The Money Throw…and Redemption: Thoughts at the Conclusion of Pessah

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By

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As a child growing up among the Sephardim of Seattle, I experienced Judaism as a happy and loving way of life. We seemed to have an endless stream of parties, wonderful food, beautiful singing. One of our customs at the conclusion of Pessah was—and still is—the “money throw.”

As Pessah was coming to an end, my grandfather, father and uncles went to synagogue for the closing services of the holiday. All the children gathered in the home of my grandparents, Marco and Sultana Romey. The anticipation was palpable. Each of the children was given a paper bag. We waited breathlessly for the men to come home. There were many “false alarms” when my grandmother, mother and aunts would knock on the front and back doors of the house, causing all of us children to rush to the door in anticipation of the arrival of the men.

And finally the great moment arrived. The door knocked, and in came my grandfather, father and uncles, all tossing coins and candy as we children rushed to gather the newfound treasures. Mixed into the coins and candy were blades of grass. It was a beautiful chaos of laughter, singing and scrambling. When the money/candy throw was over, we counted up our coins and candies with enthusiasm. The younger children invariably went for the candy, as the older ones concentrated on collecting the coins. Everyone was happy beyond words.

We have maintained this custom with our own children and grandchildren, and it continues to be a joyous way to end the holiday.

What is the meaning of this custom?

It is a re-enactment of the joy the Israelites experienced when they crossed the Red Sea and gained their freedom from the servitude in Egypt. The Torah informs us that the Israelites left with gold and silver that had been given to them by the Egyptians. When they crossed the sea, they walked through the reeds. When they got to the other side, they were sustained by the sweet-tasting mannah.

So in our custom, the money tossed to the children reminds us of the gold and silver the Israelites took with them as they left Egypt. The blades of grass recall the reeds at the sea. The candy symbolizes the mannah. Just as the Israelites rejoiced and sang at their redemption, so our celebration included ineffable joy.

The closing days of Pessah focus on the theme of redemption. The Torah reading of the 7th day relates the story of the exodus and the Song of Moses. The haftarah of the 8th day is from the prophet Isaiah and describes the ultimate messianic redemption.

We were redeemed in antiquity; we will be redeemed in the future. But what about now?
I think the “money throw” at the end of Pessah provides an answer. We don’t live in a redeemed world…but we have the power to increase faith, increase joy, increase hope. We have the ability to give our children and grandchildren a spirit of happiness and excitement in their Jewishness. We can remind ourselves of past redemption, and that we ourselves must play a role in maintaining a vibrant, creative and happy Jewish life until the future redemption.

When parents and grandparents celebrate their Jewish lives with happiness and optimism, they transmit these positive values to their children and grandchildren. And that is a key to our Jewish survival until now. And it is a key to the continued flourishing of Jewish life as we await the messianic time.

[Angel for Shabbat]