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Passover sermon, 1957.

PASSOVER SERMON

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

April 17, 1957

Numbers - numbers play an important role in this, our Passover Holiday. Last night as we sat around the Seder table after the meal was completed, we played a numbers game - involving the numbers 1 through 13 - and as father would call out each number, one of ^{us} would answer with a pertinent fact respecting that number taken from our wonderful Jewish tradition. Who knew one? One was, of course, the God of the world. Who knew two? Two were the two tables of the covenant - the two tables upon which the tablets of the Ten Commandments were inscribed. Three were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - the great patriarchs of our people. And so we went up in numbers until we reached 13 and so adept have some of our young people become, that they can recite each of the 13 in order fluently, perfectly, and even in the same breath.

What a wonderful pedagogic instrument some ancient educator devised when he invented this numbers game. How well and indelibly impressed upon the minds of many a succeeding generation of young Jewish boys and girls - thirteen basic cardinal facts taken from Jewish life and we might wish that some of our modern pedagogues could develop the ways and means of equally indelibly impressing upon our young people today the basic facts, say of, grammar or of spelling. The numbers 1 through 13, then, are familiar to us from our Seder ritual but there are other numbers equally familiar - the number 15. If you look in the introduction to your Haggadah, that wonderfully filled prayerbook which retells the story of the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt which we read through last night, you will see that the service which we read was divided into 15 sections - each one complete in itself, each one an important cog in the total story, in the total moving forward of our Seder ritual.

The number 10 - number 10 is familiar to us because it was with 10 plagues that God succeeded in getting Pharaoh to permit the Jews to leave from Egypt. Only after the Egyptians had been afflicted with 10 terrible pestilences would

Pharoah relent and allow Moses to lead the Jewish people from slavery into freedom from bondage to the service of God.

There is the number 7 - the 7 days which this Passover Holiday lasts, the 7 days in which we eat only the matzah - the unleavened bread - symbolic of the bread baked in such haste as our ancestors prepared to leave their Egyptian homes to escape into the freedom of a new life.

These are some of the numbers associated with our Passover Holiday but there is one number which is pre-eminently associated with it, which appears again and again and again in the ritual of our Passover and of our Seder, and that is the number 4. Last night 4 times did we fill our cups with wine, 4 times did we recite the Kiddush, 4 times did we drink of that wine, 4 times did we express our joy to God for the deliverance which he wrought for our people so many thousands of years ago. You will recall that when Moses first returned to Egypt he did not meet with immediate success. He went before the Pharoah and plead the cause of the Jews, asked the Pharoah for permission to lead his people out of Egypt, but Pharoah would not agree. Indeed, the only immediate results of Moses' first mission was that Pharoah sent out orders to all the taskmasters, all the slavemasters throughout Egypt that they should double and redouble the burdens and the impositions that they had imposed upon the Jew; and the Jew's lot became doubly difficult because of Moses' plea unto Pharoah so much so that the people - the Jews themselves - turned against Moses. They said: "Have you come to deliver us or to drive us deeper into poverty and into slavery?" So much so that Moses, himself, came to doubt whether or not his mission had any hope of accomplishment and in his doubt, he turned to God and God heard and understood this doubt and he answered Moses with a fourfold promise. He said I will deliver this people. I will bring them out of slavery. I will deliver them with a mighty hand. I will take them unto me as my people. And because of this fourfold promise made good a few days later by God, made good in such a way that our people was enabled to escape from Egypt, to win for themselves

a new life. Because of this fourfold promise, because of our rejoicing in the fact of freedom, we lift at the Seder table our cups in joy, 4 times, and recite our Kiddush - our praise to God.

The first 4 of our Passover Service has to do with the joy which we feel because of the liberty which our people won so many years ago, but there is another group of 4 which is equally/as important in our Passover story. You know the Haggadah which is simply the retelling of the story of the exodus is, in a sense, a book of answers. It is an attempt to answer 4 questions asked by one of the young people around the table - 4 questions which have to do with basic dissimilarities, basic differences between this Seder meal and all other meals and feasts in which we, as Jews, take part in throughout the year. Why on this night, why on this night do we do this which is different from all other nights? Why on this night do we eat only unleavened bread? Why on this night do we eat the bitter herb? Why on this night do we dip the parsley, the greenery of spring, into salt water twice; and why on this night did our ancestors eat their Seder meal reclining rather than sitting upright? The Haggadah is an attempt to explain the answers, the reasons, for these customs. It is an attempt to underscore basic themes in the Seder ritual as it answers these questions. We eat the unleavened bread because our parents and grandparents - those of many thousands of years ago - prepared hastily to leave from Egypt. This was all that they could bake. They had no time to bake for adornment or to bake richly. This was their bread of affliction and we, sympathizing with the haste with which they were searching for freedom, eat of that bread. Why do eat the bitter herb? We eat it to remind ourselves that the taste of slavery, the taste of enslavement, the taste of tyranny, the taste of oppression is a bitter one - is a sour taste. It leaves a sour taste in our mouths and/^{we} should never willingly, we who enjoy freedom, we should never willingly accept the yoke of any slavemaster, of any tyrant, of any oppressor. Why do we dip some green into the salt water? To remind us of the tears which our ancestors shed, to remind us that it was those

