

**Holiday: Passover**

**Liberation from Passover**

by Jay Michaelson on Friday April 10, 2009

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Passover

Isn't it ironic? Passover, the holiday of freedom, is often spent in a kind of slavery: the days of cleaning, the hours of the tedious Seder, the week of not eating the foods that we want. And let's not kid ourselves: it's emotional slavery, too—feeling like things have to be a certain way in order for them to be okay. As if that un-*hechshered* orange juice is really, somehow, wrong.

At this point, I suppose I should produce a cuddly, warm Jewish sentiment such as, “but only by giving up some things that we want can we be truly free of the *chametz* of selfishness and ego.” Or perhaps “freedom is not just freedom-from, but freedom-toward; by voluntarily taking on the yoke of the law, we affirm our deepest humanity, our Divine natures.”

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like Madonna said, “I’ve heard it all before/ And I can’t take it anymore.” So, forgive me, Queeries readers, if I allow myself this freedom: to queer the Queery itself, by querying why we Queery – that is, why we’re so emotionally invested in Jewish text and practice – in the first place.

Here is the context. I recently returned from five months of silent meditation retreat—yes, five months of no talking, no writing, and only reluctant indulgence in thinking. I went because I am a Buddhist as well as a Jew (ding! queer!), and because it is possible, in the Buddhist path, to make progress toward lessening the yoke of suffering, of enslavement.

In a sense, then, the whole five months was a kind of *Pesach*. Except in the *Theravadan* Buddhist tradition in which I practiced, the enslavement is a little more precisely defined than it usually is on Passover: real servitude is within, to the demands of the ego, to the illusion of a permanent self, to the fundamental human desire for pleasant rather than unpleasant.

Now, there's nothing necessarily wrong with any of those demands, illusions, and desires. On the contrary, they are a fundamental aspect of being human. For five billion years, life on Earth has gradually evolved the notion that I, Jay, am a special little soul hanging out inside of this body, and that I have to protect myself from danger, and get myself the stuff I want. Good thing

we did evolve these habits, because if we didn't, we wouldn't eat, reproduce, or run away from predators. (More on "reproduce" in a minute.)

A strange thing happened in the seventh century BCE, though: all of a sudden, thanks to technology, there was plenty of food to go around, and less reason to fight over scarce resources. And, wouldn't you know, at just around that time, the Torah was codified, the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, Plato had some ideas about form and reality, and within the same few centuries, people like Confucius, Lao Tzu, Homer, Socrates, and the Hebrew Prophets helped build human culture as we know it today. (For more, see Karen Armstrong, The Great Transformation, based on the work of Karl Jaspers.)

Given enough time to sit and think about things, most of these people came to the conclusion that the very same instincts which enabled human beings to survive are, in the context of ample resources, no longer the ones we want to encourage. When we had to fight animals (or each other) for food, aggressive instincts were our best friends. When we have to live together in a city, they're not. In the past, the propensity to really, really want something, and to feel absolutely horrible about oneself and the world if one didn't get it, was quite useful; it fed competition for mates, the storing up of food, and other survival-enhancing activities. But, as the Buddha observed most clearly, this propensity leads to the experience of suffering. Whereas when it is relaxed, one finds that one really can be quite happy with less.

This, the Buddha taught, is liberation: to be free from suffering by being free of the clinging, needing desire for something to make yourself feel good. Again, the desire is just a natural phenomenon. Walk by a chocolate store, and you'll salivate. But the clinging (*tanha* in the Pali) – the sense that you (or the world) are not okay unless things work out in a certain way – that's the part you can unlearn, with enough practice.

Real liberation, in this view, is an inward process of coming to disbelieve the flashing neon signs of appetite, even when those signs are quite poetic. Chocolate is one thing. Wanting to share my life with another person is another. And yet, for the Buddha, they're more alike than different; both present the opportunity to be seduced by desire, or free from it.

In this regard, I wonder whether Passover is more the holiday of continued enslavement than the festival of freedom. I've saved this point for 800 words into this Query because I recognize it may be offensive to some. However, I keep wondering about it, emerging from Buddhist retreat, in which the point is to let go of what seems very urgent, into Jewish life, in which we're encouraged to feel very strongly about certain things.

For example, prior to this festival of liberation, we are asked to meticulously scour our apartments for any crumb of leavened bread. As an orthodox-practicing Jew, I did this for ten years – and I can assure you that letting-go, liberation, and relinquishment were not the



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resultant mindstates of this activity. No, I would get extremely upset and constricted around the possibility that chametz might still be present behind the refrigerator, or in the cracks of my hardwood floor. Indeed, this was encouraged.

Likewise the order of the Seder (which means “order”). Does this encourage us to notice clinging and let it go when it arises? Or does it encourage us to hold on really tightly to a particular vision of The Way Things Should Be, and act accordingly?

And likewise, even more generally, the entire edifice of Jewish law, which operates the same way. This way, over here, is the right way, the holy way, and the way which connects me to God and my ancestors. That way, over there, is wrong, fallen, even corrupt. Even evil. Of course, we’re not all fundamentalists. But we are operating in a system which tells us that the Light is here and not there, that this is OK and that isn’t.

