

Pre-Passover Purification

Shabbat HaChodesh 5778

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Years ago, during Passover, I went to dinner at a favorite Mexican restaurant. As I walked in the door, I saw a couple from Temple – this was in San Antonio. Greeting them, the woman said that, upon first seeing us, she had whispered to her husband: “Oh no, there’s the rabbi. He’s going to see that we’re eating here during Passover.” Her husband noted that I was probably not inspecting all the restaurants in town, just to see who wasn’t keeping Passover strictly: “He must be here to eat, too.” Not being Jewish, the husband wasn’t entirely sure if eating there was right or wrong. If it were not permitted, though, this rabbi would be in no position to impose sanctions on his wife.

The dietary rules of Passover are complicated. Some Jews eat rice, corn and legumes during Passover; others consider eating those foods to be gross violations of Jewish law; and still others couldn’t identify a legume if it hit them in the face. How, then, should a Reform Jew keep Passover?

Tonight, we observe Shabbat HaChodesh, the Shabbat that greets the month in which Passover falls. This Shabbat, we read a Haftarah that recounts our ancestors’ preparations for Passover in the Jerusalem Temple. After this Shabbat, we are to begin getting ready for the festival ourselves.

For some, this new moon signals a period of intense house-cleaning, culminating with sweeping up some last crumbs of leavened foods with a feather and burning them in the hours before Passover begins. Whether one observes that tradition or not, Passover holds deep meaning. As we begin our own processes of purification for Pesach this year, let me suggest how a Reform Jew ought to observe Passover – one for each of the festival’s seven days.

1. A Reform Jew should attend a Seder.

Seder is serious business. We spend weeks preparing, not only the food, but also the way we will conduct the service. We may skip some pages that seem less relevant. Some may read almost everything in English. We may modify and shorten the Seder to accommodate children. However we arrange the Seder, we succeed when we communicate Passover’s message, share our Jewish traditions with the next generation, and make this Jewish experience a joyful and

meaningful part of home life. May each of us lead or attend such a Seder this year.

Here at Congregation B'nai Israel, we have transformed what used to be a Community Seder, primarily attended by non-Jews, into a Congregational Seder, a celebratory gathering for our Temple family and all who would join us.

2. A Reform Jew should observe the holy days of Passover.

For Reform Jews, Passover lasts seven days. The first and last days of the festival are holy. Just like every Shabbat, and much like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Jews traditionally do not work or go to school on these days, but rest, study and attend worship services. Most Reform Jews will not take those days off from work. However, we all should make these days holy, and we should respect those traditional Jews who do scrupulously observe not one but two holy days at both the beginning and end of Passover.

We mark these occasions by attending Passover morning services. This year, the first day is on Shabbat, when we always have morning services, and our morning service will be our only service that Shabbat. Let's overcrowd the Chapel and decamp to the Sanctuary! On the seventh day, we observe *yizkor* with a morning service. If coming to Temple at 10:30am on a Friday isn't practical, then make that day sacred on Thursday night, April 5, by kindling lights, blessing the wine and matzah at home, or by coming to the Men's Seder.

3. A Reform Jew should be rededicated to the Jewish people during Passover.

On Passover, we are linked to Jews everywhere, as we sit down to Seder tables throughout the world on the same night. We recall that we have been slaves in many times and places since Egypt. We are grateful for God's liberating power. We stand in awe of the fortitude of Jews who have freed themselves and others from persecution throughout the ages. We are beneficiaries of sacrifices made by our brothers and sisters in the Land of Israel. We celebrate our liberty in America and much of the world.

During Passover, let us commit ourselves to labor on behalf of our global Jewish family. Let us partner with God in assuring the freedom of our people everywhere. Let us make one more charitable donation, one more act of *tzedakah* during Passover, to assure the welfare of our Jewish people throughout the world. Let us commit the words of our mouths and the work of our hands to the well-being of the Land and people of Israel.

