

Pesach 5780

Tal Cohen – 3rd April 2020



‘We have a clear plan going forward. I want to assure you and your family tonight that while we are not immune from this, we are well prepared and are well equipped to deal with it. I also want to reassure the community that hoarding is not necessary; there are no fundamental shortages that we’re seeing right now.’

Pesach is a time associated with family, pouring glasses of wine for each other, too much food, talking, laughing, arguing, and discussing the festival’s themes well into the night. If you’re lucky, you might even celebrate a second night Seder with another side of the family. But what makes this Seder different to all other Seders? At all other Seders we celebrate with 100 people, but at this seder, we are quarantined. This year, the coronavirus plague and worldwide quarantine policies mean that many of us will be having much more intimate Seder. For world Jewry, this Seder will be starkly different to any other we’ve held. Yet in some ways, it could be closer to the actual story than we’ve ever been.

The refrain above is painfully familiar to us by now. Scomo and Dan Andrews’ daily announcements blur into one, with tidbits of new information interspersed throughout a persistent message: stay at home, be sensible, wash your hands, prepare but don’t panic. But there is every chance that Moses and Aaron delivered a similar message to the Israelites some 3000 or so years ago. Coming back from their teleconference with God after the ninth plague, Moses and Aaron announce to the group’s elders how the Israelites should prepare for the final plague, the Angel of Death. Each household must ‘draw forth or buy’ a lamb (one per household – no hoarding, people!), slaughter it, and with a bunch of hyssop sprinkle its blood on their doorposts to protect those inside. The Angel of Death did not discriminate, and every firstborn – regardless of nationality or species – would be killed if not within the walls of a blood-spattered house come midnight.¹ Because of this, the Israelites were also under a strict quarantine: ‘...and you shall not go out, not even to Woolies, anyone from the entrance of their house until morning’.² And so we were saved – now and in Egypt – by staying at home.

Although quarantine means this Seder will look very different to previous ones, I see a unique upside. One of the key messages that the Seder is designed to get across is *don’t forget what it was like to be denied your freedom*. Each year, I perform the tokenistic nods to freedom (pouring wine for each other to act as though we are kings and queens) and slavery (eating

¹ Exodus 12:29

² Exodus 12:22

matzah, the 'bread of poverty' and reciting the Passover story) as prescribed, without too much additional weight being felt. The concept of being a slave is so far removed from my life that it is impossible to actually *feel* that experience.

Perhaps now – despite our lives still being inarguably better than victims of modern-day slavery or oppressive regimes – with some of my usual liberties on hold, it will be easier to identify and more readily put myself in the shoes of those worse off. If we can take it in our stride and see the upsides, then I think we could actually be a lot richer for it. When I inevitably find myself unhappy that I won't get to eat Annetta's kneidlach this year, or Aunty Heidi's chocolate matzah cake, I am hoping that I can sincerely use these feelings of injustice as a steppingstone into the shoes of someone in a far less privileged situation.

This year we have a unique opportunity to experience (with a ~~bit~~ lot of mental gymnastics) the 15th of Nissan as the Israelites did some 3000 years ago. For those that usually follow, you may need to lead the Seder. For those that float under the radar until it's time for the old Hillel sanga, you're now going to be in the spotlight. As the Jews of the world sit down to a very different Seder table than we're used to, what do you think this experience can teach us?

Shabbat shalom and happy sedering.