

PASSOVER: THE “READY OR NOT” HOLIDAY
Pesach – April 14, 2012
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We tell the story to each other every year. The story of how the Jews did not have time to let the bread rise before they left Egypt which explains why we have to eat matza on Pesach and why there can't be a speck of Hametz in the house.

A friend of mine writes: “When I was a little child in Hebrew school I used to fantasize about this story. I would imagine Moses’ mom, Yocheved, remonstrating with him. (Moses wife, Zippora, was smart. She spent Passover with her parents in Midia!) But, my friend would imagine Moses’ mom complaining, (and somehow her voice remarkably sounded like that of my mother’s).

“Moe, why all the *shpilkes*? We are going to be traveling for 40 years and you can't wait 45 minutes? I have to sweep the tent floor, I am not done packing yet and besides which, the bread still isn't baked yet.”

“Sorry mom,” Moses retorts, “God says we have to leave NOW!”

“Oh really?” she replies. “Let Him tell me that when He is married and has 3 kids.”

“Mom we need to leave NOW!”

“But I have a wonderful rye bread I just put in the oven.”

“Sorry Mom, time's up”

That's the way as a kid my friend supposed the matza story must have happened. It is a fantasy that resonates with me every Pesach as there is just not enough time to prepare - to get the house ready, to get the meals cooked, to prepare for the guests and to juggle all the normal obligations of our lives. Our annual pre-Passover craziness goes all the way back to that first Pesach when there wasn't even time to let the bread rise. And humor aside, I suspect that there is an important lesson to be learned here and that is that very often we are just, as the saying goes, “not ready” for the truly important moments of life -- and yet somehow we must face them anyway.

We often hear that phrase “I am just not ready to do that.” Maybe it comes when we have to give up a bad habit, or perhaps when we need to reconcile with a family member or a friend or to complete some task that has been waiting.

“You know, I think it is time you decided to give up smoking!” “I know, you're right -soon, but not now, I am just not ready yet.” “You know I think the time has come to reach out to ...your brother, your mother (you fill in the blank) - it has been too long.” “Yes, you're right, I know I should - but not today - tomorrow - I am just not ready yet!”

But if the story of the matza teaches us anything it is that there are moments and events that come along that just can't wait – moments that need, moments that demand immediate responding to moments that just can't wait.

The quest for freedom very often is about situations like this. I am not sure how many of you are aware of it, but on the eve of Israel's declaring its independence, many Zionist leaders felt that the times were not quite ripe to declare a Jewish State. Many of them urged Ben Gurion to wait at least a few days. Maybe the Arabs could be persuaded not to invade. Maybe Truman

could be persuaded to lift the American arms embargo. Maybe a deal could be worked out with Trans Jordan. There was a great fear that a potential catastrophe awaited the tiny Jewish settlement of 600,000 Eretz Yisrael.

However David Ben Gurion knew that there are simply certain moments in history that had to be responded to. He knew that the slightest hesitation on the part of the Yishuv would be seized upon by a world that loves to sympathize with Jewish victims but has difficulty accepting independent Jews, to try and abort Jewish sovereignty. He knew the risks involved in rashness but he knew those risks at *that* moment were less than the risk of hesitancy or timidity. It was David Ben Gurion's courageous leadership which carried the day and made it possible for there to be a State of Israel today.

In the early 1960's Black civil rights leaders were told by sympathetic Whites, why don't you just wait a few years? Why not go just a little slower and not be so strident in your demands? However, Martin Luther King, Jr. understood, like Ben Gurion understood that history does not stand still and that if you do seize certain moments when they stare you in the face, then the moment may be forever lost.

Baseball season has begun again – and I am a happy guy. There are people who do not understand my joy – how can you sit there and watch a baseball game they ask incredulously – unlike basketball or hockey it seems so – well boring, so slow. Most of the time all they do is just stand around waiting for something to happen – baseball critics lament. But for aficionados of the game – there is always so much happening – even when nothing seems to be happening. For example – do you know how long it takes a baseball to leave a pitchers hand and arrive at the plate? Well the distance from the pitcher's mound to home plate is 60 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet. A baseball travelling at 100 miles per hour is covering 146.7 feet every second. That means it takes under $\frac{1}{2}$ second (0.412 to be exact) for a 100 mph fast ball to travel from pitcher to the catcher and in that 0.412 seconds the batter must decide – is it a ball or is it a strike? Should I swing or not? And when should I start in order to hit the ball. Amazing. If you ever want a humbling experience I encourage you to go to one of these batting cages and try and hit a 100 mph fastball. If you are like me – you will be a tad late on your swing – still trying to decide when the ball will be long past you. One veteran gave a rookie advice how to hit Bob Feller – whom some believe was the fastest pitcher ever – "When he raises his arm to throw just start swinging and hope you get there when the ball does. Yes, there are moments that demand action – where the usual attributes of contemplation and deliberation – just will not do. Moments that cannot wait – and baseball is filled with these matzah moments – and so is life.