tears - the effort which they expended - which made possible the deliverance from Egypt, which made possible all the other great accomplishments of our people throughout the ages and that we, as the latter day representatives of this great people - people still in an exodus from the slavery of bestiality and of animality of maturity - we, too, should do nothing that would lower our respect in their eyes which would re-enslave us to our bad habits or to external enemies. And finally, why did our ancestors eat reclining rather than sitting upright? Well, this is a custom which we no longer carry out but in Roman days, when Rome was master of the world, it was the custom of Roman nobility to eat any feast - any meal - in a reclining position and the Jew, on the great festival and the great feast day of his year, wanted to eat in a similar position to tell all men that before God all men were equal regardless of the nobility of their birth or of the humbleness of their origin - be they Roman or Jew, master or slave - before God all men are free and are equal and in this like, therefore, all men ought to be free and ought to develop a society which permitted equality of opportunity.

These are the 4 questions. These are the 4 answers which our Seder Haggadah attempts to retell. So the second 4 with which we deal tells us the meaning of our Passover story but I would call your attention to the fact that there is a third 4 written into the message and the purpose of this Passover season.

Almost at the beginning of our Haggadah, it tells a story of 4 sons - 4 basic types of people who come to the Seder table and there ask the question of the leader of the evening, of the father, of the master of the house - ask the question why this Seder is being observed. The answer which the rabbis gave to each of these 4 men - each of these 4 sons - emphasizes the psychology of the Seder. The 4 questions emphasize the philosophy of the Seder - the 4 sons its psychology. There is the * * - the wise man - the understanding and discerning son. To him you should reveal all the subtleties, all the nuances, all the fine shadings of ideas which are involved in our Bible and in the Haggadah in this whole theme of liberty and the responsibilities of freedom. There is the * * - the cynical son, the scoffing son. To him you

should simply emphasize the fact and the truth of the Passover. You should not attempt to argue with him, to rationalize your own beliefs for his ~~own~~ benefits but simply to state as a belief your unfailing and unswerving allegiance to the basic principles which this Passover Holiday emphasizes. There is the * * the simple son - the man or the woman who will never understand beyond the broad outlines the basic facts of the story. You should see to it as you retell this story that these bold facts stand out in relief, are readily apparent, so that any, however simple, can grasp them and understand them. And finally there is the * * the uneducated man, the illiterate person, the person who has not yet had an opportunity to gain a background - the basic facts behind the Seder story. This person you should have patience with and you should, bit by bit, explain to him the history of the exodus - the forty years of wandering in the desert, the meaning of freedom and of liberty in the lives of all men - its importance in our day. You should not begrudge the time you spend with such a person for there is a thirst for learning here and you must be prepared to gratify it.

These are the 4 types which appear at our Seder table. They appear in our classrooms. They appear in our Temples. They appear wherever men try to educate others into the basic facts which are precious to them, the basic moral ideals which are fundamental in their ways of life and anyone who would attempt to teach others things precious to him can concern themselves with knowing the personalities of those scholars who sit before him and ^{not} simply teach the facts baldly as he thinks they might be taught. There is then a profound psychology which any who would lead the Seder are advised to develop. There is a profound philosophy which any who take part in the Seder are asked to consider, and there is a profound rejoicing on this Passover Day which tells us that we should consider ourselves as if we, too, had been delivered from Egypt; as if we, too, were enjoying for the first time the heady wine of freedom; and revelling in this exaltation the freedom which we enjoy should become most precious to us. We should begrudge any person, or any group, or any philosophy which would take

the smallest iota of this freedom from us. These 4's remind us of the basic architectonic of our Passover holiday.

