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Surviving Passover:

Jewish Survivors of Child Abuse (*Incest, Emotional, Physical and Sexual Abuse*)

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There are many issues surrounding holidays and childhood sexual abuse that have rarely, if ever been addressed in our communities. One of those issues pertains directly to surviving Jewish holidays.

It's not too surprising that many adult survivors of childhood abuse (emotional, physical and sexual abuse) have difficult times during Passover (Pesach), as this time of the year can bring up painful memories of families get together and that routines are changed. Plus there is the added stress of cleaning your home top to bottom, preparing, and "doing it right." These issues alone can be extremely stress producing; yet in a home where violence occurred, would most likely lead to an increase of abuse.

Parents who are already inclined to use their children as an outlet for emotions and urges, are even more likely to do so when under the pressure of increased anxiety.

Many survivors of childhood abuse report that they were abused more around and over a holiday period than any other time of the year. Remember Passover brings with it--on top of cooking and cleaning--an added financial burden.

This is written as a reminder to all survivors of child abuse -- YOU ARE NOT ALONE. It is not uncommon for symptoms of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) to emerge this time of year, even after times of relative remission and/or intensify in those already struggling.

It is not unusual for Survivors to experience an increase in disturbing thoughts, nightmares and flashbacks. Thoughts of self-harm, even suicide, may be an issue. The important thing to remember is these feelings are about the past, the abuse is over, and that it is of utmost importance for you to be kind to and gentle with yourself.

Over the years we have spoken to many adult

survivors who find it very painful to even consider going to a seder. This is OK. Someday you may feel different, but if the pain is too intense, it is important that you do things that can be healing. Set healthy boundaries for yourself and do what feels safe for you. If you have a rabbi that is sensitive to child abuse issues, discuss these issues with him or her.

One survivor shared that she felt uncomfortable not doing anything for Pesach, so she'd rent the "Ten Commandments" each year on Seder nights and watch it, forming her own ritual of remembering the events that lead to the Seder night. Another survivor would invite other Jewish Survivors over to her home and they would use "The Survivors Haggadah" for their services. Another person used the time before Pesach for "spring cleaning" her relationships--reconnecting with friends with whom she feels safe, airing out the achievements of the last year and making resolutions for added liberation from her past for the coming year. The survivors above found a way to celebrate a "modified" Pesach, but there are many others for who just try to survive this time of year by pretending that there is no such thing as Pesach.

The goal is for you to do things that are healing and brings about an emotional freedom. Remember you are not alone, not wrong, not bad for having second and third and fourth thoughts about how to celebrate and if to celebrate the holiday.

Look into yourself and see what you need, then do what you can to do it. Be kind to yourself for needing to make these adjustments. And remember, when Bney-Israel left Egypt to walk toward a new era--they were walking from a place they knew, but was of pain, to a place unknown, but free. The essence of the Seder night is to remember, and ask why, and be expected to understand and participate only to the extent one can.

Have a gentle, safe holiday!