Mark Simon – Passover rembrances – Aug 2015

One of the joys of being a librarian is realizing how far a reach you have to borrow Haggadot from all over the country. A running joke between Robin and I is that I am MUCH more vocal of a feminist than she is. Comes of the coven I was raised by. I'll try to get back to you on the questions over the weekend. Glad to have been asked, and mazel tov on the 40 years!

OK, this will address your questions in no particular order.

My folks divorced when I was under 3. My Dad never did seders, because he was always traveling, My mom, brother and I lived in Dallas which in the early 60's was not a very welcoming place for Judaism. None of the grandparents lived close, the great-aunts lived in Fort Worth and would do seder, but always grilled my mom about dating, and since she did not come out for another decade, this was not her favorite thing to drive 30 miles for, especially since the g'aunts were not cooks and catered. It was not until my brother and I were in double digits that Mom's "circle" acquired another Jewish member. Edith had a son our age, so the next 5 or 6 years were spent going to their house. They always used the little Red and Gold book with no frills but it was lively, because my mom had missed cooking all that stuff.

I had little other Judaic exposure per se, I went to Catholic school from 4th-12th grades (Dallas public schools are only a little less mediocre now). This also guaranteed I would rarely have a holiday in the same time slot, so taking extra days for non-medical reasons didn't happen. This was NOT a multi-cultural environment. My college exposure to Jewish life unfortunately came from joining a Jewish frat ZBT, which I hated.

Fast forward to my mid 20's and one of my mother's best friends calls me and says: "Mark, get your buns over here! I've found a girl who's the same kind of weird as you are!!" Which is how I met my wife, Robin, and started to learn a lot more about Jewish life and culture. She was from Union, NJ and had never not been surrounded by a world that knew about Judaism. Seder fell a couple of weeks after we met and my last grandparent (my mom's mom) who had moved up to Dallas after my grandfather passed, seized on me meeting a sharp Jewish girl with both fists. We were dragged to her sisters in Fort Worth, Robin stunned them by offering to make matzah ball soup, they had never done their own and were all smitten (so was I). Even though we had only known each other for a couple of weeks, they all kept praising her (and her soup).

A year later, we were still dating and she wanted to do a seder for some curious Baptist co-workers. There turned out to be just the 4 of us and I lead my first seder at the age of 26 as the oldest Jewish male present. I was also the youngest person in the room since Cathy's fetus was not contributing so I also got to ask and answer the Four Questions. Over the first few years of my marriage and raising kids, seder was a hectic affair with our two and Robin's sister's two making a fuss for several years and breaking the flow.

As the participation got more involved and people's patience grew, I experimented with additional passages and planning out which sections would be skipped or abbreviated. My seders were filled with "skip to the top of p. 41", "drop the middle paragraph", "page 3 of the song sheet", "Who has the card with the quote from Elie Wiesel?" and much flipping around ensued. I kept a word document with the extra passages and quotes, but not the Haggadah itself. I had settled on one I liked and had a dozen copies ( I had never had more than 12 people). Finally, came The Great Seder.

We had always invited many more people than who would come. My brother-in-law believed an evening not watching sports was wasted and usually invented an excuse, co-workers were flattered but bowed out late. So, when our former nanny mentioned in 2005 she'd like to add her new in-laws and then a client of Robin's said she wanted to bring her husband and son, we thought we were in good shape. Then my mother who had been threatening to not come, changed her mind and flew in. {Summarize: everyone who normally was invited but declined unexpectedly accepted.} All the co-workers we had invited confirmed as positives with families and our count a week before was now at 25! But I had only enough Haggadot for 14! [Sounds like the miracle of Hannukah – wrong holiday!] And the one I used was now in a new edition with different page numbering! I could a) ask people to share, impractical b) go out and buy 2 dozen of the same edition, but what if I never had so many again? c) just get a schissel of Maxwell House's or d) bite the bullet and create a handmade version. Robin and I feverishly typed and edited and created the first true Simon Haggadah and had it ready in between breaking the door off the dishwasher and getting it replaced while cleaning the house with my mother underfoot (more on Passover kitchen disasters later). What could go right? As it turned out, Everything!

To start, the Haggadah came out beautiful and was widely praised (we had inserted a mockery of our corporation which had JUST sold our division in the early "Freedom From" section) . To make matters amazing, the mother-in-law of the former nanny, a Quaker, and Robin's client, a Catholic, recognized each other from being Girls Scouts together in Ohio! This prompted an extra hour of excited conversation and delayed the start time by an hour. Then the last guest who was driving in from Pittsburgh and had called to say he might not make it in time, and would just go straight to his hotel, rang the doorbell before we had finished page 1! So we had our own Elijah moment! Perfectly timed by the delay caused by the two women's reunion. Caught up in the good spirits, my brother-in-law forgot his sports and helped out at table two with some of the co-workers who were overwhelmed by the chaos and happiness. Truly, we had a glow of pride in the serendipity of our inaugural Haggadah.

A note on kitchen disasters. You know the Theatrical saying, "Bad Dress Rehearsal, Good Show"? That's the way it works for us. Our most memorable years have involved: exploding eggs (multiple times), breaking the dishwasher (twice), ruining the microwave (once), broken or chipped china and goblets (plenty), a flooded basement from fat chunks in the disposal and once even having my son slice into the side of his own finger while slicing up the brisket and need to go to the ER. That was the year we called our Wandering Aramaean Seder, we packed everything uncooked except the smoked briskets to visit my older son in the Berkshires at a supported collegiate program for autistics. My younger son did not set up the meat slicer on a stable surface and wasn't watching what he was doing, so Robin and David were off to the ER and I got to finish up with the help of the other students and staff and begin the seder. They returned right as, you guessed it, "The Meal Is Served".