Finally, I would call your attention to another 4 - another grouping of 4 with which you are perhaps not so familiar but one which also tells us a great deal about the basic meaning of this holiday. This group of 4 appears not in the Haggadah and not in the prayerbook from which we read this morning but in the Midrash, in that basic collection of elucidations and explanations on our Bible which our rabbis wrote through the long centuries. It tells a story that when the Jews left Egypt they left feeling that the great deliverance had truly come. They could see no obstacles to their escape from Egypt, to their rebuilding a peoplehood - a nationhood - in their desert, and to developing for themselves and for their children and for their grandchildren a way of life of which they would be immensely proud but almost immediately you will recall from the Bible, Pharoah relented and decided to reverse his promise to allow the Jews to go free and he dispatched his best chariot regiment to pursue the Jew and to bring them back into Egypt. The Jewish rearguard, according to this Midrash, saw the dust rising from underneath the wheels of Pharoah's chariots just as they approached the Red Sea. They brought the news of this pursuit into the camp and there was great alarm, there was great clamor, confusion, and consternation. Before them was an impassable unfordable sea, behind them now were the pursuing enemies who had gone back on their promise. On each side was a barren wilderness which no man could traverse. No one knew where to turn. They were faced with a great problem and according to the Midrash, the Jews then spread into 4 different camps - each camp having a separate counsel or advice which they would impose upon all.

One group cautioned, "Let us go back to Egypt. Let us fly the white flag of surrender as Pharoah's chariots appear. Let us tell them that we will abjectly follow them back to Pithom and to Ramesses, to all of these store cities which we were abuilding. There return to our tasks. There bend our heads again under the yoke of slavery." These were all the timid men of the camp - all the cowardly

men - all those who throughout their lives, whenever an obstacle opposed them, willingly submitted to superior force - all those who had never once dared in their lives to stand up and to be counted for something which they deemed important or precious.

A second group of men were, our Midrash tells us, unwilling to return to slavery for they were filled with the blackness of despair - they could see no hope, no out. They could not even cast about in their minds for any solution to this difficulty which surrounded them and so they advised Moses that the whole Jewish people should simply cast themselves into the sea and there drown - there commit suicide. They felt hopeless in this life. The only hope which they saw was in some future promise and they would now cash in on that promise. Here were all those ^{who} ~~that~~ are the pessimists of life - who easily despair when faced with any major problem - who give up before the problem has really presented itself and before they have explored all the possible avenues of solution.

There is, yet, a third group - a group of men who became completely unnerved and unbalanced by the danger in which they were placed. They ran about hither and yere, helter skelter, pell mell and finally they hit upon this idea as a solution to their dilemma. They said, "Let all the Jews come together to some central place and there as Pharaoh's chariots approach, let the Jews begin to shout aloud. Perhaps the noise of their shouting will so confuse Pharaoh and his charioteers, that they will turn back and we will be free." Now there was obviously no hope in such a solution but there are many who go through life and whenever they are faced with a serious problem - some issue of grave concern - become unnerved and unbalanced by it and cease to think reasonably or rationally and pin their hopes upon harebrained schemes which had not a single possibility of success.

And finally a fourth group counselled Moses that he should immediately attack the enemy that was pursuing. As they were busy about shining their

armor, buckling on their swords, this group of men told Moses that he should rush out into battle. He should brave the spears and the swords of Pharoah's hosts. Perhaps in an immediate attack, there lay some salvation. Here were joined all the men, who at a slightest provocation in their lives, respond by the use of force - all the combatative, all the pugnacious, all the erratic people of this world who look to no other solution than that of force even when that solution offers no hope.

How profound was the understanding of human nature which our rabbis expressed when they told of these 4 camps into which the Jews divided because how often when we are faced with some serious problem, do we resort to one or another of these 4 solutions or pseudo-solutions. Sometimes we play the part of the craven, of the coward. Before even the enemy is upon us, before the danger is with us, we fly the white flag. We surrender without attempting to achieve our salvation. Sometimes, sometimes we become so ~~overwhelmed~~ ^{overwhelmed} with despondency and with despair and with gloom, that we cease to cast about for some hope. We give up. We look to some preacher of salvation, some gospel or the after life as our only hope and we simply deny the problems which surround us in this world. And sometimes we pin our hopes on schemes which have no hope of realization. Our minds run away with ourselves. They become unbalanced and we destroy ourselves with schemes that could never come to reality. And sometimes we buckle on the armor of battle when we have no reason to do battle and we will simply be overwhelmed by a host ^{too} ^{for} superior ~~in~~ us when it would have been the better part of valor to have been cautious and to have sought some other avenue of solution.

