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The Passion of the Passover

***The Royal Table: A Passover Haggadah*, compiled and edited by Joel B. Wolowelsky (OU Press, 2010).**

America has long viewed itself through the prism of Passover. Writing in his diary, William Bradford, who journeyed on the *Mayflower* and became governor of Plymouth Colony in 1621, likened the Pilgrims to "Moses and the Israelites when they went out of Egypt." The Puritan John Winthrop, who would become the governor of Massachusetts, wrote in 1629, on the eve of his departure for New England, that his journey from the corrupted English culture was akin to how God "carried the Israelites into the wilderness and made them forget the fleshpots of Egypt." "One man," the journalist Bruce Feiler documents, "is America's true founding father. His name is Moses."[1]

The script of American history, and its leaders' articulation of the moral language of liberty, has drawn inspiration from the Exodus story since the country's pre-founding to the present day.[2] From the *Mayflower*'s Pilgrims to Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr.'s Moses-like vision of the Promised Land from atop the mountain, American preachers, presidents, and the general population have envisioned their national aspirations and ideals, and the understanding of their past, through the lens of the Passover narrative. As David Brooks has written, "For most of the past 400 years, Americans did have an overarching story. It was the Exodus story."[3]

While Americans have long looked to the Bible to sanction the American enterprise and to reflect their perception that God was bestowing His providence upon it, R. Norman Lamm, surveying the mid-twentieth-century American Jewish community from his pulpit, mined the Passover story toward different purposes. In *The Royal Table*, diligently compiled and edited by Dr. Joel B. Wolowelsky from the writings and sermons delivered over the course of R. Lamm's rabbinic career and preserved in the Lamm Archives of Yeshiva University, two key themes emerge. The Seder experience, argues R. Lamm, is that of royal humility, a constant

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vacillation between the confidence of freedom and the modesty of servitude. Additionally, its sights, sounds, and songs call for a renewed and passionate Jewish observance.[4] Though delivered decades ago, these teachings continue to speak to the American Jewish consciousness during its current moment.

Explaining why he chose to title the work *The Royal Table*, R. Lamm writes that over the table in which the Seder's proceedings play out, "participants conduct themselves as victors in the ancient battle not only with the Egyptians but with others over the generations who enslaved us." On this night, men, women, and children are each to be "the Master of the House," and, despite "our persecutions and misadventures" over the ages, "act as royal men and women." They are to feel fit to benefit from the "royal table," the talmudic term for a feast of the finest quality. And yet, despite the benefits of this mandated feeling of monarchy, to recline at the table of kings is not to be a constant ambition. "Do not aspire to the royal table," *Avot* (6:6) cautions, "for your table [of the scholar] is greater than theirs." A convert who aspires to join the Jewish people so as to participate in what he or she perceives to be a purely royal national experience, we are told, is of questionable motivation, having expressed, in R. Lamm's words, "a crude class consciousness" (11).

Reflective of the dual nature of the very royal table itself, the quintessential symbol of the Seder, the *matza*, as the author notes, "can be described as a dialectic baked into unleavened dough." Its constituting a token of divine redemption, "our Emancipation Proclamation," allows us to enter the mental and even physical posture of kings. And yet, as the bread of affliction, its thinness is meant to mirror the crush of servitude. "The dialectical quality that pervades the entire Seder is universal," writes R. Lamm. "This coexistence of antinomies is true of all human life, but especially of the Jewish people whose story is full of contradictions, of vacillating fortunes, of ups and downs, of apogees and nadirs" (14).

Even prior to the Seder night this duality is established. *Shabbat ha-Gadol*, "the great Sabbath" prior to Passover has traditionally been thought to commemorate the courage the ancient Israelites demonstrated in tying the lambs to their bedposts and slaughtering them as sacrifices to God. As *Tur* explains, a "great miracle" occurred in that the Egyptians, who considered the lamb a divinity, did not attempt to stop the Israelites. R. Lamm, however, creatively and linguistically reframes *Tur*'s teaching. The "great miracle," he argues, refers not to the silence of the potentially-threatening Egyptians, "but to the miracle of Jewish character. What we celebrate is not a great miracle but the miracle of greatness." How so? Unlike the Ten Plagues prior to the bringing of the paschal lamb, and

