



PESACH 5775

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The Ultimate Health Care Plan

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THE ULTIMATE HEALTH CARE PLAN
PESACH POLITICS: LOCAL OR GLOBAL?

ABSTRACT

Throughout history, a debate has raged that influences everything from personal welfare to modes of government: What takes precedence: individual rights, or the public good?

Even the current health care debate – between Obamacare supporters and opponents – reflects the tension between individual rights and the common good. Some feel that health care initiatives are in the interest of a healthier nation. Others claim that compulsory health insurance impedes individuals' right to the best health care money can buy.

Capitalism vs. socialism is but one manifestation of this larger debate. The former emphasizes self-advancement and actualization as the motor of progress, both personal and communal. The latter emphasizes subjugation of individual gain for the greater good.

Of course, both approaches have pros and cons, and both have evolved to incorporate elements of the other. The truth is, though, that no system can be sustained without individual freedom on one hand, and group cooperation on the other. At the same time, when you try to combine the two systems, many problems tend to crop up. For example: What can we do when an individual's right of expression might offend the community?

This question is especially relevant to religion and its role in our lives. Many have rejected religion precisely because they see it as a way to control people and stifle individual freedom. Some will not even attend a Passover Seder because they experienced it as herd mentality. Others embrace the need for a system whose guidelines benefit the community or nation as a whole, even as they place certain restrictions on individuals.

Pesach, the holiday celebrating our freedom, gives us an elegant solution to this dilemma.

A seemingly technical Talmudic debate about the Passover offering and the role of the Seder (are they individual responsibilities, or communal ones?) offer us a solution to balancing individual and community that everyone can embrace: a system wherein the community enhances the individual.

It also provides us with the ultimate health care plan.

1. Joke

The Bernstein family was gathered around the Seder table. Children, grandchildren, siblings, parents and grandparents were all celebrating the exodus of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage, as Jews around the world have been doing for the last 3329 years.

The family went around the table, inviting everyone to share some thoughts. The entire table was animated and engaged as they discussed and debated, as good Jews do, the different Seder customs, the events that happened in Egypt, and their relevance to our lives today.

The entire table, that is, except David, who refused to participate in the discussion—and frankly, in the entire Seder. He sat alone, quiet, somber and looking annoyed at the entire spectacle.

David's grandfather, the patriarch of the family, turned to David and asked him, "Why are you so disinterested in the events that made us a people"?

David nonchalantly replied: "Egyptians. Jews. Arabs. Israelis. I am not interested in politics . . .

Politics, they say, is all local. But then again, isn't it politics that shapes the larger world as well?

2. Individual or Communal: What Takes Precedence?

Throughout history, a debate has raged, one that influences everything from personal welfare to modes of government: What takes precedence: individual rights, or the public good?

Capitalism vs. socialism is but one manifestation of this debate. The former emphasizes self-advancement and actualization as the motor of progress, both personal and communal. The latter emphasizes subjugation of individual gain for the greater good.

Of course, both approaches have pros and cons, and both have evolved to incorporate elements of the other. The truth is, though, that no system can be sustained without individual freedom on one hand, and group cooperation on the other. At the same time, when you try to combine the two systems, many problems tend to crop up. For example: What can we do when an individual's right of expression might offend the community?

An extreme example of how far this can tragically go without any checks and balances is the notorious case of the Donner Party. In 1846 this group got trapped in the snowy mountains of the Sierra Nevada with no food left. Some of the group resorted to murdering the weak and cannibalizing them to survive. This became a classic case which has provoked many arguments around the moral question: If you and a number of others were stranded and starving, and your only hope of getting out alive is to eat the first member who passed away, would you do it to save the rest of the group? Or worse: If you saw that one individual was weak and dying, would you kill them to feed and sustain the rest of the group?

Most of us may agree that cannibalism, let alone murder, is never an option, but this case provokes us to wonder: How much of the collective good can compromise individual life?

This question comes up around the disabled: Do you build special infrastructure to accommodate the few who are disabled even if that meant the cost to do this would jack up prices. And how about the elderly and

dying: how many resources do you invest in prolonging a life that is expiring? Do you rather redirect these resources to younger and more hopeful cases of survival? Then there is the commercial/ environmental side: What is more important, buying a cheaper car that fits your personal budget and your personal tastes or a more expensive and efficient auto that would help save the environment?

