaning the house this way is tied, of course, to the story of exodus, the quick departure from Egypt without even time to let the bread rise, and so we clear our homes as if *we too* have been robbed of that possibility by the requirements of the journey. Observant Jews throw or give away all bread products and even clean out cabinets to wipe out any crumbs that might have fallen inside.

The act is in part an outward sign of liberation from the ways of slavery, the giving up, the leaving behind of what were the ways of captivity. “In an expansion of the metaphor,” Greenberg writes, “*chametz* became a symbol of what is allowed to stand around. *Chametz*

signified staleness and deadening routine; getting rid of it became the symbol of freshness and life growth.” In other words, the ritual act was both a physical and psychological cleansing of home and spirit, a break from the old, a letting go, a new beginning, with some loss, perhaps, some hardship, but the ultimate dream on its way to being made true. And so in this way Jews began their preparations for liberation, and we might begin ours.

The truth is that this story has power, staying power, because we are all always dancing with captivity of some kind. We are always yearning for, struggling for liberation of some kind, whether it is liberation from the captivity of our past, of various forms of oppression, even our own demons of perfectionism, addiction, or patterns of self-sabotage. There are any of a number of ways we find ourselves or get ourselves in captivity.

And, on the other side of this enslavement is the sense most of us have, in our core, that we are meant to be free. We have a sense, one that runs deep in us that people are meant to be free to question, free to honor their conscience, free from oppression or suppression that limits or stunts their flourishing and we believe in this freedom both as an end and a means. It is an end because every human being has the innate dignity and worth to deserve it, and a means because we have always had the sense that such liberty would lead to noble and bold lives of service. Irenaeus, the second century church father, put it beautifully when he said, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." And Liberty, I would argue, is central to such aliveness.

So, liberation is not the Jews story, not exclusively, but ours and all people's. Martin Luther King knew that. He preached the Exodus story almost as much as he preached the teachings and life of Jesus. We all *always* have liberating work to do, in our own souls and in the world's and our nation's.

Which is why I'm not preaching the sermon I said in the newsletter I was going to preach. I know while I was away the congregation engaged in the first of a larger conversation about race and racism. And no sooner was I back than Presidential Hopeful Barak Obama responded to some criticisms about his church-of-choice in a speech that addressed both those specific concerns and the larger issues of race in this election and in America. My topic for today had already gone to press, but it seemed strange to not reach into this debate even a little and today is the first organic opportunity for me to do so.

So, let me reach in just a little. I say "a little" because the issues are so layered and complicated that even people who are deeply engaged in dissecting the problem of race and its interplay with religion in America come at it differently, with different visions of what will unhinge the shackles that bind us more or less quickly. Consider this the pulling up of my chair to the table in a conversation that will continue.

Barak Obama's speech ("A More Perfect Union" March 18, 2008), to my ears, was lovely. It was a song of love to both sides (white and black), sides that run together in his blood and his life story as they do in different ways for all of us. He pointed out that we all have work to do, but he started the dialog in love and a compassionate reflection of where we might find ourselves and how we each are broken in different but symmetrical ways.

I found it ridiculous that he had to apologize for his minister, and spend so much of his speech doing so. Jeremiah Wright spoke to the UU ministers as our keynote speaker at our annual professional days at our annual gathering last June. He was lovely. Deeply learned in subjects as disparate as linguistics and African history and as sensitive to and schooled in our own Unitarian Universalist tradition as any speaker we have ever had. I could see why and how he has been able to grow a congregation from a few hundred to 8,000 people. I would go to his

church were I in Chicago, so great was my respect for him and my sense of his deep care and integrity. And since the motto of the church he serves is “Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian” (something Wright inherited from his predecessor), that would be an unusual choice for me. I trust that behind what he says in evangelical cadences on Sunday there is wisdom and insight. As he would say, there is a lot that goes on in his kitchen before the Sunday meal is brought out, ready to eat and engaging, but no one was asking Wright why he said what he said. We were too busy, as a nation, being afraid of his passion and his judgment of us and our collective transgressions.

