

Global Matters

My own private Egypt

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In this paschal season, Jews have concluded the ritual observance of Passover, which celebrates, at its most basic level, the survival of the Jewish people in the face of Egyptian oppression.

Of course, even now, thousands of years after the fact, the seder meal and the observance of the holiday in a larger sense continue to be relevant. Those of us who are now free are reminded of our obligation to work for the freedom of those who remain oppressed; still more metaphorically, we are obliged as well to free ourselves from the narrowness of our own beliefs and prejudices, and the other strictures that prevent our fulfillment and the healing of the world.

My apologies to those who have already attended one, if not two, seders, and to those readers who have otherwise had enough. It is important, however, to remain mindful of what we so solemnly recite and observe not only when we're required to do so, but especially when we're not.

Put more plainly, it's what we do when we leave the seder table, and especially when we leave our synagogues and churches that really matters.

It is an impossible task even to list the injustices and cruelties perpetrated upon the helpless, the infirm, the oppressed, even those who are simply victims of circumstance, around the globe. Human cruelty and nature's indiscriminate violence continue with sad constancy to obliterate towns, tribes, communities and nations.

Is there anything we can do to make a dent in the suffering? Of course there is. We are fortunate that in our own communities we can with very little difficulty locate many persons and organizations selflessly dedicated to improving the lives of others. We must support them in their worthy efforts.

Healing the world can take on many forms, however, and much can be done to free

ourselves from other “narrow places,” other metaphorical Egypts that continue to enslave us. I’m referring to efforts we all can make to deny to demagogues, bloviators, inciters and hate-mongers the oxygen, i.e., the wherewithal, to spew their caustic invective among us.

We’ve recently witnessed in the United States a battle over an interim budget measure that showcased partisan politics at a gutter level. Shock radio personalities like Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage dominate large swaths of the broadcast spectrum, inciting their listeners with exaggerations, distortions and innuendos that debase dialog and rational policy debate.

Now that the 2012 presidential campaign is beginning to take shape, the race for the unofficial crown of Most Outrageous Pontificator is on.

If you are still reading this column, chances are you are not a regular listener to Beck, Limbaugh, Savage or now, most grotesquely, Donald Trump. You’re not likely to be adding to their ratings.

But we aid and abet them – and we debase the discourse – when we enable them and make it easier for their rage to grab an audience. There are things we can do to deprive them of oxygen.

A concerted grassroots effort to boycott advertisers who (formerly) supported Glenn Beck’s television show on Fox News Channel is widely credited with the decision to drop Beck’s show. The consumer boycott is a tried and true method of communicating displeasure in a way that gets business’ attention in a hurry. Of course, magnates like Trump don’t need the money or feel the hurt in the same way high-end salarymen like Beck do. But people like Trump fear irrelevance.

A group in Saint John, New Brunswick, has recently committed to pay Trump more than \$275,000 to appear on a bill in that city with the equally admirable Rudy Giuliani, as well as former Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams.

Whatever Trump can teach audiences in New Brunswick about business success, audacity, failure and resiliency must surely be measured against the damage his embryonic and quixotic pseudo-campaign for the presidency of the United States is doing to political discourse in this country and to the American brand.

Deliberately stoking discord and perpetuating the myth of President Obama’s birth “controversy” do nothing to achieve solutions, create economic opportunity or better the country. Nor will Trump’s onstage antics enlighten or enrich the audiences to whom he speaks.

Perhaps there is just something in our DNA that attracts us to what is most repellent.

In this season of introspection, however, I hope to free myself from the narrowness of complacency, from the sense that someone else will take care of it, from the “Egypt of the mind” that allows hypocrisy to masquerade as expertise.

Next year, may we all be free – at the very least – of the bonds that prevent us from exercising our better judgment.



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