

Shabbat HaGadol 5786

Reflections on The Leffell Conference

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I had the opportunity this week to spend a couple of days with about 150 rabbis from across all Jewish denominations, along with educators and institutional leaders, at the third annual Zionism 2.0 conference, generously sponsored by the Lisa and Michael Leffell Foundation. As engaged funders, they attended every minute of the conference themselves, which was both impressive and meaningful. It was held in the very pleasant setting of PGA National in Palm Beach Gardens, which certainly did not hurt, although I will tell you, we barely saw the outside. The programming was wall-to-wall, serious, thoughtful, and consistently worthwhile.

Knowing that this is Shabbat HaGadol, and not wanting to give you a conference report that would probably be more interesting to me than to you, let me boil down what I brought home into just three ideas that connect pretty naturally to Passover. I think they belong at our Seder tables this year, and beyond them as well.

The first is this: the choice is not fluency or nothing.

One of the elective sessions I went to focused on Hebrew language education and usage. But it was not really only about aleph-bet and vocabulary. It was about access and belonging. The presenter noted the common complaint that Hebrew is hard to learn anywhere but Israel, and that the challenge is even greater when you have about an hour a week in a religious school setting to teach anything at all. And then came a very simple but compelling line: when it comes to Hebrew, the choice is not fluency or nothing.

That has to do with Hebrew, but it also has to do with Jewish life more broadly. Since we were at PGA, a golf reference is apparently required. Some say Judaism and golf have a few things in common: both take too much time, both can be too expensive, and both are difficult to do well. But here is the point. We sometimes assume that if we cannot fully participate, if we do not know enough, if we are not fluent, then maybe we should

step back. Maybe that is one reason our sanctuary is not always as full as it could be. Maybe even those who are here sometimes feel more like observers than participants. That is a fixable mistake in Jewish life generally, and it is especially relevant at the Seder.

At the Seder, we do not wait until everyone is an expert before we begin. We begin with whoever is there, with whatever they know, and with whatever questions they bring. The Haggadah is built that way. The Four Children are not all the same. They do not ask the same questions. They do not come equally prepared. And yet every one of them is part of the conversation. That is true not only for the Seder, but for Shabbat, for holidays, for Jewish learning, for Jewish community, and really for the larger work of building a meaningful Jewish life.

So one message to carry into this Passover is that Jewish identity does not require mastery before participation. We should resist the idea that you have to know everything before beginning. Better to begin. Better to ask, to try, to practice, to stumble a little, and to grow. The choice is not fluency or nothing. The real choice is whether to stay outside or come in.

The second idea is about how we tell our story.

At this point I should mention that most of the conference sessions were off the record, which means I can share ideas but not attach names to them without permission. I would like to respect that, partly on principle and partly because I would not mind being invited back. But one leading Jewish thinker made a point that stayed with me: you cannot tell the story of the Jewish people without telling the story of Israel. It is not an add-on. It is not optional. It is part of who we are.

What struck me even more deeply, though, was the larger claim beneath that one. We have sometimes fallen into the habit of telling our story defensively, as if we need to justify it before we can even speak it, as if we have to prove our innocence before we are permitted to say who we are. Sometimes it can feel as though we must first

reassure the world that we are not the source of its problems, and only then perhaps mention that we have made some contribution to helping solve them.

Passover reminds us that this is not the right posture for a Jewish people. Our story begins in degradation, yes. It begins in slavery and vulnerability. But that is not where it stays. Through God's intervention and through our ancestors' courage, it becomes something else. We become a people. And every year we tell that story not as an argument, but as a declaration: this is who we are.

That does not mean telling it simplistically. It does not mean without honesty or openness. But it does mean telling it with confidence. Not arrogance, but clarity. Not defensiveness, but steadiness. As one thought leader at the conference put it, we are not only the chosen people, but the choosing people. We choose to belong to this story. We choose to carry it forward. We choose not to hide. And as baseball season begins, we should not let anyone make us drop the ball. We may have concerns, and we certainly do, but we also have to know who we are and live that truth to the best of our capacities.

The third idea is the one that ties everything together. Passover is not only about leaving something behind. It is about becoming something new.

We move from slavery to freedom, but freedom is not the end of the story. As I said a couple of weeks ago, freedom is not only freedom from. It is freedom to. Freedom is the beginning of responsibility. One of the ideas I heard in a few different forms over the course of the conference was that the Exodus can be understood as the birth of human agency. That is a powerful idea. The Exodus was not only an escape from oppression. It was a declaration to the world that tyranny would not be the only form of human society. There was another possibility. Messy as it might be, there was something better to build.

That is what begins in Egypt. A people begins to see itself not only as acted upon, but as capable of acting, as capable of shaping a future. We do not leave Egypt just to wander endlessly. We leave Egypt to build. We build covenant. We build community. Eventually, we are meant to build a society.

And that is difficult work. It requires us to move beyond fear, beyond reaction, beyond living only in response to what others do. It asks us to raise a different question. Not only what are we against, but also, and more importantly, what are we building? A number of serious thinkers at the conference made versions of that point. If more people in the region were focused on building rather than destroying, on pursuing what can be created rather than obsessing over what someone else is supposedly preventing, the future could look very different.

That, too, is a Passover lesson. At the Seder we begin with slavery, but we do not end there. We end with hope. We end with redemption. We end with the possibility of a different future. That is not accidental. If we live only in the first half of the story, we remain stuck in Egypt even after leaving it.

And maybe that is one of the great demands of Passover itself. Not only to remember what was done to us, but to ask what we will now do with the freedom our ancestors were given and that we have inherited. In every generation there are those who rise against us. We know that. We feel that. But in every generation we are also commanded to tell the story, to claim the story, and to keep building the Jewish future anyway.

So as we gather around our Seder tables this year, maybe we can carry these three ideas with us. We do not need fluency before participation. We do not need apology before telling our story. And we do not leave Egypt merely to survive. We leave Egypt to build.

To build Jewish homes. To build Jewish knowledge. To build Jewish confidence. To build communities of courage, kindness, and conviction. To build a future in which our children know not only what Jews have suffered, but what Jews are here to create.

That is the work. That is the privilege. That is the challenge of being a Jew after Egypt and after October 7, in a moment that asks not less of us, but more.

May this Passover help us enter that story again, not as spectators, but as participants. Not as guests in Jewish life, but as builders of it.

Shabbat Shalom.