

New look at festival of freedom

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Question: "How does this night differ from all other nights? On all other nights we eat both bread and matzah. Why on this night do we eat only matzah?"

Answer: "Our forefathers were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but God brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm."

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THE question, posed in the Haggadah, is the same every year, and so is the answer. Both are part of an elaborate ritual ceremony or "Seder" that has remained unchanged for nearly 4 000 years.

Tomorrow night Jews throughout the world will sit down to celebrate the Seder meal, which marks the beginning of the week of Passover or Pesach, the Festival of Freedom — a time for recalling the liberation of the Hebrews from oppression by the Pharaohs and their emergence as a free nation.

Ceremonial foods, arranged in a particular order on the festive table, are symbolic reminders: matzah, both the "bread of affliction" and the symbol of freedom; bitter herbs, in memory of the bitterness of slavery; charoset, a sweet paste made of apples, nuts, cinnamon and wine, to simulate the mortar used by the Hebrew slaves to bind bricks; and shankbone and baked egg, symbols of mourning for the lost Temple.

Much has happened to the Jewish people and there have been countless other "Pharaohs". Even today, Jews in Russia and Ethiopia are experiencing appalling hardships; but the powerful message of Passover has sustained Jews throughout the ages.

The Jewish experience has nurtured an acute sensitivity to the suffering of others, so that in South Africa today Passover has a renewed relevance.

The message of Passover has been strongly reaffirmed by a new organisation called Jews for Justice, whose aim is to promote a greater awareness amongst the Jewish community of "the fundamental Jewish principles

of human dignity, justice and equality before the law" and "an abhorrence of all forms of racism and oppression in general, and the system of apartheid in particular".

They aim to stress the need for "the abolition of apartheid and its replacement by a non-racial, just and democratic social order" and "the restoration of the rule of law as the basis of the South African legal system".

I spoke to three committee members: Rabbi Selwyn Franklin, minister to the Green and Sea Point Hebrew Congregation; Professor Dennis Davis, Associate Professor of Law at UCT; and Jill Rosenfield, chairman of Jews for Justice.

Rabbi Selwyn Franklin:

"Passover is a synthesis between two extremes: concentration on the abject poverty and slavery of bondage, and the celebration of freedom.

"The matzah typifies both. It is regarded as the 'lechem oni' — the bread of poverty, humiliation and affliction, because it was the staple diet of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt; but it was also the bread that did not have time to rise when the Hebrews hastily fled.

"So, when one eats matzah, part of the idea is to serve as a mechanism for humbling the in-

dividual. The Jew has to remember the Egyptian experience and encounter Passover as if he himself were leaving Egypt; to recall not only his own but his people's humble beginnings.

"Most of the Jewish people in South Africa are either immigrants or children of immigrants, who came from very harsh conditions in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. Having been disadvantaged themselves, they are particularly sensitive to the situation of the disadvantaged in this country.

"I am very concerned about the future of this country, and am committed to trying to find some way out. It is imperative that the message of Passover — which acknowledges the aspirations of all individuals to freedom — be recognised and acted on as soon as possible.

"I am excited about the establishment of Jews for Justice, as it emphatically places the traditional Jewish recognition of the rights of the individual on the basis of an active platform."

Professor Dennis Davis

"I am often asked how I could get involved with an "ethnic" organisation such as Jews for Justice when my whole political stance has been one of anti-ethnicity.

"My answer is that all other

religious groups in this country have responded to the South African crisis in terms of their own heritages, but their stance has not appeared quite so ethnic as they represent a broad spectrum of the community.

"The anomaly of the Jew however, is that they are such a small minority — less than 120 000 today.

"Jews for Justice is not there to propagate any ethnic solutions nor to promote some sort of exclusive "club".

"It was established because Judaism has something worth saying in the predicament that we find ourselves in, and it is easier to generate an awareness among the Jewish community through an organisation such as this."

"I have been greatly encouraged by the growing number of Jews who have committed themselves to this organisation. And I can't think of any better time for this issue to be debated than on a festival such as Passover."

Jill Rosenfield:

"Ours is the first real Jewish political organisation in South Africa. Our role is to promote discussion and debate within the Jewish community and to get issues across to the community and to act as a bridge between other progressive organisations and Jewish people.



Jill Rosenfield, chairman of Jews for Justice, with Rabbi Selwyn Franklin (right) and Prof Dennis Davis.