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Rites of Spring: Passover and Palm Sunday

This Sunday, of course, is known as Palm Sunday. According to tradition, it is the day on which Jesus entered into the City of Jerusalem. As you may recall, by the time of this visit to Jerusalem, Jesus had gathered a group of followers, and he was feared by the Roman overlords, by the Hebrew kings who ruled under the Romans, and by the elite priests of the Jewish temple. Crowds gathered as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and they waved palm branches to herald his arrival.

And why was Jesus coming to Jerusalem? As our reading this morning reminded us, Jesus and the disciples were coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover, or *Pesach* in Hebrew. Indeed, what we know as “The Last Supper” with the disciples was the Passover meal, celebrated in the room provided by their host.

This spring feast had already been practiced by Jews for many centuries. Jesus was simply following the time-honored tradition. During this time, millions of Jews would converge on Jerusalem as *Pesach* began on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of *Nisan*. Every family brought with it a lamb, and as evening approached, they would sacrifice their lambs. Until midnight, they would roast and eat the paschal lambs, along with bitter herbs to remember the bitterness of slavery, and with matzah, or unleavened bread, to remind them of the haste with which had fled their captivity in Egypt. For a week, they would stay in Jerusalem, eating only unleavened bread, sharing their stories of liberation, and gathering on the seventh day for ceremony of dedication.

So, we can see that the Easter story is intertwined with the much older story of Hebrew liberation from captivity. They are both clearly spring holidays. They are stories of birth and rebirth, of liberation and renewal, of newness, of creativity. They are derived from still older holidays that celebrate the spring equinox, the moment when the sun is reborn again; that celebrate the birth of new lambs in their flocks and the first harvest of their barley; that celebrate the life of newborn children, and the joy of each family that their children will survive; and that celebrate new beginnings for a people and their ability to escape to freedom.

Scholars believe that Passover is a fusion of two early, pre-Hebrew festivals – one for farmers, and one for shepherds. These festivals welcomed spring in different ways. Shepherds are thought to have celebrated the month when the lambs are born by sacrificing a sheep, smearing its blood on the doorposts of their tents, and dancing and singing around their campfires. For farmers, this was the time for harvesting spring barley and wheat. They are said to have cleared their homes of all the *chametz*, or starter dough that they used to make their bread rise. Thus, they were celebrating the new crop by starting over, not only by cleaning out their cooking spaces, but also by eating the most ancient bread of all: flat, unleavened bread that was the beginning of farmers’ food.

So how and when did these ancient rituals become connected into the festival of Passover? Scholars believe that it may have been as late as the Babylonian exile during the 6th Century before the common era. This was a time of great sorrow and

disruption for the Hebrew people. They were conquered by the Assyrians and many were forced into exile in Babylon after Jerusalem was destroyed. During the exile, Hebrew priests and scholars felt a need to preserve Hebrew history for the future. Accordingly, much of Hebrew scripture as we know it today was compiled at that time. Suffering in exile as they were, the leaders looked especially to the ancient story of the Exodus from Egypt. They put the five books of the Torah, including the Exodus story, into a polished, redacted, written version. And, they drew an explicit connection between the story of liberation from the Egyptian captivity and the Passover tradition that had come down to them.

The ancient exodus story goes something like this. Small numbers of Israelites came into Egypt under royal protection. And at first, they prospered and multiplied. But changes in local politics brought into power Pharaohs who hated and feared the Jews, and who put them to work as slaves on the Pharaohs' building projects. The fear became so great that a Pharaoh decreed that all Hebrew babies should be killed at birth. Women of the time – Israelite mothers, midwives, even an Egyptian princess – conspired to subvert the decree. Moses, who was saved from this slaughter, grew up to be a powerful leader among the Jews, and also a bit of a rebel.

Moses killed an Egyptian overseer in a dispute and then fled and lived as a shepherd and refugee for several years. He married and had a child, and this experience of fatherhood transformed his life. He experienced an intense and fiery divine energy that would lead him to equate the birth of a child with the birth of freedom for his people. At a mysteriously burning bush, Moses received a charge from YHWH to return to Egypt and to lead his people into liberation. Aided by his brother Aaron and his sister, Miriam, Moses challenged Pharaoh to release his people. When Pharaoh refused, Moses invoked 10 plagues sent by YHWH – frogs, insects, epidemics, and so on.

The tenth plague was the one that finally persuaded Pharaoh to release the Israelites. This plague was some form of pernicious epidemic that would kill all the first-born children in the land. And this is where the ancient Shepherds' ritual came into play and provided the origins of Passover. JHWH, speaking to the people through Moses, told them to have each family sacrifice a lamb and to use the blood to mark their doorways. This would cause YHWH to "pass over" the Israelite homes when all the first-born children were being killed. But – the Israelites were told, forever more they were to celebrate this holiday to mark the day of their liberation. So, at this extraordinary moment, a new ceremony was created out of a confluence of ancient ideas about new births in a flock of lambs, about newborn babies in clan and family, and about the birth of political freedom.

When the Hebrew people eventually arrived back in Canaan – what is today Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories – they brought with them this shepherds' festival of freedom. The Canaanites were already settled as farmers, and they kept on celebrating their own festival of the new spring grain and eating unleavened bread. And for many centuries, the two festivals probably co-existed side-by-side.

