A MODERN PASSOVER TALE 5775
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Based closely on texts provided by
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Rabbi, what can I eat for the seven days of Pesach? Lentils, rice, potatoes, green beans? This question is about little things called in Hebrew kitniyot, from the Hebrew word katan (little). Ashkenazi Jews who grew up in Europe didn't know from rice! So their staple was the potato. And Sefardic Jews who grew up in North Africa and the Middle East knew about rice…not potatoes!

The prohibited grains, which can ferment and become Hametz- leavened products and foods we don't eat during Passover - are wheat, barley, spelt, oats and rye. Surprisingly these are the only grains from which we can make Matzah. So we stay away from pastas, cereals, and breads made from these products for a week. With quinoa we can eat a grain-like product and have no difficulty whatsoever, as it can be made into noodles and other products.

So what's the only reason to maintain the custom? We've always done it this way! Our Reform practice can be understood best by this statement of the Central Conference of American Rabbis: "Reform practice, following the standard of the Talmud, permits the eating of rice and legumes during Pesach. The Talmud clearly rejects the suggestion that rice and legumes are chametz, and the likelihood that our people will confuse legume dishes with leavened dishes is too remote to be taken into serious consideration." If you've always done it this way, you don't have to abandon that practice. "As a matter of Reform communal practice, our 'standards of Pesach kashrut' allow the observant Reform Jew to eat rice and legumes during the festival."

But if these are the major concerns about Passover, aren't we missing the key story of our liberation from Egypt? Have we exchanged our concern for freedom, at the heart of our story, for the concerns about what's in the kitchen? We've become experts in kosher l'pesach and novices with regard to the true message of pesach.

Our Haggadah teaches that each of us must look in the mirror and see a soul personally redeemed from the oppression of slavery. We should not turn our focus from the great teaching, handed down from generation to generation, into a focus on beans and peas. Our story is an ever new story, a tale that brings meaning to our lives, because we remember.

An engineer stumbled on a story about the Japanese tsunami which taught him that "Collective memory, as much as science and engineering, may save your life." Koutaro Ogata, a communal leader from a fishing village called Murohama, told this tale. He and his neighbors were well aware that a large earthquake would generate a large tsunami and they knew exactly what to do, because "a thousand years ago" a massive earthquake and tsunami had all but wiped out Murohama.

This is what he said. A millennium ago, the residents of Murohama, knowing they were going to be inundated, had sought safety on the village's closest hill. But they had entered into a deadly trap. A second wave, which had reached the interior of the island through an inlet, was speeding over the rice paddies from the opposite direction. The waves collided at the hill and killed those who had taken refuge there. To signify their grief and to advise future generations, the survivors erected a shrine.

Researchers discovered the records of a tsunami 1142 years before. Some 50 generations later, on March 11, 2011, the Murohama tsunami warning tower - which was supposed to sound an alarm - was silent, toppled by the temblor. Without the benefit of an official warning system supported by modern science, the locals relied on the lesson that had been transmitted generation to generation for 1,000 years. "We all know the story about the two tsunami waves that collided at the shrine." Instead of taking refuge on the closest hill, the one with the shrine, they took the time to get to high ground farther away. From the safety of their vantage point they saw two tsunami waves colliding at the hill with the shrine, as they did long ago. The engineer heard the old story and the new one again: A community remembered what it had been told and did the right thing. Reaching out from the distant past, long-gone ancestors - and a deeply embedded story - saved their children.

During the Passover Seder we proclaim: *Let all who are hungry come and eat*. Why do we say these words? Because we have a long embedded memory in our collective Jewish DNA. "We recall moving from the degradation of slavery to the liberation of journeying to the Promised Land. We celebrate our freedom by eating a bread of affliction, Matzah. This "poor bread" reminds us of how we were once strangers in a strange land. With that knowledge, with that memory, we are to be good, kind and generous to the stranger because we know what it is like to be a stranger. (Fred Greene)

Four times in our Haggadah Moses prays for the Egyptians. The Ten Plagues come as no surprise. We expect there to be an abundance of punishment against the wicked Egyptians who afflicted us so for centuries. But **would you think** that with all that Egypt had wrought upon us that Moses would be out there praying his heart out to save the Egyptians? Yet this is precisely what we find. No less than four times, Moses prays for the Egyptians to be rid of their plague of frogs, wild animals, hail and locust. Moses is described praying in three ways; *Vaye'etar*, he prayed very hard or extensively; *Vayitzak*, he called out, cried out, shouted out to G-d; and *Vayifros kapav el Hashem*, he stretched out his hands in prayer to G-d. All this was done to help the oppressor, the slave masters!

Can you picture the prayer? "G-d, please remove this plague from the Egyptians, because....?" What is a Moses to say to convince G-d to help the hard hearted Pharaoh? Yet we find that Moses not only prayed, but he called out and prayed

exceedingly. What was he praying so hard about? Abarbanel, the Spanish financier and commentator, says that Moses had to pray real hard because while the Ten Plagues were part of the original plan, the 4 prayers are not part of the script. G-d never said that he would remove the plagues. In fact, after Moses' prayers, it says twice, "and G-d did according to the word of Moses." The removal of the plagues, the whole idea of beseeching G-d to help Egypt, was completely Moses concoction. Like Elijah at Mount Carmel, Moses acted first and then prayed really hard later that G-d would listen to his request, and He did.

As remarkable as the Ten Plagues are, the four prayers are equally astounding. As the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin pointed out in his 19th century commentary, it is surprising that even as Pharaoh continued to rebel, Moses prayers for Pharaoh were accepted. Or, as the Midrash known as Mechilta says in the context of Moses calling out on behalf of the wayward Jews later on, "This is to Moses' credit that he did not say, "Since they quarrel with me, I will not ask mercy for them." Moses prays for the very people he is fighting against. Is this not remarkable?

This is the message of Passover, this what we should be spending our worry and our energy on, not can I eat rice if I'm not Sephardic or is pop with corn syrup *traif* on during Passover. We have a word for this, narishkeit – foolishness, triviality.

The Matzah reminds us of how we escaped from pain and suffering, and helps us ally our hearts and souls with others in dire straits. The poured out drops of wine with each of the plagues reminds us of how Moses poured out his heart in prayer to God on behalf of the Egyptians and how God wept for their suffering too.

People are still in a variety of "Egypts" today in our world. The Egypt of poverty, hunger, homelessness is more than most of us can even imagine. There are innocents caught up in the plagues brought down upon them by modern day pharaohs. As we celebrate Passover this year, let us tell the story, add them too our prayers and take to heart the words of our ancient and ever new story of freedom. Its not about the beans and rice.