

Passover 2020 Reflection
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Toward the end of the first portion of the Passover seder, just before the meal, we read Rabban Gamliel's statement that whoever does not explain three key items on the seder plate has not fulfilled his or her Passover obligation. In explaining the Pesach (the Passover sacrifice, symbolized by the z'roa, the lamb bone), Rabban Gamliel cites Shmot/Exodus 12:27: "It is the Passover sacrifice to the ETERNAL, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians."

In advance of Passover, one sees many attempts to connect the biblical "plagues" to the COVID19 pandemic. There are, however, important differences between the biblical plagues and what we are experiencing today.

In Exodus, the plagues are God's punishment of Pharaoh for his refusal to free the Israelites so they might worship at God's holy mountain. COVID19 is not divine punishment, it is simply a virus. In and of itself it has no moral discernment or intention. How we respond does have moral dimensions, but the virus itself does not.

In Exodus, the plagues were targeted at Pharaoh and the Egyptians. COVID19 attacks without reference to ethnicity, religion or international borders. Jews are just as susceptible as anyone else.

And yet, Passover does have important messages for us. It reminds us to have faith and hope. For centuries, Jews have celebrated Passover in, to paraphrase Dickens, the best of times and the worst of times. In good times, we rejoice that we enjoy the sacred gift of freedom, prosperity and safety. In difficult times, the acknowledgement of God's redemption in the past offers us hope of redemption in the future, including the final redemption, referenced in the Hagadah by the cup of Elijah and the concluding words "next year in Jerusalem."

This year, we gather (to the extent possible) in dangerous times. We hope the plague will pass over us – and this year the "us" is not just the Jewish people but all people – we are equally vulnerable and equally at risk.

One of the most profound passages in the Hagadah is the line: "In every generation, a person is obligated to view themselves as if they had come out of Egypt."

This sentiment, especially seen in the light of the course of Jewish history, is a source of inspiration for many Jews in terms of social justice. We know the heart of the stranger because we have been strangers in the land of Egypt (cf. Ex. 23:9). We understand that until everyone is free, our freedom is incomplete. We understand that we have an obligation to fight, not only for our own rights but also for the rights of others because, as this pandemic has underscored, we are all connected.

At this time, we find that Jews, Asian, immigrants and others are being attacked verbally and physically based on old prejudices and new irrational fears as people seek to “blame” someone for the pandemic. This is not only unjust, it is dangerous. So while we fight the pandemic by practicing social distancing and other steps recommended by experts, let us also fight the ignorance and bigotry that, precisely when we should be working together, can set us against one another.

In this generation, we must overcome distrust and superstition, so that next year we can celebrate is freedom, in health, with our loved ones around the table, and so that everyone, everywhere can sit under their vine and under their fig tree, with none to make them afraid.