

Rabbi's Column

(This article appeared recently in the Wyoming Tribune Eagle.)

This year's season of Spring Holy Days begins in March, not April. I refer to Passover, which commences at the tail end of March. Weather is as weather does, especially in Wyoming, yet the Jewish calendar follows quite different geographic seasons. Our liturgy reminds us that in the place where the Temple stood, the dry season is about to begin.

The only place in this country in which I have lived where the seasons matched Jewish liturgy is the northern valley of California. Everywhere else, it was much harder to take seriously the liturgical request for rain (when you personally hoped the rain would finally stop) or the liturgical request for simple dew in the season when you actually hoped that there would be enough rain to prevent a drought or an increase in human-accidental fires.

This ingrained remembering (or imagining that you can remember) what it is like to be somewhere you are not is an integral part of the Passover celebration. Each year we imagine ourselves to be Pharaoh's slaves, so as to enjoy that much more the moment when freedom arrives. We have done this during years in which imagining the freedom was harder than imagining the slavery, as well as in America where imagining the slavery is much more difficult than imagining the freedom.

What is the point of all this imagining and remembering? When it works right, it helps create community identification, increases empathy, reminds us that life situations change in both directions, and gives us a chance (since we are not the generation of the Exodus) to express God's sadness at the destruction of the enemies who felt they could not let us be free.

It is ok to do this imagining, as long as we remember that we are indeed only imagining. Even a good imagination does not and cannot equal the reality. This is so for every trauma and every pain suffered by individuals. Even when two people seem to suffer through the same traumatic event, the meaning, the intensity, and how that trauma is expressed in their lives often differs in some fashion. I do not know how you feel – but, having experienced feelings at different times and places, I imagine that you do feel, and when I know you or it is otherwise appropriate, I listen for the story you are willing to tell.

The story we Jews tell at Passover is that a certain Pharaoh and many of his people decided we were to be oppressed, enslaved, decimated and destroyed. With God's help we were able to finally leave there and learn the responsibility that comes with being free. Part of the story is a commitment to retell the story, so each generation can learn lessons of responsible freedom.

May each of us be willing to learn these annual lessons, take them to heart, and live by them.

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