

PASSOVER – YIZKOR
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As we all know, the Seder night is filled with questions. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks asks a most intriguing additional one: “Why was there a Pesach in the first place? Why the years of suffering and slavery? Israel was redeemed. It regained its freedom. It returned to the land its ancestors had been promised centuries before. But why the necessity of exile? Why did G-d not arrange for Abraham, Isaac or Jacob simply to inherit the Land of Canaan? If the Israelites had not gone down to Egypt in the days of Joseph, there would have been no suffering and no need for redemption.”

In other words, why in the promise to Abraham, which we actually refer to in the Haggadah, did G-d tell our ancestor that they would have to go down Egypt and endure slavery for hundreds of years? Couldn't G-d have just given the land to Abraham without the terrible experience of Egypt? Why was exile in Egypt a necessary prelude to their life as a sovereign nation in the promised land?

Rabbi Sacks suggests that Israel had to lose its freedom before it could cherish it. He writes that only what we lose do we fully pay attention to: “Israel had to suffer the experience of slavery and degradation before it could learn, know, and feel intuitively that there was something morally wrong about oppression... Had Israel achieved immediate nationhood in the patriarchal age without the experience of exile and persecution, it would – like so many other nations in history – have taken freedom for granted; and when freedom is taken for granted, it has already begun to be lost. Israel became the people conceived in slavery so that it would never cease to long for liberty – and know that liberty is anything but natural.”

Rabbi Sacks makes the point that only after Israel had experienced exile could the people understand what freedom was all about. If they simply were presented with the Land of Canaan, they would not have appreciated the gift of becoming a sovereign nation. It is only due to the slavery and the exile, the fact that freedom was taken away from them, that they could truly appreciate what the land meant to them and to future generations.

Rabbi Sacks also references the last section of the Book of Jonah. After the people repent and Nineveh is saved, Jonah is taught an important lesson. Jonah sits down upon a hill overlooking the city and G-d sends a gourd to give him shade from the burning sun. The next day G-d sends a worm that makes the gourd wither and die. Jonah is plunged into depression. Rabbi Sacks suggests that: “Loss teaches us to value things, though usually too late. What we have, and then lose, we do not take for granted.”

This is an important lesson for the last day of Pesach. We come this day not only to continue to appreciate the message of freedom, but also for our personal Yizkor prayers. At the end of the holiday, centered so much around home and family, we remember those who are no longer with us. As it usually is the case, we most appreciate their presence after they have left us. Often, too late, we recognize what we have lost.

During my Doctor of Ministry studies at Chicago Theological Seminary, I was introduced to a Belgian clergyman and author, Henri Nouwen, who wrote a number of short, but very important books, about life and ministry. One of his most meaningful books, to which I continue to refer, is entitled *The Wounded Healer*. While Nouwen uses the book to talk about ministry and the role of clergy in congregational life, its lessons, I believe, are meant for everyone. Nouwen writes: “The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there. Our lives are filled with examples which tell us that leadership asks for understanding and that understanding requires sharing.” In other words, Nouwen is teaching us that an individual who has gone through the same experiences, can be most helpful to those who are in need. Since no one’s life is filled only with happy occasions and successes, it is important to share the disappointments, frustrations, and personal losses, because in that way we grow as human beings and, according to Nouwen, become more effective leaders and clergy.

As many of you know, the period of Pesach in our personal family history has been filled in the last number of years with many sorrows. While it is a holiday filled with family experiences and wonderful memories, in my personal life over the last few years it has been filled with the loss of my mother, my father-in-law, and my youngest sister. As we observe the three yahrzeits over the course of the festival, we feel their absence in our family, in our home, and in our lives.

But the question I need to ask myself is: What has this done for me as an individual and as clergy? Has it made me more sensitive to life in general and to those who have suffered losses, in particular? Having experienced the desert, the loss of Jonah’s gourd, the exile of the Israelites, on a personal level, how has that affected me and changed both my personal behavior and my professional experience? It is not an easy question to answer, but I do know that when I sit with someone who has lost a member of their family, I understand the loss, comprehend the difficult nature of the vacuum that is now manifested in their lives, and hopefully, can offer both personal and professional words of care and concern.

