

A note from Rabbi Seth

April 3, 2020

Dear ones,

After three weeks of being inside our house with my 3 year-old daughter, I can say I've accomplished at least one thing: I've taught her to sing the Passover song, [*Dayeinu*](#).

As you might have guessed, this accomplishment isn't that impressive. As her parent, I will say that our daughter Mia is brilliant and wonderful. But getting a toddler to sing *Dayeinu* is not that hard. It's an incredibly catchy tune. The chorus is only one and a half words, most of which repeat. And you can teach a child any simple song if you play it on repeat for two hours.

I'm hoping this song will stay with her a long time. Based on how popular it is, I think it will be.

Dayeinu is popular because it's very easy to sing, but also, I think, because of its message. The song lists a series of acts that God performed for the Israelites during and after the Exodus. Each stanza concludes with the word *dayenu*, or "It would have been enough for us." As we recount how God took the Israelites out of Egypt, killed the firstborn, split the Sea of Reeds, and given us manna, Shabbat, and the Torah – each step of the journey from slavery to freedom – we say, "If we only received this gift from God, *dayeinu*." It would have been enough for us. In singing this song, we express our gratitude and say that every step of the journey out of slavery was miraculous. And if we had only gotten that much, it would have been enough for us.

Of course, if the Israelites had only been freed from Egypt but not, for example, received manna as food during the wilderness journey for 40 years, it most certainly would **not** have been enough. It turns out, you do need to eat in the wilderness. But this year, in this early part of the coronavirus pandemic that we find ourselves in, this song is striking me in a new way and bringing up some big questions.

This year, when I look at the text of *Dayeinu*, I see it as a story that is told many years after the events they purport to describe. Whoever wrote the words of the song had in his or her hands a narrative, a myth that explained the past. The poet knew what happened, and more importantly, what was going to happen to the Israelites. And yet, as they moved through the experience of leaving Egypt themselves, I don't think the Israelites ever felt the same sense of security or certainty. After over two hundred years of slavery, witnessing plague after plague strike the Egyptians and not knowing if and when they would leave bondage, standing at the Sea of Reeds and not having any sense that it would split open to reveal dry land allowing them to march through, walking through the wilderness and worrying if there would be food tomorrow, the Israelites at no point ever knew exactly how their story would end. Would they die? Would they ever reach their destination? We know how their story ends. The author of *Dayeinu* knew

how their story ends. But the Israelites did not. They walked into the unknown, taking step after step with trepidation and uncertainty, perhaps with faith, perhaps with great doubt, and no small measure of fear, not knowing where they were going, what would happen to them, and how they and their loved ones would fare.

It's probably not surprising that *Dayeinu* strikes me this way at this moment. Because the truth is, we all are facing immense uncertainty, the likes of which most of us have never faced in our lives before. At this moment, we do not know how long this pandemic will last. We do not know the ways it will continue to affect us and the people we know and love, and we don't know what our collective future holds. We hope and pray that the efforts of medical personnel, government officials, and ordinary people all over the world will be able to do enough to slow and stop the spread of the virus. We can and should be grateful for sacrifices made, and we already mourn those whom we have lost. But unlike the author of *Dayeinu*, we don't know how our story and the story of this pandemic will end.

I don't know if I have much wisdom to offer about what we can learn from the coronavirus, and the truth is, I'm already tired of articles telling us all the fun tricks we can play to distract ourselves (although, distraction can a very helpful thing at this time...). But I do wonder if one message from the song *Dayeinu* that we might be able to work with is the idea that for each thing we have in our lives that nourishes us or fills our souls, we can say *Dayeinu*. Not that it will make all the bad things go away, and not that it will negate the harmful things we have and will experience. Rather that, in some small measure, we can be grateful, and feel more human - more grounded, more connected to the flow of blessing that always sustains us, even when we are at risk, like we are today - when we note and acknowledge that which we can be grateful for.

To say, for the efforts of our friends and family who support us and entertain us and help us get through each day, *Dayeinu*, we are grateful.

For the heroic work of the administration, faculty, staff of Williams College, who have worked tirelessly to keep us all safe, connected, and learning in these times, *Dayeinu*, we are grateful.

For the medical professionals in the hospitals and in the field who work to save others while putting themselves at risk, *Dayeinu*, we are grateful.

For the companies trying to keep their employees at work and for the government programs that provide some (but nowhere near enough) financial support for the millions of people now out of work, *Dayeinu*, we are grateful (even as we fervently demand more of a safety net and more support).

For those who work in transport, delivery, food production, telecommunications, and all the other industries that nourish and sustain us and keep us connected in dangerous times, *Dayeinu*, we are grateful.

For the gift of the holiday of Passover, for the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of freedom in our own lives and for connecting with the emergent spring season, *Dayeinu*, we are grateful.

May we keep in our minds and our hearts all that we are grateful for, and may we seek to ensure the wellbeing and safety of all beings at this time.

As I mentioned last week, WCJA is organizing virtual Seders next week for Passover. The first one will be led by me on Wednesday, April 8 (time TBD) and the second one on Thursday, April 9 at 8pm EDT. **If you would like to attend, please email me to get the Zoom login info.**

WCJA also continues to host weekly Shabbat services. **The start time is moving to 5pm EDT, and we will meet at <https://zoom.us/j/8321750148>.** Folks are invited to bring candles to Shabbat services, if you would like to light along with the religious directors. If you have any questions about services, please don't hesitate to contact me or the religious directors: Melvin (mcl3), Mackenzie (mdg3), and Regina (raf3).

Wishing you all a sweet Shabbat, a restful weekend, and blessings as you embark upon the next part of this semester, wherever you are.

-Rabbi Seth