unlike the subsequent splitting of the sea, the salvation on *Shabbat ha-Gadol* did not involve injury to the enemy. "The Jews rose in stature, but no one was hurt." The "magic and the miracle of genuine greatness achieved by our people" was not at the expense of someone else. It was "achieving eminence without crushing another human being." Extending this teaching to Abraham's vision in which the slavery was first alluded to by God, "and after that, they shall leave *bi-rekhush gadol*" (lit. with great wealth; Genesis 15:14), R. Lamm, in a hasidic-like purposeful mistranslation for the sake of *derush*, offers: "and afterwards they will leave with a wealth of greatness." "Great wealth," he writes, "is an ordinary ambition: a wealth of greatness is the extraordinary Jewish aspiration" (19). Spiritual flourishing is not to rest upon the trampled backs of others.

Throughout the work, we are reminded of this crucial ethical teaching, of compassion in moments that can so easily lend themselves to moral grandstanding. The *matza* does not "puff itself up with boastfulness" (32). We avoid gloating over the defeated Egyptians. Even the Wicked Son, usually thought to be the Seder evening's second-worst villain after Pharaoh himself, is to be sympathized with, not struck down. In an interpretation of the Haggadah's instruction to "blunt the teeth" of this seemingly spiteful rebel, R. Lamm offers an embrace almost shocking in its generosity of spirit:

> The *rasha* must never be treated with disdain or enmity. We must approach him with understanding and sympathy…. Argue with him, debate with him, teach him, educate him… establish friendly, warm, personal relations with him based upon a mutual personal respect and affection… above all, love him! (40–41)

Even God's miraculous wonders are not meant to be chest-puffing reassurances of His exclusive protection, but rather, in R. Lamm's eyes, God having taken the Israelites out of Egypt with "a great manifestation" (Deut. 26:8) is a reference to the Revelation of God's presence, a moment in time in which humanity is confronted with its finitude, inadequacy, limitations, and mortality—when it realizes that security and strength stem from the Divine source (57).

Victory as opportunity for humility is also reflected in the "borrowing" of Egyptian goods on the way out of the land. It was not unethical spoils of war but rather:

> [B]y receiving the gifts of the Egyptians, we learned for all time how to be righteous and compassionate towards all victims of oppression and persecution and adversity. As a result of this act of beneficence by the

> Egyptians, we learned for all time how to treat the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. A lesson of this sort is greater than any redemption (68).

Even our physical posture is reflective of this key theme. We confidently recline, as the Romans did, in a position of leisure remembering everything that occurred in the Temple (*zekher le-mikdash*), "while they, the Romans who ravaged the Temple, are no longer in existence" (85). But we adapt this confident position of leisure while eating a sandwich tinged with bitterness. The *maror* that is dipped in *haroset* is a reminder that life is often sweet but also often bitter, "that misery is not meaningless, that pain is not pointless punishment, that human anguish has larger dimensions, that the bitter leads to the sweet" (77).

Following the meal, *Birkat ha-Mazon*'s expression of gratitude for God's building of Jerusalem with His mercies, teaches us that "at times of national triumph, we must not overreach by taking credit for our superiority and ignoring the Source of our salvation" (101).

The entirety of the Seder experience, in R. Lamm's distillation of the night's themes, becomes a check against a heady and haughty posturing, of a liberty that is exclusive and indifferent to those less free.

In 2020, writing amidst the still-simmering digital ashes of an open-letter calling for a more tolerant American public square, Thomas Chatterton Williams, one of the letter's authors, noted that

> Equality in mutual insecurity is a negative equality. Genuine positive equality can only be achieved through mutual security, which requires maximum tolerance and freedom. The boundary between the infinite and infinitely judgmental internet agora—where individuals become ideas, epithets, avatars of virtue or stigma to be celebrated or cast out—and our local, physical lives has eroded.[5]

As America's public square, emptied by the COVID-19 virus, exploded into a fraught physical and online reckoning with the racist elements of its past and present, alongside what seems to be a daily professional and personal destruction of those deemed to have transgressed ever-shifting boundaries of acceptable opinions, the Seder reminds us of the necessary sensitivity. Long a theological crusader against racism and discrimination,[6] R. Lamm saw the Jewish concept of freedom as a collaborative project. Liberty, *The Royal Table* reminds us throughout, is not to be lorded over others. It is an unceasing task, the Haggadah reminds us over and over, to achieve lasting, peaceful, and mutually beneficial societal cohesion absent the subjugation of others. "Judaism," R. Lamm writes, "no

doubt endorses the American revolutionary slogan, 'Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty'" (28). Living in a free country like America should not be "a noble political ideal corrupted by the anarchic rejection of duty." It is not an excuse to be "free to insult, free to be rude, free to ridicule religion, country, and democracy itself, and ultimately free to burn and to loot" (156).

