



THE BLOG 04/07/2014 02:12 pm ET | Updated Jun 07, 2014

Why Is This Blog Different From All Other Blogs?



By Marty Kaplan

There are two *ma nishtanas* — one adorable, and one ironic.

They both mean the same thing in Hebrew: “What is different?” “What has changed?”

The adorable one gets its charm from being sung by the youngest child at the Passover seder. *Ma nishtana* starts the sentence setting up the Four Questions: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” They are the questions of an innocent puzzled by the changes at the evening meal, and even if the 8-year-old asking now also asked last year, and will ask again next year, and knows what the four answers are, everyone around the table is glad to play their roles in Pesach theater.

If you’ve been to a seder, you know that the Four Questions are about things like why do we eat matzah instead of bread, and what’s up with this biting into a horseradish; they also prompt the telling of the Exodus story, which is the purpose of the holiday: to pass the once-we-were-slaves-in-Egypt legacy to the next generation.

The ironic *ma nishtana* is not part of Passover, though it could well be said while passing the seder brisket, in response to the report that Cousin Harold’s new girlfriend is 15 years younger than him, or that Aunt Yetta blew her Social Security check at the slots. This one means, “So what else is new?” “Tell me something I don’t know.” “What a surprise.”

This is the been-there-done-that *ma nishtana*, the wry, weary voice of experience about the way of the world. A non-Hebrew version of it is a rhetorical question and answer that goes something like this: Q: “What do you call it when a Wall Street banker who sells worthless junk to pension funds gets a bailout and a bonus instead of jail time?” A: “Tuesday.” Another day, another garden-variety outrage. Welcome to normal. If you’re surprised by sin, you haven’t been paying attention.

Usually, when I encounter some appalling evidence of immorality or injustice, when I see some deception or ignorance flushed out by facts, my first instinct is optimism. Michael Lewis reveals the predatory practices of high-

frequency traders in his new book, *Flash Boys*, and I imagine the reforms resulting from his exposé. Errol Morris lays bare the lies of Donald Rumsfeld in *The Unknown Known*, and I anticipate the accountability his documentary will inaugurate. General Motors, BP, Kerr-McGee and Massey Energy are caught red-handed, and I think, “Surely this will deter future corporate criminality.” Jon Stewart shows videotape that nails politicians and journalists for their hypocrisy, Bill Moyers disinfects corruption with investigative sunlight, and I celebrate their speaking truth to power and the miracle of checks and balances.

But then I wake up and smell the *ma nishtana*. If it’s plutocracy, this must be Tuesday. Nice nations finish last. The golden rule isn’t “do unto others,” it’s “don’t get caught.” Hope isn’t “the thing with feathers,” as Emily Dickinson called it. It’s the thing with denial.

When a magnitude 5.1 earthquake shook Southern California a couple of week ago, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a front page story explaining that the Puente Hills thrust fault is especially dangerous because it can cause intense shaking over a densely populated 25-by-15 mile area, including downtown Los Angeles, Hollywood and everything in between, like, oh, my neighborhood. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that a 7.5 Puente Hills quake could kill as many as 18,000 people, cause up to \$250 billion in damage and leave as many as three-quarters of a million households homeless.

The op-ed page of the same day’s paper ran a piece by Stanford neuroscientist Robert M. Sapolsky called “Hoping against hope: Humans are forever running up against the limits of optimism,” pegged not to the earthquake, but to Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 and the persistence of the hope that its passengers survived. Depressed people, Dr. Sapolsky wrote, “are often more accurate in their assessment of the world” than healthy people. Depression is “a failure of the human capacity for denial and self-deception... For those counted among the affectively healthy, hope is sustaining. We are able to ignore the reality of death... We believe our love will be requited, our efforts rewarded and that nothing bad would ever happen to Bambi’s mother in real life.” And, I’d add, that justice and freedom will prevail, as it does in the Exodus story.

So *ma nishtana* is an auto-antonym. Like the word “sanction” — which means both “to approve” and “to forbid” — it contains its own opposite. It’s the anthem of spring, hope and liberation, and it’s also the story whose moral is “sadder but wiser,” *plus ça change*, “meet the new boss, same as the old boss.” We won’t get fooled again? Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt. Moses may have led us out of the land of Pharaoh. But that golden calf? *Ma nishtana*.

This is a cross-post of my column in the Jewish Journal. You can reach me there at martyk@jewishjournal.com

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director