



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

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What We Ought to Say at the Seder

Shakespeare, Passover, and the Fifth Commandment

BY DR. SHAINA TRAPEDO

The following excerpt is adapted from Dr. Trapedo's article which appeared in YU's Pesach To Go reader in April 2023.

At the end of Parshat Bo, before the children of Israel exit Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, God commands the still-enslaved people to tell the story of their yet-to-be redemption to future generations:

And you shall tell your child on that day, saying, 'It is because of what the L-rd did for me when I went free from Egypt.' (Exodus 13:8)

In His Infinite Oneness, as Maimonides explains, God does not experience time. Past, present, and future converge. Yet for the Jews still waiting to witness a promised deliverance and experience freedom first-hand, I imagine this anticipatory commandment must have felt both premature and reassuring.

Over the last few years, gathering families and making Passover plans has been especially challenging. None of us know the future. Many have felt the pain of empty seats at the Seder table, as well as the joy of newly assembled high chairs. From the very young to the hard-wisdom won, the participants at the Seder present a range of ages, abilities, and attention spans. And with great blessing comes the great responsibility of handling the complexities of intergenerational communication with care.

One of the most devastating stories of a mismanaged parent-child relationship is captured in Shakespeare's King Lear. The life of "[King Leir], ruler over the Britaines in the yeare of the world 3105 at what time Ioas reigned in Iuda," was recorded in Holinshed's Chronicles and other sources that Shakespeare frequently consulted throughout his career.

The play begins with the aged king's decision to resign the throne and divide his kingdom between his daughters while he lives so "that future strife may be prevented." Yet in forcing his daughters to compete for their portions—demanding each answer "Which of you doth love me most?"—he initiates a sibling rivalry that escalates to familial and political devastation. The youngest, Cordelia, refuses to flatter her father like her sisters, plainly stating, "I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more nor less." Her honesty is met with incredulity. Lear prompts her to mend her speech and she continues, "You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I return those duties back as are right fit: obey you, love you, honor you," adding she hopes never to be like her sisters who have husbands but claim to love their father "all." Cordelia's instant and severe banishment activates the question that powers the rest of the play: what do children owe parents and parents owe their children?

Though Shakespeare often sidestepped controversy by setting his plays in the pagan past, Cordelia's use of "bond," "obey," and "honor" would have had biblical resonance for his Protestant audience. In the religious discourse of the day, the fifth commandment to honor one's father and mother was a basic tenant of faith. In the time of the Israelites' exodus, it was nothing short of revolutionary.

In ancient Egypt, the nuclear family was the basic social unit. Monogamy was predominant, and census records show the average household included two adults and two children; sons grew up, married, and moved to start a new household. New couples would live independently from their parents.



As a result of this common practice, sons focused on the needs of their spouses and couples on their offspring, creating a child-centric society that puts the tenth plague into sharper focus. “If thou wouldst be wise,” the Egyptian vizier Ptah-Hotep advises his son, “provide for thine house, and love thy wife that is in thine arms.” In his account of Egypt, Herodotus notes that “to support their parents the sons are in no way compelled if they do not desire to do so, but the daughters are forced to do so.” All of this, including the fact that Egyptians lacked kinship terminology for relatives beyond the nuclear family, illustrates a culture that distanced adult children from their elderly parents, with each successive generation living in relative autonomy from the previous one.

Prior to their descent into Egypt, the Children of Israel lived and camped as large multigenerational families, but centuries of slavery had altered their living arrangements and eroded their values. In this light, the fifth commandment given to the Jewish people in the desert is radically countercultural:

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land that your God giveth thee.
(Exodus 20:12)

As society advances, the tendency for children to feel “ahead” of their parents advances too. And while we may tend to think a lack of respect toward adults is a 21st-century problem exacerbated by the digital age, this is hardly a contemporary phenomenon.

The Haggadah famously records conversations between a father and four sons, identified not by names but by character traits. For example, after observing the labor and expense that goes into the Seder, the wicked son asks:

What is this worship to you? (Exodus 12:26)

The Haggadah notes that his word choice of “To you” (and not “to him”) is a verbal rejection of his father’s values. In response, the Haggadah advises the father: “you will blunt his teeth and say to him, ‘For the sake of this, did the Lord do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt’ (Exodus 13:8).” “For me” and not “for him.” If he had been there, he would not have been saved.” For the Lubavitcher Rebbe, placing emphasis on the word “there” transforms the message from banishment to benevolence. Indeed, redemption during the Exodus was contingent on consent, and had this son been in Egypt at that time, he would not have been redeemed; however, the father implies, we are no longer there but in the present post-Sinai era, when every Jew is free to choose a relationship with God at any moment.

As the Haggadah implies, we can mitigate tensions between parents and children by being mindful of tense. In his book *Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion*, Jay Heinrichs explains that the past tense is all about blame and punishment. “Look what you did!” “She started it!” The future tense is deliberative and deals with choices.

Of course, the reality is that children are not perfect, and many parents are objectively problematic. Lear forces his daughters to compete for his love, and both the king and the Earl of Gloucester reject children who honor them justly in favor of flatterers who fan their egos. Although Lear and Cordelia both die in Shakespeare’s tragedy, he does include a poignant scene toward the end when the two are momentarily reunited. When Lear struggles to recognize his own daughter, Cordelia requests, “O, look upon me, sir, and hold your hands in benediction o’er me,” which summons to mind images of the biblical Patriarchs who gathered their offspring as their own eyes dimmed to bestow blessings upon them. Although Lear asks Cordelia for forgiveness, he never truly intuits his mistake: believing that the parent-child bond is about reciprocity instead of perpetuity and futurity.

