

Passover in August?

Shabbat R'eih 5780

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Does anybody remember March? Oh, how naïve we were. When Roxy, her family, and I realized that we would need to postpone her Bat Mitzvah, scheduled for the Shabbat during Passover, we selected an August date—imagining that, like the flu, the Coronavirus pandemic would be banished by the summer’s sun and heat.

I’m glad that we rescheduled, and I know that Roxy and her family are, too. Roxy took advantage of the extra four months’ preparation. For Roxy and her family, two priorities mattered most: first, Roxy’s achieving this sacred Jewish milestone with meaning and flair; and second, gathering the entire family together to celebrate. Yes, a Passover-appropriate celebration at Ciao would’ve been nice; that’s probably still happening, albeit with pasta, pizza, and garlic bread, but without all the friends Roxy had hoped to join her. More importantly, Aunt Sophie and her family are here, a trip from New Jersey that would’ve been impossible in the crucible of Covid-19 there in the spring.

One of the first questions to arise, when we had to postpone celebrations like Roxy’s, was about Torah portions. Would we ask teenagers to learn all new readings appropriate to the revised dates? Or would we be merciful, permitting Roxy and others in her situation to read the portions they had already prepared?

For me, at least, the decision was clear: We would not pile yet another hardship on top of a celebrant who was already going to have to study for several extra months—and even then, not going to have the festivities she had imagined. In Roxy’s case, delaying from the Shabbat during Passover, there’s a precedent.

The Torah does not contemplate a global pandemic. However, it is concerned that some Israelites might not be able to celebrate Passover on the appointed date. A person in mourning during Passover, or one on a long journey, is permitted to celebrate “second Passover,” observing all the rituals of that holiday one month late.ⁱ

As Passover approached, some of my rabbinical colleagues asked if we should delay our congregational Passover observances by a month. Most of us thought not. Though we could not gather for a congregational Seder, and we couldn’t even celebrate at home with all the people we ordinarily would, the pandemic did not prevent us from observing Passover altogether. We could still refrain from eating leavened foods for seven days. Many of us found new and

creative ways to gather with loved ones for Passover, holding Seder by Zoom, often including family and friends who would not have been able to travel to observe at a “normal” time. Moreover, we didn’t think the pandemic would let up in time for “Second Passover,” with Seder on May 8.

Let’s not lose the important point, though. From the days of the Torah, our tradition has approached real life circumstances with creativity, not rigidity. If people couldn’t observe Passover one month, they could do so the next. We did celebrate that festival in the spring, but we did not read its Torah portion. Tomorrow morning, Roxy will.

As realities changed, even during the days of the Torah, so did the rules. In *Parashat R’eih*, the portion read this Shabbat in synagogues around the world that **don’t** have a rescheduled Bat Mitzvah, a different Passover discussion suggests adaptation to needs of the times. In Exodus, when the Israelites are first commanded to offer the Passover sacrifice, they are instructed to do so wherever they live.ⁱⁱ In this week’s Torah portion, that gets changed. Concerned that individuals will conduct sacrifices in idolatrous ways, Israelite leaders insisted that all Passover sacrifices now be brought to only one place: the Temple in Jerusalem.ⁱⁱⁱ

Later, that Temple was destroyed. Perhaps the Israelites could’ve gone back to sacrificing in their own homes, but our sages thought differently. They established the principle that our prayers, the offerings of our lips, would take the place of sacrificial offerings of crops and livestock.^{iv}

As we saw in this week’s Torah portion, Deuteronomy had centralized Jewish worship in the one Temple. Holy places like the Jerusalem Temple were destroyed all the time in the ancient world. Typically, the annihilation of a sanctuary would also kill the god or gods worshiped there. The assumption was that the gods of the conquering peoples were stronger than the gods of the obliterated temple. Our sages didn’t see it that way. Even when they could not understand God’s ways, they remained faithful. And they were creative. They established new ways to serve the God of Israel, a version of which we continue to practice today.

The global pandemic has required creativity in every area of life. Many of us complain about spending hours on Zoom. I would certainly prefer to be officiating in a sanctuary full of our congregants and Roxy’s friends. And tonight, with Roxy’s immediate family here, I’m with a veritable throng: an actual in-person *minyan* of ten Jewish adults. Most Friday nights, I’m at home with my computer,

hoping that my dogs won't disrupt the service; and I know that many of you are alone with a computer during our services, too.

Another reality, though, is that some classes and meetings are ironically more meaningful and productive on Zoom than they ordinarily were in person. I have participated in some of the most creative rethinking of how we might worship and learn during a global pandemic. Eileen Hamilton has reimaged Religious School in a way that will be engaging, fun, and innovative. Doubtless, some of what she has done, with only this strange year in mind, will inform how we study in the future. Just this past week, Eileen, David Bauman and I had a meeting with a potential guest artist to discuss *Simchat Torah*, which may be even more exciting via Zoom this year than it is in person in “normal” years, and that’s saying a lot.

Preparing for tonight’s service, Richard Estelita, our Ritual Committee Chair, removed the exquisite white Torah covers, which are for the High Holy Days, and restored the colorful covers that we use the rest of the year. You may wonder why the scrolls were dressed in white in August. Earlier this week, we began recording our High Holy Day services. Yes, I felt strange saying “Shabbat Shalom and *L’shanah tovah*” on a Sunday in August. Reading the prayers of the *Neila*-Concluding Service for Yom Kippur on a full stomach was especially odd. The *kavanah*, though, the intention, was there: to provide our congregation with the most meaningful High Holy Day experience, even if that required recording the words and music in the heat of summer.

We may be grateful that Judaism offers a long tradition of creative solutions, adapting even ancient rituals to new circumstances, flexibility that has enabled an ancient religion to thrive in modernity. In our Reform congregation, we don’t have qualms about celebrating a bit of Passover—or Rosh Hashanah, for that matter—in August, if necessary. Instead, we celebrate Judaism’s resilience as a religious tradition for all times and all seasons.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 9:9-12.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 15:5-8.

^{iv} Berachot 26b.