

Different

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The table was splendidly set, one place left empty for Elijah, the herald of the Messiah, in case he decided to attend. For the same contingency, the front door stood opened just a bit.

The youngest child stepped forward. He knew his words by heart:

“Why is this night different from every other night . . .?”

The father and mother shared the response. On this night, God spared the Jewish people from the Angel of Death, and secured their release from bondage in Egypt. Through Moses, God had commanded Pharaoh to “let the people go,” but God had also “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” and he refused that command. On the night of Passover, the blood of the lambs had marked the doorposts and lintels of Jewish homes. The Angel of Death passed over these houses, but the firstborn of the Egyptians, human and beast, were killed. . . .

“But...but that hardly seems fair!” burst in the oldest child at the table. “God *hardened* Pharaoh’s heart in the first place — those firstborn didn’t have a chance! And even if their parents had sinned, why should the children suffer for it? Some of them must have just been little babies. What had they done?”

“Shush!” stamped the youngest child. This was meant to be *his* moment. “You’re not supposed to say anything at all, Miss Firstborn. Aagghhh!!!” And the child grasped his hands around his throat and rolled his eyes with a feigned death rattle! The grandparents were aghast!

“Wait,” said the father, softly but firmly. “A good question has been asked. Why *did* God harden the heart of the Pharaoh? Why did the firstborn of Egypt have to die?”

Silence for a moment.

“To demonstrate to the people of Israel God’s total devotion to them,” responded the grandfather.

“As an act of justice,” answered the grandmother. “The Egyptians had once killed every male child of the house of Jacob. Moses alone had survived. This was divine retribution.”

“Perhaps,” spoke the mother... “And perhaps, as God spoke those words to Moses, condemning the children of Egypt to die, all the angels hovered, holding their breath. Perhaps Father Abraham himself, who had argued so forcefully for the innocents within Sodom, whispered in his beard, *No! No! Challenge this, my son!* And perhaps even God, in his heart of hearts, hoped that Moses, himself a sole survivor, had learned from everything he had seen and experienced — that he would turn to God and say, “Please, Lord, Master of the Universe, would you punish the innocent with the guilty? Far be it from you, Lord. Rather, I ask you, please, lead your people from slavery without this bloodshed. Must the hearts of the mothers of Egypt break as did the heart of my own mother? Is there not some other path, different than the way of vengeance, of unending retribution? Must these young ones die that we might live?”

The children looked at each other. The grandparents looked at their children, and at their children’s children. Then for a few more awkward moments they gazed out of the room’s picture window, into the night so unlike, and yet so like, every other night....

Alternate ending:

The children looked at each other. The grandparents looked at their children and at their children’s children. For a few more awkward moments they gazed out of the room’s picture window into the night. Absorbed in their own thoughts, they hardly heard the front door open a bit more widely, the legs of the chair pull across the floor....

