

Hide and Seek on Passover: Looking for Redemption (sermon delivered in 2017)

“They tried to destroy us; we prevailed; let’s eat.” This ironic description of all Jewish holidays certainly applies in this season, when we celebrate both Purim and Pesach, just one month apart. In these very different festivals, there is one common underlying theme: hiddenness and the search for what is hidden.

Last month we celebrated Purim, in which Queen Esther hides her identity until just the right moment, and her name is associated with the Hebrew word *nistar* – things that are hidden and mysterious. Most mysterious of all about the Megillah of Esther is the character who is missing from it: God. God does not explicitly appear in the story of the Purim miracle at all, and sages throughout the centuries have sought to find hidden references to God in the megillah. This outwardly very secular story points to the challenge of seeking spirituality, of finding God’s presence in times and places when God is hidden and invisible. On Purim, and often in our lives, God hides and we must seek.

Now we come to Passover, and God is far from hidden. In fact, we might say that God is “in our face” in the Passover story. God is not only present; God also initiates and directs most of the action. God is at center stage as the main character in the Haggadah. We do not need to play hide or seek with God on this holiday. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of hiding and seeking that takes place on Passover, which challenges us in different ways from the hide-and-seek of Purim. We search for *chametz* on the night before Pesach, stumbling a bit in the dark, a fitting prelude to the *seder*, which begins with our ancestors’ in darkness. We try to find all of our *chametz* and clean it from our homes in order to observe the dietary rules of Pesach. It is also a way to symbolically expunge the excess in our lives. We prepare for redemption by trying to bring to light all of the hidden *chametz*, the excess in our lives, so that we can get rid of it.

Passover’s most famous hide-and-seek game, of course, is the *afikoman*. We break the middle matzah for *yachatz*, recalling our ancestor’s brokenness and incompleteness, and also recognizing the fact that a poor, enslaved person cannot eat all of her food at once, but rather needs to set some aside for later. We hide the larger piece, it is said, to remind us that more in this world is hidden than is known. At the seder, by the time we hide, find and eat the afikoman, we have told the story of our people moving from degradation to freedom, and we are prepared to look towards redemption, towards the future. In the part of the seder known as “*tzafun*,” hidden, that hidden piece of matzah is now brought to light as we pray that redemption too will be revealed in our world.

There is something – or somebody – else who is *tzafun*, hidden, at the seder, and that is Moshe. Moshe, who certainly might have served as the main protagonist of the

Haggadah, is almost completely missing from its traditional text. He is mentioned only once by name. How can this be? The most basic answer is that the sages who compiled the haggadah wanted to avoid any chance of Moshe becoming the object of worship in this story, instead of God. But there may be a deeper meaning, as well, in the person of Moses, who “hides” in the Haggadah.

Looking back to his story, we recall that Moshe’s life was characterized by hiding. In fact, the word *tzafun*, hidden, a word rarely used in the Torah, but which we know from the seder, appears twice in the Torah’s story of Moshe’s early life. First, immediately after his birth, his mother hid him in the river to avoid him being murdered per Pharaoh’s decree. The Torah notes that “she saw that he was good.” Torah commentators point out that *every* mother thinks her child is “good” and *every* mother would try to hide that child, so what is different about Moshe? They respond that there was something already present, yet hidden, in Moshe, something more than a beautiful baby. Moshe was a future redeemer of his people, and the seeds of that redemption were already present.

Later in the story, Moshe is hidden from his own people in Pharaoh’s palace, and still later he hides from everyone who knows him as he escapes to Midian. At the burning bush, Moshe hides his face. Much later, he “disappears,” or at least is perceived to go missing, on Mount Sinai. After his encounter with God, his face is hidden behind a mask, a *‘masveh.’* Finally, Moshe’s burial place is never revealed, as the Torah pointedly tells us.

Why is Moshe associated with so much hiding? It is true that Jewish tradition always tries to avoid any possibility of ascribing divinity to Moshe, especially with regard to the Exodus story. Moshe, our greatest leader, is never called “redeemer,” only Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher. We have only one Redeemer – as the Haggadah explicitly states – “I and not an angel, I and not a messenger...” The ultimate redeemer is the Holy One alone.

Still – ours is not a theology in which humans sit back and wait for God to act. Slaves have to do that, and our ancestors in Egypt needed divine intervention to begin their move towards freedom. But as free people, we are part of redemption. So, there is another way to look at Moshe’s hiddenness, and especially at his absence from the Passover Haggadah. Yes, our tradition avoids idealizing our leaders, even one as great as Moshe, to avoid focus on him instead of on God. But in addition: when Moshe hides, others have to act. Maybe another goal of hiding him in the Haggadah is to avoid focus on Moshe, instead of on each and every one of us, in the here and now. We all know of Moshe’s vital role in the Exodus narrative, yet we manage to tell the story without him. Just as we are taught not to sit back and wait for God, we also should not sit back and wait for spectacular human leaders like Moshe.

Every person at the Passover seder is obligated to eat a piece of that hidden matzah – the *afikoman*. This reminds us that every single person holds the potential to work towards redeeming the world. The history we enact at the seder teaches that it is our task to find what is ‘good’ and hidden away in each of us and to bring it out in the open. May our seder experiences inspire each of us to come out of hiding, and to become agents of redemption in our world. A joyous Pesach to all!