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Deviance or making do:

Seder in the institution

Jordan Mathurin

Deviance or Making Do: Seder in the Institution, compares the institution of Jewish religion and the traditions that go along with the holiday of Pesach, Passover, against one impromptu Passover Seder held at a rehab clinic and mental health hospital. It shows how in many ways and to many of the Jewish faith this event could be viewed in such a way that it is labeled as deviant, but in the end how far does it actually stray from the true heart of a Seder?

Introduction

What is making do? Can it be as simple as choosing a second option when the first is gone, like what to have for dinner, or must individuals be in a situation where making do requires them to alter their entire life styles? For instance, in Terry Williams' "The Cocaine Kids," teenagers earn the best living they can with the resources they have. Victor Frankl also describes the ways he and many other Jews forced into camps "Made-Do" with the situation in which they were placed. Out of this experience, Frankl developed this definition for the meaning of life: "Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual." But what happens when the process we go through to make-do leads us down the road of deviance, or, in other words, makes others look at our decisions and behavior as deviant? Due to a family member being an in-patient at the same time as the Jewish holiday Passover, I spent this year's family Seder at a rehab center. While there, I was able to view the process of "making-do" first hand.

What is Passover?

Pesach, more commonly known in English as Passover, is a Jewish holiday that occurs from the 15th to the 22nd of Nissan. On our calendar it usually coincides with Easter, or occurs slightly before it. Passover is one of the most widely practiced of the Jewish holidays; even those who don't attend synagogue regularly tend to have a Seder to celebrate the holiday. Just like any of the other aspects of Judaism, tradition plays a large role in how everything is organized and celebrated. Those who follow tradition to the "T" may see anything that departs from ordained rituals as a deviant

act. For example, orthodox Jews would look upon a Seder that does not follow their strict rules as unorthodox and therefore deviant. I can positively say that the Seder I attended this year would be, in the eyes of any other practicing Jew, the definition of a deviant Seder. To understand this, it is important to know what the norm for Passover is.

The reason for the holiday of Passover is to celebrate our, and by “our” I mean the Jewish people’s, freedom from Egypt. After years of slavery and suffering G-d saw it fit to send a man named Moses forward as his messenger. Moses pleaded to the pharaoh to let his people go. With pharaoh refusing each of these pleas and ignoring the warnings of disaster, G-d made right with his promise and delivered ten plagues upon the Egyptians: frogs, locusts, boils, etc. By the last plague pharaoh had been broken and practically pushed them out of the country. But then his heart changed and he had his army chase after the fleeing Jews; G-d steps in once again and saved the Israelites. That is the Passover story in a nutshell. It is told yearly during the Passover Seder and the Seder itself is what I will be focusing on in this paper.

The traditional Seder has 15 parts. There are four glasses of wine that are drunk throughout the night. There are prayers said over each cup to honor the holiday and our blessings. There is also a cup set aside for the prophet Elijah. In the center of the table there is always a special plate aptly called the Seder plate. On this plate rests six of the traditional symbols of Passover. These items are the bitter herbs, shank bone, haroseth, parsley, bitter greens, and hard-boiled egg. There are

prayers that accompany each of the items on the plate and are said at different times during the Seder.

Another important tradition in celebrating the holiday is the lighting of candles on the first two and last two nights of the holiday. Then of course there is the feast, which almost always includes matzo ball soup, roasted meat, and a whole spread of sides. Even when celebrating just with my family, which is only four people, we would have food to feed at least eight. Before and after eating, it is ritual to wash your hands by pouring water from a jug over your hands into a bowl. This is one part that my family and I never followed, so possibly we have always deviated a little from the normal Seder. Everyone always concludes the Seder by joyfully saying, "Next year in Israel." It is also important to note that the text that guides the whole Seder is the Haggadah. The Haggadah varies from version to version but includes the stories and prayers for everything I listed above. My family has been using one that takes about an hour to an hour and a half to work through, since before I can remember.

Seder In The Institution

Due too circumstances in the family, this year I had the Passover Seder in Silver Hill. Silver Hill is a mental health hospital and rehab center in New Canaan, Connecticut. The staff member who was in charge of organizing the whole event was the chaplain of the hospital and she greeted us as we neared the main building. It can easily be said that the whole experience was a lot different then any one I have had before, a leader from another religion just being the start of it all.

