Angel for Shabbat: Hol Hamo'ed Pessah

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The Haggada explains the historical background of the three main symbols, Pessah, Matzah and Maror. Here are some thoughts on these symbols, as they relate to moral and spiritual values.

MATZAH:

Matzah is a basic, no-frills item. It is flour and water, without leavening. It stands for our basic selves, unpretentious, not inflated with vanity or pride. Matzah reminds us that we need to remember who we are; that we need not (and should not) participate in the rat race of one upmanship; that we cannot let our own internal happiness be dependent on how others judge us. Matzah is what it is, without apology, without need to impress others, without worrying if other foods are fancier or more elegant.

Because of its sheer simplicity and honesty, Matzah symbolizes freedom. When we really know who we are, we gain a fine sense of our own freedom. We can be strong unto ourselves; we can rise above the fray; we can stop playing games of who has more, who has better, who has control. When we are free within, we have the confidence to live our own lives, not the counterfeit lives that others would impose on us.

PESSAH:

The Pessah offering in the ancient Temples in Jerusalem was to be eaten in groups of family and friends; the paschal lamb was not to be prepared for only one person. If Matzah symbolizes the inner strength of the individual, the Pessah offering reminds us that we are part of a family, part of a larger community. For us to grow as meaningful human beings, we need to see beyond our individual selves. We remember our family origins--our parents and grandparents, our earlier generations. We link ourselves to those traditions and see ourselves as part of a grand dramatic unfolding of family history. We recognize that we are also links in that chain of family tradition, with responsibilities to family and friends--and to generations yet unborn.

MAROR:

The Maror, bitter herbs, remind us that the world includes many people whose lives are filled with suffering, pain and bitterness. As we are grateful to the Almighty for the blessings He has showered upon us, we cannot forget the bitter tears that are shed by hungry children, by helpless parents, by lonely and frail elderly people. We cannot forget the immeasurable pain inflicted by wars, by terrorism, by cruelty, by disease, by poverty...

As we sit around the seder table, the Matzah reminds us of our basic individuality; the shankbone (symbolizing the Pessah offering) reminds us of our link to family and friends; the Maror reminds us that our happiness and fulfillment also depend on our concern for those who are less fortunate, those whose lives are embittered.

The Maror also reminds us that no one gets through life without experiencing times of sadness and pain. At those times, we need family and friends to come to our aid, to comfort us; and when others are grieving, they need us to console them and help them.

Matzah, Pessah and Maror, then, have ongoing messages for how we can lead better, happier and more meaningful lives. Together, they contribute to our inner freedom, our family continuity, our commitment to make this a better world.

Mo'adim leSimha, Hagim uZmanim leSason.

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