

# Experiencing the Exodus (from Japan)

“May all who are hungry come and eat with us.” As Jews we say these words from the traditional Haggadah during the first two nights of Passover every year, but this year, they rang especially true for me and my family as we muddled through the events surrounding the Japan earthquake and subsequent tsunami. By the time Passover came along over a month later, we were grateful for the chance to celebrate.

Though I am an American I live in Tokyo, Japan with my husband and two children. We have been here for quite a long time – six of the past eight years, and we really do consider it home. The kids attend an international school that attracts children from all over the world. We as foreigners are a part of the landscape, but we remain external – not directly part of the culture. Japan is a homogeneous society and while foreigners are welcome, it is not easy to blend in. Like the Jews of yore creating their shtetls, we live in a “gai-jin ghetto” – a ghetto for foreigners.

That being said, Tokyo is still an easy city in which to live as a foreigner. We joke that living in central Tokyo like we do, is just like living in Manhattan, only it’s clean, safe, and quiet. Orderliness is a part of the Japanese ethos. On escalators, everyone stands on the right side, with room on the left for passing. No one jaywalks and even though there are no trash cans visible on the sidewalks, there’s never any trash either. Japanese people follow rules.

Then, the big earthquake hit. At first, panic. But the Japanese people are calm by nature – unflappable, so we went with it. In the immediate aftermath, life didn’t seem so abnormal.

Sure, my son’s basketball practice was cancelled, as was the kids’ Sunday school, and our pre-Purim party, but soccer practice went on as normal. We met friends to play in the park and go out for lunch to a favorite restaurant. The sun shone and it was nearly 60 degrees all weekend. However, we were rolling with the aftershocks; we waited on the gas lines; and we shopped early in the day so we could stock up. We cried for the people of Northern Japan and listened to the news when possible.

The following Tuesday morning at about 5am, there was another earthquake that, even though it only measured 4.0, was right under Tokyo, and felt much larger. Then we got the grim news about the nuclear reactors. By 3pm we were on a flight to the U.S. Was it the right decision? We’ll never know; but it was the right decision for our family and we were by no means alone. There were hundreds of people at the airport about to create a Japan diaspora – a diaspora of multi-national foreigners all displaced from Japan. The idea was dizzying.

We spent the better part of five weeks watching and waiting. Will the Japanese get the nuclear situation under control? What is the real situation with radiation in the food and water? Will there be food deliveries in Tokyo? Will there be extended blackouts in the city, and if so, will they affect our house? An entire Japan diaspora of Americans in America asked themselves these questions.



We were still in the US when Passover rolled around. Since we live across the globe from family, we took the opportunity to have a Seder with my family in New York, including my grandmother, who is 89 years old and as feisty as ever. My daughter, Sydney, age 8, asked the four questions with some help from her older brother, just as she had done the year before in Tokyo. We drank four cups of wine and we opened the door for Elijah, just as we had done every year in Tokyo.

There were complications involved with having made the decision to leave Japan. Not only were the Japanese nationals unhappy with our decision, but so were other foreigners who had decided to stay. The Japanese term for foreigner is "gai-jin." We were now referred to as "fly-jin". This senseless judgment made me ache inside. I had tried to make the best decision possible for my family, and people who did not agree with me were denigrating me. It was never that I didn't love

Japan. It was a bit of fear, a bit of familial pressure, and a big dose of two children unoccupied for two weeks that tipped the scales as I agonized over the decision to stay or go. I don't feel the need to defend what I did, but the idea that my actions call for disparaging remarks, saddens me.

I am now back home in my lovely little house in Japan. The food is plentiful; the water is safe and the people are stoic. I didn't have to wander for forty years like my ancestors did in the desert, but my road back home was long. My faith and my family sustain me, as they should in times of crisis. It may sound trite, but I do pray for Japan and its people.

The lessons of Passover resonate even more than usual this year. Love thy neighbor; take strangers into your home when they are needy; teach your faith diligently unto your children. Now we are slaves; next year may we be free men. This year in New York; next year in Jerusalem (or Tokyo). ✡

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