The Bitter & The Sweet
Yizkor Drash - Pesach 5784
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
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I came back last night from vacation in San Francisco. We were with my family for *Pesach*, so when people ask me, “how was your seder?” I am reminded by my colleague and friend Rabbi David Wolpe of the old joke, “In a word, good.” “In two words?” “Not good”.

Seder was hard this year. For many in this room, the hardest in memory. It was good to be together, but it was not good to be without our loved ones who we miss so much.

The empty seat at the table, the one many of us left for the hostages, and for those in mourning the seat that had always been filled for as long as we can remember with that loved one we are here to remember. Both very impossible voids that no amount of matzah could fill.

It was good to gather and sing of freedom and redemption, but not good to be reminded of how the world has changed against us since October 7.

As I sat with my family around our Seder table I found myself thinking about the

words of the Haggadah and rituals of the Seder through the lens of this moment in Jewish existence. That of course is always the mitzvah of Seder, that each generation must see itself as though it came out of Egypt. But this year is different. In some respects we have reversed the decree. Last year we were a free people in our own land, this year we are in danger everywhere. Last year we stood with allies against injustice, this year those same allies stand against us. Last year we felt hope for the future, this year it feels like we are reliving the past.

Historically Yizkor, which is purely an ashkenazic tradition originating in the 10th century, was conceived as a communal memorial service for Jews who were murdered by mobs during the crusades, and later the inquisition and pogroms. It's only in the last few hundred years that individual prayers to remember our loved ones who died have become the focus of the Yizkor service.

This year both themes are sadly back in focus. For many, not since the shoah has yizkor made this communal demand upon our community, that is both a reminder of

how relatively good we have had it as Jews in the world, and how devastatingly familiar the horrors of October 7 are for our people.

This morning I want to give all of us a lens and perspective from the Seder that I hope will help us navigate both the communal and the personal loss we memorialize today. A way for us to honour the blessing of our loved ones, confront our sorrow and not give into despair; despair for our personal losses, those of our people and for the world in this terrible conflict.

It starts with the Haggadah, because part of the secret of Jewish survival existential and personal is that we understand what happens on Pesach as the seder unfolds through the haggadah as, "*matchilim b'gnut u'mesaymim b'shevach*" which basically means, things start out bad and then you have to make them good". The teaching comes from our rabbinic sages and is summed up by Rabbi Wolpe as, "we take slavery which is a bad thing and we make it the cornerstone of our understanding of what it means to achieve liberation which is a good thing."

In two words, “not good”, in one word, “good”.

Or to put it in the context of the Seder rituals themselves; we first eat the maror, the bitter herb but then we mix it with the sweet charoset, tempering the bitterness with sweet honey and apples and dates.

The Israeli folk singer Naomi Shemer, set the idea famously to music, “Al dvash Val ha oketz, Al maror Val matok / the honey and the bee sting, the bitter and the sweet.

If you trace this theme throughout the Seder and really throughout Jewish ideology it occurs again and again. It is, you could say, the “Jewish Way” - to make something good out of what was bad.

What did Joseph say to his brothers when they confessed to him their guilt in throwing him in a pit and then selling him into slavery? Joseph responds, “you meant it for bad, but God intended it for good, so that I might save the lives of many people.” (Gen 50:20)

After the destruction of the first temple in 586 the Jews wrote psalm 137. “By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, and wept, when we remembered Zion.”

From destruction comes poetry. Our tears water the seeds of return and rebuilding 70 years later. You only mourn what is important to you. The Jews had become complacent in their attention to the temple. But as we have each learned, it is at times only in the absence of something or someone that we appreciate what we had.

500 years later the temple was destroyed again, through *sinat hinam*, Jewish infighting and senseless hatred. But in exile, the rabbis wrote the Mishnah and the Talmud, rules and codes to guide us for generations away from a return to such self destructive behavior. From bad to good. From bitter to sweet.

And so we come to this morning of Yizkor, this moment of sorrow and grief. We feel poignantly the absence of our loved one, we miss them more than words or rituals can express. A candle is not enough, to stand and say their name for Kaddish does

not bring them back. If anything this moment forces us to taste the bitter, to return to the broken heart that is still wounded and tender even years later. Time doesn't really heal wounds, it just numbs us to them. The wound is there, we just need to touch it. Yizkor touches it.

But through the lens of Jewish history, the examples of the Seder and the Haggadah, we have seen our people's unique survival skill to take what was bad and make it into something good.

And you have seen it in yourself as well. As painful as this year or years have been since the death of your loved one you have experienced good in the midst of the bad, sweetness amidst the bitter. To acknowledge that truth is not a desecration of the memory of those you mourn today, it's *kavod hamaytem*, it does honour to the deceased when we make something good out of what was so bad. When we replace the bitter with the sweet.

There are members of this congregation that only started coming to synagogue, be it minyan or Shabbat to say Kaddish. They

came every week and now still a year or years after that mitzvah has been fulfilled they still come. And they have found friends and community. Instead of isolation they found companionship. Out of bad, they made something good.

There are those in this room today that reconnected with family and friends because at the funeral or the shiva they reconciled what had been previously irreconcilable. Out of bad, you made something good.

In the soul searching that comes with the loss of someone dear many have found new strengths, new independence, new abilities, new interests. You are stronger than you thought. You are more loved than you realized. You were shaped by them, but not defined by them. You are you and look what you've done in your grief, you are remarkable. And for that they would be so pleased, so comforted and so proud. Out of bad you made something good.

"*Matchilim b'gnut u'mesaymim b'shevach*" out of something bad we can make something good. That is the lesson of the

Seder, it's the lesson of this moment in Jewish history, it's the lesson of Yizkor and the blessed memory of those we mourn today. In fact it's the very meaning of the phrase, may their memory be a blessing.

Make it a blessing, not for their sake, make it a blessing for yours, make the memory of those who were murdered on Oct 7 and in the war that followed a blessing for all of us and the world. Out of something bad, we make something good. Remember the bitter herb, but mix it with the sweet charoset. To fully appreciate life we need

both, that’s the story of our people, that’s, “the Jewish way.”