What can we learn from the loss of someone close to us? The first lesson is that we should take nothing for granted. We should appreciate what we have before we lose it, and express gratitude to those who are around us at this moment, for we know not what the next moment may bring.

I recently read a very touching story by Sidney Simon, professor emeritus in psychological education at the University of Massachusetts. He writes that his family knew that his father was quite ill and decided to come in from all over the country to celebrate Grandpa Simon’s birthday celebration in the nursing home. His father was a marvelous storyteller and since he had a captive audience, he was the center of attention. However, when it was quiet, Sidney Simon announced that it was now his father’s turn to listen to some stories. He wanted everyone to tell Grandpa Simon what they loved about him. One after another, people told stories from their hearts, they recalled all kinds of memories, as the room was filled with laughter and tears. He reports that the stories flowed one after another and triggered more and more memories. Even the littlest grandchildren couldn’t wait to tell Grandpa Simon why they loved

him. He writes: “For a man who had been kind to some many hundreds of people in his life, here was our chance to celebrate him.”

A few months later at the funeral he realized the gift that he had given his father. After all, most stories are saved for the funeral after a loved one is no longer around to hear the words. He was pleased that the family had spoken those loving memories to his father in life, told through laughter, accompanied by hugs and joy. He ends his little reminiscence with the following lesson: “Words do matter, and they are enough. We just need to say them, to speak them publicly to the ones we love, for everyone else to hear. That’s the way to give back love, and our chance to celebrate a person in life.”

What a wonderful lesson for all of us. It is very often much too late when we tell the stories of our loved ones, recognize the true essence of their lives and what they meant to us. Sidney Simon and his family used the opportunity to tell his father, his children’s grandfather, what he meant to them while he was still alive. I am sure when he passed away there was a great sense of loss. However, they could feel satisfied that they told him what he meant to them during his lifetime.

I think that we all need to learn that we are all wounded healers. All of us have gone through experiences which wound us to the core. The question is what can we learn from those experiences to help us grow and mature and make our relationships with others more meaningful. What I have learned from the losses in my family is that I can take nothing for granted. Even though we have family spread all over the world we try, as much as possible, to be in touch with them on a regular basis. Though it means traveling on our part, even with our busy schedules, we try to be present for happy occasions in the family and not wait for sad ones to occur. Unfortunately, we don’t always express the words of endearment and of appreciation that we should. Hopefully, we will learn to do that as well.

When we write about someone who has died, we often place two Hebrew letters, a *Zayin* and a *Lamed*, that come after the deceased names. These letters are an abbreviation for “zikhrono liv’rakhah,” may his or her memory be for a blessing. Memories are blessings when they bring warm feelings, reinforce virtues, or inspire positive action. We recall those memories after the person has left us and we recognize that they have spread their blessing to us. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could appreciate those lessons, show our gratitude, and express our appreciation for them while the person is alive and not wait until we are forced to remember them after they are gone? I think one of the lessons of Yizkor is not only to remember those who have left us and recall the blessing of their lives, but to learn to appreciate others while they are alive as we express to them sentiments of gratitude and appreciation.

Yes, we can only appreciate freedom when it is taken from us. Thus, the Israelites, according to Rabbi Sacks, had to endure years of slavery and exile before they returned to the Land of Canaan. Yes, the great prophet Jonah had to learn the lesson that if he could be concerned about his own personal comfort in the form of a gourd protecting him from the sun, how much the more so should he have been concerned about the people of Nineveh. And yes, just before we recite our Yizkor memorial prayers we should acknowledge that we need to recall not only those who have left us, but appreciate those who are still with us.

Perhaps that is the lesson of Yizkor on Pesach: Remember those who are no longer with us sitting around the Pesach table and appreciate those with whom we are fortunate to celebrate the great festival of freedom. It is a lesson we should carry with us throughout the year.