

Passover - The Ready Or Not Holiday  
PASSEVER: THE "READY OR NOT" HOLIDAY

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We tell the story to each other every year. The story of how the Jews did not have time to let the bread rise before they left Egypt which explains why we have to eat matza on Pesach and why there can't be a speck of hametz in the house.

A friend of mine writes: "When I was a little child in Hebrew school I used to fantasize about this story. I would imagine Moses' mom, Yocheved, remonstrating with him. (Moses wife, Zippora, was smart. She spent Passover with her parents in Midian!) I would imagine Moses' mom complaining, (and somehow her voice remarkably sounded like that of my mother's) "Moe, why all the shpilkes? We are going to be traveling for 40 years and you can't wait another 45 minutes? I have to sweep the tent floor, I am not done packing yet and besides which, the bread still isn't finished baking yet."

"Sorry mom," Moses retorts, "God says we have to leave NOW!"

"Oh really?" she replies. "Let Him tell me that when he is married and has 3 kids..."

"Mom we need to leave NOW!"

"But I have a wonderful rye bread I just put in the oven and if I take it out now it will be ruined!"

"Sorry Mom, time's up"

That's way my friend supposed the matza story must have happened. It is a fantasy that rings true every Pesach as it always seems to come too soon. No matter how early we start - there is just not enough time to prepare - to get the house ready, to get the meals cooked, to prepare for the guests and to juggle all the normal obligations of our lives and

be ready to sit down leisurely for our Seder dinner – it always comes too soon. Yes, our annual pre Passover craziness goes all the way back to that first Pesach when there wasn't even time to let the bread rise. And humor aside, I suspect that there may be an important lesson to be learned here and that is that too often we are just, "not ready" for the truly important moments in our lives; not ready: no matter how much time we are given to prepare; not ready: no matter how much we know they are coming – no matter what, we somehow are just not ready -- and yet ready or not, we must face them anyway.

I often hear that phrase "Rabbi, I am just not ready to do that." It is a comment that I frequently hear after suggesting that maybe the time has come to reconcile with an alienated family member, or friend. Maybe it is said in response to a suggestion that the time has come to give up a bad habit, or to complete a difficult or distasteful task one has been putting off for too long – “Rabbi, I am just not ready...”

"You know, I think it is time you decided to give up smoking!" "I know, you're right – I know I have to do it - soon, but not now, I am just not ready yet." "You know I think the time has come to reach out to ...your brother, your mother (you fill in the blank) - it has been too long." "Yes, you're right, I know I should - but not today - tomorrow - I am just not ready yet!"

But if the story of the matza teaches us anything it is that there are moment and events that come along that demand an immediate response - they just can't wait.

The quest for freedom very often is about situations like this. I am not sure how many of you are aware of it, but on the eve of Israel's declaring its independence, many Zionist leaders felt that the time was not quite ripe to declare a Jewish State. Many responsible leaders urged Ben Gurion to wait, at least a few days. Maybe the Arabs could be persuaded not to invade. Maybe Truman could be persuaded to lift the American arms embargo. Maybe a deal could be worked out with Trans Jordan. There was a great fear that a potential catastrophe awaited the tiny Jewish settlement of 600,000 in Eretz Yisrael.

However David Ben Gurion knew that there are simply certain moments in history which demand an immediate response. He knew that the slightest hesitation on the part of the Yishuv would be seized upon by a world which loves to sympathize with Jewish victims but has difficulty accepting independent Jews, to try and abort Jewish sovereignty. He knew the risks involved in rashness but he knew those risks were less than the risk of hesitancy or timidity. It was David Ben Gurion's courageous leadership which carried the day and made it possible for there to be a State of Israel today.

In the early 1960's Black civil rights leaders were told by sympathetic Whites, why don't you just wait a few years? Why not go just a little slower and not be so strident in your demands? However Martin Luther King Jr. understood, just as Ben Gurion understood, that history does not stand still and that if you do seize the moment when it stares you in the face, then that moment may be lost forever.

As many of you know the issue of homosexuality is presently before the Law Committee of our Conservative Movement, a deliberative body of which I am proud to be a member. It is a challenging issue, a controversial issue to be sure. The arguments for and against are profound and significant – yet the one argument that troubles me the most – are those who argue that we should wait. The time is not yet ripe – they say. It will damage the Movement to rule on this now – it is too hot an issue, too controversial an issue, too important an issue – in another 10 -15 years everything will look different than it does today – do not act precipitously, do not act hastily – there is just too much at stake. Yes, there is much at stake – and it was precisely the argument that was made 15 years ago when the Law Committee first took up this issue. But delay is not a strategy and there are thoughtful teshuvot by some of our clearest thinkers that have presented to the Law Committee and they demand a response – they deserve a response – up or down, yes or no. There is always something more to wait for greater clarification, more studies, more facts – but , Passover, and the story of matza reminds us that there is a point where, “I'm not ready yet,” - is an excuse not an adequate response. It will not be an easy decision – but I am glad, and I am proud that the Law Committee has set their meeting in December 2006 for a final vote – for almost two years now we have discussed and debated this issue – in so many ways we do not feel ready – but ready or not – a decision must be made.

