

### **3/28/10 Sermon**

"Daiyenu"

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

As a child, I loved Passover. It was a rare peaceful, fun-filled family time. My father was fully present – a rare event. My mother and mother-in-law, both named Alice, would have a drink of wine – too much, in fact. They would put the sickening sweet Manischewitz on the floor between them and polish it off with the help of the rest of us. Dad would always do the long Seder ritual as we sat complaining that our belly buttons were touching our back-bones. It was my family at its best.

The Passover Seder brought to life the human struggle for freedom. We knew the story by heart from yearly repetition. The four questions – "Why is this night different from any other night?" – set the stage for the telling of the quest for freedom.

Passover for us was never about being a chosen people. Who needed that, centuries of persecution? My grandparents and other family members barely escaped the pogroms by immigrating to America and Brazil around 1903. I learned early on what it was like to be singled out for unwelcome attention; I was called a "Christ killer" and a "baby killer" and told I was going to hell more than once. As an American, I didn't want to be set apart, to stand out in a primarily Christian world. As did most immigrant families, my parents emphasized assimilation over separateness. It was only as an adult that I came to revalue my Jewish roots. Being a Unitarian Universalist has allowed me to honor those traditions that still carried meaning for me.

Passover for my family was always about freedom from oppression for all the oppressed of the world and not just for the Jews. In a UU broader understanding, the Seder is about confronting powers and structures and principalities of evil. The Passover is meant to disrupt the status quo; to loosen the bonds of slavery; to open us to new ways of being; to free us from our prisons, self-inflicted or imposed from outside. Passover sets us all free.

While I was raised in an observant home, I never was faithful after my bar mitzvah. I eventually married a Methodist – not a bad title for a book, "How to Marry a Methodist." She kept the holidays and was more observant than I. Jane wanted our sons to be aware of their mixed religious heritages. Today, they call themselves "U-Jews" or "Jewnitarians."

As UUs, the Passover struggle for freedom exists at the core of our shared faith and values. UUs believed each of us are called by faith to make a better world, to free the captives, to fight injustice within our own hearts, our local community and the broader world.

Passover moved me because it united families of different faiths together to share a sacred meal and honor what was common to all of us. With a meal filled with meaning and purpose beyond ourselves – a universal longing for freedom.

There is power in all ritual and the story that Passover tells through the symbolism of a meal is visually and emotionally powerful. When we flicked a drop of wine onto our plates as we named each plague brought a chill to one's spine; blood, boils, vermin, locust, frogs, flies, darkness, and death of the first born of Egypt. As children, we could imagine the angel of death as envisioned in the Cecil B. DeMille movie, "The Ten Commandments," entering the towns and villages of Egypt, smiting the first born. A person dropping over dead where they stood and a great cry of anguish was heard. The story of the Exodus brought the pain of slavery and oppression of the Jews to life. The lash was real! We kept the door open for Elijah but he never came. Remembering back now, we never once invited a stranger through our door. We do that as UUs, don't we?

Hope is at the core of this story – "Next year in Jerusalem," next year the temple would be rebuilt. A nation would be reborn, freedom finally realized for the human community.

As UUs, Jane and I questioned the existence of God, comfortable with the Bible stories as metaphor and parables that could still teach us something vital and central about human nature. The Egyptian captivity was more than just a physical reality but a state of mind, imprisoning us with destructive habits and addictions. It is a place where our ideas, our beliefs, our diversity and differences were oppressed. The sad reality is that even in America today, many are still imprisoned by personal demons and demagogues.

We are all the walking wounded, hurt by life or by others, living in a desert that seems devoid of hope. We seek to be free of such prisons but forget that freedom is a privilege we must protect and nurture, must learn to share and use well. Our UU faith tells us that we must take responsibility for demanding and working to create the freedom we seek.

We often find ourselves at the crossroads of the sea that blocked our way and the road to freedom, but we had to risk the crossing, if we were to

journey to the Promised Land. For Unitarian Universalists, the land of milk and honey is that place which Dr. King dreamed, where all would be judged by the content of their character. It is that place, to quote Lynn Strauss, "that we call the Beloved community, where love guides relationships of equity and compassion." It is there where we find peace between all nations, all faiths, Democrats and Republicans. Here all commit to work for the common good, to create a world where war, hunger, thirst, homelessness are things of the past. Here resources are devoted to end plagues such as AIDS, where universal health care exists as a right and not a privilege.

Passover and Easter next week are universal reminders to keep hope alive, to hold to a broader, more loving, more inclusive vision of what is possible. When we sit and break bread together, and talk to our brothers and sisters in faith, believers and non-believers alike, much is possible.

If we do not begin in that hope and faith, this journey will never lead us to the Promised Land. The journey is to find meaning to our existence, to be set free. No one can do this for us. It is our responsibility to pack our own bags, make haste with the unleavened bread and set out on the long and unknown road to a new future. Infused with hope, courage to face our fears must travel on the freedom road as our companion and guide. For those who cannot walk alone, we must lend a hand of love and compassion. That is what the Hebrew God would want. That is what a people of self reliance, humanists, atheists, pagans – Unitarian Universalists all – are called to do.

This is our free living faith, built on hope within this beloved community.

Blessed be!