A Passover Seder with Jan Peerce

Music selected and composed by Ario S. Hyams
Directed by Barry Hyams
Choral Arrangements by Abraham Ellstein
The Passover Seder is an ancient "project lesson" which anticipates many findings of modern progressive education. As such it is child-centered, it is dramatic, and it transmits profound ideas with amazing simplicity.

The "four questions" are a prelude to the father's narration of the story of Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. These questions aim to motivate the child and to excite his interest. His astonishment aroused by the novel features of the festive meal, the child asks: Why the unleavened bread, why the bitter herbs, why the dipping of two vegetables in salt water and why the leaning on the left side? The entire procedure is planned to hold the child's attention to the very end, even as the "treasure hunt" for the hidden Afikomen is considered a means of helping him overcome the slumbering effects of the prescribed four cups of wine.

Ingenious indeed is the pedagogical inventiveness of the "four sons." Too often teachers insist on teaching a subject and forget that they are teaching a child. The Haggadah implies that due cognizance must be taken of the child's capacity to learn. Even the son who is slow to understand and "who knoweth not how to ask," is lovingly included in the pageantry of the Seder. Nor is the Seder reduced to mere child's play. The adults are urged to evince a youthful curiosity and to engage in a mutual interchange of comments on the life-giving implications of the story of the Exodus. We recall the example of the five celebrated sages who throughout the night were so engrossed in an exchange of insights on the significance of the Exodus that their pupils had to remind them at dawn that the time for morning prayers had arrived.

However, the Seder is more than a collective reminiscence of an event of bygone days. "In every generation every person must think of himself as having gone forth from Egypt." We must relive the drama of human liberty if we are to treasure and protect the heritage bequeathed to us by the past. At the Seder table the entire family experiences in almost contemporaneous fashion the glow and the glory of liberation from Pharaoh's bondage.

"Therefore, we praise, glorify, bless and give thanks to Him who performed all these wonders for our fathers and for us. He brought us from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity, from darkness to light, from bondage to redemption."

At the Seder all members of the family take on a royal dignity. The father is the king, the mother is the queen and the children are princes and princesses. They all recline at the feast as if they were members of the nobility. It is a requirement of the Passover Laws that even the poorest family must be supplied with the plentitude necessary for the joyful celebration of the redemption, and the four cups of wine are equally mandatory for all. At the very opening of the feast the head of the household invites the household to join in the festive celebration: "Let those who are hungry enter and eat with us; let those who are forlorn come and celebrate the Passover with us." In this fascinating manner, the Seder symbolizes the belief that every human being is a rare and irreplaceable specimen of "the divine image" and should therefore be treated with the utmost love and respect.

This vivid remembrance and reliving of the past takes place in the home—the cradle of civilization, the child's first and foremost school for character development. The Seder highlights the home-centered nature of the Jewish religion. A major portion of Jewish religious life has its focus and its fulfillment in the home which is thus transformed into a "miniature sanctuary" permeated with the poetry of religion and pervaded by a heightened sense of dignity.

The freedom which Passover celebrates is more than freedom from an oppressor. It is freedom for responsible living. Liberty does not mean lawlessness. "Only he is truly free who engages in the life of the Torah," say the rabbis. Freedom means service to the Highest. The God who liberated Israel introduces Himself in the Ten Commandments, not as creator of heaven and earth, but as "I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). The liberation was completed when at Sinai the people vowed to acknowledge none other as their master than "the Ruler of the Universe." There are poignant implications in the thought that to be free means to serve God. The cause of the world's unrest is the very fact that people are only too ready to exchange one human master for another, to move from one bondage to another, submerged groups and oppressed peoples in desperation vow allegiance to a dictator, to the dictatorship of a class, or to an aggressive national vanity. They thereby disavow their allegiance to Him who liberated His enslaved people from Pharaoh's thrall and to whom alone we owe fealty.

Nor is Passover limited to a pious reminiscence of the glories of the past. It also beckons us to the future. Through the cup of Elijah it conjures up the vision of a grand Passover of the future when liberty will be the passion and possession of all mankind. Elijah is the prophet who will herald the day when the heart of the fathers shall be turned to the children and the heart of the children to the fathers (Malachi 3:24). Then there will be a Universal Passover of Liberation. On that Passover of global scope, Jerusalem will become the rallying place of a free and peaceful humanity. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4-5). Thus the concluding words of the Seder, "Next year in Jerusalem," voice the hope of all men of good will for a universal era of peace, brotherhood, liberty and security.

Notes by Dr. Max Arzt
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Choral Arrangement of Ani Ma'amin by Ario S. Hyams.

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(Part I)

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Choral arrangements
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A PASSOVER SEDER WITH JAN PEERCE
(Concluded)

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