My family and those attending the Seder gathered in the staff café at 5:45. Those in attendance outside of my family included the chaplain, two patients from the depression ward and four from the rehab program. One of the women who joined us was not Jewish and of the other four only one was a practicing Jew. The first 15 minutes were filled with a chaotic attempt at trying to organize everything that needed to be on the tables, but by six o'clock we had the "30 Minute Haggadahs" passed out and we were ready to start. At first we were not sure who was going to begin the readings, but the one practicing member of the group volunteered. Two candles stood in the center of the table, but lighting them had to be skipped because of the sprinkler located directly above. The prayer was said and we moved on to the first cup of wine, or instead I should say grape juice. Since we were at a rehab clinic, alcohol of any sort was forbidden. We moved around the table taking turns reading sections of the Haggadah. Some people who weren't as familiar with the readings needed help with certain words, but someone was always willing to help.

As we neared the feast we inquired with the kitchen on what would be for dinner. The chef told us only the matzo ball soup, which was answered with sighs of disappointment around the table. Matzo ball soup is delicious, but usually just the starter to the meal. Also the patients were skipping their dinner to be at the Seder. Thankfully the chef was more than willing to cook something else for us to eat and after a few clarifications to what was kosher for Passover we were assured there would be chicken and fish. When we got to dinner I started by serving out bowls of matzo ball soup from the warmer but found out we were a few bowls short and had no spoons. The kitchen though was again more than happy to help. For dinner there

was steamed carrots, grilled chicken, and lemon baked white fish. During dinner everyone started to open up more and talk about their childhood Seders and their lives outside of the institute. I found it interesting about how many jokes were made about being in silver hills. For example one man stated that he wondered what would be done if he walked around with a glass full of the grape juice.

After diner we picked up the Haggadah again and started with the prayer for the third cup of wine. At this time another cup for Elijah is poured and the front door is opened. The only problem was that patients are not allowed to leave any of the outside doors open, so only the door to the room was opened and closed shortly after. When the Seder was over, everyone sat around and talked for a while, munching on kosher desserts, but most of them had AA meetings starting soon and couldn't stay for too long. The patients expressed such gratitude to my parents and me for helping throw this Seder. It had been a comfort to them to do something normal and many were missing family that they couldn't see. The one practicing Jew gave everyone hugs because he truly thought he would not be having a Seder this year. After we packed up what we had brought, we thanked the kitchen staff and headed out to the car.

Deviance Or Making-Do

What was deviant about this whole situation? I think it can be clearly said that the people we held the Seder with would be considered deviants in normal society. They all either had mental health issues or alcohol/drug problems. These are the people that others frown down upon and do not want you to become. It's ironic though, because many of the patients held respectable jobs outside of the

hospital. They were trying to cure themselves, so that they could return to their families and the normal flow of society.

Victor Frankl in his book "Man's Search for Meaning" discusses his fellow Jew's needs for religion in the concentration camps. He notes how they "...improvised prayers or services in the corner of a hut, or in the darkness of a locked cattle truck in which we were brought back from a distant work site..."(46). These were normal people as well those who were seen as deviants in the eyes of the Nazis. They were doing their best to make-do in the situation they were placed in.

Erving Goffman separates this concept of "making-do" into two categories in his book, *Asylums*. The simple of "making-do" is the process of converting an object into something it is not, for a purpose it was not meant to serve. One example is using a rolled up shirt as a pillow. This part of making-do can be done by anyone, no matter how affiliated they are with the institution. On the other hand, those more affiliated are able to work with the system. They are not just changing single objects but flexing the system in their favor. For example, Goffman talks about hospital patients who developed a way of getting second portions of food to take back to their rooms.

The first thing that deviated from a normal Passover Seder and our first act of making-do was that we were not able to light candles because of the sprinkler. This is a ritual that is done on most important holidays and skipping it wouldn't happen anywhere else. Next, the lack of wine was completely different. At every Seder I had attended in the years before, there had been at least one bottle of wine

on the table, and normally only the children had grape juice. I myself had only in the recent years graduated to the drinking of wine and not grape juice. Of course, it is completely understandable why they could not have wine at this table. The Haggadah was also a version that would not normally be used. It was incredibly short and had a lot more English and explanatory text in it. It was useful though for those at the table who did not know what to do and those not completely comfortable with Hebrew. The feast part of a Seder is normally well planned out and ends up filling the day with cooking. This year though, the feast ended up being a last minute thought.

One of the bigger things that deviated from the norm of a Passover Seder was the fact that it was not made up of family and friends. I say this but I feel that by the time we left, we were leaving as friends and not as strangers. There was no way this could be considered a typical Seder and a lot of things were not conducted as they should be according to tradition and the Jewish faith, but to me this was one of the most interesting and maybe the best Seder I have had so far. Before my family and I left and the patients headed to their AA meetings, we shook hands and gave hugs and each of the patients thanked us for providing them with something that they would have otherwise not had. The joy that we had brought to them could be clearly seen.

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