Moreover, we were too busy living, for a moment, under the strange assumption that even if Wright were off-base his parishioners, including a man of such integrity and intelligence as Barak Obama, would roll over and play dead to whatever Wright says from the pulpit. Does *anyone* in America accede to everything his or her minister, rabbi or Imam or other leader says from the pulpit? Does anyone here?! I know conservative Jews and Christians and most are in dialog with what is taught and preached.

However, even leaving that question aside, how particularly strange it was for Americans to make this assumption about membership in a church that is part of the progressive United Church of Christ. The UUC is jokingly called even by its own people, Unitarians Considering Christ. They like us are built, as we are, on the notion of challenge to inherited truth.

The whole conversation seemed a waste of Senator Obama’s time and ours to consider....  
**But consider it we did!**

Why? That’s what we should be asking. Not consider it because there is a clear answer we will ever arrive at, but realize the absurdity of the situation and wonder (wonder with intensity) what is underneath it all? The truth is that something is always present when such “weirdness” appears.

Here are my guesses about what might be behind and underneath this most recent strangeness:

- Perhaps we had this conversation as a nation because blacks are a suspect class in America, not just in the world of legal protections, but in general;
- And perhaps that suspicion comes out sideways nowadays, in ways more bizarre, since it is social unacceptable to be quite so blatant;
- So perhaps our racism comes out in the questioning and doubting someone’s strength of character, the wild ways of her church, the reliability of his love for their nation and all its citizens; and
- Perhaps also whites, like myself, fear the chickens of a past of transgressions will “come home to roost” and the great fear is that a black finally put in power will start righting the wrongs. Are we afraid to risk powerlessness... as if that is a real possibility! Are we afraid to risk true, unflinching justice even though we saw a man of mercy, so we know any justice would likely be laced with mercy?

Mind you, I’m not arguing for one candidate or another. I think IRS laws forbid it anyhow, even if I felt inclined. I am arguing for some self-consciousness. I hope, among other things, that John McCain continues to refuse to speak on matters of religion (he calls them personal, private, intimate) and in so doing moves the conversation from what happens in the pulpits he and his opponent visit, to what happens in the policies they would each write.

What was clear after Obama's speech was 'tis season of liberation, yet again. 'Tis the season of remembering all that we are enslaved to and the dream we all have of a world where all that scars us and stand between us has been dismantled. It is time to clean our cabinets again because crumb of the ways of lives of bondage are still there – prejudice, fear, enjoyment of privilege we didn't earn and more. It was obvious from Obama's speech and what necessitated it that we are all in bondage around issues of race. We have lots of letting go of old ways of seeing the world, old habits of the heart, old and familiar comforts, even if it is the simple comfort of the lie that we don't have more hard work to do, that "all is well in Egypt-land."

The congregation of Beth El in Sudbury, Massachusetts asks each year at this time:  
*"What sacrifices would we make for freedom today?  
What would we leave?  
How far would we go?  
How deeply would we look within ourselves?"*

Those questions seem very much before us as a country still and again.

There is no warm, risen bread on the morning you leave the land of oppression. You take only what you need. A few belongings tied in a bundle and a timeless love for human freedom, and the dream of what all people liberated to be their whole and best selves would look like and the knowledge that you are not there yet. You have to be willing – *we* have to be willing -- to pull up the stakes to our tents, to risk facing our fears and failures and enter the desert with together. There is an ancient story, repeated every year at this time, that says that a promised land lies on the other side of the desert landscape, waiting for those who were willing to risk the journey.

So may it be for us. Amen

"I call that mind free which sets no bounds to love... which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind. I call that mind free which has cast off all fear but that of wrongdoing and which no menace or peril can enthrall; which is calm in the midst of tumults and possesses itself though all else be lost."

■ William Ellery Channing