

RITUALS OF REMEMBRANCE

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When the great rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with God, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

Elie Wiesel tells this story because he loves stories and it makes the point of the importance of remembering. For Wiesel, memory seems to be the closest thing to the image of God in human beings. He views memory as the central transmitter of ethical and moral insights, and he values stories for their ability to continue memories, to transmit insights from one generation to another.

Wiesel is certainly not the first person to figure out the importance of stories. Religions have used stories from the beginning to keep their traditions alive. It was as true of the ancient pagan religions, much of which we still know about through the Greek myths and other stories, as it is of modern religions, which rely heavily on key stories to instill certain values and beliefs in their followers. In fact, most religious holidays are based on stories which are carefully designed to make a certain point, to keep people faithful to one way of viewing things; one set of moral values.

April is a month full of celebrations, stories and rituals. Today is Palm Sunday, commemorating Jesus' supposedly triumphant entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, which signified that he came in peace. Palm fronds were strewn before him, and more than 300 million palm fronds will be harvested from Central American rain

forests so that today, in Christian churches all over the world, but especially in America, people can wave fronds and welcome Jesus into their midst. It makes a great story.

But Jesus was a leader that no one really understood - not even his disciples, who wanted Jesus to grab a title or distinction and proclaim himself and them as the vanguards of the new world. They had given him the mantle of authority, and they expected him to step out in front of the crowd and bring about the final, greatest miracle of all: the coming of the Kingdom of God. They led him into Jerusalem, into danger, thinking he would bring a greater, more wonderful life. Instead, the end of his life came swiftly, tragically, awfully, in a way that no one, except Jesus himself, anticipated. He was tried, convicted, and cruelly executed, and through it all he offered no resistance, no defense, no miracles to stop it happening. And the disciples fled, confused, and abandoned him, because they could not understand or accept what was happening to their leader and their hopes.

Today is also the beginning of Holy Week, which combines the story of Jesus' downfall, crucifixion, and supposed resurrection with the ancient pagan celebrations of spring, fertility, and renewal. It is a week filled with symbols of food, and rituals around eating - the last supper and the Easter Feast. For people who have fasted for forty days during Lent, having a big blowout on Easter makes sense, I suppose. Fasts are usually followed by feasts. Other symbols of Easter also relate to food and renewal: the eggs, symbolizing fertility; and the spring lamb, signifying new birth and ongoing life. As a spring holiday, Easter celebrates the joy of renewal, revival, and resurrection, drawing from the images in nature and the old festivals celebrating them, and transposing the same images on the life of an important man, Jesus of Nazareth. It is also a story about the unexpected, for the Easter story teaches us that we cannot always know what will happen in our future, and that sometimes, just when we think things are going well, disaster strikes. It is a story that says that even when all is lost, even when it seems that hope is dead, there is the possibility of resurrection and new hope and an even better life.

Also this week the Jewish people celebrate Passover, which is their great spring festival. Their annual feast, the Passover Seder, is a ritual to remember the experience of exodus - to experience first the crushing bitterness and despair of slavery and then the wild, exhilarating release to freedom. Like Easter, Passover speaks of the joy of renewal, revival, and resurrection. At the beginning of the story, the ancient Hebrews have fallen on truly hard times. Enslaved in Egypt, they have lost their autonomy, but not their identity. When a charismatic leader rises up and urges them to trust in their God and seize their freedom, they rejoice. But not for long, for the steps to win freedom are daunting. For forty years they wander in the desert, keeping their dreams and vision firmly in mind. Finally, they reach the promised land and freedom. It, too, is a great story.

Sometimes, stories change to fit a new need. We know, for example, that the Easter story took on the form it did in order to provide the man Jesus Christ with some special characteristic that would convince the Jews and pagans of the time that this new religion based on him - Christianity - was more powerful than the old religions. And, the timing of the story was also manipulated to coincide with the already prevailing stories and rituals around the renewal of nature and the cycles of life which held such power over the lives of the ancients that Christianity could not compete. In many ways, the Easter story is an amalgamation of the old religions and the new one, in order to make the new one acceptable.

Much the same is true of the Jewish holiday which also, coincidentally, happens in the spring of the year - Pesach, or Passover. In its present form, it celebrates the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. But it really began as two separate fertility holidays - a farmer's festival called Matsot that celebrated the spring grain harvest, and a shepherd's holiday called Pesakh that celebrated the birthing of new lambs and kids. King Josiah, a descendant of David, combined the two, and also added an historic event - the flight of the Jews from Egypt some 600 years earlier. He wanted to glorify the exodus in order to stimulate national pride and unity. So Pesach was made into a national epic and major holiday - which could only be done by attaching it to the already existing major holidays of the people - the celebrations of the coming of spring.

The priests, who followed the kings and edited the Torah, made their ancestor Moses the human hero of the Exodus story, just as Yahweh, or God, was the divine hero. In their hands, Pesach was molded into a tribute to divine providence, and the Exodus was exalted to the status of super miracle story of the Jewish world, just as Easter was made the super miracle story of the Christian world. Both are allegedly stories of historical events, carefully contrived to mold a group of people together as a religious community with certain shared values. And, both are celebrated at this time of year because they needed to usurp the power of the rebirth of the earth in order to become major holidays.

