DIFFICULT PEOPLE AT YOUR SEDER
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Temple Sholom
April 7, 2017

Are you worried about your seder?

Not will you have enough food, or will the matzo balls float or sink just as your bubbie always made them? Those are things well within our control.

I am talking about the uncontrollable aspects of the seder, the stuff you cover over with a little more gravy from the brisket.

Are you worried about the people and how they will behave?

You know Uncle Saul was a Trump voter.

Aunt Barbara thinks all Muslims are terrorists

Harry your childhood friend blames the government for everything, his wife Sally blames the Chinese.

David thinks technology is the source of all evil, cousin Yolanda is a militant vegan and won't sit at the table if there is a shank bone on the seder plate – don't even get her started on the brisket.

Your Israeli friends now living in Canada think the occupation is destroying Israel and making it into an apartheid state – that's why they left.

Your other Israeli friends, who used to live in Canada but made Aliyah, but now are back for some reason you're not really clear about, think North American Jews should stay out of it, unless you move to Israel like they did.

Sarah doesn't believe in God, Aaron doesn't believe in personal hygiene or wearing shoes and Grandpa Phil believes everything he reads on the internet – unless it comes from the Mainstream Media, that's all fake news.

Cousin Steve likes to make connections to the suffering of the Palistinians every time its his turn to read, and Grandpa Harry drowns him out by bellowing Am Yisrael Chai when ever Steve brings them up.

Yeah Seder is going to be fun this year, as long an no one talks about anything that's really going on in the world.

Do you worry about that?

I guess some seders have become like Facebook pages, we simply, block, unfriend or mute those voices we don't want to hear. But its harder to do with seder, a lot of those people are

family, some gave birth to us, though we puzzle to understand how they can see the world so myopically, when we see it so clearly.

I was asked by a couple of people recently for guidance on managing the Seder in these polarized times - and in particular, on leading pluralistic discussions with people (especially family) who disagree on contentious issues while still engaging meaningfully with the political questions of the day and not abandoning the overarching frame - and opportunity - to talk about the critical themes of justice, liberation, and the stranger.

With the help of one of my teachers, Yehudah Kurtzer, the North American Director of the Shalom Hartman Institute I thought I would share some thoughts and advice. Maybe with guiding principles we don't have to fear our seder, but rather embrace the discomfort, lean into it as we lean back on our pillow and remember that one of the reasons God loves the Jewish people is because we argue with each other.

So here are four thoughts, because four seems like the right number for Pesach-related things:

1) The core pedagogies of the Haggadah are asking questions and telling stories. Real questions - those that are open-ending and that invite people to think - exhibit the humility of curiosity and create space for multiple voices. Storytelling, in turn, enables people to speak personally from their experience rather than posturing. Both of these pedagogies are more effective - not to mention more authentic - than the toxic combination of rote readings, pointless arguments, or political pontification.

In preparing for Seder, consider building more of these pedagogies in and perhaps replacing the old and dated questions and stories of the Seder with your own.

In some homes they put a bowl with all the hot button topics of the day in the center of the table. At each cup of wine they pull a topic from the bowl and debate ensues. I think that this actually "ventilates" the differences of opinion that are in the room by making space for them and puts a time limit on the discussion.

A colleague takes this to another level and provides fact sheets, or two conflicting opinion pieces on a subject and then has the people as the table engage in intergenerational Hevruta study (study in small groups) at some point in the Seder.

The central idea I am trying to suggest is that by paying attention to pedagogy - that which is already in the Haggadah, (stories, debates, learning through poems/songs, even kenestetic actions like dipping, dripping, chewing and opening) and then amplifying those in a structured educational activity as part of your dialogues you can signal and create a sophistication in conversation that transcends the usual bickering and could help provide structure to the discussion.

2) Those who studied the iEngage program with me, will remember we spent a lot of time trying to draw distinctions between what we call the moral, the political, and the partisan.

A conflation between these three - even as they live along the same spectrum - creates the real possibility that people who vote for different candidates even as they share many core values

become classified as moral opposites or enemies, and thus become irredeemable. A blending of these distinct positions creates the possibility that people see standing up to the inhuman gassing of civilians as a partisan political position rather than a clear moral line that must not be crossed. Our community and our country are playing with fire by collapsing these categories. But if we pay attention to this divide in how we structure our conversations, we might be able to refine the discussion by keeping to the realm of the moral and not allow for the cheaper and easier shortcut to discussing partisan politics.

Consider the analogy to the Ancient Greek symposium, upon which the original seder was based, the questions asked by Socrates and friends are not "did you vote for this guy or the other guy" but massive, values-based philosophical questions; and the different answers offered by the respondents are often surprising as a result.