Even the current health care debate – between Obamacare supporters and opponents – reflects the tension between individual rights and the common good. Some feel that health care initiatives are in the interest of a healthier nation. Others claim that compulsory health insurance impedes individuals’ right to the best health care money can buy.

This question is especially relevant to religion and its role in our lives. Many have rejected religion precisely because they see it as a way to control people and stifle individual freedom. Some will not even attend a Passover Seder because they experienced it as herd mentality.

Others embrace the need for a system whose guidelines benefit the community or nation as a whole, even as they place certain restrictions on individuals.

Pesach, the holiday celebrating our freedom, gives us an elegant solution to this dilemma—the ideal way to balance and blend these two approaches.

3. The Pascal Offering

In what appears as a discussion of technicalities, commentaries debate whether the Pascal offering in the times of the temple was a “public offering” (*korbon tzibbur*) or an individual offering (*korbon yochid*).¹

A note of background: All Temple offerings were clearly either public ones (brought on behalf of all the people) or personal ones (brought by an individual). But when it comes to the Pesach offering, we find that it was somewhat of a mixture of both. On one hand, the Pascal lamb was offered by all Jews, together, in the Temple, (not by individuals in their homes, as it was done when the Jews left Egypt²), joining together all the individual offerings (*b’kenufa*)³, and slaughtered in three groups.⁴

On the other hand, each person or group was responsible for bringing their own offering, from their own money (not public funds). Additionally, the offering was eaten by its owner and those who were designated to that offering.⁵ These are all typical features of an individual offering.

This leaves us wondering: Was the Passover offering a public or individual one?

1 See at length Likkutei Sichos vol. 18 pp. 104.

2 See Exodus 12:7.

3 Talmud Yuma 51a. Rashi Pesachim 66b.

4 Pesachim 64a.

5 Mishne Zevachim 56b.

4. Religion vs. Spirituality

This paradox spills over into the Seder: Is the Seder a communal experience, or an individual one? It would seem to be communal; not only is Passover a time when all Jewish families join to recall our Exodus from Egypt, but the Exodus itself is what made us a nation. It was the official “birth” of Jews as a people⁶—not just a motley group of people sharing a common ancestry and heritage. However, the Haggadah also teaches that every Jew, on Passover, is to see himself as though he had left Egypt. Is Pesach a communal experience, or a personal one?

For that matter, this question applies to Judaism as a whole: Is Judaism primarily a group system, an “organized religion,” with the community’s needs taking precedence over personal expression? Or is it primarily about an individual experience centered upon each person’s personal relationship with G-d?

Interestingly, statistics show that 92 percent of people in the U.S. identify as “spiritual.” But only 40 percent identify as “religious.” What’s the difference? Why are there so many more people willing to identify themselves as spiritual, but wouldn’t dare to classify themselves as religious?

Perhaps it’s because “religion,” in the minds of many, means ritual. And ritual is about laws, blind faith, dogma, herd mentality, structure, conformity—all things that minimize (or even compromise) the role of the individual. Spirituality, on the other hand, connotes free-spiritedness, individuality, transcendence, freedom. Now that sounds enticing.

And yet, at the same time, deep down, we all crave belonging, community, the opportunity to be part of something bigger than ourselves—something religion seems to offer. This tug of war within us between these two desires can be confusing. Can Judaism offer the best of both worlds? Personal expression and common purpose?

5. A Beautiful Balance

Indeed, paradoxical as it may seem, the Pascal lamb ultimately symbolizes a dual dynamic: it is both a communal and individual offering and experience. The Rambam⁷ keenly enumerates the Pesach offering in the group of individual offerings, but adds: “this type of offering [however] is similar to a public offering.”

And the reality is that Judaism, like the Pascal offering, is a beautifully balanced mixture of both as well. It combines the benefits of each approach to form a beautiful hybrid of communal and personal, where the group and the individual enhance one another.

⁶ Deuteronomy 4:34; Ezekiel 16.

⁷ In his Mishne Commentary, introduction to Seder Kodshim.

