



Do What You Can

Rabbi Michelle Robinson

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Last year, I made a Passover parody playlist to help our family get in the holiday spirit. This year, a friend sent me a coronavirus playlist with songs like, “Don’t Stand So Close to Me,” “U Can’t Touch This,” and “It’s the End of the World as We Know It.” Or my personal favorite for this *Pesach*: “From a Distance.”

Last night, many of us connected with our loved ones from a distance via Zoom, FaceTime, and other virtual platforms. In Israel, there’s a new *Pesach* move: *ochlim b’nifrad, shirim b’yachad* – eat separately and sing together.

Last night, all over Israel, with the entire country on lockdown and not allowed even to leave their homes, people took a page out of two other major Jewish holiday playbooks. Apartment-dwellers channeled *Hannukah*, moving their tables to their front windows. Those with more outdoor room channeled *Sukkot*, setting their tables out on balconies or in backyards, so they could join neighbors in song. Eating at separate tables, singing together.

Singing together is such a critical part of what we do. Even in isolation, finding some way to sing together is a very Jewish move. But beyond the song, it turns out that the enforced distance of this year may also give us an intimate window into another deep Torah of *Pesach* that has been lost to us for generations.

First, some background. The Torah gives two separate sets of *Pesach* laws. One is for the first *Pesach*, *Pesach Mitzrayim* – the events that happened while our ancestors were still slaves in Egypt. And the other is for all the rest of the celebrations that would follow: *Pesach Dorot*.

All our lives we’ve all been celebrating *Pesach Dorot*. We gather in large, joyful community to tell and to sing a story of something that happened long ago. We stretch and strain

to put ourselves in our ancestors' shoes – to find new resonance in an ancient tale. We tend to focus on the end of the story – the courage of crossing the sea and the preciousness of freedom. This year, though, the first page of the ancient tale suddenly reads like our own.

As our ancestors sheltered in their homes from a plague of death, we shelter in our homes from a plague of death. As our ancestors took a lamb for each household and marked the first *Pesach* in isolation as small family units, we mark this *Pesach* physically only with those who share our household. As our ancestors were afraid, we are afraid. We know, as they knew, where we want to be – past all of this – but we have no idea how we will get there.

When we look back to that first *Pesach*, we know exactly how the story ends. But those living it had none of that clarity or certainty.

Last week, Micah Goodman observed that *Pesach* is the moment in our Jewish calendar when “we celebrate the heroism of living in uncertainty.” That feels like a heroism we could use right now. Yet we know that uncertainty wasn't any easier for our ancestors than it is for us. The proof? Right after they cross the sea to liberation, Moses leading the men and Miriam leading the women dancing with their timbrels, barely a moment passes before they want to go back to Egypt. Micah observed that this reflects our basic human need to be in a psychic space where we know what to expect. To be unsettled is unsettling.

Here, it turns out, the lens of *Pesach Mitzrayim* is helpful. Go back with me to the moment before the happy ending. Go back before the Exodus. There is a moment, right before the final plague, that I have always dismissed as irrelevant to us today. The Israelites are told to take some blood and paint it on the lintels of their homes. Really, when was the last time you used the word “lintel”? We use “lintel” exactly once a year for exactly one moment that feels as antiquated and irrelevant as the word itself. Blood on the top of your door to miraculously save you from the angel of death?! If only it were so easy.

So I have always dismissed this part of our tale as a magical miracle that is rendered meaningless for the modern reader by the fact that it worked in every Jewish household, something we know is not on the menu for our time.

But, this year, in light of Micah's teaching of the "heroism of living in uncertainty," I looked again. And I saw something that I want to share with you. *Pesach Mitzrayim* is not just a moment of courage. It is a moment of real existential fear, even dread – marking the lintels in particular.

Sheltering in place, a plague is coming. And all I have is a paintbrush. Marking the doorposts is not just a magical amulet of miraculous protection, but an act of agency. All I have is a paintbrush – so I am going to use what I have.

Painting the lintels – a high point on each door that you have to lift up your arms to reach – is an act of hope in the face of fear, that we can lift our hands higher to do what we can, no matter how small. Painting the lintels is a powerful reminder that at a time of plague, the simple act of staying home, inside our doors, is a holy act of communal care.

In my family, the week before *Pesach* we go around the house to gather up pillowcases for pillows to recline at our Seders. The pillowcases are a particularly poignant piece of our Passover prep filled with generational memory. We follow the tradition set by my great-grandfather, who hid the *afikomen* in a pillowcase behind his seat. As the story is told, *m'dor l'dor*, all night long he would make a game of goading the kids to try to distract, negotiate, or sneak their way into freeing it from his place.

This year, we went around the house, as we always do, to gather up pillowcases. But this year is different from all other years. This year, the pillowcases will not be used at our Seder table. My daughter Maya has taken them to the makeshift sewing studio she set up in our family room, where she now spends hours tailoring them into protective face masks: masks for her grandparents, masks for our family, masks to donate.

There is so much we cannot do. But our pillowcases are our modern lintels, reminding us, through uncertainty and anxiety, that freedom is found in so many ways – most importantly when, in the face of fear, we do what we can.

Which brings me back to that Passover playlist. Like so many of us, 80's pop idol Jon Bon Jovi is stuck at home. He is not a first responder; he cannot save lives. He is not a grocery worker; he cannot bravely help people get groceries to their home. What he can do is write songs. So that is what he is doing – one song in particular. Last week, on his Instagram feed, Bon Jovi posted, “These are uneasy times we’re dealing with, but we’re all in this together...Here’s my idea. We write this one together. I’m going to give you the chorus [and] the first verse...tell me your story.”

He begins to sing about all that is closed and all that is lost. Then comes the chorus: “When you can’t do what you do, you do what you can.”

Then he keeps playing – leaving room for everyone who listens to add their own verse. In the comment section, people posted their heartache. One wrote: “Will I hold my first grandbaby or just see through the glass?” Another: “My heart is still aching for everyone I love... before I go to bed, I pray to the [One] above.” They also post their hope. As one fan posted: “The storm may be brewing but love is what we’re doing. Even at home, just pick up a phone.” Another, “We cook some meals, stick by each other, lend a helping hand.”

Together they form a song that goes on to remind us, as the first *Pesach* so powerfully teaches: In a time of plague, pick up your paintbrush. “When you can’t do what you do, do what you can.”

Chag sameach.