I so admire people who know how to act and how to act decisively when life demands it because most of us tend to err in the other direction. You know the time that I most often experience this sentiment? This expression - "I am not ready yet!" It is when people are forced to confront the death of someone they loved, or their own impending death. How often have people said to me in one form or another - "Rabbi - it is just too soon - I am not ready to let go of my husband, my wife, my father, my mother - my child... Rabbi I am not ready yet to die!" And yet, the lesson of Pesach and Matza is, "ready or not ... here it comes ... ready or not, here comes life and ready or not, here comes death." How many of you have had to make a major life decision and felt you did not have the luxury of enough time to make that decision thoughtfully, carefully? Welcome to the wonderful world of matzah. How many of you have suffered the loss of a loved one – and felt it was too soon, not fair – you just did not have the

time you needed to prepare, to say good bye – to make the necessary arrangements?

There was a time when I met with a family following the death of a loved one, that one of the questions I used to ask was, “How old was your father...your mother....” I stopped asking that question because I learned that the answer didn’t really matter. When a 40 year old dies we call it a tragedy - but is the death of a 70 year old, or 80 year old, or 90 year old any less of a tragedy? Not to their loved ones. Life is infinitely precious - and we can never have enough - when we are 40 - we dream of living to 90 - and when we are 90 we dream of living to 100. When it comes to life there is always something more to be done. In life we may have finished yesterday but we are just beginning tomorrow and there is always something new to look forward to – another birth to be celebrated, a wedding to prepare for – a milestone to achieve. And so, we are always bargaining with God - for a little more time - I am not ready yet God - just a little longer - what is Your hurry?!

We are about to recite the Yizkor service. And the truth is that all of us have gathered to mourn friends and loved ones who died too soon. There is an element of anger mixed in with our sadness that our loved ones were taken too soon. We were not ready; *they* were not ready. There was so much more to be said; so much more to be shared, so much more to be done - together.

Our complaint against God would echo the conversation that my friend fantasized between Moses and his mother: “why all the *shpilkes*? What is your hurry God? We are going to be traveling for 40 years and you can’t wait 45 minutes? We will spend eternity in the world to come - a few more years in this one would kill You? I have to sweep the tent floor, I am not done packing yet and besides which, the bread still isn’t baked yet.”

“Sorry mom,” Moses retorts “God says we have to leave NOW!”

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Matza is the unfinished bread. We eat it nonetheless because that is how life must be consumed - unfinished, undone, and incomplete.

Dear friends whether it is in the great theater of history or the side-shows of our mundane personal lives. There are moments that arise which must be responded to bravely and courageously. We are all batters, standing in the batter’s box, waiting for a pitch that will come too soon and too fast. We are all Moses – hurrying the Children of Israel along – recognizing that life cannot wait forever – indeed that life demands our attention and our action now. That is the challenge that confronts us today as it did our ancestors leaving Egypt so long ago. We can either slink away with one excuse or another or like them, we can boldly go forth bravely into the uncharted desert relying upon our faith and our inner fortitude.

At this time of Yizkor I invite you to look around you - you are surrounded by a community of mourners and for all of us - each and every one of us - we mourn the loss of someone who was taken - too soon. We were not ready, there was so much more to be said, so much more of life to share together. But the choice is now yours - to use this time of Yizkor to express your frustration and anger - or to use these precious moments to express your love and gratitude.

Benjamin Disraeli once said - "Life is too short to be little." The choice is yours.

Rabbi Simcha Kling z"l wrote a short but beautiful piece that has been included in the Yizkor service we are now about to recite. He asks:

"How do we face the reality of death?

We know that it is a fact. It is part of life.

We may postpone it.

We may try to delay it as much as possible.

But some day we must be confronted by it.

How do we face the reality of death?

By giving thanks to God for the gift of life.

By voicing appreciation for the blessings we have known.

By being grateful for those lives that have touched ours and whose echoes still resound in us.

Ready or not, please rise for the Yizkor Service p. 188.