

Negotiating Truths from a Church Pulpit:
The Open Door

(Ps. 79:6-7; Ps. 69:25; Lam. 3:66; Ps. 37:8; Is. 60:18; Prov. 25:21; Ps. 35:11;
Prospective Immigrants Please Note by Adrienne Rich)

Let me share with you what I heard from a Catholic educator, Kathy Chesto. She was discussing the relationship between Judaism and Catholicism with her sixteen-year old daughter after her daughter had shared Passover at the Seder of her Jewish friends. "I finally figured out the difference between Judaism and Catholicism", her daughter said, "When you're Catholic, everything important happens at church. When you're Jewish, everything important happens at home."

I tell you this story today for a few reasons. First, because I love irony. Kathy Chesto is a Catholic writer and educator who developed a program called F.I.R.E.-- Family Intergenerational Religious Education. It takes place in the living rooms of Catholic families. When she tells this story, it is to explain why she created a program of religious education not in churches, but in homes. And paradoxically and fittingly, Kathy's program became the prototype for "Family Room"-- a program of Jewish family education designed by her friend, Vicky Kelman. In "Family Room", Jews bring ritual and study out of the synagogues and back into their homes. Sociologically, it's not as simple as Kathy's daughter thinks. For the last two generations, Jews in America have placed the burdens of shaping Jewish identity on the institutions of the Jewish community. And it takes a Catholic educator to emphasize that the strongest inculcators of religious identity are not religious institutions but religious homes.

Secondly, Kathy's daughter learned this distinction by witnessing a Passover Seder, the one family holiday that, no matter how attenuated their Jewish connections, Jews still observe in their homes. And yet, if we look at the way in which Passover rituals have been appropriated or transmuted within Christianity, we see the completion of the circle. A reinterpretation of Passover forms the central concept of the Eucharist--that is, a ritual communal meal, which was home-based in Judaism, becomes a ritual communal meal that is church-based and central to church worship within Christianity.

Finally, I believe that this story hints at a difference in how Judaism and Christianity understand family and spirituality. For a Christian tradition that holds up monasticism as a religious model, and regards church as the place of communion, family is not essential to religious expression or practice. Rather the individual is essential.

As Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas has written, "...nothing distinguishes Christians and Jews more dramatically than our understanding of the family. Put simply, Christians are not bound by the law to have children. We must... appropriately honor <ing> our parents but to honor our parents does not mean that we must make them grandparents. The stark fact of the matter is that Jesus was neither married nor had children. By itself that fact does not explain why Christians do not have to be parents, but it does indicate our conviction that what God has done through the life of Jesus makes the existence of the church not only possible, but necessary. What Jesus started did not continue because he had children, but because his witness attracted strangers. Christians are not obligated to have children so that the tradition might

continue; rather we believe that God through the cross and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit has made us a people who live through witness.”¹

I find this perspective fascinating and paradoxical because, it seems to me, nowhere is the battle to maintain the traditional family more passionately joined than in the Christian evangelical world. And in that world, who is the snake in the garden? Who overturns the proper order? Who is the demon in disguise? Why, the feminist, of course! These Christians accuse feminism of perpetuating the moral decay of family and religion. And yet, feminism has invigorated religious communities and practice, in both the Christian world and the Jewish world.

When Rabbi Laura Geller and I organized a conference called “Illuminating the Unwritten Scroll: Women’s Spirituality and Jewish Tradition” not only did nearly a thousand woman clamor to attend—three times as many women as we expected, but the unthinkable occurred—our granting agencies gave us **more** money than we requested! They understood that women were making powerful and lasting contributions to religious life. The women who came to that conference were hungry. They were drawn to the intersection of those three words—women, spirituality and Jewish. They did not want to dismantle; they wanted to bring their tools and build.

For many women, and I count myself among them, feminism is not a threat to religion. Rather, it has provided an entrée to explore and strengthen religious commitments, to ask new questions, to include previously silenced voices. If Kathy Chesto’s daughter were to attend a Seder this year, she might have discovered a new Haggadah, the first widely distributed Haggadah written by feminists.

The Haggadah, the storytelling liturgy that serves as the foundation for the Seder, has been reinterpreted and recreated in many forms. If you browse the book tables at Keplers or bob and bob in the Spring, you will find a library of haggadot--feminist haggadot, civil rights haggadot, environmental haggadot, gay and lesbian haggadot and egalitarian haggadot. This genre of creatively reinterpreting the Haggadah began in 1968 with the publication of “The Freedom Seder”, incorporating the passions of the antiwar movement in the cadence of the traditional liturgy of the holiday of liberation. It spawned a virtual revolution in Jewish practice.

A few years ago, the Reform movement commissioned three women to create the first official Reform Jewish Haggadah in three decades. Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, artist Ruth Weisberg, and Cantor Josee Wolff, called it, The Open Door. They were thinking of a poem by Yehuda Amichai, “And doors—I never remember whether they open in or out.”² By choosing this metaphor, they suggest an attitude to modernity—to the changing family, to the give and take between Jews and Christians, to the willingness to learn and teach across boundaries. The metaphor of the open door also challenges—how is it possible to retain a particularistic ritual at the same time that the influences of the outside are welcomed in? And by choosing this metaphor, they are making a direct reference to a specific point in the Seder, a time when a door is opened, a time of complexity and paradox.

