

TZAV – A PASSOVER LIKE NO OTHER

April 4, 2020

Rabbi David Wolpe

0:00

Shabbat Shalom! You know the story about the rabbi who sees in the front row that a man is sleeping next to his wife during the sermon? And so he comes down from the pulpit and he goes over to the wife and he says, “Would you please wake your husband up?” and she says, “Mmm, rabbi, you put him to sleep, you wake him up!” And the truth is, I don't know right now who I'm putting to sleep, maybe you—by the way, I'm not so happy with how you look at the moment—but it also, that joke, is a sort of solitary reminder to rabbis that sermons are not always as powerful and effective as we might imagine to ourselves. It's like what Auden said about poetry in his obituary for the Irish poet Yeats. He said, “Poetry makes nothing happen,” and sometimes—sometimes—you think sermons might make nothing happen, but the sermon that I'm about to give, although it might make, nothing happen, could save lives. And that's why I'm giving it. Because if the right person hears it in the right way it really could save lives, and this has to do with Pesach.

1:41

Pesach, as you know, is our family holiday. Pesach is the time when we gather. Our memories of Pesach, as we get older, our memories, if we are lucky, of people gathered around the table, celebrating, singing, eating, drinking, eating, and drinking... and celebrating. That's what Pesach is, and the idea that we can't have a Pesach like that is very painful. It is even true

that some people will be celebrating Pesach alone and that's a very painful and difficult thing to imagine. And therefore, it is my understanding that there are some people in our community who are going to have a Pesach Seder with lots of people in spite of the fact that they've been instructed not to. It is to them primarily that I am speaking now. I understand, I really do, very deeply, why do you want your family around during the Seder; why you want to invite people into your house, why you don't want the Seder to be an isolating experience or an electronic experience because as you may know, a number of rabbis including many Orthodox rabbis both here and in Israel have permitted Zoom for the Seder for this one year in what is called a *shat hebcha*, which means a time of emergency. And you don't want that, and I understand it... but I want you to know that anybody who invites people over to the Seder this year is violating Jewish law in the most serious way.

3:55

And it's easy to say to oneself, “Ehh, we’ll be fine,” and you might be! You might be. But here are the crucial facts that we all have to keep in mind, and there are three: One is that people can transmit the virus who are not symptomatic. So you can have someone come over to your home who *feels* as well as I do now, and yet they're actually going to transmit the virus to someone else. Through speaking, through touching, through a sneeze, through a cough—because we sometimes sneeze and cough when we feel okay too. That's the second important fact you know, is that the aerosolization, that is the ability to catch the virus from somebody who's speaking to you nearby, seems real. And even though there is still some scientific question about the degree and the length and the duration and all of that, it is pretty clear that you can catch the virus from somebody from talking to them. And here's the third fact: Older people especially are

vulnerable... So if you have someone to your Seder who is young and fine and someone else who is old, their grandparent or you, the consequences could be devastating. And, if that happens you will not be able to forgive yourself. And it is so much better to avoid the consequence than to regret it.

6:06

In the story of Pesach, we read that in Egypt there was no house in which there was not someone who had died. Now it is true in our own case that the vast majority of people who get this virus will live, and most of them in fact will do well. That's at least the current scientific finding. But we don't know who won't do well, and it is not true that only older people are suffering. Some younger people have gotten sick and some younger people have died. When we talk about underlying conditions after all, first of all we don't know if only underlying conditions make you sick and second, we don't know who has an underlying condition, a lot of them have never been diagnosed. This is not the year to be a hero, this is the year to be a little afraid. This is the year to allow your intelligence and your concern and your empathy to overwrite your ego. This is the time. Again and again we have seen that when people were too late to suggest quarantine as has happened in Florida, that the results were the rapid spread of the virus. It is pretty simple! You don't want to have people to your Pesach Seder. You don't want to open the door to anything except Elijah.

8:00

I know that this will require for some of you a last-minute change of plans, and it will be difficult and you might even feel embarrassed to say, “You know what, we changed our mind,” I really understand that. But it is much better to be embarrassed now than to be devastated later. So I'm asking you please, pay attention to what the Orthodox Council of rabbis in Bergen County said which is that it is *forbidden* to invite people to your Seder who don't live in your home. That we are not allowed to take that chance with our own lives or with other people's lives because you are imperiling other people who are there. This year, do it online. This year, if you need to, do it alone. It is better to be sad than to be sad and sick. It is better to be smart than to have made a decision that will haunt you the rest of your days.

9:21

This is not a sermon any rabbi wants to give, but as I said at the beginning, sometimes *sometimes*, sermons can make a difference. And if there is anything I can do to prevail upon you not to have people in your home for this Pesach, then I plead with you: don't do it. Don't take that chance. Don't forget that Pesach is about the protection ultimately of the Jewish people. It's your turn to protect the people in your life. To preserve them. To help save them. For this Pesach, everybody stay home, so that next pass off we will all be here to celebrate together. *Shabbat shalom.*