Fortunately, Moses and the leaders of Israel took none of these 4 counsels. We do not know what transpired so many thousands of years ago. The sands of time have run so full that our vision of those days is clouded but we do know that they achieved the miracle of deliverance, that they persisted in their determined effort to find a way to free this people, and that because of their persistence the miracle of deliverance became reality. How so? I think it

became so because above all else, they pinned their faith on the last of the 4's basic to this holiday - ~~the~~ on the 4 letters which in Hebrew spell out the name of God * */ They put their faith in God. They adopted some reasonable plan which had a hope of success. They worked to achieve that but they worked in confidence - in faith - that God would make good His promise, that God would see to it that those dedicated to His service would not suffer for their dedication.

So it must be with us. Whenever we are faced with a serious life problem, let us avoid the way of the coward, let us avoid the way of the defeatist, let us avoid the way of the unbalanced, let us avoid the way of the pugnacious. Let us find hope in our God and out of that hope let us build for ourselves a plan of action - reasonable, efficacious - one which will lead to the success, to the happy solution which we desire. Faith will give us hope. Hope will give us courage and strength and where there is hope and where there is courage and where there is strength, there is the miracle of deliverance.

Amen.

*Omission of Hebrew

When Moses himself ~~was~~ ^{doubled the} efficiency of the mission. God appeared
unto the great leader - and renewed his covenant - by promising, [2]
him " I will buy you out ~~from~~ ^{from the hands of} the Egyptians,
I will deliver you from the hands of
I will redeem you with a contracted loan ...
and I will take you to me for a people.

4 time ~~did God~~ ^{did God} ~~show~~ ^{show} his intent to bring the Jews out of Egypt.
4 time do we raise our gloves in joyful gratitude - to God God
for having allowed our ancestors to break out of Egyptian enslavement
& to begin that eventful and impit. history which was to add so
much of religious & cultural advancement to our civilization.

The no. 4 plays another important role during our seder service.
At the very beginning of the evening one of the young people present
asks 4 questions - 4 questions concerning what makes this night diff.
from all other nights - It is to answer these 4 questions that we
begin our seder service. Thus thousands of years ago when the
formula of 4 questions was devised there was 1 way in which the
seder meal differed from all other festive meals - On it ~~was~~
placed only unleavened bread. On it the Jew tasted of bitter
herbs. On it the Jew dipped ~~the~~ some parsley into salt water. And
On the seder night the Jew sat at his meal reclining, rather than sitting upright.
Each of these 4 customs emphasized a theme basic to the seder holiday:
the unleavened bread was symbolic of the haste with which
the Jews fled Egypt - the reclining position was a reminder
that the Jews were no longer slaves - the dipping of parsley into salt water
was a reminder of the bitterness of slavery - the sitting upright was a reminder
of the freedom of the Jewish people.

the dipping of parsley into salt water recalls the tears shed by
the Jewish slaves - the reclining position was a reminder
that the Jews were no longer slaves - the sitting upright was a reminder
of the freedom of the Jewish people.

(and)

the reclining of tables - a custom now generally set aside - meant to [3]
be an answer during Roman days that he was eating as might
a Roman nobleman - and that before God and man was better
than he because of birth and station -

The Haggadah seeks to answer these 4 questions - The answer encompasses
the whole message of the Passover and ~~leads to~~ ^{leads to} the meaningfulness
of the Seder.

4 cups of wine

4 questions to answer

and there is yet another famous group of 4 essential in our Passover
service.

almost at the very beginning of the Seder service, the Haggadah offers us
some good practical advice. It reminds us that when explaining
rel. truth such as we are here concerned with - we must remember
that not every person is equally well equipped to understand our
explanation. The Haggadah has in it "4 sons" of 4 human types

- the $\text{p} \text{---} \text{D}$ is the learning person
- the $\text{p} \text{---} \text{D}$ is the inquiring, sniffer
- the $\text{p} \text{---} \text{D}$ is the simple person
- the $\text{p} \text{---} \text{D}$ is the uneducated person

a good Seder leader will adapt the Passover story to such a mix that
the material he presents is suited to the needs of his ~~audience~~ audience - and
he should always remember that before him sit men and women from
each of these categories. There is good advice here for our speakers or
leaders. All teaching ~~must be done~~ ^{can be} successful only if we keep in mind
the backgrounds and abilities of those whom we teach -

4 cups of wine - the 4 of the Passover

4 questions to answer - the meaning of the Passover

4 sons to illumine - the psychology of the Seder

It seems that the 4 introduces us to the very heart of the holiday.

I would call to your attention another I associated with the holiday -
It is found not in Haggadah - but in the midrash - that unimpaired [4]
collection of explanation and embellishment with which the Rabbis
surrounded the Bible.