In the Reform Jewish world of my childhood, there were always Christians at our seder table. This was as much part of the ritual as the symbols on the Seder plate. On Passover we opened our home, provided hospitality, offered explanations, reached out to others. But we

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Christian Ethics in Jewish Terms: A Response to David Novak” Christianity in Jewish Terms, p. 138

² Kol Dichfin—The Open Door: A Passover Haggadah, Sue Levi Elwell, Editor, Ruth Weisberg, Artist, Josee Wolff, Music Editor, Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York 2002, title page

simultaneously affirmed what makes us Jewish, renewed our ancient connection, and celebrated family and tradition. On all other days we were cultural or “gastronomic Jews”—our identity stamped by bagels and borsht, but on Passover, even in our secular home, we practiced religious ritual.

The Haggadah, teaches, “In each and every generation, you should see yourself as if you went forth out of Egypt.” This rendition is not straight history; it is narrative theology. God took us--you and me and Uncle Marty who kvetches that the Seder is too long and Barbara who films the Seder for her anthropology classes and Sam who always spills red wine on the tablecloth and Billy who wants to show off how much Hebrew he knows, God took all of us out of Egypt. The Seder teaches. “This is your family; this is your community; this is your experience; this is your heritage.”

So here is the paradox--if the Seder is the ritual that defines and reinforces a collective memory, national identity and social solidarity, how can it also be the time to invite Christians in? Does the presence of guests make Jews self-conscious about our traditions and beliefs? Do we practice the Seder rituals in the same way regardless of whether everyone partakes in the collective memory and national identity the Haggadah fosters? How do we handle those passages in the Haggadah that are less than welcoming to Christians? Can we have a huddle and an open door in the same moment?

Ah, the open door...there it is. I can't talk about this conundrum without the open door. I've conducted an informal, unscientific survey of Christian friends who have attended seders. Some remember the door being opened. Some remember Elijah the prophet being invited in. Everyone remembers checking the wine goblet to see if Elijah drank from it. But nobody remembered any discomfort. Nobody experienced the anger of “*Shfoch hamatcha*—Pour out your wrath”. I'm not surprised. I'm about to let you in on a secret. It happens at the end of the Seder, when the prophet Elijah, the harbinger of ultimate redemption is invited in and offered wine. At that moment of hoped for redemption, the door is opened, but it is not a door of openness. Instead, we fling open the door and recite these angry words from Psalms, “*Shfoch hamatcha*--Pour out your wrath upon the nations that do not know You, upon the dominions that do not invoke Your name, for they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation. Pour out Your wrath on them, so Your blazing anger may overtake them. Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of the Eternal.” (Psalms 79:6-7, Psalms 69:25, and Lamentations 3:66)

So what's all this anger doing in a celebration of freedom? Here's the back-story. At the height of Christian anti-Jewish hatred, Christians accused Jews of killing gentile babies and using their blood to prepare the matzah and wine for the Seder. In order to show how innocent Jewish practice was, in order to prove that nothing untoward was taking place behind closed doors, the door was flung open. But words were added in anger that such an intrusion was necessary, that the very celebration of freedom and liberation was infused with fear and misunderstanding, that the very moment of redemption was riddled with terror and insecurity.

So we come full circle. In the reinterpretation of these rituals in Christianity, blood and wine, body and matzah were mingled, and appropriated. And then, through ignorance and hatred, this alchemy led to a sinister understanding of a Jewish ritual that never mingled them in the first place.

I want to take you on a textual journey. I maintain that how this passage is treated is a barometer for how secure Jews feel among Christians in America. The Reform Movement

published the first Haggadah in America in 1923. *Shfoch hamatcha*, this text of anger, is absent. Instead, when the door is opened, the celebrants deliver different words from Psalms:

“Praise the Lord, all ye nations; Laud Him, all ye peoples. For His mercy is great toward us; And the truth of the Lord endureth for ever. Hallelujah!”³ (Ps. 117) Here we find not wrath, but encouragement, to the nations for praising God. As I read this substitution, I think of two Yiddish expressions that I used to hear my grandparents utter, forming two sides of the coin for Jews in America. One, full of pride, is the description of this great land as the “goldinah medina”—the “golden country”; and the other-- “shah still”-- is borne of Jewish fear. It means, “Keep quiet. Don’t make waves. Don’t stand out.”

Fifty years passed before the Reform Movement published another Haggadah. In the interim, most of us used one that was distributed as a promotion for the Maxwell House Coffee Company—marketing genius meets Jewish ritual! In this Haggadah, the words of anger also are missing. However, like a phantom arm, an allusion to them, an explanation for why they have appeared historically, precedes the opening of the door.