Another April holiday, much more recent, is Earth Day. Originally a secular holiday, celebrated mostly by environmentalists and peace activists, it has become more "mainstream," and, interestingly, more a kind of religious holiday. Churches are getting involved in taking care of the earth in many ways, which is somewhat surprising because environmentalists and people of faith had limited connection, and often animosity, at the beginning of the modern environmental movement. It seems some of that animosity, or at least denial, is recurring. Yet, spiritual traditions are beginning to devote energy to what some see as the defining challenge of our age - the need to preserve creation and build just and environmentally healthy societies. This is as it should be, for there is a strong relationship between religion and revitalization of the earth- the exhortation to be good stewards of the earth is found in Genesis. How we choose to live on earth and treat our environment are questions with deep moral and

ethical dimensions that need to be decided not only in the arena of public policy, but also in the churches, synagogues, and mosques.

One thing that has helped this movement is stories - stories about environmental degradation which are as compelling as the religious stories about human degradation by slavery and crucifixion. Stories which also lead to rituals - annual river cleanups, recycling, and earth day itself, which has become another spring festival of renewal. And as more stories are told about melting glaciers, deadly storms, drowning coastlines and stranded polar bears, more and more are motivated to make care for the earth a religious ritual. Over the years, throughout the world, major climatic events have happened, which have seriously changed the lives of those affected by the events. In the last year alone, think of the massive floods in New Zealand, Indonesia, China, and even parts of the United States. There have been devastating earthquakes in Haiti, New Zealand, and most recently, Japan - the latter accompanied by a terrible Tsunami which wiped out vast areas and killed thousands of people and made many more homeless. It also damaged a nuclear power plant, releasing large amounts of radioactive materials, and set off a world-wide discussion about our reliance on this form of energy. And, the numbers and severity of hurricanes and tornados has increased dramatically in recent years. Those of you who lived through the tornado that swept through southern Minnesota while I was here can attest to the long-term affect it had, even though no lives were lost. After each of these assaults by nature, however, there is, eventually, renewal and restoration. We need to remember them, if only to recognize that there is always hope for resurrection.

There are many other April events which deserve rituals of remembrance. This past week we noted two important events in American history - the beginning of the civil war, and the death of Abraham Lincoln, April 30. The Civil war was certainly a major milestone, claiming as it did 600,000 soldiers, and radically changing the culture and economics of the south, and the composition of the entire country. It has been remembered through the years by rituals of re-enactment, where people dress in the style of the time, and camp out in tents like those used then, and replay the battles that were important in the war. There are some who still seem to be fighting the civil war, which has been known as "the war between the states," and claimed to be about states' rights. Now "revisionist" historians are saying that the real reason was slavery all the time. It was a war of resurrection for the South - "The South will rise again", and of restoration for the rest of the country, for it restored the nation as one, undivided, united. The Civil war, and Abraham Lincoln, probably had a larger impact on the American psyche than any other event. It led to great grief and suffering, but also resurrection, restoration, and renewal. Yet, many of the issues that led to the war, and divided the country, are still or again with us. And certainly the freedom and equality that African Americans hoped would come are not yet fully realized. So it is very important that we continue to talk about and re-enact and ritualize this major event, to remind us that sometimes things we think have been won still need attention.

Similarly, it was also in April that two important events occurred related to World War II - the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, when thousands of Jews defied their Nazi overlords in a desperate battle they knew they could not win. It was an act of defiance, an affirmation of their dignity against a universe that did not seem to care. The other was the death of Adolph Hitler on April 30. Hitler has become the standard by which evil is measured. Elie Wiesel, knowing the importance of story and rituals of remembrance, and himself a Holocaust survivor, advocated for another spring festival, Yom Hasho-ah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day. He realized the necessity of keeping the collective memory of a people alive, so that, hopefully, bad history will not be repeated. Elie Wiesel is right - we need to tell the stories, we need to record the history, we need to hear from those who were there what really happened. We are seeing a dramatic rise in Holocaust denial, and in skinhead Neo-Nazi groups, even right here in the midwest. There are now 926 "hate" groups in America - an increase of more than 50% since 2000, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which keeps track of such things. This is why we need to remember - so we don't repeat the same mistakes.

We need to remember the holocaust because, truth to tell, even now, in various areas of the world, there are holocausts occurring as I speak. Whenever one religious or ethnic or national group makes another its enemy to the extent that exterminating members of the enemy group is considered acceptable, we have once again broken down as a human society. In the last decade, there have been many incidents of ethnic cleansing, religious strife, extermination of certain groups, and mass disruption of societies throughout the world - Iraq, Afghanistan, Tunisian, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and more. Each of these, and all of these, have affected people in devastating ways. The people will probably survive, even resurrect and find ways to restore and renew their countries and their lives, but they, too, will need to remember and to develop rituals to remind them of what can happen if we are not vigilant and caring, and how to avoid such events in the future.

Part of the remembering, however, needs to include telling the whole story, including our own nation's complicity in some of what happened. To be helpful, stories have to be accurate. There is a difference between history and opinion and fiction. There is nothing wrong with revisionist history, as long as it moves us toward a greater truth and understanding of things. But, as the stories of Easter and Passover have shown, stories can be manipulated and designed to serve some partisan purpose. Knowing how the stories of past events can be used to mold a people together around a certain set of values, both for good and evil, I am wary of the tendency to only want the stories that represent a particular point of view told. Stories can be used to enlighten people and further understanding, or they can be used to demonize people and cause conflict. And I cannot help but wonder to what extent the ways in which various stories are being told by different groups today - how people's need to be the heroes and make others

the enemies - black and white, with no nuances - might be contributing to some of the problems we are now seeing around the world - and in our own country.

We need to tell the stories. We need to practice the rituals that help us to remember. We need to realize that great stories, accurately told, can lead us to remembrance, resurrection, and renewal. Let us use the great spring religious holidays of Easter and Pesach and Yom Hasho-ah to remember our religious values, and how we need eternal vigilance in order to keep them alive. It is true, as Elie Wiesel said, that in telling the stories, we offer people eternal hope.