HOW DO YOU EAT A HOT DOG ON MATZAH?
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There are three sermons being given in congregations this Shabbat and next across the country. I will attempt to give one, comprised of all three, but don't worry it won't be three times as long.

In Orthodox congregations, the rabbis are sermonizing about the miracle of liberation, God's redeeming power, and how it was with a strong hand and an outstretched arm that God led the Israelites from slavery to freedom.

My more traditional, and in some cases fundamentalist colleagues north on Oak, are testifying to the historical accuracy of the Exodus, that it happened just as the Torah describes, that the

plagues that befell Egypt were divine punishment and that the parting of the Red Sea was evidence of God's love of the Jewish people and miraculous redeeming power.

I thought for a moment if I could give that sermon in this congregation, and though I am sure you would listen to it, I could not with full sincerity deliver it.

The historical accuracy of the biblical Exodus is problematic for me theologically. I don't think God punishes or rewards people, Jews or anyone else for that matter.

I don't believe that the 10 plagues, if indeed they happened as is described, were punishment for the

sins of Egypt, any more that the blizzards of this past winter, or the earthquakes and tsunamis of past years were divine punishment for the sins of humanity as some would argue.

The Judaism I live and am guided by is a rational Judaism. My belief in God is constrained and informed by that rationalism. In the words of the great modern Jewish philosopher, Mordechai Kaplan, in my understanding God is, "the Power that makes for Salvation."

God is the force within humans which drives us to seek goodness and to make the world a better place. God created the world and all that is in it, but then left to human beings the responsibility and

power to care for it and those in it. It is up to us to make of God's creation as much or as little as we aspired to make of it. God is the power and the inspiration that drives us toward the good.

Therefore, in my view God was not the source of the slavery nor was God the physical redeemer of the Israelites. The cruelty of the Pharoah and the collective weakness of the Israelites is what allowed them to be enslaved. Likewise, it was not the hand of God that freed them from Egyptian bondage, but rather a spiritual and moral turning **to** God for intellectual guidance and emotional support that allowed them to break the chains of bondage and seek freedom as individuals and as a people.

The Torah's account of the redemption is a record of how human beings inspired by God risked everything for freedom. Thus we are constantly leaving Egypt.

In Conservative congregations this evening, and next week Rabbis will be talking about the particulars of a recent ruling by the Rabbinical Assembly Law Committee, the conservative movements legal body that ruled that rice and legumes are now permitted to Ashkenazi Jews on Passover.

As is often the case in Conservative Judaism, this ruling is not universally accepted, some think, regarding rice and beans at seder, its about time and some think it's the end of times.

Someone once said that God is in the details, and indeed for Conservative and observant Jews God is indeed in these details. Just I will assume not to the same degree for most of you.

While you would politely and with some curiosity listen to 15 minutes on the *halacha*, on why rice and legumes were eaten in Talmudic times, then restricted to Sephardic Jews, then embellished with prohibitions extending to corn syrup and chickpeas. While you might indeed be interested, your practice is not governed as much by Halacha as it is by minhag or custom.

So, while a panel of esteemed Conservative Rabbis now says its ok to have rice at your seder, my guess

is unless your Bubbie gives her own affirmative ruling, you're still eating roasted potatoes. At least that's what my mom serves, and I have been making the rice argument since I entered rabbinical school.

Though I do want to note that the intricacies of applying Jewish ritual correctly are not insignificant in Reform Judaism, nor are they, as they might sound, without any spiritual value for Reform Jews; in fact, quite the contrary, God is indeed in the details.

The Talmud relates one of my most favorite debates between the schools of Shammai and Hillel, over the size of the bulk of an olive. For pages and pages the rabbis of the Talmud debate what is the

average size of an olive. Why? Because, eating a piece of bread more than the size of an olive is considered a meal, and if you eat a meal you are required to say a blessing over the meal, and the rabbis wanted to be sure to use blessing correctly, to bless that which was a meal and not to blessing something that was not, was to not take Judaism seriously, and whatever we do in Judaism we should do what we do seriously and with intention.

