

# Telling the Story

Rabbi Daniel Reiser | Westchester Reform Temple | Scarsdale, NY  
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On Passover, we are commanded to tell the story of the Jewish people. And so, this past Wednesday evening, even though we were only able to gather virtually, our family, like so many Jewish families around the world, joined together on Zoom to do exactly that -- to tell the story of the exodus from Egypt.

And you might not be surprised to hear that it only took a couple of minutes before we had digressed entirely from our intended purpose of telling the story and were instead deep into a conversation about some of the enduring themes of the exodus narrative.

The conversation took a particularly interesting turn when a member of our family pointed out that the Passover story doesn't just tell the tale of our people's liberation. The story also makes a series of bold theological claims along the way -- insights into what our ancient ancestors believed about the nature of God.

First of all, the story asserts that there is a God -- already a claim that is worthy of debate. Second, the story asserts that God notices when human beings are suffering. Remember, after all, that the Passover story tells us that God heard the outcry of the Israelites from beneath their Egyptian bondage. This is a God Who sees and hears what's happening on earth. Third, the story asserts that God not only notices human suffering -- God also cares about human suffering. God's heart is stirred upon hearing the outcry of the Israelites, and is filled with compassion. Fourth, and finally, the story asserts that God not only cares about human suffering -- what's more, God can and does do something about it, and liberates our people from Egypt.

To summarize, the Passover story makes four theological claims: (1) there is a God; (2) God notices human suffering; (3) God cares about human suffering; and (4) God can intervene against human suffering.

As you might imagine, these observations sparked a long conversation around our seder table - a conversation in which there were no definitive answers. Each seder participant agreed or disagreed with a different set of these four claims. Some people expressed their conviction that there is no God in the first place, so it's meaningless to talk about whether God is concerned with human suffering. Others believed that there is a God, Who created the laws of science and physics, but that, after causing the Big Bang, God has since been absent from the universe, and is therefore unaware of human suffering -- like a watch-maker, who builds a watch, winds it up, and lets it go, completely unaware of how time has unfolded. Others believed that God knows about what is going on in the universe, but doesn't much care -- that, from God's perspective, an earthquake is not a human tragedy, but rather, is simply the natural and necessary shifting of the earth's tectonic plates. Still others believed in a God Who cares deeply about human suffering, but that God is unable to do anything about it -- the way that a parent might care

about their child's pain, but is unable to do anything to make that pain go away. And still others expressed their belief that God is manifest through human relationships -- so that, when humans take action to alleviate suffering, we are, in fact, acting as God's agents.

It was a rich and deep conversation, on a topic that we do not regularly engage -- and certainly helped to make the seder feel like a night that was different from all other nights.

One reason this conversation was able to take place is because Judaism is not dogmatic. That is, there is no particular statement of belief that a person must accept in order to be a Jew. Certainly, Jewish thought has its own theological tenets -- its own constellation of core beliefs that guide Jewish life. But none of these beliefs are mandatory. Much more important than affirming any one particular belief is our very participation in the conversation. It is not required that we think the so-called "right" thing. What is required is that we think something.

Whatever each of us may believe about God, there are two important principles that ought to guide the articulation of our own theology. The first principle is that we should think of our personal theology as always subject to change. The ideas we had about God at age four likely don't match with the ideas we had at age 14 -- so why would they look the same between age 14 and age 34, or 54, or 84? For some of us, our convictions are long-lasting. For others, our ideas about God continue to grow and to change as we do. Any statement of belief does not have to be forever and for all time. Rather, it should reflect our best current thinking, and we always reserve the right to change our mind.

The second guiding principle -- and for me, the most important one -- in articulating our personal theology is: our beliefs ought to be an outgrowth of our experiences. There's an exercise that clergy periodically undertake -- but in truth, anyone can do it -- called writing one's autobiographical theology. It's a fancy name for a relatively simple exercise. Your autobiographical theology is exactly what it sounds like: tell us the story of your life (your autobiography), and then tell us how that story has impacted what you believe (your theology). It sounds obvious -- that, of course, our life experiences shape the things we believe -- but sometimes the most obvious thing is the thing that is most easily overlooked. When it comes to theology -- and philosophy more broadly -- it is often all too easy to rely exclusively on the sophisticated or famous things we've read in books. It is much easier to quote Descartes and say "I think, therefore, I am" than it is to seriously consider what it is that we ourselves believe.

