

Foreword

by

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I first met Rabbi Dr. Jeffrey Cohen in Beverly Hills, California. I was Senior Rabbi at Beth Jacob Congregation, the largest Orthodox community in the Western United States. Beth Jacob prided itself on selecting the most outstanding and articulate contemporary Jewish thinkers and writers for its Scholar-in-Residence programmes.

Dr. Cohen was the only scholar whom I had not met before extending him an invitation. So many people, however, spoke highly of his special gifts of mind and heart, that I was persuaded to bring him to the West Coast sight-unseen. We were not disappointed.

Although Rabbi Cohen arrived sight-unseen, he was hardly an unknown figure in the world of Jewish scholarship. He is the celebrated author of an impressive array of publications, both scholarly and popular. His writing is lucid, his reasoning tight, and his ability to communicate with his reader enviable.

Most of Dr Cohen's books relate to Jewish Liturgy and the Festival calendar. His latest offering belongs to both genres. It is both an in-depth exploration of the contemporary significance of Passover, and a sensitive exploration of the Haggadah of Pesach, its liturgical centre piece.

To be sure, there are probably more editions of the Haggadah, with more commentaries of more variety than any other Jewish text. The great halachic masters have left their particular imprint on this most loved little book. The Hasidic giants have embellished its text with their own insights. There are liberation haggadot, feminist haggadot, and, now, templates for do-it-yourself haggadot for the personal computer. One wonders how much is left to be said about this text.

Dr Cohen's book is an indication that a great deal has been left unsaid by his predecessors. But this is not a commentary on the Haggadah. Dr Cohen has already done that. It is a compilation of the central ideas and problemata suggested both by the Haggadah and by other aspects of the Passover festival.

Dr Cohen ranges wide in his analyses. He does not shy away from dealing with the Theodocy. Eschewing the theology of self blame and guilt, he makes reference to Salman Rushdie's experiences to illustrate his view that suffering can produce growth. He articulates the perplexing existential problem of "the difficult freedom" with disarming simplicity. He invokes self-psychology in seeking an understanding of the reexperiencing of Egyptian slavery and liberation, and emphasises that the central imperative of the Exodus is to ethical sensitivity and moral activism.

Dr Cohen is not afraid of being controversial. He unabashedly takes issue with the Sages of the Talmud and Midrash. Even the great Maimonides and Nachmanides do not escape his

Page 2.

critical analysis. Few orthodox rabbis would dare to suggest a startlingly different explanation of the paschal lamb ceremony -- and carry it off with such brilliance.

Dr Cohen is always original. Some of his insights and interpretations are breath-taking. His suggestion, for example, that the four sons represent different stages of individual spiritual growth and development is strikingly new, and psychologically very sound. His discussion of spiritual intimacy and covenantal election in the context of the *Dayyenu* hymn is masterly.

Dr Cohen makes his readers conscious that, though many things change, they essentially remain the same. The chapters which uncover the Judaeo-Christian polemic embedded in the Seder ritual are particularly illuminating. His citations of Christological interpretations of the Haggada by the contemporary 'Jews for Jesus' groups proves his point both dramatically and simply.

I was deeply moved by Dr Cohen's discussion of love and marriage. His call for spontaneity, discovery and love is well taken. His objections to parental and societal intrusiveness need to be heard.

I am privileged to have been invited to write this Foreword. Since coming to live in England to direct the academic programmes of the London School of Jewish Studies, I have had many occasions to meet and converse with Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen. He is certainly one of the most gifted members of the Anglo-Jewish Rabbinate. I am honoured to have him as a friend and colleague.