

Passover Universal, Passover Particular

By Rabbi Wesley R. Gardenswartz

I recently saw a fascinating news story about three infant boys who were separated at birth. Each was sent out for adoption to a different family. One was raised as a Jew. One was raised as a Catholic. One was raised in a Protestant denomination. They grew up and out of their adopted homes. As adults, they continued in the faith traditions with which they were raised as children. The news story began by showing the Jewish brother making kiddush and having a Shabbat dinner with his family.

After decades of living separate lives, unaware of each other's existence, through a tip found over the Internet, they discovered one another's existence. They came together. Three brothers. Three religions. The angle of the news story, and of the live interview with the brothers, concerned the role of religion in their reunion. Did their separate faiths divide them?

No. Each of the three affirmed that their reconnection was not hindered by their different faith traditions. To the contrary, the three different faiths provided common ground. The Jewish brother noted that each brother serves the one God of all humanity. Each religion is about love and kindness and repairing the world.

The brothers' shared testimony about the universality of religious truth made me think about Passover, which we celebrate this month. The first seder is Wednesday night, March 27. Passover tells us that what the brothers say is true-and not true-at the same time. Judaism surely shares some universal truths with other faiths. But Judaism also imparts truths known to no other faith. We miss the richness of our tradition if we acknowledge only the universal, but not the particular.

Passover teaches us that Judaism, like other great faiths, believes in God that sides with the poor, the oppressed, the dispossessed. The God that led the Israelites out of slavery is the God that sided with African Americans during the civil rights struggles.

But Passover also teaches us that Judaism, unlike the other great faiths, has rituals and traditions which God commands only us to perform. Cleaning our kitchen, getting the leaven out of our home, burning the leaven, selling our chametz, buying and eating only kosher for Passover products, celebrating two seders with all of its ritual, going to shul to daven the Passover liturgy-are for Jews only.

Most of us relate intuitively to the three brothers who see the universal in their faiths. And the universal is good and much to be appreciated. But what is particular to Judaism-the rituals that only we do-is a particularly strong aspect of Passover. It is our treasure to live, to love, and to transmit to our children and grandchildren. Hag kasher v'sameakh.

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