



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
Congregation Beth Tikvah
304 E. Midland Avenue – Paramus NJ 07652- 201.262.7691

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday, April 15 2022

What Are We Doing With Our Freedom?

Shabbat and Passover Day 1

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Last week I was asked about adding an item to the Seder plate to remember the people of Ukraine who are suffering so bitterly as a result of Russia's illegal, unjust, and vicious invasion. My answer was that whereas I believe that a discussion of the important issues raised by the war in Ukraine should certainly be a part of our Passover experience, I didn't believe that we needed to add an item to the Seder plate to foster those discussions.

I know that other Rabbis and authorities have different feelings about this. After all, there are those who have advocated for these additions to raise awareness of important issues worthy of our attention. Years ago, there were those who suggested that we put a tomato on the Seder plate to foster discussions about the often mistreated farm workers whose hard work produced the food on our table. Cotton balls were suggested to remember slavery in American history. There was the orange which people suggested as a feminist symbol, or as a way to remember the LGBTQ community. Perhaps you are familiar with other such items that were suggested over the years to demonstrate solidarity with or encourage discussion about a particularly pressing moral or political concern. The issue is not whether these potential additions are a good idea. The issue, for me at least, is the balance between the universal and the particular, which is one of the great tensions in religious Judaism. The discussion of the great issues of our time must be part of our Passover experience. I happen to think that these important issues can be addressed utilizing the traditional symbols that have adorned the Seder plate for thousands of years.

What do all the additional symbols suggested for our Seder plates actually want us to focus on? They want to draw attention to the plight of the poor, the slave, the refugee, and all those who are suffering from oppression. That same idea animates the Passover Seder. In popular culture, jokes abound about all the food and recipes that are so much a part of our holiday observance, and the length of the Seder before people "get to eat". But think about what we are supposed to be doing during that time. The Rabbis have commanded us to reenact what it must have been like to have nothing, to suffer shame and abuse, humiliation and slavery. At the very heart of the Jewish experience is the story of our origins, of our slavery, and to never lose that perspective, especially at a time when we enjoy affluence, freedom and power. That's what the traditional Jewish symbols on the Seder plate are asking us to consider: what are we doing with that affluence, freedom, and power? Are we securing the interests of our fellow Jews? Are we donating to causes and supporting political candidates who are addressing the needs of the poor, immigrants and refugees? Will we side with Ukrainian victims of oppression, or their Russian oppressors? Those are the questions that the observances of the Passover Seder challenge us to consider.

What is the central message of the Passover Seder?

In every generation it is incumbent upon all of us to see ourselves as if we personally came out of the land of Egypt.

For 26 years, in one form or another, you have heard me talk about the importance of this message. It reminds us that even if we drive a nice car, have a home, and a few dollars in the bank (and less face it, most of us have more than a few dollars), there is no authentic Jewish experience without an outsider's perspective, a refugee's perspective, a slave's perspective. An appreciation of the pain and suffering of our ancestors, and how they must have felt on the night of their liberation is the heart of the Passover experience. It's there to teach us to not only feel a kinship with, but more importantly, a responsibility to those who are seeking their freedom, their acceptance, and an end to their oppression. So whether or not we feel the need to add extra symbols to the Seder plate to heighten awareness, those who are suffering must be on

our minds as we gather for Passover, along with a commitment to do more to see them liberated. Only then can we truly say with conviction the famous words of the Passover Haggadah "this is what the Lord did for me when I came out of the land of Egypt".

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach

Rabbi Arthur Weiner