



# Sermon Tidbits

APRIL 18, 2016

## Passover – First Days

### The Four Children – Together at the Seder

**The Torah speaks of four children... (Passover Haggadah) (כנגד ארבע בנים דיברה תורה (הגדה של פסח))**

For many Jews around the world, the first night of the Seder is similar to an American Thanksgiving, consisting of good food, many glasses of wine and family. Often family includes our extended families—cousins and the “uncle” who we only see once a year at this very occasion. As we all know, gathering that many people together for a meal which includes copious amounts of wine can prove precarious. Indeed, author Nerys Copelovitz lists the tenth plague on her [“Ten Real Plagues of Passover”](#) as “family overdose.” She writes, “*Mishpacha*, you know we love you, but there’s a limit. You can have too much of a good thing.” And, while family overdose may indeed be a modern “plague,” we wouldn’t have it any other way. Family represents a key element to the Seder experience.

The Sages wrote this focus on family, with all its diversity, directly into the Haggadah. During the Maggid section, as we recall the story of the Exodus, we note the presence of the “Four Sons” and discuss different ways to address their questions and relate the story to them. In a famous correspondence, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch notes that while these children—the wise one, the wicked child, the simple child and the child who knows not to ask—cannot be more different, they do share a critical trait: they are all at the Seder. He writes, “While the ‘Four Sons’ differ from one another in their reaction to the Seder service, they have one thing in common: they are all present at the Seder service.” Each child represents an archetype; an attribute within each of us whether it is righteousness, rebelliousness, simplicity or ignorance. Yet, despite their differences both in ideology and practice, on the night of Pesach each of these children feels welcome at the Passover Seder—where they share a meal around the same table.

Today, in our current political atmosphere, one might consider this fact to be the greatest Passover miracle—that the liberal son, always ready with a sarcastic quip, and his conservative sister who somehow always finds a way to weave Rush Limbaugh into the conversation—nonetheless manage to sit around the Pesach table together in peace. We might have expected that just as they watch different TV channels, read different websites and newspapers, they may also find separate Seders to attend. Yet, each year we must ensure that the four sons do not make four separate Sedarim but instead gather together at the same table. On this critical night of the Jewish year, we sit together to remind ourselves that despite our difference, we are all part of the same people and our redemption will only come when we share it with others—and especially those whom we disagree with.

We must also ensure that unity remain an elemental aspect of our communal support for the state of Israel. As the political climate in the United States grows more extreme, our two political parties find themselves at odds on almost every issue. Just last week, [388 members of the House of Representatives signed a letter to President Barack Obama](#) which reiterates support for a two-state solution and expresses opposition to United Nations (U.N.) initiatives that circumvent direct Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations and seek to impose a solution. The letter calls on America to continue its role as a trusted mediator adhering to a set of key principles. Among these key principles are: maintaining close coordination with our ally, Israel; encouraging Arab states to support peace efforts; opposing Palestinian efforts to seek statehood recognition in international bodies; and unequivocally condemning Hamas until it renounces terror, accepts Israel’s right to exist, and accepts previously negotiated Israeli-Palestinian agreements. Despite their very real disagreements, Democrats and Republicans have found a way to set aside their difference and come together around

their support for a strong Jewish state, and for a rock-solid relationship between the United States and Israel. While the four sons may have little in common, even they recognize the importance of gathering together on the eve that represents national redemption. As we work to protect Israel in such a dangerous time, nothing can be more important than our willingness to work together. Our future depends upon it. ■

## The Bitterness of Oppression

These bitter herbs that we eat... (Passover Haggadah)

מרור זה שנו אוכלים (הגדה של פסח)

We think of Passover as a holiday of freedom and redemption, and rightly so. We gather for the Seder each year to celebrate the liberation of the Jewish nation from bondage in Egypt so many centuries ago. At the Seder, we ask the questions, remember the plagues, drink four cups of wine, eat too much and celebrate the birth of our nation. Yet, this description only tells half the story. While the Seder is designed to remember our freedom, paradoxically, many aspects of the Seder remind us of the bitterness of slavery as well. We begin the Seder by highlighting the Matzah and declaring, “*ha lachma anya*”—“this is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in Egypt.” On this night we eat the bread not of kings, but of slaves. We dip the Karpas in salt water to remind ourselves of the bitter tears of the Jewish slaves who suffered for so many years. Finally, we eat the *maror*—the bitter herbs—because, as we read in the Haggadah, “The Egyptians embittered our fathers’ lives in Egypt, as it is said: ‘They made their lives bitter with hard service, with mortar and with bricks, and with all manner of service in the field; all their service which they made them serve with rigor.’ ” (Exodus 1:14) Passover is not just about the sweet thrill of freedom. We must also remember the bitterness, and associate the experiences of the Children of Israel in Egypt to lives today.

The Jewish people are well acquainted with the pain of persecution, not only in biblical times, but in our own day. Whether in Europe, Africa, or the Middle East, we have suffered under the yoke of oppression. Passover reminds us to feel the pain of others, for we remember being slaves in the land of Egypt. Michael Walzer (*Exodus and Revolution*) suggests that the Jewish people are unusual in that the memory of slavery in Egypt is not suppressed, but motivates biblical laws mandating empathy for the unfortunate. Thus, we cannot ignore suffering in our own time.

In addition to being the leading state sponsor of terrorism, Iran remains one of the world’s leading human rights abusers. According to the 2015 [Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index](#), Iran currently ranks 173 out of 180 countries in press freedom. Former U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Chair Katrina Lantos Swett said that since 2013, “the Iranian government has imprisoned more than 350 people, including 150 Sunni Muslims, 100 Baha’is, 90 Christians, and at least a dozen Sufi Muslims, for their beliefs. The number of Christians imprisoned has nearly doubled over the past year.” And, Amnesty International [reported](#) that Iran executed 694 people in the first six-and-a-half months of 2015, stating that Iran’s execution rate “paints a sinister picture of the machinery of the state carrying out premeditated, judicially-sanctioned killings on a mass scale.” This is nearly double Iran’s rate from 2014.

[Human Rights Watch](#) report, sums up Iran’s human rights record this way, “Although Iran elected a moderate candidate, Hassan Rouhani, to be president in 2013, the country has seen no significant improvements in human rights. Repressive elements within the security and intelligence forces, as well as the judiciary, retained wide powers and continued to be the main perpetrators of rights abuses. Executions, especially for drug-related offenses, increased sharply from previous years. Security and intelligence forces arrested journalists, bloggers, and social media activists, and revolutionary courts handed down heavy sentences against them.”

As we retell the Passover narrative, let us never forget the bitter taste of our own slavery nor become callous to those suffering today. Iran continues to attempt to present itself as a moderate, reforming nation. Its actions, in oppressing its own people tell a very different story. ■

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