

**Logic Versus Custom, Seven Versus Eight?
Reflections on the End of Pesach and
Reconsideration of Personal Practice**

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I felt a tad sad as we marked the end of Passover this year, this past Monday night. It wasn't that I missed the matzah – on the contrary, I found the observance harder this year than on some previous occasions, even with a relaxed view of *kitniyot* (we followed the Sephardic practice, this year, of eating rice and beans and corn – as even the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi authorities who still insist on this restriction admit that it is “nonsense” based on a mistake.)

No, I felt a bit sad because it felt too isolated, too lonely to end Passover after seven days.

Seven days is the length of the holiday as ordained in the Torah. It says it, in plain English, right there in the original! (See, e.g., Exodus 12:15). Seven days is the length of the holiday in Israel to this day, but Jews in the Diaspora had, several thousand years ago, added an “extra” day, to cover any irregularities or ambiguities in calculating the lunar calendar, and so the practice outside of Israel was to observe Passover for eight days. At the outset of the Reform movement in the 19th century, arguing – will full logic – that the calendar had long since been calibrated with mathematic precision and no longer depended on witnesses showing up in the courtyard of the Temple reporting that they had seen the sliver of the new moon, our liberal branch of Judaism declared the “extra” day of all the holidays defunct, and returned Passover to its Biblically envisioned seven days. (Why many Reform Jews now observe a Second Day of Rosh Hashanah is a complicated question for another time.)

And so here I am, happily breaking bread and hauling boxes, last Monday night. Seven is enough. We're done. Passover is over.

So why did we feel so all alone?

I have written elsewhere (“Put Down That Bread,” <http://www.faces-in-the-mirror.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2012-09-27T13:22:00-07:00&max-results=20&start=2&by-date=false>) of the importance, the centrality of the observance of Passover, and the prohibition on the eating of

bread (and other leavened products) as a core marker of Jewish identity. I don't want to repeat that argument now. But I continue to notice the trend... away from this observance.

When I was growing up avoiding leaven during Passover was a quite widespread observance – even among marginally affiliated or tentatively connected Jews. But it just... doesn't seem to be that way anymore. At least not in the circles in which I travel.

Ending Passover last Monday night? Three Reform colleagues I spoke with Tuesday said they were waiting until Tuesday night.

And on Monday night there was no “buzz,” no added activity, no excitement in the bakeries or pizza places in our part of town. Because, I think – liberal Jews are no longer keeping seven days. They are keeping either eight days – or one/none. This practice... people are perfectly willing to eat matzah. They just are not keen on giving anything up. They are fine with the positive commandment. But no one is going to tell them not to do something. And the hard “work” of Passover comes down to preparing a seder meal – not to an all-out, full-blown, otherwise-totally-worthwhile Spring Cleaning. (Note that I did not grow up in a kosher home – but we still got rid of the bread, put the cereal in the basement, put the not-often-consumed-anyway bottles of beer somewhere else.)

So here is the question: am I missing something, or going to the wrong part of town, or are we a vanishing-breed, we seven-days-of-Pesach Jews? Where do you stand on this, and does it matter to you at all? Did you end Pesach last Monday night? Last Tuesday night? Or sometime after the first seder?

Personally, I believe that eight days of Passover is excessive, illogical, and inaccurate. But I know that custom and community often trump logic... and I miss that sense of being in this boat together. I would actually consider switching our practice, extending the holiday against my own rational instincts... to return to a sense of breaking (or, more literally, baking) bread together.

Is this the most pressing question in the world? Gun control and capital punishment are on the front pages, the spectre of nuclear weapons extends from the Middle East to East Asia. Economic issues press upon us.

But yes, I do believe Jewish solidarity is an important issue – and practices which surround and protect and promote Jewish identity are worth weighing in our lives. So, no apologies from this corner, for raising what may seem a small issue to some. There is a word for that feeling of opening oneself up to obligation, to being pulled, or called, to a commitment that comes from outside the self. That word is “holy.” And that feeling of connection to my community, that feeling that was missing this year... that is something to which I am wholly committed.