



Should Christians celebrate the Seder?

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When speakers on Judaism come to address groups of Christians, they are often expected to bring visual aids to illustrate what they have to say: a ram's horn to reflect the Jewish New Year, a palm branch when speaking about Tabernacles; a spice box to explain the home ceremony that concludes the Sabbath.

The most popular of all such illustrations are the symbols used at the Passover meal, the Seder: the shankbone which is a reminder of the Paschal lamb offering; the burnt egg representing the second, festive, sacrifice; the bitter herbs to remind us of the bitterness endured by the Israelites in Egypt; the salt water that tastes like their tears; the charoset (a mixture of apple, almonds and wine) that looks like the mortar out of which the slaves were to build the pyramids; and, above all, the unleavened bread and the wine, often passed around in the audience to provide a "taste of Passover."

Whenever I am called upon to bring such visual aids, I refuse – not because I wish to deprive Christians of an experience of Judaism, but because I believe that this kind of simplistic explanation offers a false experience. It is as unhelpful as passing around wine and wafers to give a Jewish audience a "taste of the Eucharist."

Annual reliving of the Exodus

The fact that the Eucharist may have its origin in the Seder which Jesus celebrated points to the differences between the two religions more than to the similarities. The only way in which Christians can ignore such differences is by viewing Jewish Passover celebrations as quaint customs from ages past instead of seeing them as intended: an annual reliving in the present of the Exodus from Egypt, which thus becomes a paradigm of Jewish history.

The book that is read at the Seder, the Haggadah, is a Midrash (Jewish exegesis) on Exodus, not a straight retelling of the story. The purpose of Midrash is to breach the gap between past events and present reality. The Exodus represents for the Jew the beginning of redemption and every celebrant is expected to apply that experience to himself and herself.

The aim of reliving the Exodus is to prepare ourselves for the final redemption, the Messianic times, reflected in the Seder by an extra cup of wine on the table – for the Prophet Elijah, the figure which, according to Jewish tradition, will herald the advent of the Messiah. Our redemption began in Egypt and could be completed very soon. Therefore, Elijah may come at any moment; those who celebrate the Seder must be ready to receive him.

Providing a setting

The quaint ceremonies that Christians seem to love so much are indeed visual aids – but not to illustrate Judaism at the time of Jesus. Their aim is to provide a setting for the Midrash, and the setting chosen is that of the classical symposium at which participants would engage in serious discussion during the meal.

That is why the symbols are set out on a tray and the celebrant is expected to lean on his left side – in the manner of free Romans – to make the point that after the Exodus, the Jew, too, is a free person.

The Christian connection between Easter and Passover seems to be another Midrash on Exodus and redemption. We now know enough about Midrash to refrain from adjudicating as to which one is authentic and which one is false. All we can say about the two is that they are different and that the differences are due to the fact that Jews and Christians need to build different bridges in order to link the past to the present.

Not a quaint relic

To view Passover as a quaint relic of the past telling us how Judaism was in the days of Jesus is to rob the Jewish celebration of its contemporary relevance.

In the spirit of true inter-faith dialogue, it is more helpful and wholesome for representatives of the two religions to learn from each other's Midrash, instead of trying to incorporate the one into the other.

That is why I prefer to talk about the place of Passover in Jewish life today – including the many contemporary additions and allusions in the numerous editions of the Haggadah currently in use – instead of concentrating on ancient symbols. What matters is what those symbols mean now in the respective religions.

Symbols mean different things

Christians use unleavened bread and wine at Easter and Jews use unleavened bread and wine at Passover, which obviously points to a common origin. But what is significant is how these symbols have come to mean very different things in the two religions pointing to diametrically opposed notions of the Messianic future. To study the different traditions of Midrash may be a more helpful contribution to Christian-Jewish understanding than consideration of the common origins.

It is for such reasons that I have been reluctant to act as leader, or even as "consultant," at Christian Seder celebrations, not because I regard them as in any way offensive to Judaism, but because I fear that they may be misleading.

At the same time, however, I have always endeavoured to invite Christian friends to the Seder celebration in my own home and encouraged other Jews to do the same, because sharing in each other's festive times, rather than imitating them, is a way of forging close bonds. .

On similar grounds I have been an opponent of Christmas celebrations in Jewish homes whilst encouraging Jews to accept invitations from their Christian friends to celebrate Christmas with them. To know of each other's Midrash sheds light on our own; to fuse the two into a continuum causes confusion.