4. A Reform Jew must work for freedom during Passover.

We are taught, “Remember the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” We are enjoined to be mindful of those who are enslaved by poverty and hunger, by illness or by prejudice, by homelessness and by hopelessness. The festival inspires us to yet another act of *tzedakah* to help the needy of our larger community, wherever in the world they may be. Let our voices and our deeds cry out for the freedom of all humanity. Our Passover Haggadah tells us that we are not truly free until all men and women live at liberty and in peace. We best rejoice in our own freedom by committing ourselves to the liberty of others.

5. A Reform Jew must hope during Passover.

At the Seder, we shall open the door for the prophet Elijah, the biblical crusader for God. At the end of his life, Elijah did not die, but was taken up into the heavens in a fiery chariot. Our tradition teaches that the prophet will return to us, to herald the coming of a messianic age in the future. Significantly, we are not permitted to wait idly for God to send a Messiah. Instead, we Jews are commanded to repair this broken world, little by little, to build the messianic future with our own hands, with God’s help.

Often, we may despair. Our world seems so rife with trouble, so sad and irreparable. On Passover, festival of freedom, we open the door, not only to Elijah, but to the possibility of a brighter future in a world at peace. Let us begin during Passover to hope, to dream of the reality of a more perfect tomorrow, and to work toward making the dream real.

6. A Jew must strive for faith in God during Passover.

Two weeks from tonight, more than a few self-proclaimed atheists will sit around Seder tables. Also present will be many whose faith is unshakable. Most of us, though, will be in the middle. We believe in God; we wish to believe in God; and yet, we experience doubt. We question God, which is very much a part of being Jewish, for we are called *Yisrael*, Israel, meaning, “one who struggles with God.”

The Seder service does not mention Moses, because we are not to focus on a human liberator, but on our God. May we strive, even if the struggle is difficult, to develop our faith in God during Passover, each in our own way.

7. A Jew must observe Passover dietary restrictions.

Yes, we should refrain from eating *hametz*, foods that are forbidden during Passover. Technically, *hametz* consists of five grains – wheat, barley, spelt, oats, and rye – when those grains are mixed with water for long enough to rise. Some Jews don't eat corn or rice; some don't eat garlic. I have no argument with Reform Jews who observe those additional restrictions. However, I do not. Therefore, I ate corn at that Mexican restaurant all those years ago, and may again this year.

Whatever Passover dietary restrictions we adopt, we should do so with seriousness, with consistency, and with purpose. We can learn discipline, by staying with our Passover dietary restrictions throughout the week. We may sanctify our homes for the holiday, by removing forbidden foods from our refrigerators and our pantries, and we may symbolize that act of cleansing by checking every nook and cranny for *hametz*. We must not bring ridicule on our faith, on our people, on Reform Judaism or on our Temple by eating obviously inappropriate foods in public during Passover. We lose respect for ourselves, and we relinquish our esteem in the eyes of others, when we eat sandwiches, rolls and pastries in restaurants during Passover.

You no doubt noticed that I left the dietary restrictions to the end of this sermon. I did not “save the best for last.” In fact, as concerned as I am that some among us will ignore these *mitzvot* altogether, I am equally disconcerted by those whose obsession with these dietary laws obscures the deeper meaning of the holiday. We eat matzah to remind us of the poor bread our ancestors ate in slavery. We eat matzah to remember the bread that our people baked quickly as they were hastily leaving Egypt. We eat matzah to call our minds to the plight of others who eat only poor bread all year, not by choice or by ritual, but because they are not free, just as we were slaves in the land of Egypt.

When we badger ourselves or one another about a drop of corn syrup in a Coca-Cola, but fail to work for freedom, we are in violation of Passover. When we spend days preparing pesadich cakes but do not reach out to our fellow Jews, we are not keeping Passover. When we pop Pesach macaroons into our mouths but fail to praise God for our blessings, our Passover is downright *treife*.

This year, may each of us indeed have a “kosher Passover.” May we keep Passover, in what goes out of our mouths and in what goes into our mouths. May we observe the festival, in the foods served on our Seder tables and in the services conducted there. May we faithfully seek to be God's partners in securing the welfare of our Jewish people, and in fighting for the freedom of men, women

and children everywhere. Then, may our Passover observance truly be pleasing in God's sight.

Amen.