

Passover D'var by Gail Pasternack  
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Every year, when spring brings longer days and shorter nights, we gather with friends and families to celebrate life and freedom. In our homes, we perform a series of rituals as part of our Passover Seder. These rituals are metaphors for our own lives, and through them, we take a journey of self discovery.

This journey begins before the seder. We prepare for Passover by cleaning and removing all the hamaytz, the leavened bread, from our homes. Hamaytz could represent all that is bloated and fermented within ourselves. By cleaning our homes and participating in the Seder, we engage in acts that help remove the hamaytz from within.

Finding it can be difficult. Hamaytz can hide in places we don't look, or it can crumble into pieces that are hard to see. Yet it is still there.

This week, I stumbled across an article in the New York Times that had me rethinking the concept of the hamaytz hidden within us all. The article was about an antisemitic incident at a New Jersey high school, one that led to an investigation by the state attorney general and a lawsuit against the school.

Several years ago, the Juniors of that school went on a trip to the beach. One student wrote in the sand "I h8 Jews." He took a photo of it, and sent the photo in a group text to other students. For the most part, the reaction was positive. The students thought it was so funny, and discussed putting the photo in the yearbook. One girl on the group text was Jewish. She'd heard a number of antisemitic remarks from other students before, and had been offended when a teacher in the school recommended "Mein Kampf" as a good read. The photo was the last straw. She showed it to her father, and her father reported it to the principal.

The situation spiraled out of control after the attorney general's investigation. The boy who took the photo and the students who found it funny stated outright that they were not antisemitic. It was just a joke. The school claimed it handled bullying and prejudice appropriately, and the community sided against the Jewish girl. She was accused of being a snitch and was completely ostracized by the other students. She lost all of her friends. When the girl shared this with the principal, she was told to forget about having friends in the school and to find friends in her synagogue. In the end, she dropped out of school and opted to homeschool because she'd lost all faith in her community.

What does this have to do with hamaytz?

Like hamaytz, prejudice against those who are different from us is hidden deep within. It is hard to see. In fact, we rarely see it unless we look for it, unless we examine ourselves. It is uncomfortable to examine ourselves. Most of us do not want to. If we do something that offends someone, it is normal for us to claim innocence. I'm not racist. I'm not homophobic. I'm not antisemitic. These statements are reflexive. We say them without thinking.

Yet, these statements are gaslighting. By claiming innocence, we are pushing the blame onto those whom we offend. We're saying, "I'm not the one with the problem. You are the one with the problem." We're saying, "I'm the victim here, not you."

So what do we do when we are the target of prejudice? That's a hard question, and I'm not sure I know the full answer. Fighting prejudice is a long, arduous journey, and it's overwhelming. Prejudice, like weeds in a yard, always creeps back. Do we give up and let the weeds take over, or do we plant seeds of native plants that will live in harmony with each other? Do we allow hate to consume us, or do allow the seeds of compassion and understanding to take root?

Several years ago, I heard a story on NPR about Daryl Davis, a blues musician, who spent thirty years befriending members of the Ku Klux Klan. Once he became friends with a KKK member, he would show them how misguided their hate was. Over 200 Klansmen left the KKK because of their friendship with Daryl. Each one gave their robes to him, and he kept them as a reminder of the impact he made in reducing racism.

For Daryl to be able to do this, he needed to have compassion for those who hated him. No easy task. I know. I've tried.

I've come to realize that I need to look for prejudices that are buried deep within myself, the hamaytz that blocks me from living life fully. To reach inner liberation, I need to truly accept that suffering and joy, wisdom and foolishness, light and darkness, and hope and despair are all part of life's dance. I need to accept the beauty and the faults within myself and all of humanity. Only then will I be free from my personal bondage. And only then can I have any chance of helping others free themselves from the bondage of hate, resentment, and fear.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/04/nyregion/new-jersey-antisemitism-high-school.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>