In a heightened moment such as this one -- when each of us is living through a once-in-a-century pandemic, when life and death are so visibly before us, when we daily encounter the randomness of why one person suffers while another does not, when small acts of human heroism are so frequently on display, when moral dilemmas confront us every hour -- in a heightened moment such as this, when the full complexity of the human condition is before us, now, more than ever, is the time considering our theology. Now is the time to ask big questions. Now is the time to wonder about God. Now is the time to consider our own autobiographical theology -- to tell the story of our experiences, and how those experiences impact what we believe. Each of us is living with this pandemic. Each of us has a story to tell. Each of us has

something important to say -- some statement of belief or doubt, some idea about God or humanity, some question, some deeply felt intuition, some righteous lament that needs to be voiced.

Moments of crisis have always produced the best theological innovations. The Babylonian Exile, the Destruction of the Second Temple, the Spanish Expulsion, the Holocaust -- each of these moments in Jewish history led to a shift in the ways that our people thinks about God, the world, and our place in it. And while this pandemic certainly does not rise to the level of any one of those historical catastrophes, nevertheless, we can learn something from our past: that a moment of crisis can and should cause us to think carefully about the things we believe.

That, after all, is exactly what the Passover story is all about. The Passover story is, in its own way, an act of autobiographical theology. Our ancestors lived through a crisis -- and in its aftermath, they had a story they needed to tell. Their experience was one of bitterness. Of slavery. Of saltwater tears. Of having to make bricks without straw. Of having their newborn babies thrown into the Nile river. And out of this deep suffering, our ancestors cried out, raised their voices in pain. And whether we ourselves believe in God or not, our ancestors felt stirred within them some deep intuition -- a feeling that there is in fact a God, a God Who notices when we are suffering, Who cares about us, Who wants us to thrive and be free, Who wants us to know that even in our moments of deepest despair, we are always loved.

That's the story our ancestors told. When, God willing, generations from now, our great-great-grandchildren look back at today, what are the stories that we will have told?

We will tell the story of an elderly grandfather, who lived a long and full life, who thrived in his career and was beloved by everyone who knew him -- who, though he was pushing 90, still had so much life in him, who contracted the virus, and tragically, his life came to an abrupt end.

We will tell the story of a mother, who, though she was perfectly healthy and young, not in any high-risk category, nevertheless wound up in the hospital, in need of an oxygen tank to help her breathe -- and who, though she thankfully came home within a couple of days, nevertheless, reminded us of the randomness and unpredictability of human suffering.

We will tell the story of thousands of doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals, who, at great personal risk to themselves, with not enough protective gear to stay safe, and much to the worry of their friends and family, who, even with great trepidation, nevertheless turned their offices into intensive care units, and proved just how deep is the human commitment to caring for one another.

We will tell the story of people who were laid off from their work, small business owners who had to close their doors, who suddenly had to worry about where their income was coming from, how they would feed their families, who experienced firsthand just how quickly life can change, how one day you can feel like you have it all, and the next day, it may be gone.

We will tell the story of complete strangers, who knocked on their neighbors doors, and asked through the window whether everyone inside was alright -- who drove to the grocery store to pick up beans and rice, so that those who were homebound would still have something to eat.

We will tell the story of teachers, who got into education because they loved connecting with young people, and who, cut off from their classrooms, and with little training to do so virtually, nevertheless found ways to inspire and show their love for the students who look up to them.

We will tell the story of disappointment, of weddings postponed, of vacations cancelled, of family gatherings put off to some other time -- painful reminders of the old Yiddish adage, that "humans plan, and God laughs."

We will tell the story of parents, who, while balancing the demands of working remotely, suddenly found themselves responsible for homeschooling, feeding, and entertaining their children, who struggled to find enough hours in the day to be responsive to the many demands on their time and attention, who wrestled with the setting of priorities, with the need to balance work and family.

We will tell the story of boredom, of people shut indoors for weeks on end with nothing but time and nothing to do, the feeling not just of social distancing, but of isolation, of loneliness.

We will tell the story of friends who hadn't spoken to each other for months, who reached out for a friendly check-in, to simply catch up, to laugh, or joke, or watch a movie together while sitting on the phone, who remembered the importance of relationships, of people who keep us balanced, and wished we kept in touch like that more often.

These and so many others are the stories we will tell. These and so many others will be the experiences that shape what we believe. The meaning of this crisis will not be clear and simple. It will be messy, complicated, many-layered -- filled with loss, pain, unexpected randomness, surprising joys, inequalities, small acts of heroism, frustrations -- the entire spectrum of the human condition.

On Passover, we are commanded to tell our stories. And if we listen carefully, we will find that it also works the other way around, too. Our stories have something to tell us. Our stories tell us who we are. They tell us what we believe.