The individual, in Judaism, is sacred. Consider this amazing law⁸: If an enemy threatens a Jewish community with an ultimatum, “give us one of you and we kill him, or else we will kill you all,” the community should allow themselves all to be killed and not give up one soul! Every single person has a different, and indispensable contribution to make. The collective good is dependent on the individual good. – There you have the Torah response to the Donner Party debate.

Therefore, the communal aspects of Jewish life and law – and the synergy of the collective – are there to serve the individual, not the other way around. The structure and the rules and guidelines of the Torah were put in place not to stifle individual freedom, but to the contrary: to harness and bring out individual potential, to allow us to express our uniqueness, to each form our own personal relationship with G-d in a way that only we can.

We find a similar balance in nature: No one can deny the breathtaking harmony in the diversity of our ecosystem. This beauty, in large part, stems from the fact that the greater whole is totally dependent on each species and each component living up to its unique individuality, performing its critical role. Take bees for example. We all know bees pollinate plants. But did you know that bees help produce around \$14 billion worth of agricultural crops per year, approximately one third of everything we eat? Without that tiny bee, the entire agriculture system is compromised. Our lives—and the world as a whole—would be a much different place if that one species, the tiny bee, didn’t exist.

Just study your own body and you will see the same. The delicate balance of biological systems depends on the health of the minutest cell function. Conversely, when all the organs work in unison, function is improved even at the cellular level. The efficacy of the macro and micro are interdependent.

Music is another example: On one hand, a piece of music is governed by many structured rules. Only certain notes can be combined to form certain chords. One needs to know how to properly implement music’s many elements—tempo, rhythm, cadence, melody, harmony. And yet, when a person finally masters those notes, nothing is more magical or transcendent or soulful. Nothing feels more like an expression of you, as an individual.

We see from this that in a healthy system complying with rules and structures not only doesn’t compromise individual expression, it enhances it. The collective and the unit join together as one: Each individual note is both necessary and in need of all the other notes. It is the structure that actually allows us to transcend structure!

The importance of the individual contribution can never be underestimated—or overvalued. Following communal guidelines does not need to contradict individual expression. Quite the contrary: as long as we know that the rules are meant to help express our individuality—that the structured notes are not meant to stifle the sound, but create a beautiful harmony—then both community and individual can prosper.

⁸ Rambam Mishne Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 5:5.

6. Completing the Unifying Circle

A story:

Two rabbinical students were once sent by the Lubavitcher Rebbe to the Aleutian Islands to inspire any Jews who lived there with the beauty of Judaism. After a week, they still had not found any Jews. But they made one last attempt by visiting a local elementary school. They went into classroom after classroom, asking if there were any Jewish children in the class, and each teacher told them there were not.

Then they entered the last classroom. Again, they asked if there were any Jewish children, and the teacher answered no.

But a girl sitting in the back raised her hand. “Mommy, so we’re not the only Jews in the world!” a little girl asked the teacher, who was also her mother.

Embarrassed, the mother quietly told the rabbinical students that she would speak to them after class. When the class was over, she confessed to the two young men that she was not very comfortable with her Judaism, as they were the only Jews on the island. As they talked, the boys offered some warm words of encouragement, and the mother resolved to buy some Jewish books and mezuzahs.

The mother then asked them to offer some encouragement with her daughter. They said to her, “All around the world, women and girls bring in Shabbat by lighting candles on Friday afternoon, eighteen minutes before sunset. But when they are lighting eighteen minutes before sunset, bringing in Shabbat in Australia, it is not yet Shabbat in Israel, until eight hours later, when the women there light the candles. And then seven hours later, New York lights and brings in Shabbat, and eventually California, and the entire world lights, and brings in Shabbat at different times.

“The very last time zone is at the furthest point on earth, which is the Aleutian Islands. And the Aleutian Islands is the very last place in the world every Friday to have the opportunity to light Shabbat candles! You and your mother have this opportunity: to usher in the light of Shabbat for the entire Aleutian Islands.

“You will also be the very last Jewish girl in the world each Friday, little Stacy, to usher in Shabbat with your Shabbat candles, completing this unifying circle.”

This story impresses upon us how important each person is, and the fact that each person has their own role in the communal whole, in the “unifying circle” that is the entire Jewish nation.

In the words of Hillel⁹: “If I am not for myself who will be for me” – emphasizing the crucial importance of the individual. But on the other hand, “When I am only for myself what am I?”— emphasizing the power and responsibility of the individual being part of something much bigger than him- or herself.