On Passover, the night of our exodus from bondage, we are to welcome those who are different, those who are less fortunate, even those whom we might perceive to be unrighteous. They all have a seat at our table. And we are to share our story with them. The American project, as this past year has made clear, has not yet fulfilled its highest ideals. Modeling itself on the ancient story of Israel, America, too, has wandered the desert for too long, not yet entering fully its potential as a land of promise. And yet, as the second major theme in *The Royal Table* makes clear, the Jewish tradition holds out the promise of eventual societal redemption.

Towards the beginning of his *The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred and the Jews*, the renowned playwright David Mamet explains his intention:

> To the wicked son, who asks, "What does this all mean to *you*?" To the Jews who, in the sixties, envied the Black Power Movement, who in the nineties, envied the Palestinians; who weep at *Exodus* but jeer at the Israel Defense Forces, who nod when Tevye praises tradition but fidget through the seder; who might take their curiosity to a dogfight, to a bordello or an opium den but find ludicrous the notion of a visit to the synagogue; whose favorite Jew is Anne Frank and whose second-favorite does not exist; who are humble in their desire to learn about Kwanzaa and proud of their ignorance of Tu Bi'Shvat; who dread endogamy more than incest; who bow the head reverently at a baptism and have never attended a bris—to you, who find your race and religion repulsive, your ignorance of your history a satisfaction, here is a book from your brother.[7]

R. Lamm, decades before Mamet's forceful attack on Jewish apathy and ignorance, was similarly troubled by this deleterious phenomenon plaguing our coreligionists. Unlike Mamet, R. Lamm argued that the most effective response in combatting this indifference was to return to the essence of Judaism's entire ethos—passionate halakhic observance. We must, he writes, "go beyond history, beyond theology, and beyond philosophy, in explaining what Judaism really is." After all, every world religion can boast its own "beautiful concepts, stories, and ideals." Therefore,

> If we are to be honest, and we must be, we must emphasize that which is unique to Judaism. And that is: the practical commandments as defined by the Halakha.... We must stress the actual, practical *mitzvot* (45).

When we respond to the Wicked Son by saying "because of this, God took me out of Egypt," what we mean to convey is that "Tradition is our way of orienting to our God, it is that which sensitizes us spiritually, which opens us to eternity and the timeless." It is not a way of commemorating the past, "but of using the past as a pretext for living in the present meaningfully" (42). In that sense, it might very well be the *tam*, the simpleton, who is the real hero among the "Four Sons." After all, he does not attempt to boast of his learning by asking impressive-sounding questions, but expresses a simple, and whole, love of God and submission to Him. He does so by preferring heart to mind, and faith over philosophy (43).

Commenting on the book of Exodus' observation that "he who did not put his heart to the word of God" left his cattle and slaves outdoors to be slain by the hailstones (Exodus 9:20–21), R. Lamm turns what seems to be a passing reference to the Egyptian's scoffing into a statement about the very purpose of humanity. Indifference, in his view "is the cardinal sin of mankind." Setting his sights on his own Jewish community, he lamented "not put[ting] our hearts into His service." The sins of his generation, he felt, were not anger against God, nor rebellion against Torah, but rather simple apathy. "We do not desecrate the Sabbath because we dislike it; we are just religiously phlegmatic" (61). Our faith should be an optimistic one, eliciting from us hard work, ceaseless dedication, and endless effort towards fulfilling its laws and its ideals. And we should not hesitate. We must "take our Jewish identity as natural, and not to apologize for it" (51). Like the midrashic depiction of Nahshon ben Aminadav leading the way into the raging sea, we can be both deliberate and dynamic, considering the risks and then committing ourselves to the destiny of Judaism (70).