In the Folio version of Shakespeare’s tragedy, Gloucester’s surviving son urges the audience at the end of the play: “The weight of this sad time we must obey; Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.” However, after listening to Lear wish infertility on his own daughters at the height of his fury, we’re left to wonder whether this is actually good advice. And if we do aim to speak only “what we ought to say,” then “ought” according to whom or what?

God willing, our homes will host family and friends this Passover as each of us is bound to not only retell a story from our collective history but imagine ourselves personally experiencing the Exodus. Numerous laws and guidelines exist to help us navigate the Seder night for a multigenerational crowd. Yet the Seder also teaches us that it’s not just what we say, but how we say it that matters, and obligates us to exercise the highest levels of care in our communication with young and old alike. By saying what we ought, and untethering the bestowal of kindness from compliance, we become blessings to ourselves and others and can look toward the future with faith and gratitude.

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Second Passover

BY RABBI DR. MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

This excerpt is adapted from Rabbi Soloveichik's article which appeared in Commentary in May 2022

On April 13, 1945, a unique service centered on Passover was held in the liberated Buchenwald concentration camp. Some 1,500 survivors gathered at the Kino Halle, the auditorium that had until that point been used by Nazis to watch movies when they took brief respite from murdering Jews. The service was led by Rabbi Herschel Schacter, a chaplain in Patton's Third Army who only several days earlier had entered the camp uttering the immortal words *Shalom aleichem Yidden, ihr sind frei*—Peace be unto you, my fellow Jews, you are free.

The chaplain joined his words with the distribution of the central food of Passover: unleavened bread. The service was, in its own way, a true embodiment of the Seder. There was, ostensibly, one problem: Passover had already...passed. The matzah distributed was composed of mere crumbs because it was but a remnant, left over from a Seder the chaplain had held for Jewish servicemen at the Rhine River almost two weeks before. But rightly understood, this makeshift makeup Seder for those unable to observe Passover was also rooted in Jewish history and divine commandment.

The month following Passover in the Jewish calendar is marked by commemorations of modern moments in Jewish history, both the horrific and the miraculous: There is Yom Ha-Shoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, observed in Israel on the date of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising; Yom Ha-Zikaron, a memorial day for Israeli soldiers murdered in battle; Yom Ha-Atzamat, celebrating Israeli Independence; and Yom Yerushalayim, rejoicing in the liberation of ancient Jerusalem.

In the process of marking these moments, a more ancient date, once central to Israelite observance in Temple times, has been largely forgotten. It is called Pesach Sheni, the "Second Passover," and Rabbi Schacter's belated "Seder" illustrates how this now-obscure day may actually embody Jewish history more than Passover itself.

The origin of "Second Passover" is described in the book of Numbers, in a tale that occurred one year after the Exodus itself. Remembering the liberation a year before, the Israelites in the desert assemble to sacrifice the paschal lamb, as they had in Egypt 12 months prior. Several Israelites, however, had just recently buried a dead body; this contact necessitated a seven-day ritual defilement, preventing them from engaging in sacrificial rituals associated with the tabernacle:

And there were certain men, who were defiled by the dead body of a man...and they came before Moses and before Aaron on that day. And those men said unto him, We are defiled by the dead body of a man: wherefore are we made less, that we may not offer an offering of the Lord in his appointed season among the children of Israel? (Numbers 9:6)

The complaint asserted by the defiled Israelites bespeaks not only religious reverence but also national identity. The paschal offering was the central civic ritual of ancient Israel, compared by both the Bible and later sources to circumcision.

For these individuals, defiled by the dead, to be sidelined from the celebration was to be cut off from "among the children of Israel," from their very portion in the people itself.

In response, the Almighty informs Moses that from then on, a day would be set aside, a month after Passover, for the bringing of the Paschal offering by those previously prevented from doing so—for those in a state of defilement because of the burial of a loved one, and for those who could not reach Jerusalem in time for Passover.



This is believed to be a photo of Rabbi Herschel Schacter conducting Passover services at the Buchenwald camp on April 13, 1945.

It is therefore no coincidence that Schacter, looking back at that moment in Buchenwald, called it a "Second Passover." It was not yet a month after the festival, as Schacter acknowledged, but "it was Pesach Sheni in the most meaningful sense for these Jews, who were unable to have an actual Pesach." Is there a better parallel to the origin of Second Passover—those defiled by the dead ultimately celebrating freedom—than a liberation celebration of survivors following an encounter with the ultimate embodiment of death? And is there a biblical day, established so many millennia ago, whose symbolism more strikingly joins together all the modern markings this month, of the Holocaust and the birth of Israel, of Jewish life after Jewish death?

Two weeks after the first service in Buchenwald, another was held on April 27, which happened to be "Second Passover" itself. One participant, Avraham Schneur, noted that up till that point in the camps he had been incapable of faith. Suddenly, the chaplain intoned the memorial prayer for those who had been murdered, and he realized that this included "my father my mother, and my brother, and perhaps also my sisters." And "from then on I knew I had to recite a prayer for them...I received a prayer book and knew that I was resuming being a Jew."

It is safe to say that for most reading this article, a "Pesach Sheni" will not be central to their celebrations this year. But if we take pains to mark it, it will render our more modern commemorations more profound, reminding us of what it means to be part of a nation that has no last chance, and will never die.

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