

Feedback: an exodus ritual in practice

16 March 2008, Sydney Australia

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I've just returned from our local Exodus ritual. We gathered with 8 adults and 6 lively young children (aged 2-9), which meant some adaptation. It went like this:

1. At 6pm we gathered in the living room for a highly interactive, child-friendly telling of the Exodus story. We started and finished with the introductory and closing prayers/steps as found in the Bat Kol Exodus booklet, though adapted slightly for the children. In between, we told most of the Exodus story. We used an illustrated children's book as the basis of the storytelling, punctuated by interactive moments where we involved the children (and adults) in: acting out the story with various props, singing songs with dance actions, playing percussion instruments, and passing around the bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

2) At 6.40pm we gave the children a lamb dinner, then settled them down to watch 'Prince of Egypt' (an animated film based on the story of Moses).

3) At 7.15pm the adults gathered at the dinner table in relative peace for their own ritual. This flowed easily, and was quite lovely. We didn't try to retell the scripture story as everyone was exhausted from the children's efforts which preceded it. We started and finished with the prayers from the Bat Kol Exodus booklet. The bulk of the time we spent sharing exodus stories. E.g., One person told the story of his family's dangerous exodus from Shanghai amidst the political turmoil of 1949. Another spoke of exodus events in terms of living through breast cancer diagnosis, surgery and recovery. Another spoke of pressures in his workplace and the challenge of making radical changes. Another spoke of how she came out of a black and white, fear-based religious outlook to a freer and more humane one.

4) 8pm: adults enjoyed a lamb casserole meal.

All in all, it was a heartwarming, thought-provoking celebration. The children's ritual was at times chaotic, due to a challenging five year old, and space constraints. However the children were engaged the whole time and there were no signs of restlessness, only hyperactivity! The only part that didn't work was the cup of wine (grape juice) which, by the time we got to it threatened to make the ritual too long and messy and we quickly abbreviated it and moved on. The video was excellent post-ritual entertainment. The kids loved it and were clearly making connections between their exodus ritual and the movie. Also, their parents had prepared them in the previous week by reading the Exodus story in a children's bible, so they effectively had three storytelling moments as a result of this ritual: their bible preparation, the actual ritual, and the video that followed.

For the adults, the movement from the child-friendly ritual to the adult table ritual worked well for a group of this size. (However, in a small family unit celebration the presumption is that it would be done as a single family ritual at the meal table.)

Children's Exodus ritual

Items for a sacred space:

- Candles and candle snuffer. (Kids love using the candle-snuffer and you may have to light and relight several times. Best to have a candle for each child.)
- A plate of unleavened bread.
- A plate of bitter herbs.
- Grape juice: pour into a fancy carafe and keep in a safe place until required.

Other items for dramatic storytelling

- A children's well-illustrated storybook presentation of Exodus. (We used Anita Ganeri's *The Passover Story*. London: Evans Brothers, 2004.)
- Costumes: Tea towels and headbands, oversized shirts and sandals, to give the impression of Hebrew slaves. (Our costumes plans didn't eventuate!)
- Tambourine and maracas (or any small percussion instruments) for Miriam's victory dance (but keep hidden until required if you don't want musical bedlam throughout!).
- An adult dressed up as an Egyptian TV reporter who interviews the children about the plagues.
- Two blue sheets which can be used to give Reed Sea impressions.
- Music (and lyrics on sheets if needed, but keep the songs simple and catchy)
- We had an adult guitarist and two songs:
 - I don't have the name of the first one. The refrain is "Pharaoh, Pharaoh, ooh baby, let my people go, yeah yeah yeah." And we had simple actions to accompany.
 - The second was a single refrain sung in a robust fashion with backing drum beat to the tune of 'Here we go round the mulberry bush'.
'Rider and horse went into the sea, into the sea, into the sea.
Rider and horse went into the sea and sank like a stone!'

Preparation: read the exodus story in a children's bible.

Post-ritual entertainment: watch a suitable children's DVD such as "Prince of Egypt".

Ritual steps:

Introduction:

Welcome each person by name. We created a bit of fun but starting with the eldest and working our way down to the youngest.

Involve the children in lighting the candles.

Eldest child asks: why do we gather on this night?

Adult leader reads the statement in the Exodus ritual booklet. Adapt slightly for children.

Storytelling

Read the storybook, displaying illustrations.

Punctuate with the following (or similar) interactive moments:

‘I wonder what the sound of the groaning of the Hebrew slaves was like...?’
Ask a child to pass the plate of bitter herbs to remember the bitterness of slavery.

‘I wonder what was the look on Pharaoh’s daughter’s face, when she found the baby in the Nile?’

‘I wonder how Moses felt when God commanded him to return to Egypt and to tell Pharaoh to release the Hebrew slaves...?’
At this point sing a song... We sang “Pharaoh, Pharaoh, ooh baby, let my people go, yeah yeah yeah” with one verse which refers to the burning bush.

After a suitably gory description of the plagues: ‘I wonder what it was like at the time of the plagues...do you think the frogs were in the Egyptian kids’ lunch boxes?’
Introduce Cleo Cleopatra, celebrated TV journalist of TV Pyramid, broadcasting live from Egypt. Have her go around and interview the kids (and adults) about what they saw/heard.

Continue with the story. At the Passover night, pass around the unleavened bread.

Entrapment at the Reed Sea: ‘I wonder how the Israelites felt with the sea on one side (they couldn’t swim like you kids can) and Pharaoh’s soldiers on the other...?’
Have 4 adults wave 2 blue sheets to create a tunnel of 2 walls of water as the kids run through.
Now: who wants to be the Egyptians coming through? (The kids nominated the grandfather in our midst and then all got in on the act as we collapsed the blue sheets over them. This was a riot! Raucously funny and a highlight of the storytelling. Needed more space!)

The victory dance of the Israelites. Nominate a ‘Miriam’ and hand her a tambourine. Distribute other small percussion instruments and have the kids sing and dance freely. (This worked well!) Song: ‘Rider and horse went into the sea...and sank like a stone.’

Finish the story briefly — the Israelites headed into the wilderness... and after many adventures eventually arrived at the promised land (the Mount Sinai story may be too much by this stage depending on children’s ages and attention spans). Remind the children to always trust that God — who is greater/stronger than any difficulty — will help us, like God did the Israelites. But we have to be brave like them, trusting God and going forward as God leads us.

Move to the closing prayer of the Bat Kol exodus booklet, adapt it to the children and invite their intentions for the ways God makes us happy and free, and pray for those who are sad and in need of God’s help.
We attempted pouring small cups of grape juice, but this started to look messy and dangerous, and the children were tiring, so we just finished the ritual by extinguishing the candles. This was an enjoyable way to end... what is it about kids and candles?!