Scholars believe that the two festivals became one only during the Babylonian exile. The exiles were cut off from their own barley harvest, which negated the festival of unleavened bread. And they were cut off from the altar at the temple in Jerusalem where they carried out their sacrifices. And, they were sorely in need of reinvigorated

stories of liberation. Their desire for freedom and a return to the land of Israel may well have caused them to rewrite a unified narrative, and new holiday, that melded the festivals of unleavened bread and the lambs into a story of their liberation from Egypt in a much earlier time. The matzah festival becomes woven into the story of the Exodus. The unleavened bread becomes a way of remembering the haste with which the Israelites fled Egypt, forcing them to leave without having time for their bread to rise. And this explanation dovetails with scholarly views about the origins of the books of the Torah. The exile was the last great period of revision of various versions of the Torah. The writers of this period – known to scholars as the “priestly” writers – added to and re-shaped the ancient texts into something close to the form in which we know them today.

By the first century of the common era – roughly the time when Jesus lived, and afterwards – the Pesach feast had been transformed into an ordered meal. What we now know as the *Passover Seder* was based on the pattern of the Greek and Roman *symposium*, which was a kind of discussion banquet. Over time, the order of the *Seder* was written down as the *Haggadah*. There is a prescribed order to the progression of the evening, as the Passover story is told, often with digressions for discussion of the meaning of various passages. There is also the drinking of wine at various points in the *Seder*. The meal is usually a lively event, often with singing and dancing, with progressively noisier discussion. It is a ritual, a learning experience, and a time for remembering and celebrating, all rolled into one.

The basic structure of the *Seder* consists of:

- A series of preparatory steps – lighting candles, washing hands, eating bitter herbs dipped in salt water, and breaking the matzoh
- An introduction to the telling of the story in an interplay of questions and partial answers
- The heart of the telling of the story, often with the reading of commentary, known as midrash, following the command we heard in our reading to tell the story to the children
- Singing psalms, praising YHWH for past and future redemptions
- Formally eating the ritual foods –
- The post-meal recitation of prayers and psalms.

How many of you here have attended Seders? Over the last many years, I have usually attended at least one *Seder* each spring. Some of them have been pretty riotous, with ample amounts of wine, and a great deal of hilarity with the children over the prophet Elijah’s visit and the hiding and finding of a bit of Matzoh. Some have been much more serious. During the 1960s there was a popular form, known as the Freedom *Seder*, that updated the story with current politics. All have been uplifting and inspiring events, even though they may go long into the night before everyone gets fed. The last few years, Karen and I have attended a *Seder* hosted by Rabbi Michael Lerner, author of *The Left Hand of God*, and leader of a synagogue known as *Beit Tikkun*. This *Seder* is actually held at the First Unitarian Universalist Society in San Francisco, and it is a lively, although lengthy, event, with bands, singing, and so on.

So Passover, and the *Seder* meal, remind us of a number archetypal themes: The cycles of the year and their emergence into spring with the birthing of the lambs and the harvesting of the first crop of grains; of the births of children and their central importance to both their families and their community; of newness, growth, creativity; of the rebirth

of oppressed peoples into liberation; of the joy that we take in celebrating together with music, singing, dancing, eating, and drinking; of the importance of community.

Passover is an event that has undergone many transitions over the centuries. It is a holiday that has proven to be adaptable, even as it continues traditions that go back many, many centuries. In this sense, Easter does not seem to be quite so adaptable a holiday, unless, I suppose, you count the easter bunny and easter eggs. But these modern manifestations have little if any connection with the original religious meaning of Easter.

Perhaps Passover is adaptable, even as the basic traditions remain, because it is a story of new beginnings, of birth and rebirth, and of liberation. It tells a story that can have meaning in the struggle of any oppressed people for freedom. In this way, for example, the Exodus story was seized on as a metaphor for the African-American struggle – first within slave communities, and later carried on in African-American churches. The story is a powerful narrative of liberation, and it has inspired African-Americans in their struggle against racism in this country.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow suggests another way in which the Pesach story might serve as a framework for the emergence of new forms in the relationships between men and women. The Exodus story keeps asserting the importance of women and their experience of childbirth as a guide to freedom. The midwives are the first to defy Pharaoh's decree that all Israelite newborn boys be killed. And remember, these midwives were often Egyptian women. But they heard in the cry of each newborn baby the voice of the sacred, the voice of newness creativity, unpredictability. Even more than the mothers they understood the importance of childbirth, because they had assisted at so many births. And from giving birth to children, they were able to give birth to freedom. The newborn carries – on the biological level – the same message that freedom carries on the historical political level: it is possible to start over. Transformation is possible!

In the Exodus story, the women keep on teaching the lesson. Pharaoh's daughter and Miriam conspire to hide Moses and protect him. And Moses in turn must learn from women, and from the miracles of childbirth and fatherhood, before he is ready to lead his people effectively. The story shows that the process of liberation cannot be fulfilled until the men are part of it too. But it is the women who understand the path, who can understand the connection between the birth of a child and the birth of freedom.

So let us find in this spring season, the hope that resides in all these spring festivals, ancient and modern.

Let us find the hope that rises up in us whenever a child is born.

Let us find the hope that rises up in us to remember that liberation from oppression is possible.

Let us remember that it is possible to start over, again, and again, and yet again.

Let us remember that transformation is possible!