⁹ Ethics of the Fathers 1:14.

7. Ultimate Health Care

This Passover lesson in balance – between the communal and the individual – also holds the secret to the ultimate health care plan:

The Zohar, the classical work of Kabbalah, states that matzah has two names: “Food of Faith” and “Food of Healing.”¹⁰

But which precedes the other – does faith bring healing, or does healing lead to faith. After all, after healing from an illness people often say “thank You, God,” demonstrating that healing leads to faith.

The chassidim of the Alter Rebbe were once debating this issue, and they approached the Mittlerer Rebbe [Rabbi Dovber], the son of the Alter Rebbe, who was a mentor to many, to get his opinion. He told them: “Faith comes first. As my father said: ‘Food of Faith is the [matzah of the] first evening [of Pesach]; Food of Healing is the [matzah of the] second evening.’”

And the Mittlerer Rebbe went on to explain the difference: When healing brings faith, then clearly there has been illness, which then was healed. When faith brings healing, there was no illness to start with.

Asked the chassidim: Does this also refer to physical illness and healing? And the Rebbe replied: Both to physical and spiritual. Because, to Jews, matter is not divorced from spirit, since spirit transmits into matter, and matter is transformed into spirit.¹¹

I do not have the expertise to propose a detailed health plan for all people of our nation. But as a Rabbi, speaking to you on this Pesach, I am absolutely certain that the health care debate will be served well if it takes its cue from the healing powers of Passover and matzah. Namely: the emphasis that faith and healing dictates and demands of us to humbly find the appropriate balance between the collective and individual good, and the integration of matter and spirit.

After all, the United States was built on the foundation of E Pluribus Unum – out of many, one, and In God We Trust, and the faith in the Creator that has created us all equal and endowed us all with unalienable rights.

It’s uncanny how these values reflect the faith (In God We Trust) and community/individual (E Pluribus Unum) balance of Passover and matzah, the bread of faith and healing. But that should not come as a surprise knowing that the Founding Fathers built our country on Torah metaphysics.¹²

The health of our nation is dependent on the health of every individual. One should not compromise the other. On the contrary: they should enhance each other. Out of the many – one. The one is comprised of the many.

¹⁰ See Zohar II 41a; 183b.

¹¹ Sichas Pesach 5702, p. 94-95. Cited briefly in Hayom Yom 15 Nissan. Haggadah shel Pesach with the Rebbe’s commentary.

¹² See On Two Wings, by Michael Novak.

And the health of both the community and the individual is dependent on our faith and trust in G-d, recognizing that health is driven not by materialism and money, but by the fusion of matter and spirit, a healthy soul in a healthy body.

George Bernard Shaw said: “We have not lost faith, but we have transferred it from G-d to the medical profession.”

Benjamin Franklin once quipped: G-d heals, and the doctor takes the fees.

Using these beliefs as our guiding principles, and eliminating politics from the issue, I have no doubt that we will be able to come up with the proper health plan, that benefits our entire nation, without impeding individuals’ rights.

8. “Spi-ritual” Seder

At the Seder, we will join with our families and friends and we all follow the same fifteen-step Seder (order), the very same process. We follow the “order” according to our sacred law and tradition that has been passed down for thousands of years. Like musical notes, the Seder has very defined and specific structure.

But, at the same time, like musical notes, we also make it personal. Each of us sings the songs in our own voice, with our own unique inflections. Because at the end of the day, as the Haggadah emphasizes, each of us – you and I – is supposed to view ourselves as if G-d took us out from Egypt.

In other words, you need to experience Passover—freedom—on an extremely personal level. Not just a communal one. Because in celebrating Passover, we’re also celebrating the freedom that G-d gives each of us, individually, to actualize our potential in this world. And that, in turn, benefits all Jews—and for that matter, the entire world.

This year, encourage your children and Seder guests to ask the same four questions, but to personalize their questions, too: What does it mean to you that this night is different than all other nights? What does eating matza mean to you? Maror? Reclining? And the same with the rest of the traditions: what does all this mean to you?

This Passover, let’s infuse the “spirit” into the “ritual”—so that the holiday is truly a “spi-ritual” experience.

Wishing you a truly happy, healthy, and spiritual Passover.