

Remember: A Passover Sermon  
Sunday, April 28, 2024  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

Reading: From the Torah, in the book of Deuteronomy

When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbor, do not go into their house to get what is offered to you as a pledge. Stay outside and let the neighbor to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you. If the neighbor is poor, do not go to sleep with their pledge in your possession. Return their cloak by sunset so that your neighbor may sleep in it. Then they will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God.

Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.

Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

This Monday Rabbi Benjamin Resnick began a piece in [The Washington Post](#) like this, “Every year, one of the highlights of my family’s Passover Seder is when we all whip one another with green onions. It’s a custom that originated in the historical Jewish communities of Persia and Afghanistan, and it’s fun — a gentle way to remind ourselves of the lashes from ancient persecution. Until fairly recently I had never experienced it as anything other than a playful diversion.

“But last spring something changed. As usual, we armed ourselves with scallions, and when it was time I cheerfully told my boys, 5 and 8, that they could hit each other. Like the other adults,

our 8-year-old was alive to the ritualized aspect, and he gently flicked that scallion at our 5-year-old. His little brother, though, eyes full of mischief, reared back, whacked him as hard as he could and laughed. And then our 8-year-old cried.”

Resnick continues, “I have thought about this episode more than once over the past year. My children probably don’t remember it. But for me, it looms large. And, in a fashion that feels almost mythic, it represents so many archetypal aspects of a Jewish childhood, or perhaps any childhood: the jokes that are not entirely jokes, the rigors of brotherhood, the specter of violence that is present even in our most precious and comforting stories,” [Opinion | Preparing for the first Passover Seder since the Oct. 7 attack on Israel - The Washington Post](#).

What shall we do with the story of Passover this year? It is always a story that contains violence; enslavement, plagues, a pursuing army, but this year the violence has not remained within the story. It is in the newspapers. It is in people’s current lives.

There are people held hostage. There are people who have become homeless and who are starving, living in the midst of a war. There are students rallying for a ceasefire, for divestiture of their universities from arms dealers and from Israel. There are those who say how can there be a ceasefire without release of hostages. There are those saying divestiture means nothing. There are many trying to thread the line between critiquing Israel and avoiding antisemitism.

Rabbi Resnick writes, “More profound than scallions — and more urgent as we prepare for the first Seder in the long shadow of Oct. 7 — is one of the core statements in the Haggadah, the book used as an aid in telling the story of the Exodus: ‘This is the promise — not only once did they arise to destroy us, rather in every generation they rise to destroy us. But the Holy One Blessed Be ... will save us from their hands.’ In every generation, indeed,” [Opinion | Preparing for the first Passover Seder since the Oct. 7 attack on Israel - The Washington Post](#).

That fear and hope is something our Jewish members and neighbors and some of you live with. Our Building and Grounds chair asked if we should have a safety monitor for last night’s seder.

In [The Conversation](#) an article titled “When does anti-Zionism become antisemitism? A Jewish historian’s perspective” was published on March 27. It says in part, “An awareness of this ongoing history of persecution (of the Jews) is important to understand the trauma of the October 7 attack by Hamas in southern Israel, during which 1,200 people were killed (and some sexually assaulted) and around 240 people abducted. It was a watershed moment for Israelis, as well as the Jewish diaspora.

“It also helps to understand the Jewish perspective on some of the rhetoric heard at global protests against Israel’s subsequent war in Gaza – and more broadly against Zionism – since October 7. To many, this equates to antisemitism.

“Much ink has been spilt on the issue of whether protests against Zionism, or anti-Zionism, are inherently antisemitic.

“Certainly, within the academic realm, anti-Zionism does not necessarily conflate with antisemitism. As Michelle Goldberg recently wrote, anti-Zionism can emerge from those who

believe in the potential for Israelis and Palestinians to live together in the same state, or from well-intentioned concerns for Palestinian suffering, among other reasons.

“However, when the real-life impact of anti-Zionism results in cries advocating for the killing of Jews, then it can only be understood as antisemitism. As is any criticism of Zionism or Israel that crosses the line into blatant racism or discrimination, demands to de-platform or exclude Zionists, the resurfacing of tropes and conspiracy theories about Jewish people, or the questioning of Israel’s right to exist as a state....

“In recent years, efforts have been made to define antisemitism to show how it intersects with attitudes towards Israel and to draw clearer lines explaining when anti-Zionism becomes antisemitism.

“This culminated in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s adoption of a working definition of antisemitism in 2016. While stressing that legitimate criticism of Israel is *not* antisemitism, seven of its 11 examples of antisemitic behaviour relate to Israel. These include:

- denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, for example, by claiming the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour
- drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis
- holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

“To date, 38 nations have accepted this definition of antisemitism....

“Some scholars, including those who would consider themselves anti-Zionists, however, have rejected the definition and developed and signed another, known as the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism.

“A small minority of Jews who oppose Israel’s existence as a Zionist state adhere to this definition. For other Jews it is seen as more accurate because it is less prescriptive than the IHRA definition and also seeks to ‘clarify when criticism of (or hostility to) Israel or Zionism crosses the line into antisemitism and when it does not’.

“For instance, it says criticising or opposing Zionism ‘as a form of nationalism’ is not antisemitic, while ‘denying the right of Jews in the state of Israel to exist and flourish’ would be...”

The article ends, “... our aim should be to work towards understanding each other’s pain and learning to listen to each other with respect, even if we choose to agree to disagree. We seem to have a long way to go to achieve this goal,” [When does anti-Zionism become antisemitism? A Jewish historian’s perspective \(theconversation.com\)](#).

A big part of the story of Passover is that in remembering one’s own people’s pain one’s heart should become open to the pain of others. “Remember that **you** were slaves in Egypt.” Act accordingly.

Our current statement of the sources of our Unitarian Universalist tradition includes this source, “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

And just what would that look like? The proposed change to our bylaws puts it like this, “Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these shared values are:”

And these are the two values I think are most relevant. “Pluralism. We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect. Justice. We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.”

That goes far beyond not hitting your brother hard with a scallion. Is it even possible? But another part of the Passover story says that the sea did not part for the fleeing Israelites until one brave soul took the first step in. Let us be brave enough to take the first step toward love and justice and then let us see what miracle may occur.

I end with a Passover reading from The Jewish Fund for Justice.

“In every generation, each person has the obligation to look at (oneself) as if personally brought out of Egypt.

“We have discussed liberation and sung its praises.  
We have recounted oppressions and remembered its tears.  
We have numbered our blessings and offered our gratitude....

"Still, others cannot celebrate liberation. Others yet shed tears. Others cannot yet sing out 'Dayenu.' Others yet hunger for redemption.

“Each one of us has the power to act as an agent of redemption, if only we can see ourselves as (the Holy's) partners in pursuing justice.

“I can stay the tears of others if I can see myself diminished by their sorrow.  
I can hasten the time when everyone will be able to rejoice in freedom, if I can see myself as the companion of those fighting against oppression.  
I can honor the history and the struggles of my own people, if I can respond to the struggles of people everywhere to gain dignity and deliverance from bondage.

“When I look at myself in the mirror after this celebration of freedom, who will I see?”