Ethically, this is very important. It’s good to believe that God likes it when we’re kind, and not when we are cruel. Children need to be taught this. Yet I submit that even this laudable ethical sentiment is susceptible to misreading. Sure, we Queeries readers all agree that kindness is good and cruelty bad. But why not sexual conformity good, sexual deviance bad? Why not restraint of the “animal” urges good, and free sexual expression bad? Beats me. Once we say that God likes some things and not others, the train has already left the station. Now we’re just debating details.

The problem is that, while I may have one vocabulary and a Bible-thumping homophobe has another, we are basically using the same grammar of right and wrong. And it is that grammar, more than the words we use, that is so unhelpful.

I do think there is an alternative, but it’s not a very Jewish one. I also want to be clear that it is an “elite” program, not a “mass one”; most people do not have the interest or privilege for it, and so for most, mass religion may yet have its place. But for me, the alternative to all this yes/no stuff is to give up the judgment game entirely and act instead from a place of love.

That, I’ve found, seems to work – as long as I’m really honest with myself, and thus really available to listen to what the mental factors of love, generosity, and patience really have to say. Of course, information and detailed ethical norms govern how that love is best to be expressed – otherwise, we’re back in the trap of crusades, “reparative therapy,” and opposing same-sex marriage all because of “love.” But underneath that information, for me, there does not have to be a sense of tightness, fear, and the sense that it-must-be-this-way-or-else-it’s-not-okay. Just lots of love, and letting go, and relaxation, and relinquishment. Lots of “I don’t know.” Lots of very basic stuff, like preferring kindness over cruelty, not because God said so, but because kindness is more compassionate (usually), and compassion sits well in the soul.



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In contrast, Jewish ritual law is often all about that core sense of Not-OK, that deep fear that things need to be a certain way or else God will be displeased. Passover is a time of just that kind of tightness: lots of rules, restrictions, rituals, and rites. I can read the tension in my friends' faces, the ones, I mean, who are busy scouring their oven for bits of burned-on *chametz*. The way this holiday is observed is often the opposite of liberation.

Now, I know, because I have lived this way myself for decades, that there is a sweet sense of OK-ness that arises when things are finally done right. And I know that the feeling of the Pesadik jam spilling on an uncovered part of the counter is a very icky feeling. But the ickiness should be the beginning, not the end, of the investigation. Why does it feel icky? What else might feel icky in the same way?

Here's what I've noticed: it's icky in the same way that gay sex was when I was first coming out. It's icky in the same way that seeing a woman wearing *tefillin* was when I first saw the image twenty years ago. It's icky in the same way that I used to feel about people I couldn't tell were either boys or girls. It's icky, in other words, because of learned neuroses that are part of the problem, not the solution.

Yes, yes, I am saying it. I am saying that the spiritual grammar of Passover is the same as the spiritual grammar of sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. It's the fear-based grammar of right/wrong, black/white, okay/not-okay, good/bad. It's the feeling – not even an idea – that things are Somehow Deeply Wrong when they don't come out right. It's the ordering principle of Leviticus – which for our ancestors was so powerful (see my Torah Queery [“It's the Purity, Stupid”](#)) but which, I think, has by now outlived its usefulness.

When I see people, including myself, tying themselves up in knots about Passover, I think that they, and I, are moving in the wrong direction. Real liberation is attained by relinquishing ideas about how the world has to be, and realizing that you are fundamentally okay regardless of how things are. Not desperately trying to make everything come out right. Save your icky-feeling for Tibet, Darfur, and the melting of Antarctica.

Even in the context of ethical/social activism, the Buddhist claim is that the fear-based feeling that Things Are Not Okay is not actually helpful. It is possible to feel fundamentally OK and also to be moved to take action against injustice. Indeed, according to this theory, such action will be more effective when it is not motivated by reactive emotions. But I'll be satisfied if we eliminate the sense of ickiness *ben adam l'makom* (between humanity and God), and save it for *ben adam l'chavero* (between one human and another).

In the axial age and today, the rules and regulations of organized religion serve an important role.<sup>1</sup> They create order out of chaos, and keep dangerous people in check. However, if we are



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privileged enough to have our basic needs met, we should grow up spiritually as well, and move beyond the sense of having to do things a certain way for the universe to be OK.

And yes, finally, I do think queers should know this lesson especially well, because most of us have already done it. We've already moved beyond the notion of okay/not-okay when it comes to our sexuality—and now that we know how to do that (denial, wrestling, submission, acceptance, love), we have the opportunity to do the same thing in other areas of life as well. I love my Orthodox gay friends, and I hope that their spiritual path brings them love and happiness. But when someone gets really fidgety (not just *halachically* disapproving, but actually emotionally uncomfortable) about the unseen bugs in the broccoli, or the potential \_treif\_ness of tinfoil, I often feel like some important connection has come unplugged. You're queer, remember? The jot-and-tittle method of legal reasoning has already been seen to fail.

If the separate dishes and the dip-the-parsley-twice and the three-drops-of-wine-for-acronyms bring more joy and love into your life, *baruch hashem*, please do it. But if, like me, you find that *yirah* is eclipsing *ahavah*, that fear is preponderant over love, then I invite you to look closely into whether you're truly free this Passover, or still in a subtle kind of slavery.

<sup>1</sup> Axial Age – the period from 800 BCE to 200 BCE, according to Karl Jaspers, who argued that during this period “the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently... And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today”. [Wikipedia entry for 'the Axial Age']



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