

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Passover and Easter: Freedom and redemption



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"When this world has love, then we finally will indeed have Passover and Easter. There will be redemption!"

This week, Jews begin the celebration of Passover and Christians observe Holy Week concluding with Easter Sunday. Because of calendar differences it is not always the case that they occur the same week, and this year the dates are quite closely aligned. The beginning of Passover is observed with Seder on Friday evening. For Christians in the West using the Gregorian calendar, the previous evening is the celebration of Maundy Thursday, which commemorates Jesus celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples known as the Last Supper. Easter Sunday this year is Sunday for most Christians in the West, but for the Eastern Orthodox Churches, using the Julian calendar, it will be April 8.

More important than the changing dates on the calendar is to recognize what is being celebrated on these religious holidays. The Jewish eight-day celebration of Passover commemorates the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. The highlight is the Seder meal celebrated at the beginning of the weeklong observance.

The focal points of the Seder include the eating of matzah, or unleavened bread. This symbolizes that when the Hebrew people were getting ready to leave there was no time for the bread to rise. The eating of bit-

ter herbs commemorates the bitter experience of the slavery endured by the Israelites. Drinking the four cups of wine celebrates the new freedom that was attained after the exodus. The recitation of the Haggadah is a liturgy telling each generation the account of deliverance. The core narrative of Passover and the Seder meal is the movement from slavery to freedom.

The Christian story celebrated during Holy Week is that of the final days of Jesus, who after his entry into Jerusalem celebrated with his disciples the Passover meal. This was followed by his betrayal, trial, death by crucifixion, and resurrection, which is celebrated on Easter Sunday. The core narrative of Holy Week and Easter is the movement from death to life.

My first significant interfaith experience occurred many years ago when I was a graduate student and my wife and I were invited to celebrate the Seder with a Jewish family in South Chicago. That was when I first experienced the close relationship between my own understanding of the Christian celebration of Holy Communion or the Eucharist and the rituals of the Passover meal.

BUILDING BRIDGES

After moving to Grand Rapids, I also had the privilege of meeting and learning from Rabbi Phillip Sigal, who served as the rabbi at Congregation Ahavas Israel from 1980 until his untimely death in 1985. Rabbi Sigal was also a scholar, writer and one committed to building a bridge between Judaism and Christianity.

Following his ordination as a Conservative rabbi, his deep commitment promoting interfaith understanding led to his pursuing a doctorate in New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. It was there he developed his theory of "dual covenant theology, namely, that God intended there be two tributaries of the covenant with Abraham: the Judaic, expressed in rabbinic Judaism; and the Christian." He also noted his desire to do further research toward broadening this to include Islam.

BASED IN COMPASSION

Central to his vision was understanding of the imperative of both faiths expressed in the love commandment. As he studied the teachings of Jesus, he saw reflected back to him the "compassion of the Judaic tradition in which Jesus and he both were reared and formed." Throughout his career, he was deeply active in seeing that this compassion common to the two traditions be translated into collaboration for social justice.

Following his death, the Rabbi Phillip Sigal Memorial Lecture was established by the Interfaith Dialogue Association, which has now joined with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. Given Rabbi Sigal's commitment to social justice, it is especially appropriate that this year's lecture on April 10 will address "Social Justice as a Faith Based Imperative." Our speaker will be the Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, the general secretary of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society.

Sigal's ideas were published in a number of books both during his life and after his death. He had planned a five-volume series on the "Emergence of Contemporary Judaism," of which the third volume was published in 1986. The forward to that volume was written by his widow, Lillian Sigal. She wrote: "Despite his deep love for Judaism, he did not feel compelled to show its superiority over Christianity, but rather preferred to illuminate the common matrix from which both faiths have sprung and to stress that both provide equally valid paths for the pilgrim in search of God."

She concludes with a reference to an interview with the religion editor of the Grand Rapids Press during the Passover/Easter season just a few months before his death. "Phillip spoke of the redemptive power of love — the guiding principle of his life." She concludes by quoting him: "When this world has love, then we finally will indeed have Passover and Easter. There will be redemption!"

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Rabbi Sigal Memorial Lecture

"Social Justice as a Faith Based Imperative"

Tuesday, April 10 at 7 pm

Eberhard Center, Grand Rapids

Information and free registration at interfaithunderstanding.org