

PESACH

Payback from the King

2008 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

The king treated us badly. He ordered that we be persecuted. He ordered that we be enslaved. He ordered that we be killed.

However, on that first Passover night, the king finally saw the light. After centuries of enslavement and persecution by his nation to ours, the king saw the error of his ways. He wanted to make it up to us. He wanted to pay us back for all the work we had done. He wanted our good will and our blessing.

This had been predicted. Our nation suffered greatly at the hands of the Egyptians. Now they paid us reparations. Generations earlier, G-d promised Abraham that his children would be enslaved, and that *"afterward, they will leave with great wealth."* (Genesis 15:14)

And now that promise was being fulfilled.

Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron during the night... "Leave my people -- you and the Israelites. Go! Worship G-d just as you requested. Take your sheep and cattle... Also, bless me!" The Israelites... asked the Egyptians for silver and gold articles and clothing... The Egyptians granted their request. They drained Egypt of its wealth. (Exodus, 12: 31, 32, 35, 36)

And so it was, that on Seder night, the king came to visit and wish us well.

This year, in a sense, that scene was repeated. The king of 800 million Catholics, the leader of the "Roman Empire", Pope Benedict XVI, paid a call on a synagogue with a message of peace and friendship, wishing the Jews of the world a happy Passover. And he brought a gift.

The empire over which this king presides has not always maintained a benevolent attitude toward our People. Indeed, rivers of Jewish blood have flowed as a result of Inquisitions and Pogroms, if not instigated, then certainly tolerated by the Catholic Church. Now, the king comes in peace.

It is certainly praiseworthy that the Pope desires a positive relationship with the Jewish community. But there is a time and place for everything. I must admit that I was troubled by the picture of the Pope, wearing a cross around his neck in a shul. Icons of other faiths do not belong in a house of Jewish worship. When Moses needed to pray to G-d, he left the Pharaoh's palace that was filled with symbols of the Egyptian religion.

And what of the exchange of gifts? The Pope received a silver Seder Plate and a box of Matzahs. In return, he presented a 15th Century Jewish manuscript from the Vatican Library.

Well, that's not exactly what he gave. Actually, it was a **replica** of that manuscript. The original is still sitting safely in the secure confines of the Vatican Library.

I wonder where that manuscript came from. I think it is safe to assume that the Vatican librarian didn't stroll into his local Judaica bookstore and purchase a few choice volumes of Jewish literature.

It is well-known that the Vatican possesses massive amounts of old Jewish books that were confiscated from "heretical" Jews over the centuries. A privileged few rabbinic scholars have been permitted limited access to some of these writings. There is even a theory that some of the vessels from the Second Temple, plundered by the Romans, are hidden away in the Vatican.

This writer took the position a while back that the Jewish community should not engage in religious dialogue with other religions. (See "The Pope and the Designated Hitter".) Many in the Jewish community objected to the Pope's decision to reintroduce the Latin Mass, complete with prayers that the Jews should convert. The pope was asked, by Jews, to change the liturgy. I don't think we should tell Catholics what prayers they should say, any more than we want to answer to them about the prayers that we say. We disagree with their theology, and there is nothing to be gained in interfaith negotiations on theology. If Catholics want to pray for Jews to convert to Christianity, we are not going to change their beliefs by asking them to change their prayers.

That having been said, I certainly don't think it is a bad thing that Pope wishes us well. Nor is it negative that Jews and Catholics discuss certain secular matters of common interest. I just have a problem with the venue, and I have a problem with his gift.

One of the statements he made during his visit to the U.S. was an expression of remorse over the damage that has been done by Catholic priests who molested children. "It is a great suffering for the church in the United States and for the church in general and for me personally that this could happen," he said.

And that is a good thing. Confessing sins of the past helps to prevent repetition of those sins in the future. Perhaps someday he will apologize for the Vatican's apparent indifference to the plight of Jews during the Holocaust.

If the Pope really wants to begin to atone for sins perpetrated by the Church, he can start by emptying the Vatican's coffers of pilfered Jewish holy items. And we want the real things, not replicas.

If the Pope is willing to give back what is ours, he can have all the Matzah he wants.

Have a Good Shabbos and a Good Yom Tov.