But you know the time that I as a rabbi, most often experience this sentiment? This expression - "I am not ready yet!" It is when people confront their own mortality. It is when people are forced to confront their own impending death or the imminent death of someone they love. How often do people say to me, in one form or another – Abut rabbi, I am not ready to die yet! Rabbi - it is just too soon - I am not ready to let go of ....

my husband, my wife, my father, my mother - my child... there is too much left to do, too much we have not yet accomplished!" And yet, the lesson of Pesach and Matza is, "ready or not ... here comes ... life and ready or not, here comes death."

There was a time, in my early years as a rabbi, when I met with a family following the death of a loved one, that one of the questions I used to ask was, "How old was your father...your mother...." I stopped asking that question because I learned that the answer didn't really matter. When a 40 year old dies we call it a tragedy - but is the death of a 70 year old, or 80 year old, or 90 year old any less of a tragedy? Not to them. Not to their loved ones. Life is infinitely precious - and we can never have enough - when we are 40 - we dream of living to 90 - and when we are 90 we dream of living to 100. When it comes to life there is always something more to be done, new horizons to conquer, new experiences to be shared - we are always bargaining with God - for a little more time - I am not ready yet God - just a little longer - what is Your hurry?!

We are about to recite the Yizkor service. And the truth is that all of us have gathered to mourn friends and loved ones who died too soon. There is an element of anger mixed in with our sadness that our loved ones were taken too soon. They were not ready. We were not ready. There was so much more to be said, so much more to be shared, so much more to be done - together.

Our complaint against God would echo the conversation that my friend fantasized between Moses and his mother: "why all the shpilkes? What is your hurry God? We are going to be traveling for 40 years and you can't wait 45 minutes? We will spend eternity in the world to come - a few more years in this one would kill You? I have to sweep the tent floor, I am not done packing yet and besides which, the bread still isn't baked yet."

"Sorry mom," Moses retorts, "God says we have to leave NOW!"

"Oh really?" she replies. "Let Him tell me that when he is married and has 3 kids..."

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Matza is the unfinished bread. We eat it nonetheless because that is how life must be consumed - unfinished, undone, and incomplete.

Dear friends whether it is in the great theater of history or the side shows of our mundane personal lives. There are moments that arise which must be responded to bravely and courageously. We can either slink away with one excuse or another or we can boldly go forth bravely into the uncharted desert relying upon our faith and our inner fortitude.

At this time of Yizkor I invite you to look around you - you are surrounded by a community of mourners and for all of us - each and every one of us - we mourn the loss of someone who was taken - too soon. They may not have been ready yet; we certainly were not ready, there was so much more to be said, so much more of life to share together. But the choice is now yours - to use this time of Yizkor to express your frustration and anger - or to use these precious moments to express your love and gratitude. Benjamin Disraeli once said - "Life is too short to be little."

I recently saw the Broadway musical Spamalot – a delightful comedy based on the humor of Monty Python. There is one song that I loved – that goes, “I am not dead yet...” And it is a theme that repeats throughout the play. Death comes too soon – for our loved ones – and for us. It is always too soon – and we are rarely ready.

But as Monty Python would say to those of us who are sitting here today: “You are not dead yet...” Or if you are not a Monty Python fan—allow me to rephrase it in the words of the Psalmist as we joyously sang them this morning during Hallel – the words of Psalm 115: Lo hamaytim yehalleluh ya – “The dead cannot praise You O Lord... “Vaannahnu, nevarech ya – But we – we who are still alive – we shall praise You – halleluyah!!

The choice is yours.

Rabbi Simcha Kling z"l wrote a short but beautiful piece that has been included in the Yizkor service we are now about to recite. He asks:

"How do we face the reality of death?

We know that it is a fact. It is part of life.

We may postpone it.

We may try to delay it as much as possible.

But some day we must be confronted by it.

How do we face the reality of death?

By giving thanks to God for the gift of life.

By voicing appreciation for the blessings we have known.

By being grateful for those lives that have touched ours and whose echoes still resound in us."

They died too soon – and so will we - -but for now, we are not dead yet, haleluyah!