

The Passover Murder

(2024)

“I may not be much of a Jew, but I am more of a Jew than anything else.”

Gabriel Josipovici

When I look back on it now, I wonder why the thing that haunted me was not the dead body of the 80 year-old woman; not the plastic grocery bag over her face; not the torn underpants down around her ankles; nor the jar of Vaseline that helped the police piece together what had taken place. It was the smell of *tzimis*— the pungent, sweet smell of prunes, sweet potatoes, and apricots, simmered together for hours under a low flame. It was the smell of Passover.

Though, the small aluminum saucepan had been removed from the stove and the burner turned off before I arrived, the familiar smell still permeated the small one-bedroom apartment in a Maryland suburb bordering Washington, D.C. And it was that aroma that washed over me as I walked in, evoking a flood of memories.

Had my family stopped celebrating Passover after my mother died or was it long before that when my father became too ill to sit at the table and officiate at the telling of the Exodus story? I couldn't remember. But for some reason, it had been years since I had been to a Seder. I missed this holiday with its story of liberation; the hidden matzo; the wine for Elijah; the repetition of the four questions and the answers describing why the night was different from all other nights.

From my earliest age of awareness I knew I was Jewish even though my family never went to *shul*; my mother didn't light the Sabbath candles on Friday nights; my father diced ham into the Spanish omelets he made on Sunday mornings; and when Grandpa Willie died, no one said *koddish*. And by *knowing* I mean more than just sharing a label with some group—more than an association with a word. I learned early that there was more to it than that. It was a sense that I, we, were different than most of the people in the broader community, the dominant culture.

How did I know that being Jewish meant being different? Was it because on Christmas mornings my brother and I were among the few kids in our neighborhood not trying out new toys? Was it the story my Grandma Ida told about her escape from Poland, then part of Russia, during the *pogroms* that I somehow knew had something to do with her religion being a “problem?” Maybe it was the fact that my family didn't go to church on Sundays while my friends' families did. Or maybe it was that on weekends our refrigerator filled with what years later an African American housekeeper would call “Jew food:” bagels, lox and cream cheese, pickled herring and Hebrew National salami.

Though I don't remember it, my parents must at some time have explained why we were “different.” But different how? Even now, I'm not certain what the nature of the difference is for me. I know what it's not. It's not about accepting the Old Testament, but not the New. It's not about a particular view of God. In fact it's not about religion at all.

Perhaps if I'd grown up in a neighborhood populated by more Jews, I wouldn't have felt my “otherness” so acutely. Or if my family belonged to a temple or if I had been *bat mitzvahed* or had joined any one of a number of organizations for Jewish youth, I

would at least have felt part of the Jewish community. As it was, I grew up feeling I was on the outside looking in on both the *tribe* of gentiles and the *tribe* of Jews.

Anything my parents did or didn't do that seemed different from my gentile friends' parents, I assumed was because we were Jewish. Except on special occasions, my mother never set a table with napkins. Must have been because we were Jewish. Our beds were not made with top sheets. I figured Jews must have a different approach to linens. During conversation in my house we all interrupted one another. Wasn't that a Jewish thing?

And then there were actual occasions that fed my sense of otherness. In the home of a Catholic girlfriend, one of her younger siblings asked me if I had "killed Christ." I had no idea at the time what that was about but it certainly didn't sound good. Once on a playground, a little girl called my cousin, "a dirty Jew." I didn't know why. But I knew he was being singled out and she deserved the shove I gave her.

With Christmas approaching, my sixth grade teacher marched our class into the auditorium where, seated at a piano, he led us in Christmas songs. As one of only two Jews in my class of twenty or so, my face flushed as I stepped behind one of my classmates and wrestled with my options. I could sing all the songs as the other Jewish girl in my class opted to do. But she was an introvert, shy and desperate for acceptance. I, on the other hand, prided myself on being outgoing and, even at twelve, speaking my mind. I also for some reason knew enough about the meaning of the word "hypocrite" to know I didn't want to be one.

My 12-year-old brain quickly formed a hierarchy of participation. At one extreme I could sing all the songs while at the other extreme, I could walk out. Somewhere near

the mid-point was an option to sing only some of the songs, the non-serious ones, the ones without the words “Jesus,” “Christ,” “Savoir,” or “Lord” in them. I could create a kind of *Jingle Bell* line. Songs such as *Jingle Bells* and *Deck the Halls* would be one side of the line whereas *Silent Night* and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* would be on the other. Or I could lip sync or stand there silently. While my 12 year-old self elected to stay, sing the songs on the “safe” side of the *Jingle Bell* line and feel guilty for not leaving, I am reasonably certain my 16 year- old self would have walked out. I feel I should know, but I don’t, what my present 70-year-old self would do.

When I was in my fifties, my law partners and I were invited to lunch by the vice president of a local bank. We were being interviewed to become the bank’s counsel. When the banker announced that he was tired of “Jew lawyers,” I sat silently looking down and stirring my coffee while one of my Catholic law partners became enraged, stood up and announced that we were leaving. My mix of reactions was typical for these situations. I felt cowardly for not revealing my identity. I felt anger at the banker. I was proud of my partner but somehow embarrassed that something about me had put him in this situation. And yes, I felt guilty that because of me my firm would miss a financially beneficial opportunity.

A friend asks: “What do these experiences ultimately mean?” I’m not sure. Maybe it’s that anywhere but Israel, being Jewish means being on the outside looking in. How do I describe that feeling? Is it a more than- average- amount of self-consciousness, a more-or-less continual judging of what’s being said and how to react to it? Is it a desire to at once fit in and yet not conform if conforming means burying one’s identity?

Years ago on a group trip to China, a fellow tourist bragged that he “Jewed” down a merchant. Should I let it pass or confront it? If I confront it and he explains, perhaps disingenuously, that it is meant as a compliment, should I accept that? Should I become hyper-vigilant the rest of the trip? Sometimes I worry that stereotypes not confronted will only be re-enforced. When, in the past, people said my parents didn’t “act” Jewish, does that mean that they are excluded from some negative stereotype? Let that happen enough times with enough people and the stereotype will never change.

* * *

Sargent M. had called me to the scene of the murder because I was at the time the chief of a major crimes unit in the prosecutor’s office in Montgomery County, Maryland. Funded by federal grants, in other jurisdictions these were referred to as “career criminal units.” I preferred to call ours a Major Offender Bureau for no reason other than I liked the acronym, MOB. Among the major crimes we handled were all homicides. Ours was a suburban jurisdiction and, unlike the neighboring urban center of the District of Columbia, there were relatively few of these, no more than ten or so a year. This one was one of the most egregious.

The police moved around the apartment with an efficiency borne of years of practice. In court, the fingerprinting, the photographing, the searching for clues, would be referred to as “processing the scene.” Since this murder occurred before that technology was available, DNA samples would not be collected from the deceased. One officer from the “Identification Section” of the police department was using a brush to dust powder on the doorknobs in the hope of lifting useable fingerprints. Another officer was in a small