

Pesach - Yachatz 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, April 4, 2015

As is our custom I like to speak on this second day of Pesach about discussion topics for you seder tonight. Today I want to talk to you about why we break the middle matzah, that part of the seder known as Yachatz. Last week some of you may remember that I spoke about the mitzvah of Matzah, and why it is that we eat it on Pesach. We eat it because the bread did not have time to rise and we had to leave Egypt in a hurry. But this is really only part of the story. We really eat matzah so that we can feel what our ancestors felt; as we say at the Seder, in each generation we are to feel as if we personally left the Land of Egypt. And part of feeling what they felt is eating what they ate, and they ate Matzah, the "Poor Man's Bread." As the name implies, you can imagine that for slaves, every scrap of bread was important.

I know we are supposed to imagine that we are them, but it's hard for me to get into the head of slave in Egypt, thousands of years ago, (even if I watch the movies.) On the other hand, it is not so hard for me to imagine what it was like to do slave labor in a concentration camp 80 years ago. I have been to Aushwitz, and walked through that camp. But actually, even in Aushwitz, for those who have been there, it is hard to imagine what life was like, and that's because most of the buildings there are large brick buildings that were former army barracks. The wind does not howl through the cracks of the buildings. In fact, it actually looks a little like a college campus. But I have also been to Majdanek, and it is a lot easier there to imagine what it felt like to live there clothed only in rags. That concentration camp is all small wooden huts with no insulation, with just row after row of shelving that served as beds for the Jews who lived and slept there, piled one atop the other. Even though I was there more than 20 years ago I remember it like it was yesterday.

It was freezing cold December day when I went, and even in my down coat I was very cold. They had no outwear at all. And unlike Aushwitz, there are no towns nearby, no cafeterias. It's way out there. So I remember being very hungry, and I had only skipped one meal. And I could imagine then, and I ask you to imagine now, what it must have felt like to eat anything you could get your hands on. Any morsel of food would do. Any scrap of bread to just get by. Think about that. Think about that and you'll have a better idea of what it meant to live as a slave.

Those slaves in Poland 80 years ago would eat any scrap of bread to survive. And that's why we eat matzah, it's the bread of true affliction. Think of the harsh affliction of winter starving in Poland and you'll appreciate the matzah. And they did not have a whole loaf of bread of course. They ate slivers and chunks at best. And that's why we break the middle matzah before we eat any matzah at all at the seder. It's a reminder that slaves, and concentration camp prisoners, never really got a full loaf of bread to eat. They ate scraps and so we do, too. And we take the bigger piece of the bread off the table. We hide it, as if it were being hidden from the view of those who were hungry. No one at the table is ever given a whole piece of matza at the seder - really ever. They did not have a whole piece and neither do we.

But this raises an interesting question for me: Why not then eat ONLY scraps of bread, or in this case cracked pieces of matzah right from the beginning of the meal? Wouldn't that be dramatic and get the kids to ask more questions? First we crack all the matzot and then we make motzi over them? That would lead to some good story telling! Why do we use two whole ones,

matzahs that are not, by the way passed around whole, as well as breaking the middle one? And the answer is one you likely already know.

We use two whole matzahs when we make motzi, in addition to the broken one, because it is Yom Tov, and like on Shabbat, we bless two loaves, or in this case full pieces of matzah, to remind us of the double portion of manna that fell in the desert. Its not only about telling the story of the slavery, it is reminding ourselves that this holiday take place in the context of the larger, beautiful Jewish cycle of life; the cycle of Shabbos and festivals. Our history as slaves is just part of the history of your People. And the suffering, whether it was in Egypt long ago, or in Europe 80 years ago, is but a small part of how we are.

And that, I believe, is why we break the middle matzah and put it into the two larger ones. Yes, we were slaves, and yes we have, on many occasions gone hungry, but the beauty of our week-in and week-out Jewish life envelops that suffering and the sadness, and, in a sense, hides it from view. The joy of Jewish life mitigates the sadness in the same way that the two larger matzahs cover the broken one inside.

I spoke last week about welcoming the group from Saybaba, a newer religion practiced in this area. They brought about a dozen 10th and 11th graders to our synagogue last Shabbat morning since part of their religion is learning to love and respect ALL religions. And after shul they sat down for Kiddush and I spoke to them for a while, explaining what they had seen and who we are. And then I took them on a tour of the shul. I wanted them to see a Torah, and for them to stand on the bimah when I opened the ark and opened the sacred scroll. But on the way into this room, I paused and explained to them the symbolism of our Holocaust memorial outside this room. I explained that when we walk by this we not only remember those who perished, but we gain a deeper appreciation of our own ability to practice our religion in freedom. But I also pointed out that we do not have the Holocaust Memorial here in the Sanctuary. No, it's outside, because as much as we remember, the primary focus of our faith is the joy of Jewish living that takes place in here, week in and week out. And the same, I would say is true of the middle matzah. We break it and remember the suffering, but we surround it with the whole matzahs that represent the 363 other days of the year when we celebrate the joy of Jewish life. We don't eat only broken matzahs because, in the end, we focus not on the slavery and the suffering, but on the redemption and the joy.