F Scott Fitzgerald (no lover of the Jewish People) wrote in 1936:
"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise."

Pirkei Avot – "Who is wise, the one who learns from all people."

I'm reminded of the internet meme that has been going around Facebook, it's a graphic of a pie-chart filled in 100% and the caption reads, percentage of your Facebook friends who have NOT had their political opinion changed by a post on Facebook.

The goal of the discussions at seder is not to change opinions but to understand them.

At seder this year we can challenge ourselves to see what possible moral values drive the different positions along the spectrum of thoughts around out seder table. Let's uncover what possible place these values have in how we formulate our own positions and how we talk and listen to each other.

What weight and considerations should be given to values such as equality, justness of a legal claim, tradition or majority? Even if our own position gives priority to some other values and other conclusion.

What claim should the values and moral convictions that motivate other positions have on us, even if we don't embrace them?

Practical conclusions can be different but moral underpinnings may be similar or the same.

As an example – we all agree that what is happening in Syria is a human tragedy – and we have different ideas about what to do about it. HOWEVER the values that motivate us to do something, or do even to do nothing may be quite similar to each other. We can find commonality in our values even as we disagree in their application.

3) I find Pesach fascinating for its integrating the particular redemption story of a particular people into a moral message that is universal; or the reverse, routing a universal story into the particular story of the Jewish nation. It is really easy to miss the point in extreme

universalization of the Pesach messages towards abstractions about liberty and justice, and extreme particularization of the story to be about just the story of the Jewish people without reference to the themes in the story that have defined and transformed monotheistic civilization for millennia.

The conversation about universalism and particularism is much less interesting when these values are imagined in tension than when we explore their deep codependences. The implied tensions are the ultimate site of embedded conflict that can emerge at the Seder.

The opposite of a narrow and fundamentalist view is not an insisting on the 'opposing' narrow and fundamentalist view to create "balance" - it is to push towards the implied nuance that the Pesach story really embodies.

Yes it's a story about us, but within the story it tells us it about others as well. "Each generation must see itself as though it came out of Egypt". In that one line is the beauty of the seder and its message, we were slaves, but we actually weren't slaves, we have to imagine that we were, but still others of our kin were slaves, and others, not of our kin still are slaves. Universal and Particular, not OR but AND. There is wisdom in that ancient synthesis of ideas that we need in our modern day. The most particularistic aspect of Judaism is universalism.

4) The fun in the Seder is serious business. I don't just mean the silly things that we do or the same jokes that recur at the Seder from year to year; I actually think components of the Haggadah are (possibly intentionally) hilarious, like the nonsense about 250 plagues, and that magical midrashic math that – if you follow that logic of how 10 becomes 50 and then 250 it really makes you wonder if the ancient rabbis were running a Ponzi scheme. But still, embrace the madness. You can still get in some learnings and conversations about big issues in a light and joyful Seder.

As our seders have become more kid-centric we have added skits, and props for each of the plagues. From the time I was a child we have sung silly Passover parody songs and simple children's songs. In the years when the youngest at the table was university age, we still sang the childhood songs with the silly hand motions – nothing helps reduce the tension in a room like laughter and laughing together. Plan some comic relief in your seder and you will maybe breath a sigh of relief when the topics and discussion get heated.

Its worth noting that the whole seder is an imaginative exercise - the reenactment, the playacting of the exodus before it happened, the visioning of the world of freedom that we want even in the throes of a world of servitude that we inhabit. Maybe the playacting can be a tool for us to do the serious without owning the serious. Instead of mapping the righteous and wicked sons on the people we know, what does it take to get in the mind of all these characters? How can joy, play, and imagination help make us more empathetic towards others, and invite empathy from others in return?

I want to add a fifth point, call this a bonus round for the afikomen. So often we come to seder expecting to talk about big stuff like politics and values and "the world we live in". I think we do this because it lets us off the hook on the really hard things we never talk about, like our personal struggles. Many of us are enslaved by our smartphones. How will Passover help liberate us from such personal addictions, from unhealthy habits? Drop the politics all together,

not because they create division, but because it is easy to hide behind punditry and talking points. Go deeper, get personal, talk about what enslaves you, what liberates you, where you find miracles and the plagues that torment.

And look: take comfort. If none of this works, remember that passive-aggression and even outright aggression is one of the dominant features of Jewish memory. If it goes wrong, you might be doing it right. And if all else fails, just keep your mouth shut and drink a lot of wine, it has to end by midnight one way or the other.