

How a Reform Jew Violates Passover

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Once upon a time, rabbis gave sermons twice a year: On *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Sabbath between the High Holy Days, the rabbi would orate about the laws of repentance. On *Shabbat HaGadol*, which literally means, “the great Sabbath,” the Shabbat immediately preceding the beginning of Passover, rabbis would hold forth on Passover observance. The goal was to assure that members of the community would properly dispose of their *chametz*, all leavened foods, and refrain from eating anything prohibited during the festival.

I wonder: What laws would be the focus, if a Reform Rabbi in the 21st Century were to give a *Shabbat HaGadol* sermon, focused on preventing the community from violating the holiday?

I could remind folks of the basic prohibitions of the holiday: Throughout the seven days of Passover, we are to refrain from *chametz*, which is any of five grains – wheat, barley, oats, spelt, and rye – mixed with water and permitted to rise. The easiest way to observe the commandment is to avoid those five grains, except in products specifically marked, “kosher for Passover.”

Centuries ago, rabbis in Europe also prohibited an additional category of foods called *kitniyot*. Those rabbis were observing a time-honored tradition of “building a fence around the Torah.” They believed that if people ate foods that seemed to be like *chametz*, such as corn and rice, they might be tempted to eat the fundamentally forbidden foods as well. Sephardic rabbis, including the most Orthodox among them today, never prohibited these foods among the Jews of Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East. Reform Jews are bidden to make decisions about ritual observance on the basis of commitment and knowledge. Some Reform Jew will find meaning in avoiding *kitniyot* during Passover, keeping true to their Ashkenazic – which is to say, European – backgrounds or their lifelong practice. Corn products are the most prominent example of *kitniyot*, so people who observe these commandments avoid iced cream and consume only kosher for Passover Coca-Cola and chocolate, for example.

My own take is that we can determine the difference between *chametz* and other grains that resemble it. I am concerned that a requirement to avoid *kitniyot*

– like corn, rice and legumes – will seem onerous. Reform Jews are more likely to reject all Passover food restrictions if the list of prohibitions is longer than the ancient rabbis determined that it needed to be on the basis of the Torah itself.

Our prophets of old preached against ritual observances that were not matched by ethical behavior. Similarly, as we remove the leavened foods from our homes and from our diets during Passover, we are enjoined to concentrate on the reason for observing that commandment. If we cut out bread, baked goods and pasta, but live do so without intention, then the *mitzvah* is meaningless and we have violated Passover.

At the Seder, we retell the story of the Exodus, and we recall the reason that we abstain from leavened foods throughout the festival. We learn that *matzah* represents the poor bread, which our ancestors were forced to eat as slaves in Egypt. When we refrain from eating leaven, we identify with all of the world's poor, from the people who struggle on the streets of Little Rock to the children who starve to death on the other side of the globe.

We also know that *matzah* is the bread of freedom. When our ancestors were released from bondage, they rightly feared that Pharaoh might send his armies after them. Rushed, they didn't make time for their bread to rise. One last time, they would have to eat poor bread, but this time in celebration. As we eat the *matzah*, we are commanded, each of us, to see ourselves as though we, personally, had been freed from bondage.

We violate Passover, then, if we fail to observe the *mitzvot*, telling the story at the Seder and refraining from *chametz* for seven days, which are intended to remind us of our slavery and of our freedom. And just as surely, we violate Passover if we observe those *mitzvot* by rote, abstaining from leaven and going through the motions at the Seder table, without recalling our redemption.

In Judaism, memory plays a critical function. When we remember that we were slaves in Egypt, our purpose is not simply to call our collective history to mind. Instead, our memory must be linked to purpose. Torah proclaims: "Remember the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." We violate Passover when we do not begin to bring freedom to those who are most in need of liberation today.

We Reform Jews are heirs to a great tradition, as we are the spiritual descendants of rabbis and congregations before us who marched with Dr. King,

who struggled for Soviet Jewry, and who responded promptly and proactively to the call for women's equality. Today's needs are no less pressing. We must take up the mantle that has been placed upon us.

"Remember the stranger:" Today, sadly, young Jewish adults on American college campuses are often maligned or marginalized. Perhaps you've heard the story about the Student Senate at UCLA, which nearly denied a woman a seat on an important panel for no reason other than that she is Jewish. Thankfully, in that instance, the faculty advisor stepped in, and the administration has responded appropriately. Still, across the country, on far too many campuses, our young people are beset by anti-Israel crusades that quickly morph into anti-Semitism. We violate Passover if we do not hear the students' cry, stand up to anti-Semitism on American campuses, and assure that our young people are prepared to enter college as secure, knowledgeable Jewish adults.

"Remember the stranger:" This week, in Arkansas, our Legislature and Governor have cleared the way for passage of a most hateful bill into law. Called a "religious freedom restoration act," House Bill 1228 would permit individuals and businesses to discriminate against gays and lesbians, transgendered and gender non-conforming individuals. Worse, discrimination would be justified by religion, taking God's Name in vain. Sadly, most people don't realize that a person can legally be fired, or not hired, or not promoted, in Arkansas and in most American states, explicitly on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Marriage equality will not end the struggle for freedom for LGBT Americans. We violate Passover, when we permit discrimination in God's name, and in our name.

"Remember the stranger:" Hunger continues to plague our planet. Billions around the globe suffer from food insecurity, not knowing whether or when they will find their next meal; and millions die of hunger and malnutrition every year. When we say the blessing after the meal at our Seder, we will praise God "who nourishes all." Yes, God has provided sufficient food for everyone on this planet. We, though, have failed to be God's partners, by assuring that food is distributed fairly so that everyone on Earth has enough to eat. American food aid programs are designed to benefit American farmers and shipping companies, rather than the world's poor. Here at home, in the wealthiest nation on the planet, members of Congress emphasize waste and fraud, which constitute less than one per cent of federal nutritional assistance, instead of assuring that every American has enough to eat. We violate Passover if we eat our fill without struggling to assure that everyone has enough to eat.

Yes, Reform Jews violate Passover if we avoid the Seder, if we do not thank God for our freedom, and if we fail to refrain from eating *chametz*. On Passover, and throughout the year, though, our ritual observances only serve their intended purpose if they inspire ethical action. This Passover, let our celebration and our abstinence lead us to seek freedom, for our people and for all the world.

Amen.