

The Jewish Story Is Mine

As we were about to light our yahrzeit candles last night, my mom asked me what blessing one is supposed to say. “No blessing,” I said. “Lighting yahrzeit candles is a custom, not a commandment. It is a time for each of us to remember in our own way, and to say whatever is in our hearts. Some families take that moment of lighting the candles to share some of those memories. Others remember individually.”

Rich was lighting the candle for his parents, and for other relatives whom I didn’t even know. But my mother and I were lighting candles and thinking of the very same people: my dad, my sister, mom’s parents and my dad’s parents (my grandparents), and my aunts and uncles (mom’s sister, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law). We were remembering the same people, but in different ways, because we each have our own unique connection to each one of them. This morning when we had breakfast, those yahrzeit candles were still burning, three separate candles, clustered together. A family created by memory.

Why do we light those candles? In Jewish tradition the candle flame represents the human soul. Proverbs (chapter 20 verse 27) says: "The soul of a person is the candle of God." Like a human soul, flames change. They grow, shed light, flicker, and then they fade away. The gentle flame of the yahrzeit candle reminds us of the fragility of life, and reminds us that someday, if we are lucky, someone we love will be lighting a candle for us, remembering what was good and precious about our lives. It reminds us what this season of counting the omer is ultimately about. “Teach us to number our days so we can get a heart of wisdom.”

Jewish mourning is both private and public. When we visit a grave or observe a yahrzeit, we generally do so in private. But we come together for yizkor, the public observance for the community of bereaved. Originally, yizkor was recited only on Yom Kippur. Its primary purpose was to remember the deceased by promising to give tzedakah in their memory; tzedakah elevates the souls of the departed. Since the Torah reading on the last day of the pilgrimage festivals (Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot were the days when the ancient Israelites made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem) mentions the importance of donations, yizkor was added to these holiday services. Hence, yizkor on Passover, and the tradition of making a donation to the synagogue in memory of a yahrzeit.

When we say the yizkor prayers in a few minutes, I’ll be thinking about my dad. Each of you will be thinking of those people whose lives made your life possible. We’ll be remembering individually, but we are doing it together. That is why it is so powerful.

There is a Torah of our life and a Torah of tradition. What makes Judaism so transformative is that these two Torahs interact; each is enriched by the other. My father, my memories, in a sacred space flooded by other people’s memories of their fathers, mothers, spouses, siblings, children. I am not the only one to have walked this path. I

can learn from those who have been on it longer than I. I can teach those who someday will join us here. And someday, everyone will join us here.

No holiday makes this connection between the Torah of our lives and the Torah of tradition more intensely than Passover. I tell my story of liberation from the Egypts of my life, my narrow places, within the master narrative of my people. Locating my story (the Torah of my life) within the story of the Exodus (the Torah of tradition) is, in fact, the whole point of Passover. “In every generation, every one of us is obligated to look upon ourselves as though we really did come out of Egypt.”

That why I was so perplexed by David Suissa’s *Jewish Journal* column this week called “A Seder for Broken Jews.” In it he decries what he calls “the big fashion of recent times to rewrite or repackage the Passover haggadah to fit our individual tastes (because of)... a craving to inject our personal identities into everything.” And then he says: “The Master Story of the Jews, then, becomes the Master Story of Me. I celebrate not the story of my people, but how I have adapted that story to fit my own story, my own modern identity... It’s a spiritual showdown: Who shall surrender? Shall I become the story or shall the story become me? Shall I become my grandparents or shall they become me?”

What David is missing is that my grandparents are not me, nor am I them. But my grandparent’s lives were enriched by understanding their story as the Jewish story. In telling me that story, and making it real in their lives, they raised a Jewish granddaughter to believe that her story, too, is an essential part of the larger Jewish story.

Passover works on four different levels. The historical: we were slaves in Egypt. The political: there is a pharaoh in every generation and in every generation there is a people, not only us Jews, desperate to become free. The psychological: each of us has a narrow place; we struggle to break free from what constricts us. And the spiritual: each of us envisions a promised land of wholeness and connection to what is beyond ourselves. The historical is our master narrative; it is the Torah of tradition. Through that lens we understand the Torah of our lives — our politics, our personal struggles, our spiritual aspirations. Through that lens we find the community and the courage to create lives of meaning and purpose.

I become the story and the story becomes me. I put an orange on my seder plate along side the shankbone, the egg, the matzah, and the maror. They don’t compete with each other as David implies; they enrich each other, and my connection to our story.

David wants us to create a hagaddah for broken Jews — to celebrate the variety of our people across time and culture and offer interpretations from as many different sources as possible. But why create again what already exists? The Open Door Hagaddah (Reform) is replete with readings, symbols, and traditions, not only from Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities, but also inclusive of those who have been excluded in the past: gay and lesbian Jews, women, Jews with disabilities, Jews of color. There is the Hartman Family Participation Hagaddah (Orthodox) that is inclusive of the same range of diverse and rich Jewish experience. And there are many other examples of inclusive haggadot.

But there is nothing broken about these hagaddot. Instead, they help us tell our stories within the story of tradition. David writes that we are a broken people, still working to fulfill the Passover ideal of uniting for a common destiny. In my view, our common destiny is symbolized by the weaving together of the Torah of our lives and the Torah of tradition.

The Torah tells us that the very last thing that Moses did on the night we left Egypt was to fulfill the promise that his ancestors made to Joseph before he died: to carry his bones with them when they left Egypt. Joseph didn't want to remain in Egypt, that narrow place, for eternity. So more than four hundred years later, Moses fulfills the promise.

Was it just to honor Joseph that Moses fulfilled that promise? Or did it meet some need that Moses himself had at that moment?

The moment of leaving Egypt was a moment of crisis, a moment of choice. Moses needed all the courage he could summon, and so he needed to bring his ancestor Joseph with him. He needed the Torah of tradition.

All the important moments in the Torah of my life – the moments of celebration, of change, of crossing through personal obstacles as real to me as the Sea of Reeds – will be clearer when I understand that they are part of a bigger story, the story of my people, the Torah of tradition. I learn from that Torah, from the Passover story, that the way things are is not the way they have to be; that change is always possible; that seas split if one has the courage to jump into waters over our heads. I am strengthened in my belief that I can reach a promised land by joining together with others and finding a path through the wilderness.

Like Moses, wherever I go, however the Torah of my life unfolds, I am stronger when I take the bones of Joseph with me. And I also take the memory of my father. My story is the Jewish story, and the Jewish story is mine.

We continue with yizkor...