

The Taste of Memory  
A Yizkor Sermon for the Seventh Day of Passover 5770  
April 5, 2010  
Rabbi Laura Geller

I'm ready for Passover to be over, though I wish my mom didn't have to leave tomorrow. But honestly, we finally finished the left overs from our seders...and as much as I love matzoh and charoset, it is enough already. Tonight, after sundown, we'll make havdallah and then probably go out for spaghetti or pizza.

Still, I'm intrigued by the words on the box of matzah that is sitting on our kitchen table: the taste of a memory.

What does memory taste like?

There's a poem in the Women's Torah Commentary that evokes the taste of memory: (Rabbi Hara Person; page 376)

“The seder is a love song written  
In the language of silver polish  
And dishpan hands  
Freshly grated lemon zest  
Blanched almonds  
Shelled pistaciospitted olives  
Sliced meat  
Matzah meal  
White table cloths  
To-do lists  
Trips tp Boro Park and Sahadi's

This is how it's done.

Ashkenazi haroset

Vegetarian chopped liver  
Bonnie's matzah ball soup  
Israeli salad  
Gefilte fish terrine  
Chestneu farfel stuffing  
Tzimmes  
Leek and shallot kugel  
Salmon in grape leaves with pine nuts  
Turkey and brisket  
Coconut macaroons  
Sephardic lemons pistachio cookies  
Chocolate dipped apricots

Remember

Tables stretched the length of the house  
Tulips on the mantle  
My grandmother's blue glass plate  
Aunt Hannah and Uncle Joe's silver  
Nana's candlesticks  
The silver salt bowls from my mother  
Freda and Solly's cut glass horseradish pot  
The wedding present seder plate  
Grape juice stains on the tablecloth  
Thin paperback hagaddot  
Silly half versions of songs  
And don't lick the wine from your finger after the plagues

Don't be fooled by the easy domesticity of these words.  
This is more than a recipe for nostalgia.  
This is an urgent message of  
    survival  
    adaptation  
    love

Read between the words.”

Read between the words.

Read between the words... and remember that the mitzvah of Passover is to tell your children your story: this is because of what God did for me when I came out of Egypt. And we don't just tell the story with words... we taste our way through the story. The taste of memory....

The four cups of wine...each connected to one of God's promises to us: (Exodus 6:6&7) “ I will bring you out of the burdens of Egypt; I will deliver you from their service; I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments; I will take you to me for a people...

Matzoh: the taste of oppression and freedom... the first fast food...

Maror, : the taste of bitterness

And the two dippings alluded to in the four questions:

The first is the karpas dipped in salt water... the possibility of renewal that overwhelms our tears.

The second is the maror that we dip into the charoset.

Maybe to make certain we eat enough to taste the story, the ancient rabbis actually specify the minimum quantity of each of the wine and the ritual foods.... for example, at least four cups of wine, at least 2 ounces of maror.

But charoset is different.

It turns out that there is no explicit Biblical mitzvah requiring charoset and therefore there is no required minimum amount.

But still, we dip the Maror in charoset,  
the bitter into the sweet...  
The Talmud explains why:

“You dip the maror into the charoset and then shake it off  
because charoset nullifies the poisonous effect of the maror.”

It almost sounds like some kind of homeopathic medicine!

The taste of memory:

Charoset, made with apples, nuts, wine and spices are  
reminiscent not only of the mortar we used to make bricks but also  
also of the foods mentioned in the Biblical love song called Song  
of Songs. Charoset, according to tradition, is the taste of love.

The taste of the memory of love.

So why is the requirement just to dip and not, like with maror, to  
eat a requisite amount?

Because remembering love, even a little bit, is enough to overcome  
the bitterness of loss.

Maybe that is why we say Yizkor at the end of Passover. Passover  
is, to use congregant Victor Gold's analogy, a kind of time vortex,  
the moment the past and the future converge. We tell the story of  
our ancestors to our children and grandchildren. The story of our  
people becomes the context for our own stories of coming out of  
the narrow place. We hope those people who matter to us hear

those stories... and that those stories will echo in their story as they grow up to tell it to the next generation.

We continue to taste the story in all those leftovers, and we remember the stories of the people who once sat at our seder table, the ones we loved, our grandparents, parents, husbands, wives, partners, children, cherished friends.

The taste of memory.

Today, the seventh day of Passover, is the anniversary of the splitting of the sea. Pharaoh's armies are behind us, the water is in front of us; we have no where to go.

Mourning sometimes feels like that...

You remember the midrash that tells us the sea only split after one brave soul jumped in to waters over his head. Yizkor tells us to remember... and still to jump, to continue our own journeys.

What did we take with us out of Egypt? We took matzah, of course. But that is not all we took. The Torah tells us that Moses took with him the bones of Joseph. We took the memory of those who came before us.

We bring the taste of memory.

We took the story and the memory with us through the sea and into the wilderness, and we retell it every year. Retell and retaste....

Retell the stories of those people whose stories shaped our stories, and write new chapters in our own unfolding story, enriched by the taste of memory and of love.