

Attending to Details:

A Pesach Meditation on God, Grandmothers, and Gratitude*

Lori Lefkovitz

The time between Purim and Pesach is anticipatory, designed in various ways to heighten expectation. When I was growing up, conversation about Passover food shopping and cleaning began at Purim. My grandmother, until her last days, *schlepped* cartons of Pesach dishes up from the basement and assigned us all our Pesach duties. She was terribly exacting, and she religiously supervised our going through our coat pockets for gum wrappers.

The *Seders* were, of course, the main event, but as an adult, I now realize how much those family experiences around the dining room table felt important precisely because there was so much anticipatory preparation. The readying behind the scenes, the cooking, and the learning for the *Seders* in the weeks before created the necessary atmosphere for a momentous week. The *Seders* loom large in my memory now because the devoted labors of advanced planning—like the planning before a *bar-mitzvah* or a wedding—sanctify the occasion and make it awesome.

Often it is the behind-the-scenes work, that which we are likely to take for granted, that is especially important. The cliché tells us that God is in the details. At no season is that more apparent than in Spring, and Passover is the holiday of Spring. It is now, when we see the crocuses determinedly rising from ground so recently snow-covered, when we see buds on the branches and we know that we are in transition between winter's barren landscape and what will

* Reprinted with permission from *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, January 2000. For additional essays visit www.shma.com.

soon be a lush green world, that we are most inclined to be hopeful, to believe in a power for good in the world, a generous lifegiving force, a force that liberates Nature from the cold and human beings from slavery.

All of which is to say that God and grandmothers have a good deal in common. Their work is often done so reliably that unless we pause to take notice we might forget to appreciate the greatness in the details. If we have been lucky in our lives, we have found comfort in an infinity of detailed loving attentions, from mittens to hot lunches, blessings that are blessings precisely because they were given naturally and unconditionally.

Miriam's Time

Moses is the main actor of the season, and Moses, Aaron, and the priesthood are the principle characters of the Torah readings of these weeks. But I like to think of the weeks between Purim and Pesah as Miriam's time. For, behind the central liberation myth of our people, the drama of Moses pleading with Pharaoh, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the fulfillment of the dream of nationhood in the Promised Land, is the story of the bravery of a slave mother and her daughter, and an Egyptian Princess who was moved by the sight of a slave baby in a basket.

At an even earlier moment, we are told that though the Pharaoh ordered the midwives to see to it that there would be no male babies, Shifra and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, defied these orders and bravely did their work.

In these small ways, the Passover story recognizes the significance of women's work and courage. The Talmud, too, acknowledges the centrality of midwives, mothers, and sisters in this

liberation story. One tradition insists that it is *because of the merit of the women* that God freed us from bondage. This story elaborates that it was women's faith and hopefulness that allowed the miracles to occur. For when the Hebrew men, desperate because of Pharaoh's order to destroy their sons, decided it would be better not to have children at all, their wives and daughters, tradition tells us, maintained their attractiveness and persuaded them to change their minds and not give up on the Jewish future. When it came time to construct the Tabernacle, Moses was ready to reject the jewelry and mirrors of women as gifts out of which to make holy ritual items because he worried that they symbolized vanity. But he was prevailed upon to accept these items, and it turned out that they were particularly pleasing to God because they were the signs of the vitality and hope of the people.

Every year at my family *Seder* we make my mother tell us about Passover when she was a little girl in Siberia. My mother's family are *hasidim*, and when she was a child, and Hitler was invading Poland, her family, along with many others (but tragically not with enough others) willingly abandoned all of their possessions, were packed into cattle cars, and were deported to Siberia to live out the war years in the safety of Stalinist Russia.

Though practicing religion was strictly forbidden, the first thing they did when they got to Siberia was reconstruct from memory the Jewish calendar. These Jews, who gave up everything they had, risked it all to bake *matzoh*. My mother remembers that they made *matzoh* in the middle of the night and that the children stood watch to sound warning in case someone might be coming. As in the Exodus of old, in Russia in the 1940s, the courage of women and children was intimately connected to the preservation of a Jewish way of life. What is so

moving here are the Jewish priorities. They saved their lives before their things but understood that it was only worth it if they did not lose their identity in the process.

Our tradition, in saying that it is because of the merit of women that the people were freed, hints at an understanding of the value of the intricate work behind the scenes and the importance of details in a Jewish life and community. Pesach especially invites us to take notice of every crumb. Such attention makes us mindful of and grateful for not only the grand miracles of liberation but also for the small miracles of our everyday lives.