The rabbis had a keen understanding of human nature. They felt that
the Bible had not told ^{all the details} ~~the whole~~ of the story of the Exodus of the Jews from
Egypt. Thus they said when Moses finally led the Jews out of Egypt
there was much rejoicing. Everyone was elated and excited. The journey
from Piton to Ramesses to the Red Sea was every effort. But then
bad news was brought to the camp. A scout from the rear guard brought
in the information that Pharaoh's chariot regiment was following,
in hot pursuit. Immediately the bubble of elation burst. There was
commotion throughout the camp. Pharaoh's chariot was behind.
The Red Sea was ahead - impassable - help - help - Israel the
rabbi said broke into 4 opposing groups each offering a different
counsel.

One group said. "Let us return to Egypt". This group counseled
surrender and a willing return to the slavery and the oppression
which they had just left. They wanted to save their lives whatever
be the cost. This was the party of the cowards - of those men and women
who go through life surrendering the hopes, whenever any difficulty
present itself

A second group said, "We will drown ourselves in the sea". This
group saw no hope. They were not so ~~sure~~ ^{sure} as to bargain their lives
for permanent slavery. But they had not the vision to see how any
advantage could come out of the situation. Defeated - as they were
they saw was suicide - This group was made up of those men and
women who by nature ^{admit their} ~~just~~ ^{admit their} defect which
there is yet even a slim hope - ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~will~~ ^{will} ~~see~~ ^{see} ~~slavery~~ ^{slavery}
life's darkest side

Disunited
A third party advocated "Let all the Jews should come together and
stand as one as they should & make a much noise & provide.
Perhaps all the shouting would confuse and frighten the Egyptians.
To this group were joined all the undisciplined in the camp - all
those men and women who prefer going to fight - who when
faced with serious problems derive all manner of unpleasant

One group advised "Let us return to Egypt." The timid and the [5] cowards added their voice to the advice. They ^{men proposed} ~~preferred~~ to return to the oppression they had just escaped - if in a day they could save their miserable lives. There were to be found all those who live in fear of their weakness and the strength of others - who spend their lives surrendering, or hope weakness by diffusing present ills.

A second group said "There is nothing left to do but to ~~throw~~ ourselves into the sea!" ~~There were men and women from the~~ ^{the} ~~depression of the~~ despairing & of the exactly defeated - ~~men~~ - of those who would solve their problems in the world by speeding themselves into the next. They wanted peace to accept again slavery, yoke - but there was none the less a complete surrender. ~~the~~ the.

A third section of the people became despondent and enraptured. To be pointed of ~~the~~ seemingly justice almost admitted. "Let all ~~us~~ you come to one place," they advised "and then begin to throw loudly at the Egyptians. Our strength will confuse them and they will not be able to attack us. The highly motivated and the exactly frightened were largely numbered among this party. Their fears had led this group to set store by the unplanned & impossible.

The fourth part of the people were for immediate killings. They began to kill on their own and shouted at Moses that he should make plans for immediate engagement. The believed - & the contention - the pugnacious & the vain all found their way into this group. Men always ready for battles and fighting - who see the engagement to any problem in making, not to open combat - who have no feelings need less immediate solution.

How long these 4 groups resemble ~~the~~ the way men cope with life's problems?

Some of the unintelligible of surrender at the least sign of opposition. They spend their days dominated by others, subject to the whims & commands of parents, husbands or wives, employers, all those

who might take advantage of their cowardice

[6]

Some seek here in another world for relief from ~~hopes~~ ^{hopes} in this world. They turn ^{away} to those who promise eternal salvation. They part for the ^{gospel} ~~message~~ of the other world - and sometimes they hasten their own journey too.

Others become discouraged when obstacles present themselves. They run almost aimlessly - expending much energy - achieving nothing - because they are dreaming of hopes which could not possibly be.

Some run out to do battle ^{they are} - Brave and courageous - but often to succumb only in destruction, themselves - for they do battle often at the inopportune time & against impossible odds.

Passover is a holiday which commemorates one of the greatest achievements in all history. ^{Israel} ~~The Jews~~ freed itself from oppressive tyranny - the escape of a group of Hebrew slaves from brutal persecution. We do not know how all the details of this accomplishment 3500 yrs. have died in memory of that day. But we can be sure that Israel freed a Jewish man and himself because they rejected each of the 4 counsel suggested above & instead found the miracle of deliverance in determined effort, in courage achievement, & above all in unshakable faith in God - in the faith that enabled Israel to trust the wages of the Philistines confident that they would put

For God is the Lord 4 associated with our Passover, 21-21. 10 of 4 letters - Faith in God - a faith which enabled men to act nobly - bring the deliverance from all our personal & national bonds which - then by prayer