

Telling the Story

Karla Hailer-Fidelman

“Could not one postulate that religion might also, likewise, be nothing more than a love of the food one ate as a child? And if that were so, then perhaps all the trouble Moses had with the children of Israel after they fled Egypt had less to do with the worship of golden calves than it did with fast food.” – Harlan Ellison

Harlan Ellison is one of those witty, irreverent curmudgeons that never fail to make me laugh. His essay about manna in the desert and all the resulting problems of nothing but manna to eat for an extended period became part of our Seder one year. Granted I had to clean up some of the language, as Ellison can get a bit salty, but the thought of the stewards “geshrying” to Moses is so human, so real, that it could easily apply to my house every year for the one week of Passover. I suspect every Jewish parent knows the set of whine:

“How come we can't have spaghetti?”

“Do we have anything to eat but matzo?”

“How come a Milky Way isn't Kosher L'Pesach?”

While a quick wit and clever rejoinder goes a long way around this house (“that sounds like a vintage whine from around 1992 Cambridge, Massachusetts if I'm hearing it properly”), it really does beg the question of do we ever really figure out why something is Pesadich or do we just learn to cope?

That's why I really love the mitzvah of expanding on the tale or, as my boys and I like to say, departing from the text. What really started me going was the first time the family Seder went from a three ring circus to just the three of us, my two sons and me. Faced with major life changes and the realization that I was looking at two small children, one of whom was really only starting to read, what was a mother to do? I certainly couldn't just read the whole traditional Haggadah as the two of them would have been bored and the point of the Seder would have been missed.

So I departed the text.

It actually was quite easy once I realized the exact framework for a Seder. So long as we remembered the 14 steps and the order in which they are done, the story became the easy part.

Since it was also the first year that the Rugrats did the whole “let my babies go” thing, which my children watched repeatedly (I mistakenly taped it and next thing I knew that tape was being played more often than the Lion King), my job was a lot easier.

Reclining around our coffee table, I took my youngest in my lap and my older boy next to

me and began to spin the tale that they knew, but I was able to slip in more detail (like all of the 10 plagues) and let them ask questions. We ate and sang and opened the door for Elijah and in general had a wonderful little Seder.

Over the years our lives changed as our family did, but one thing that has stayed with us is creating a family story for our Haggadah. One year it involved interviewing all the kids to see what they thought the story of the Exodus was. Of course, that was also the year they had seen *Prince of Egypt* a few times so there were a lot of details about Moses having chariot races around the pyramids, but we were able to work together to extract the story, complete with parts for each kid. Another year involved finding things they thought were the important lessons from the story and why we celebrate Passover.

Soon I'll begin talking to all the kids about this year's Haggadah and studying the story a bit more. We are now at a point where we can start talking about the how and why of things. Such as where does the idea of kitniot (the Ashkenazik prohibition of rice, corn, millet and legumes during Pesach) come from and is it something we should follow? Granted, the younger boys are still a little young, but with two adolescents in the house now, these are the types of things that they want to know. This means it will translate into questions like why are some Pesach marshmallows OK but other ones aren't? But it is a good opportunity for the family to learn and understand.

While I never know what our Haggadah will look like until a day or so before our Seder, I know that it is always something worth saving if for no other reason than 20 or so years from now when I hear, "But ma, all the baby did was climb around and knock things over and whine and, well, it just wasn't what I remember."

Then I can remind my boys of the time we sat around the coffee table and told a story that began, "A long time ago in Egypt, there was a baby..."

*Karla Hailer-Fidelman is a columnist for **The Newton Tab**. She wrote this article for ShalomBoston.com for Passover 2001.*