



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 4: Multi-Generational Baggage

In every generation, all are bound to regard themselves as if they had personally gone forth from Egypt, as it says, “And you will tell your son on that day, saying, ‘this is on account of what the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt.’”¹

This declaration is made at the dramatic height of the Passover Seder, the great festive meal at which the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt is retold. Typically, the Seder is a large family gathering around a table bedecked with symbolic and traditional foods. No Jewish rite is as widely celebrated, nor does more to impart Jewish identity, than the Seder. And this ancient rabbinic passage, with its mandate that Jews transport themselves back thousands of years to the moment of liberation from bondage, teaches an important lesson about Jewish identity. From their earliest moments, Jews are taught to look at their lives as connected to every generation of Jews that have come before or is yet to be.

This is to say that an historical and intergenerational consciousness is as much a part of Jewish identity as any prayer or practice. And a large part of that consciousness is formed by the miracle of Jewish survival against the reality of constant threats. Earlier in the Seder comes the declaration that, “in every generation there are those who have risen against us to put an end to us.” It is a sentiment that resonates with every Jew who knows her people’s history. Two other widely celebrated Jewish holidays - Hanukkah and Purim - commemorate, respectively, a rebellion against the forces of assimilation and a deliverance from a planned genocide. And beyond religious observance, Jewish history is filled with a tragic litany of expulsions, massacres, blood libels, forced conversions, and pogroms.²

To someone who is not Jewish, this historical consciousness, focused as it is on the persistence of threats to survival, might appear to be little more than multi-generational baggage. And the weight of such baggage might explain why Jews sometimes behave in ways

¹ Passover Haggadah quoting Exodus 13:8.

²For further information on this topic, please refer to two episodes in the “Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic” series: “Understanding the Basics of Antisemitism” and “Antisemitism: Myths and Modern Times.”

that seem tribally defensive, overly sensitive to perceived slights, or obsessed with antisemitism. Which raises the question, why carry around all of this as an integral part of your heritage?

But to someone who prizes her Jewish identity, this multi-generational consciousness is a survival mechanism. It equips her with the knowledge necessary to perceive patterns of history that pose threats and then, at least, try to stop them. Others may, for example, see the Holocaust as an historical aberration caused by a madman exploiting his country's vulnerability by appealing to its darkest fears. But to a Jew focused on Jewish survival, the most salient feature of the Holocaust is that it took place in a cultured society and country where Jews felt completely welcomed and seamlessly integrated. In that sense, the Holocaust, while far greater in scale, is no different in kind from the threats that Jews are warned may arise against them in every generation.

Yet it is the constancy of such threats that makes survival such an imperative to every generation of Jews. A secular Jew will see in this pattern, and in the remarkable record of Jewish achievement in spite of it, proof of the talent and the tenacity of his people. The religious Jew will see in it proof of a divine mission, a covenant that continues from generation to generation. For Jews, then, the continuation of their people is a generational charge that now is in their hands. As it has, despite all odds, been passed on to them, so too must they pass it on to the next generation.

The privilege of avoiding multi-generational baggage belongs only to those who feel neither an obligation to their people's past nor a fear for their future. That is certainly not the case for the Jew who is taught, as a child, that it was her parents who were delivered from Egyptian slavery by God's mighty hand and outstretched arm. As time unfolds, and as her understanding of her people's history deepens, both its many tragedies and its remarkable accomplishments, she will come to see herself as the one who was delivered. That is what she, in turn, will teach her child, because, in some mysterious but profound way, she will know it to be true.

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