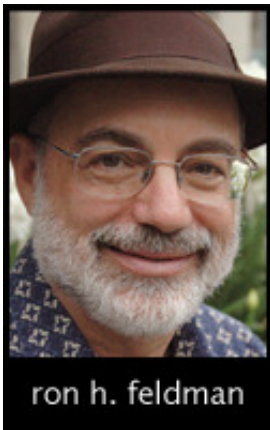


'Next year in Jerusalem'? — just kidding!

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Every year at the end of the Passover seder I say, "Next year in Jerusalem!" But I don't mean it — and the overwhelming majority of American Jews who recite this don't mean it, either. If we wanted to be in Jerusalem, we could be there in a day — and, obviously, most of us don't do this.

For centuries the declaration at the conclusion of the seder was an affirmation of the Jewish hope that the Messiah would arrive and lead the Jews from the four corners of the Earth back to Zion — for that was the only way they could conceive of Jews being able to celebrate the seder in Jerusalem.



But those of us born since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 live in a fundamentally different era of Jewish history. American Jews, in particular, have grown up with the reality of being free to visit or live in Jerusalem any time we want. We keep saying "Next year in Jerusalem" because it is a tradition, but our radically new freedom to get to Jerusalem has emptied this declaration of its traditional meaning. So, if we are not merely hypocrites, what can this possibly mean, since by our actions we are showing that we really do not want to be in Jerusalem?

An aspect of the revolutionary changes in the Jewish world that have flowed from Israel's independence, and which accelerated with the end of the Cold War, is that almost any Jew who wants to move to Israel from almost any place around the world has been able to do so. Not always the easiest trip but still doable.

While a few of these immigrants have made aliyah for more idealistic reasons, most have moved to Israel because of the most common reasons for all human immigration: political oppression (in this case, anti-Semitism) or economic need/opportunity. In this sense, Israel fulfills one of the purposes that Theodor Herzl suggested: the need for a place of refuge for Jews in the face of anti-Semitism. But Herzl (and most early Zionists) never thought the Jewish state was going to be the residence for all Jews.

With the vast majority of Jews free to make aliyah, in our era we have seen a tremendous self-sorting of Jews. Millions from around the world have moved to Israel — now about half of world Jewry. But along with this, millions of Jews from around the world have moved to various other countries out of convenience, need or desire, including many Israelis who have left that homeland (I'll bet you know some!); they did not personally need the "refuge" and found other places that, for whatever reason, they think are more desirable. Those Jews who want to live in Israel have for the most part moved there. And most of those Jews who don't want to live in Israel have the freedom not to — and do not!

So, it seems to me that in our era, "Next year in Jerusalem" means I have the freedom to go and come from Jerusalem as I wish. It is no longer something unattainable. This does not mean the messianic age has arrived. Rather, living in Jerusalem is a lifestyle choice, and having a seder in Jerusalem is an add-on to our tour itinerary.

Yet, this freedom to go to Jerusalem, and perhaps choose to celebrate the seder there, is more profound and meaningful than the mythical release from bondage of the Israelites or the coming of the Messiah. Even though things are far from perfect in terms of anti-Semitism and the politics of the Middle East, we live in what is probably one of the freest and most desirable eras of Jewish history. This is about as good as it gets!

So, the freedom I celebrate at the end of the seder is the freedom of movement. When I declare "Next year in Jerusalem," what I mean is: "Next year in Jerusalem — if that's what I want." This freedom is not something to be complacent about. Rather, it is something worth celebrating, with four glasses of wine!

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