“How many images this moment brings to mind, how many thoughts the memory of Elijah stirs in us! The times when we were objects of distrust, when our doors were open to surveillance, when ignorant and hostile men forced our doors with terror!”⁴ “The injustice of this world still brings to mind Elijah who in defense of justice, challenged power. In many tales from Jewish lore, he reappears to help the weak.”⁵

After this proclamation, the door is opened, and the readers trumpet Elijah’s role in reconciling parents and children.

Unlike the versions from the twentieth century, in the recently published The Open Door, *shfoch hamatcha*, the Psalms of anger reappear. But there is much water under the bridge. The words are contextualized graphically, in the physical layout of the page. Throughout the Haggadah, contemporary insertions or discretionary text appear in shaded boxes. It is in such a shaded box that Psalms text, “Pour out your wrath” reappears.⁶ Like its predecessor, this Haggadah frames the moment prior to opening the door with a reading alluding to Jewish persecution,

“But we Jews have not always opened our doors with hope on Seder nights. Too often in our history, we have opened our doors reluctantly, with fear. When prejudice and hatred blinded our neighbors, we left our doors ajar to show that we gathered not for an evil purpose, but to offer thanks and praise to God.”

Underneath the shaded box of “Pour out your wrath”, the Haggadah encourages Seder participants to engage in a “new tradition, asking God for guidance as we seek partners to shape a world of justice and peace.” This new tradition offers four other biblical verses, verses intended to parallel and comment upon the traditional words of anger.

“Give up anger, abandon fury, put aside your wrath: it can only harm. The call to violence shall no longer be heard in your land, nor the cry of desolation within your borders. If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat. If she is thirsty, give her water to drink. For when

³ The Union Haggadah, Home Service for Passover, (Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York) 1923, p. 63.

⁴ The New Union Haggadah, edited by Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, (Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York) 1974, p. 68.

⁵ The New Union Haggadah, p. 70.

⁶ Kol Dichfin-The Open Door: A Passover Haggadah, edited by Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, (Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York) 2002, p. 86.

compassion and truth meet, justice and peace kiss.” (Psalms 37:8, Isaiah 60:18, Proverbs 25:21, Psalms 85:11).⁷

These three books spanning nearly a century reveal how American Jews have regarded Christian neighbors over time. In 1923, to the extent that Christians were addressed in the Haggadah at all, it was as those who would join in praising God. Any hint of a difficult history does not appear. The liturgy ends with the nations-- Protestant, Catholic and Jew sharing in the completion of the Seder with one heart. This unity and vision is underscored by the concluding song of the evening--“God Bless America”.

By 1974, one can breathe in a subtle whiff of a history of persecution, but the aroma changes quickly. The only verse included from the traditional text is the one that does not mention wrath. The Prophet Elijah is universalized as a defender of justice and a challenger of power. There is no hint of Jewish anger. Jews, with Elijah’s presence and fortitude, hope to fight injustice and to reconcile the generations. These are universal desires. Christians who might be at the table could easily affirm this vision without experiencing any discomfort or challenge. Like a children’s movie with more sophisticated allusions for adults, if you weren’t privy to what these verses hinted at, you wouldn’t know that they held any further meaning. As the medieval philosopher Maimonides was fond of writing, “Hamevin yavin”—“The enlightened ones will understand.”

By 2002, even if “Pour out your wrath” is found in a box, it is not hidden. Jewish wrath is part of the story and now the story is more honest. But the power of the emotion is contextualized by conversation and by the suggestion of a new tradition. Four verses of hope parallel the four verses of wrath. The desire for destruction is countered with biblical encouragement for compassion. A Christian at a Seder using this Haggadah is invited to witness the complex web of emotions affirmed on Passover—hope for redemption mixed with a past of revenge fantasies, compassion mixed with fear. Ideally, the juxtaposition calls for conversations about universalism and particularism, or wrath and sin and peacemaking, or sacred texts reflecting both our loftiest values and our deepest fury. This text reveals some of the struggles that comprise a very complex American Reform Jewish identity.

As Adrienne Rich reminds us, “the door itself makes no promises. It is only a door”. This is a moment in Jewish and Christian encounter when we stand at a threshold. This is a moment to engage in what Rabbi Yitz Greenberg calls “holy envy and holy critique”. When possible, let us open our doors in trusting invitation, and in times of self-reflection, may we feel free to close our doors respectfully, without suspicion.⁸ If we are to speak truth, let that truth reflect our complexity and our ambivalence, our history and our future, as well as our respect for and appreciation of other religious traditions. As Yehuda Amichai reminds us, the open door does indeed swing both in and out, encouraging Jews and Christians to engage in an encounter with one another with honesty, creativity and courage.

Pitchu li sharei tzedek avo vam odeh ya (Ps. 118: 19-20)
Open for us the doors of righteousness. Let us enter and praise God.

⁷ Kol Dichfin-The Open Door: A Passover Haggadah, p. 87

⁸ Peter Petit, “Along the Way to a Clearer Mutual Understanding”, CCAR Journal, Spring 2005 p. 92.