

Matzah, Mitzvah, Maror and Maggid

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Almost 40 years ago, our son lost his cherished *nounours* in the pedestrian mall in central Jerusalem. He was inconsolable. A friend, coming to visit us for Passover, brought a similar teddy bear from the same manufacturer. But there was no special attachment to the new bear, who remained without a little boy to love it.

If I had been Franz Kafka, the story might have had a different ending. The forty year old Kafka left Prague in September 1923. In love with Dora Diamant, a 25-year-old kindergarten teacher from a Hasidic family in Poland, they lived together in Berlin. Whenever he would visit the centre-city, Kafka wrote in his diary "I have trouble with my breathing, start to cough, become more anxious than I ordinarily am, see all the dangers of this city uniting against me." He usually remained in the peaceful Steglitz neighbourhood where he walked everyday in the park.

According to Dora, one day she and Kafka met a sobbing little girl. In response to his concern, the girl explained him that she had lost her doll. Kafka told her "Your doll has gone off on a trip." "How do you know that?" "Because she's written me a letter." "Do you have it?" "No, I left it at home, but I'll bring it with me tomorrow." Was it possible that this mysterious man was telling the truth?

Kafka took great care with this task. The next day he returned with a letter which he read out loud to the girl. The doll is very sorry, but she's grown tired of living with the same people all the time. She needs to get out and see the world, to make new friends. It's not that she doesn't love the little girl, but she longs for a change of scenery, and therefore they must separate for a while. The doll promises to write from afar.

Every day for three weeks, Kafka brought a new letter from the doll. As his tuberculosis worsened, Kafka planned to return to Prague (where he would die in June of 1924). In the version that Dora told to the French literary critic, Marthe Robert, Kafka "finally decided to have the doll marry. He described the young man, the engagement. . . , the preparations for the wedding, then in great detail the newlyweds' house." Overly busy, the doll could understandably no longer visit her former mistress.

Kafka's friend and literary executor, Max Brod does not mention this ending, but writes that before leaving Berlin for Prague, Kafka made sure that the little girl received a new doll. According to yet another version, Kafka insisted that this was the doll that originally belonged to the little girl. She appeared different, because she had gone through many remarkable experiences. Life had changed her the way she looked.

Except for what Dora Diamant later recounted, we have no records of any of these letters from the great writer. About ten years ago, this Kafkaesque narrative was described in a short story by Guy Davenport ("Belinda's World Tour") and a children's book (*Kafka and the travelling doll*) by Jordi Sierra i Fabra. Had I been as creative as Kafka, perhaps I would have told a wonderful tale about a boy's bear on an international trip.

At the heart of our Passover celebrations is a narrative that has sustained our people and, as Michael Walzer has pointed out in *Exodus and Revolution*, inspired millions beyond our covenantal community. Our Seder meal is structured around Matzah and Maror, Mitzvah and Maggid (the Telling). We proceed from identifying the bread of affliction to recounting the four questions, telling two stories that "begin in degradation and end in praise," detailing the debate between Ben Zoma and the Sages regarding Exodus and memory, describing the four children, remembering the enduring promise, reviewing the plagues, singing Dayyenu, and devoting attention to the three symbolic foods identified by Rabban Gamaliel, and singing Hallel Psalms of praise. All these are different ways of telling the same story.

In recent years, many of us have added contemporary voices to the Seder story: a recollection of Holocaust and heroism, Sharansky on Jewish identity and inner freedom, Hebrew women who contributed to liberation (with Miriam's water bowl or a fish on the table), poetry reflecting the Zionist experience, Canadian commentary. This year, the Seder has been

deeply affected by the cruelty and brutality of the attack by Hamas, the subsequent war, the loss of civilian lives and the enduring imprisonment of hostages by Hamas.

Each year, we tell the story with different emphases. Our seder meals are of different duration. Does that make our *haggadah* recitations dissimilar? Yes. Does the essential narrative remain the same? I believe so. As long as we have the Matzah and the Maror, the Mitzvah (of not eating Hametz) and the Maggid-Telling.

I think this can be a metaphor for contemporary Jewish life. There are various expressions of Jewish identity and practice. Rather than thinking of them as divisive, let us pay attention to what we hold in common. We share an amazing saga of faith and fidelity to God through periods of celebration and challenge. Our Covenant connects us to other Jews throughout the world and over the passage of time. It extends beyond ethnic loyalty to a quest for the ethical in our relations with other people. It is a legacy that we can sustain, in a world full of trivial eye-candy and international uncertainty. Some who differ on matters of faith share *mitzvot*; others who have varying practices may hold some beliefs in common.

Is my *nounours* recollection correct? Did my son remember the event?
Does my vignette resonate for other parents?

Did the Kafka doll incident really occur? Was it a parable? Did Kafka author it or did Dora? Each of the contemporary versions are quite compelling, but I don't think we'll ever know. Still, there are many life lessons we can take from Dora's report. In Paul Auster's retelling in *The Brooklyn Follies*, a character comments, "by the time those three weeks are up, [the girl] has the story, and when a person is lucky enough to live inside an imaginary world, the pains of this world disappear."

Did the Exodus occur in fact or fiction? One of my friends, a contemporary scholar of Bible, told me that when he sits for Seder, he places the question of archeology and authenticity, history and verisimilitude aside and walks the path of our people past and present. Whatever divergences in belief or behaviour, as long as we continue to eat the matzah, weep from the maror, refrain from bread and pasta, and continue to tell the ancient saga, then we, our ancestors and our descendants will again leave Egypt on the path to Sinai and the Land of Promise.