President's Column

The Jewish Spring Holiday Season

by Helen B. Bloch

Purim is the kickoff to the spring holiday cycle. This joyous holiday commemorates the time in Persia, present day Iran, where the evil Haman cast a lot, known in Hebrew as "pur," to destroy the Jewish people on the day shown on the lot. Queen Esther, who had hidden her Jewish identity, proverbially came out of the closet to save her people and plead on their behalf before King Achashverosh to save them. Her plan worked and the Jewish people were allowed to defend themselves, thereby saving themselves from extinction. In celebration of the victory, Jews were commanded thenceforth each year on the holiday that became known as Purim to give money to the poor, send packages of food to friends, read the Megillat Esther (Book of Esther), and have a festive meal. As part of the tradition, people dress up in costumes to represent the hidden miracles that occurred at the time, and drink until they cannot tell the difference between the cursed Haman and the blessed Mordechai, who was Esther's uncle.

So we start the spring with a holiday that commemorates our redemption -- we get the kids involved and have a big party in which we drink and celebrate. This helps prepare us emotionally for the next holiday, which comes 30 days later -- Passover. On Passover, we are redeemed from slavery in Egypt and are born a free nation. We then commence our travel to the Promised Land, Israel. During that journey, 49 days later, we stop at Mount Sinai to receive the 10 commandments from G-d, the Torah. We celebrate our receipt of the Torah at the end of spring during the holiday of Shavuot.

The period from Purim to Shavuot is a cycle with the centerpiece being the Passover seder. Like Purim, the celebration of Passover at the seder is child-focused and meant to be a fun learning experience. We drink four cups of wine, eat a festive meal that includes matzah (unleavened bread), and have questions built into the program to engage kids to participate. This is all done while reliving the journey our people took from slavery to freedom.

The weeks that follow Purim enable us to begin a month-long process of realizing that we are a free people. We have time to get rid of our spiritual and emotional baggage called chametz -- the haughty stuff we cannot eat on Passover because it takes time to rise. We get back to the basics: we think about what it means to be a free people and how we can express our freedom now that we are born a free nation.

Preparing for Passover enables us to realize that we do not need certain material goods in order to survive -- it is a personal cleansing starting from the high point of indulgence we experience on Purim. Following our redemption from slavery where we celebrate living as a free nation, we rejoice on the next holiday, Shavuot, in which we revel in our receipt of the Torah, our rules of the road that enable us to maintain a just society.

The lessons that emanate from these holidays are ingrained within our Decalogue Society. If we have learned anything from our own history that we commemorate during this season it is that we cannot stay quiet in the face of evil, even if some of us would rather we not make waves because they are concerned about their personal career advancement. So, with the rise in anti-Semitism, our legislative and anti-Semitism committees have been busy responding to various events and thinking of ways to be proactive. And we have made a difference. We are sanguine that legislation will be passed in Illinois that will improve Holocaust education, protect children from anti-Semitic events in schools, and enable all children of faith to observe their holidays without repercussion from their public schools for missing classes. When one of our board members was the victim of anti-Semitic vitriol at the Basia salon in the Hilton Chicago hotel, we wrote to both entities immediately seeking corrective action and received positive responses with detailed corrective measures.

The correspondence concerning this unfortunate incident between us, the salon, and the hotel can be found on my personal LinkedIn and Facebook pages. We have also formed a women's council to address issues of special concern to women. We plan on integrating the ideas generated by the women's council into the Society as a whole, such as providing CLEs on topics that advance the career needs of women. These are but few of the items we have tackled during my presidency.

You too have an opportunity to stay engaged on issues of concern to Jewish lawyers. Besides our regular CLEs, Decalogue offers some CLEs on timely topics which are open to the community, including our May 14 event on First Amendment rights and hate speech. We are here to serve our members and the community as a whole. Participate and continue in your support of Decalogue so that we may continue in our efforts to serve you and the community as a whole. If there is programming you would like to see us do, please get involved and join a committee. Usually our events and CLE committees start planning programs for the upcoming bar year over the summer. In the meantime, have a joyous spring holiday season.

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