The Talmud explains, so enamored was God upon hearing his children debate the size of an olive, that he fell in love with the Jewish people all over again, because He saw that they cared so much about His

Torah that even the bulk of an olive would inspire a debate.

As Reform Jews should resonate with us. Perhaps not on the bulk of an olive, but the implications that we should take equal care and seriousness about the proper observance of the moral and ethical commandments that inform us on how to live our lives, raise our children, care for those in need and act as a nation. Indeed, I hope and pray that as our nation daily debates matters of morality and ethics, including the recent legislation regarding Physician Assisted Death that we look to the intricate details and insights that are unique and specific to Judaism to inform our own values on the application of this

new legislation. For more on this, please see yesterday's Temple Happenings email, where I included a sermon from last year when the supreme court issued its ruling.

And so what you might ask, "What are they preaching in Reform congregations tonight and this week before Passover?" If it is not the undeniable truth of the Exodus as described in the Torah, and it is not the intricacies of the observance of the laws of Passover, what do we talk about this evening?

For myself I want to talk about Hotdogs. As irregular as it maybe for Shabbat and Passover to fall on the same day, it is conversely routine for Passover and the opening week of the baseball season to

almost always coincide. And with it comes a Jewish dilemma, nearly as great as the size of an olive.

How do you eat a hotdog on matzah?

You can peruse the Talmud and the Torah, in Hebrew and in English and I can assure you will not find an answer (in truth you won't even find the question).

I found my answer when I was about 10 years old and my parents took me to my first Passover-opening day. There sitting in the stands at Candlestick Park, in San Francisco I pleaded with my parents for a hot dog. They agreed and when the vendor came and handed it to my mom, she unwrapped it from its foil wrapper, removed the toasty bun, which she threw to

the floor, and handed me my Hebrew National. As I pondered in my head, why is this opening day different from all other opening days, she replied you can't eat the bun its pesach!

As I munched on my bunless dog, I looked around the stands and was amazed to discover so many others doing the same. Who knew that I was surrounded by so many Jews at a ball game. Every where I looked someone was eating a hotdog without a bun, and if not a hotdog, then they had Matzah sandwiches, or cans of macaroons. And indeed it was there that I found the answer to my question when I noticed the man 2 rows behind us. He had soaked his matzah overnight in water and then

formed it into something resembling a taco shell, let it dry and placed his hot dog right in the middle.

But with that answer came this observation years later, and this is exactly what I and I hope all of my Reform rabbinic colleagues are preaching to their congregations this week and next. The eating of Matzah during Passover is one of the most important things you will do as a Jew all year, it is one of the keys to the survival of the Jewish people, to our continuity from generations to generation and an expression of religious freedom equal to and worthy of this holiday that celebrates our people's redemption. Remember back to when you were a

kid, or if you are a kid then remember back to last year or the year before.

Do you remember what it was like to pull out your matzah sandwich in the cafeteria at school? Do you remember those mixed emotions of fear and pride as you proclaimed for all to see that yes indeed you were a Jew. Do you remember seeking out the others matzah eaters? Maybe you sat a bit closer to them that week, strength in numbers. Maybe you shared your unease, for this was indeed for some the bread of affliction. Did your non-Jewish friends ask you about the strange cracker bread? Did they want to taste it, did they make an anti-Semitic remark? What happens now as an adult? If you go out to lunch with

co-workers will you bring your own matzah, or suddenly declare you're going low-carb with out explanation?

All of these moments, they are the personification of the challenges and opportunities of what it means to be a Jew in North America today. To eat Matzah in public is to live and breath the very message of the Passover seder, that we were once slaves in the land and now we are a free people.

My message this evening is very simple and I will make it very direct. It is imperative, for your own Jewish identity and that of your children that you do not hide your matzah, that you proudly and public munch the manishevitz for all 7 days of Passover (or

8 if you count that way). Why? Because you never know who you will inspire to do the same. You never know what little kid sitting at a ball game will feel proud to be a Jew because he sees you being proud too. You never know who you might inspire to further embrace their Judaism, it may very well be yourself that you inspire most of all, and the greatest gift we can give another person is to inspire them to be the person they long too be. This Passover eat matzah, help guarantee the Jewish future!