

## Introductory Remarks before 5771 JYW 8<sup>th</sup> Night Passover Celebration

Welcome, *hag sameach* (happy holiday) to everyone! What a thrill to see us all together.

I have a few short thoughts to share before we begin our Passover celebration.

Ashkenazi Jews customarily call this evening a "Passover Seder." Sephardi Jews call this the "Night of the Haggadah" or the "Night of Unleavened Bread."

I bring this difference up because what I want to share briefly here is about how we are working our way towards each other as branches of a larger group.

At JYW, our mission is to offer a maximally inclusive Judaism - which means explicitly acknowledging and including constituencies of Jews that have been traditionally excluded from mainstream Judaism.

Exclusion can happen by conscious intent (eg. a synagogue has a policy of not officiating at interfaith weddings), or exclusion can happen by omission (eg. never having a photograph or illustration of a gay couple in a religious school curriculum).

In tonight's celebration, we're expanding our mission of Jewish inclusion in a way that's new to our organization -- we're addressing the story of Crypto-Jews in particular and are including some of the practices of Sephardic Jews in general.

One of the facts of inter-cultural inclusion is that cultures don't automatically translate into each other. Far from it. Perspectives on what's most important, what's necessary to pay attention to, are quite different.

In our case, all three JYW employees are Ashkenazi Jews. Our graphic designer, our marketing consultant, our curriculum consultant are Ashkenazi as well (Ashkenazi = white Jews of Eastern European and to some degree central/western European descent). The "dominant culture" in U.S. Jewry is Ashkenazic.

So chances are, no matter how clear our intentions and how eagerly we do our homework, we'll miss something, misunderstand something, or get something completely wrong. We'll be far more likely to default to an Ashkenazic practice over a Sephardi one, or perpetuate an Ashkenazic cultural bias or a mistaken assumption about the contours of Sephardic culture. When one is in the dominant cultural position, there's a lot you don't see. Indeed, in the process of putting this evening together, I've made my share of mistakes.

Interestingly, as a Jewish leader, I'm often in the position of working with well-meaning Christians who sometimes get stuff wrong about Jews. So it's been a humbling learning

experience for me to be on the other side of the dynamic, being the one who is well-meaning but at-times unaware. Or being the one lacking good information. Or, actually having plenty of information and not remembering to use it! This is a process.

It's legitimate for people to need to learn about each other. The key for me, and probably for anyone in a position of privilege, is to respond to moments of misunderstanding and missed opportunities with some graciousness and humility.

My hope is to keep learning and to not let embarrassment, defensiveness or fear of making mistakes keep me from getting closer to and learning more about other people.

In closing, I appreciate that I have been blessed with some partners with whom to travel, and I eagerly look forward to our celebration together tonight.

Rabbi Brian Field  
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