It is through the observance of the Torah's precepts that our lives are transformed, allowing us to become new people (188). On the 49-day journey begun the second night of Passover and extending until Shavuot, we make a literal accounting of our ascension towards this higher plane, the uniquely Jewish aspiration to transcendence through fealty to the Divine precepts (130–131). By manifesting our Jewish destiny through observance of halakha and commitment to its values, we "offer an alternative to the world; to speak the word of God and Torah in the great spiritual abyss; to remain critical of the local idolatries that desecrate every

generation…. We must speak the authentic word of Torah on the great issues of the day—fearlessly, courageously, and honestly" (71). This passionate expression of Jewish commitment can often seem like a lonely endeavor. But R. Lamm encouraged his readers not to hesitate and not to hold back their commitment:

> Even in times that are difficult and tense, we must be able to sing…. That is a real test; to sing of your Jewishness even when you sing alone, to be content in your Jewishness even when the world is alienated from you, to laugh at despair and banish it from your life. To be a Jew means to sing (73).

Though it may often be lyrical, the properly committed Jewish life is not one of insularity nor of spiritual corner cutting. It requires deep diligence and constant commitment. Lamenting that while America had been founded on a Puritan work ethic, R. Lamm noted how moderns "worship at the shrine of the short-cut," too often desiring easy and quick triumphs (94–95). Our presence at the Seder, our participation in this night suffused with melodic meaning, then, expresses the very essence of the assiduous Jewish project itself.

> It reminds us to attend to children, to husband and wife, and to friends in a manner that is more involved, more engaging, more enduring, and more concerned. It challenges us to make our observance of the *mitzvot*, and particularly prayer, warmer and livelier, deeper and more intense. It inspires in us a commitment to Judaism that is more personal, more significant, and more determined (109).

In his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot writes,

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

Passover is our yearly opportunity, as Jews and as Americans, to arrive back where we started. R. Lamm, by offering a reading of the Haggadah that is characteristically brilliant in its exegetical insight, often cleverly counterintuitive (*Shabbat ha-Gadol* as testament to Jewish national greatness; the *tam* as hero), and unapologetic in its call to action, offers a clear vision for the ceaseless exploration. He takes a text so beloved, so endlessly commented upon, and challenges his audience to live up to its highest ideals.

As *The Royal Table* makes clear, American Jews must take the Seder night's divinely granted opportunity to remind our fellow citizens that if a nation is to be exceptional, if it is to perceive itself as uniquely blessed by God, it is only through creating a society of mutual liberty and spiritual flourishing. And such a society must not be built on the backs of others, but through the shared notes of a harmonious collaborative song.

Amidst his mid-nineteenth-century observation of the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville noted how "In America, it is religion that leads to enlightenment; it is the observance of divine laws that guides man to freedom." Through participating in a passionate Passover experience, with R. Lamm's *The Royal Table* as our guide, we, as Jews, and as Americans, find ourselves uniquely positioned to lead the way.

[1] *America's Prophet: How the Story of Moses Shaped America* (Harper Collins, 2009), 4.

[2] Relevant recent works include Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010); Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Yale University Press, 2013); James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2013); *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States*, Meir Y. Soloveichik, Matthew Holbreich, Jonathan Silver, Stuart W. Halpern, eds. (Toby Press, 2019).

[3] David Brooks, "The Unifying American Story," *New York Times* (March 21, 2017), A29.

[4] While *The Royal Table* was assembled from material presented over decades, throughout this essay it will be treated as a unified work.

[5] "A Game of Chance," *Harper's* (October 2020), 9.

[6] See his sermons "The Religious Foundations of Business" (*Ki Tetze* 1963) and "Putting a Bad Conscience to Good Use" (*Vayera* 1966). See also Shmuel Lamm, "Rabbi Norman Lamm's Theology of Anti-Racism," *The Lehrhaus* (July 13, 2017) at www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/rabbi-norman-lamms-theology-of-anti-racism; and Ari Lamm, "We Must Engage the World Right Now," *Tablet Magazine* (June 12, 2020) at www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/norman-lamm-engage-the-world.

[7] David Mamet, *The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred and the Jews* (Nextbook/Schocken, 2006), xi–x.