

Four More Questions for Passover

Rabbi Brant Rosen - Passover 2010/5770

Question 1: Maggid, Telling the Tale

A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war, they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground." So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them...

(Exodus 1:10-11)

As we begin the Exodus story, we read that the oppression of the Israelites resulted from Pharaoh's fear that their growth would somehow overwhelm the Egyptian nation. These verses certainly have an ominous resonance for the Jewish people. Indeed any member of a minority faith or ethnic group knows all too well the tragedy that inevitably ensues when a nation views their demographic growth as a "threat."

Today it is all too common to hear Israel's leaders and supporters suggest that the "Jewish character" of Israel is threatened by the demographic growth of the Palestinian people. How should we react to the suggestion that the mere fact of this group's growth necessarily poses a national threat to Israel? As Jews living in the Diaspora, how would we respond if our leaders raised questions about the "demographic threat" of a particular minority group to the "national character" of our country? In a multi-ethnic society, can a state's identity ever be predicated upon the primacy of one ethnic group without the oppression of another?

Question 2: Zayit, Olive

As we ask this question, pass olives around the table. *Zayit: al shum mah?* – This olive: why do we eat it? The olive tree is one of the first plants mentioned in the Torah and remains among the oldest species in Israel/Palestine. It has become a universal symbol of peace and hope, as it is written in Psalm 52: *I am like a thriving olive tree in God's house, I trust in God's loyal kindness forever and ever.*

We add this olive to our seder plate as a reminder that we must all be God's bearers of peace and hope in the world. At the same time, we eat this olive in sorrow, mindful that olive trees, the source of livelihood for Palestinian farmers, are regularly chopped down, burned and uprooted by Israeli settlers and the Israeli authorities. As we look on, Israel pursues systematic policies that increasingly deny Palestinians access to olive orchards that have belonged to them for generations. As we eat now, we ask one another: How will we, as Jews, bear witness to the unjust actions committed in our name? Will these olives inspire us to be bearers of peace and hope for Palestinians – and for all who are oppressed?

Question 3: Return

When God returns Zion from captivity, it will be as in our dream; Our mouths will be filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy...

(Psalm 126: 1-2)

We begin the blessing after the meal with the image of return: a vision that has always been central to our collective Jewish “dream.” Today, of course, this Jewish ideal has been realized by means of political nationalism. Zionism has succeeded in “returning” the Jewish people to sovereignty in its historic homeland. The founding of the Jewish state, however, has tragically created a nightmare for another people. The creation of Israel in 1948 displaced 700,000 indigenous inhabitants from their land. As a result, over 4,000,000 Palestinian refugees now yearn passionately to return to their homes.

And so we ask: what has the Jewish “return” to Zion wrought? How do we understand a Jewish “right of return” to Israel that grants automatic citizenship to any Jew anywhere in the world while denying that same right to the very people who actually lived on this land not long ago? Can any “return” truly be complete as long as it denies that right to others? Could there possibly be a way that both peoples might realize their respective dreams of return?

Question 4. “Next Year in Jerusalem!”

We now end our Seder meal once again with the proclamation “Next Year in Jerusalem!” And so we ask: what will we do to ensure that Jerusalem lives up to its name as a city of peace? How will we respond as the Jewish state increasingly implements policies that claim this holy city in the name of one people only? Do we dare to dream of a city divided or a city truly united for all its inhabitants? ...and if we do believe that Jerusalem must be, once and for all, a true City of Peace, what are we willing to do to make it so?

TOGETHER: Next Year in Jerusalem! Next Year in *al-Quds*! Next year in a City of Peace!