

Sermon: “Drag and the Passover Orange” (Laurel)

What does drag have to do with passover?

Resistance. Colorful, creative, community resistance. Theater and joy and cheek and celebration.

In one of my sociology classes in college, we spent a fair amount of time talking about how we put on clothes to communicate certain identities to others as well as ourselves. Uniforms are a particularly obvious and socially acceptable form of this. I, for instance, am dressed as a minister. You would probably figure out I was the minister from my actions even without the outfit, but it’s clarifying. I don’t really fit people’s stereotype of a clergy person, so the outfit helps.

But, in this class, part of the assertion was that we’re always doing this in a whole myriad of ways. We’re always dressing up as ourselves. We saw this happening in our children’s story with the rainbow hair that made Trinity feel like herself.

I remember my professor saying succinctly, “It’s all drag.” Which is to say, we are all engaged in this task of dressing up as ourselves, dressing to communicate who we are and what we value both to ourselves and the world around us.

And yet, what we think of as drag is doing more than that, or at least doing it more overtly. Drag is art and performance and world-building. There’s a boldness to it, an intentional

exaggeration, a kind of electric joy and total cheek. Drag mocks rigidity. Drag makes space where there is constriction. Drag is big and colorful and loud and pushes against the limits of acceptability to make room for everyone left out.

So of course it's threatening. Of course the people who want to police trans kids' bodies also want to outlaw drag. Not because they are the same thing, but because both of them reject the rigidity of a status quo that says our worth is conditional on compliance with a binary in which we are either male or female and nothing else is sacred.

I find it particularly telling that no one seems to be making a fuss about drag kings - I suspect because, to oversimplify, the idea that women would want to be men is in keeping with patriarchal ideas. In contrast, drag queens utterly disrupt a status quo in which men are the pinnacle of humanity and women are meant to be quiet and tame. Drag queens embody a flagrant disregard for social constriction, for a system in which some people matter more and some people matter not at all.

Drag makes space for creativity and play and sass and joy. It's liberation embodied in big hair and parody. Thank god for drag queens.

So what does this have to do with the seder plate?

As our kids learned in RE this morning, the seder plate is part of how Jewish people celebrate Passover. The seder meal is a

rowdy inter-generational celebration among family and friends. It's a time for retelling the origin story of the Israelites - a story of fleeing persecution in the hopes of finding a better world.

The plate contains a variety of foods that help tell the story of Moses and the Israelites fleeing Egypt and escaping persecution. There's karpas, typically parsley dipped in either salt water or vinegar, to symbolize the hope of new life mixed together with the tears that the Israelites shed in their suffering. Haroset is a mixture of fruits and nuts - to symbolize the mortar that the Israelites used to construct buildings for the Pharaoh. And the list goes on: shank bones and eggs, matzoh and wine. It's a feast table that acts as an interactive story, rife with ritual and tradition.

So where does the orange come in? Have any of you experienced an orange on a seder plate?

There are alternate tellings of how this came to be, so I want to read you the words of Susanna Heschel, who started the tradition in the early 1980s. What I want you to notice is how creatively altering an old ritual was used as a way of making space for people who were outcast and overlooked in a time when the stakes were incredibly high. Heschel wrote this in a 2001 essay:

“In the early 1980s, the Hillel Foundation invited me to speak on a panel at Oberlin College. While on campus, I came across a Haggadah - (Haggadah is a word that literally means telling,

because it's what Jewish people use during the Seder meal to tell the story of Passover - it's sort of like the script for the play that's being created around the seder table) that had been written by some Oberlin students to express feminist concerns. One ritual they devised was placing a crust of bread on the Seder plate, as a sign of solidarity with Jewish lesbians (there's as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of bread on the Seder plate).

At the next Passover, I placed an orange on our family's seder plate. During the first part of the Seder, I asked everyone to take a segment of the orange, make the blessing over fruit, and eat it as a gesture of solidarity with Jewish lesbians and gay men, and others who are marginalized within the Jewish community.

Bread on the Seder plate brings an end to Pesach — it renders everything hametz. And it suggests that being lesbian is being transgressive, violating Judaism. I felt that an orange was suggestive of something else: the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life. In addition, each orange segment had a few seeds that had to be spit out — a gesture of spitting out, repudiating the homophobia of Judaism.”

The sheer amount of violence in the world, especially against queer people of all kinds, can feel profoundly daunting, immobilizing, demoralizing. It's a different kind of terror that existed in the 1980s, but terror nonetheless. I'm not going to repeat to you all the harm being done against trans people and

drag queens and gender-non-conforming people all over this country. I think what matters is that we, as people of faith, do the opposite clearly and unequivocally.

I doubt, when Susanna Heschel added that orange to her family's seder plate, that she thought it would become something lasting. I would even venture to guess that it felt like an insignificant drop in the bucket given the realities for queer people in the 1980s. And yet here we are, still making space, still reflecting on what that orange means on the seder plate.

It's impossible to tell in the moment of action how our decisions will matter. Trying to insert more love and kindness into the world is an act of faith. But it can also be a joy. It can be snarky and loud and playful and creative.

There are so many ways to journey towards that promised land of love and diversity. Maybe it's adding an orange to your grandmother's seder plate. Maybe it's going to a drag show or telling a friend what we talked about at church today.

Queer joy is a thing that cannot be contained, a thing that makes space. Thank goodness. Thank goodness for the rainbow haired trans girls and the bedazzled drag queens and the kind Jewish scholars inserting new fruit into old traditions. The promised land is something we're all building together - it's not a destination, but a way of going.

In the words of our UUA President the Rev. Susan Frederick Gray: “Joy feels like love and it moves like freedom.”

May it be so and amen