

ברשת

Vol. XI No. 3

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Nisan 5758 / April 1998

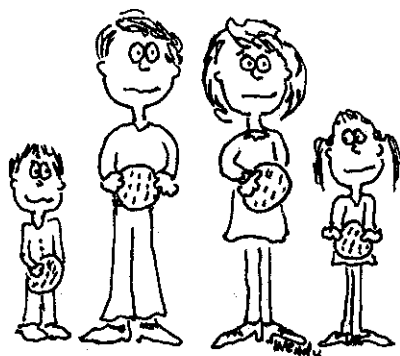
PESACH: INSPIRATION AND OBLIGATION

by Rabbi Moshe Hauer

Yetziat Mitzrayim (The Exodus from Egypt) occupies a most prominent place in Jewish life. We are instructed to mention it every morning and evening, and it is consistently invoked in a variety of contexts throughout the Torah. Most notably, G-d introduces Himself to the Jewish people at Sinai in the first of the Ten Commandments (Belief in G-d), "I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the slave house."

Why is this event so significant to us? Why must we relive it each year at the Pesach Seder? From the previous text, it appears that the Exodus brings three attitudes into focus: 1) our theology; 2) our destiny as a people; and 3) our responsibility to G-d. Let us approach each of these three elements.

1. Rav Yehuda HaLevi, in his monumental work the *Kuzari*, explained that the Exodus transformed our attitude towards G-d from faith into knowledge. Because we have been privileged to see Him through His total conquest of nature accomplished through the (cont. on p. 3)



"WHY MUST WE CELEBRATE PESACH EACH YEAR?!"

FOR EVERYTHING A BLESSING

by Kenneth M. Prager, MD

When I was an elementary school student in Yeshiva-a Jewish parochial school with both religious and secular studies-my classmates and I always found amusing a sign that was posted just outside the bathroom. It was an ancient Jewish blessing, commonly referred to as the *asher yatzar* benediction, that was supposed to be recited after one relieved oneself. For grade school children, there could be nothing more strange or ridiculous than to link the acts of micturition and defecation with holy words that mentioned G-d's name. Blessings were reserved for prayers, for holy days, or for thanking G-d for food or for some act of deliverance, but surely not for a bodily function that provoked smirks and giggles.

It took me several decades to realize the wisdom that lay behind this blessing that was composed by Abayei, a fourth century Babylonian rabbi. (cont. on p. 2)

THE SEASON OF REDEMPTION- THEN AND NOW

by Moshe (Marc) Trittel

Pesach is upon us again. This special time of spiritual renewal was ordained by the sages of the Talmud to always occur in the Spring, a time of rejuvenation in the natural world. What is the intent behind this ruling? We know from the writings of the Chassidic masters that spiritual blessing comes down into the world cloaked in physical form. So it would seem that Pesach comes with a spiritual blessing that mirrors events in nature during the Spring. In order to understand the nature of this spiritual blessing, let us take a step back and look into the nature of the redemption from the Egyptian exile.

The Exodus from Egypt was the beginning of a fifty-day process that culminated in receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai. During this time, we as a people were liberated from the impediments that (cont. on p. 3)

FOR EVERYTHING A... (cont. from p.1) Abayei's blessing is contained in the Talmud, an encyclopedic work of Jewish law and lore that was written over the first five centuries of the common era. The Jewish religion is chock-full of these blessings, or *brachot*, as they are called in Hebrew. In fact, an entire tractate of Talmud, 128 pages in length, is devoted to *brachot*.

On page 120 (Brachot 60b) of the ancient text it is written: "Abayei said, when one comes out of a privy he should say: Blessed is He who has formed man in wisdom and created in him many orifices and many cavities. It is obvious and known before Your throne of glory that if one of them were to be ruptured or one of them blocked, it would be impossible for a man to survive and stand before You. Blessed are You, Hashem, that heals all flesh and does wonders."

An observant Jew is supposed to recite this blessing in Hebrew after each visit to the bathroom. We young Yeshiva students were reminded of our obligation to recite this prayer by the signs that contained its text that were posted just outside the rest room doors.

It is one thing, however, to post these signs and it is quite another to realistically expect preadolescents to have the maturity to realize the wisdom of and need for reciting a 1600-year-old blessing related to bodily functions.

It was not until my second year of medical school that I first began to understand the appropriateness of this short prayer. Pathophysiology brought home to me the terrible consequences of even minor aberrations in the structure and function of the human body. At the very least, I began to no longer take for granted the normalcy of my trips to the bathroom. Instead, I started to realize how many things had to operate just right for these minor interruptions of my daily routine to run smoothly.

I thought of Abayei and his blessing. I recalled my days at Yeshiva and remembered how silly that sign outside the bathroom had seemed. But after seeing patients whose lives revolved around their dialysis machines, and others with colostomies and urinary catheters, I realized how wise the rabbi had been.

And then it happened: I began to recite the Abayei *bracha*. At first I had to go back to my *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book, to get the text right. With repetition—and there were many opportunities for a novice to get to know this blessing well—I could recite it fluently and with sincerity and understanding.

Over the years, reciting the *asher yatzar* has become an opportunity for me to offer thanks not just for the proper functioning of my excretory organs, but for my overall good health. The text, after all, refers to catastrophic consequences of the rupture or obstruction of any bodily structure, not only those of the urinary or gastrointestinal tract. Could Abayei, for example, have foreseen that "blockage" of the "cavity," or lumen, of the coronary artery would lead to the commonest cause of

death in industrialized countries some 16 centuries later?

I have often wondered if other people also yearn for some for some way to express gratitude for their good health. Physicians especially, who are exposed daily to the ravages that illness can wreak, must sometimes feel the need to express thanks for being well and thus well-being. Perhaps a generic, non-denominational *asher yatzar* could be composed for those who want to verbalize their gratitude for being blessed with good health.

There was one unforgettable patient whose story reinforced the truth and beauty of the *asher yatzar* for me forever. Josh was a 20-year-old student who sustained an unstable fracture of his third and fourth cervical vertebrae in a motor vehicle crash. He nearly died from his injury and required emergency intubation and ventilatory support. He was initially totally quadriplegic but for weak flexion of his right biceps.

A long and difficult period of stabilization and rehabilitation followed. There were promising signs of neurological recovery over the first few months that came suddenly and unexpectedly: movement of a finger here, flexion of a toe there, return of sensation here, adduction of a muscle group there. With incredible courage, hard work, and an excellent physical therapist, Josh improved day by day. In time, and after what seemed like a miracle, he was able to walk slowly with a leg brace and a cane.

But Josh continued to require intermittent catheterization. I knew only too well the problem and the perils this young man would face for the rest of his life because of a neurogenic bladder. The urologists were very pessimistic about his chances for not requiring catheterization. They had not seen this occur after a spinal cord injury of this severity.



"THESE JEWS HAVE A BLESSING FOR EVERYTHING?"

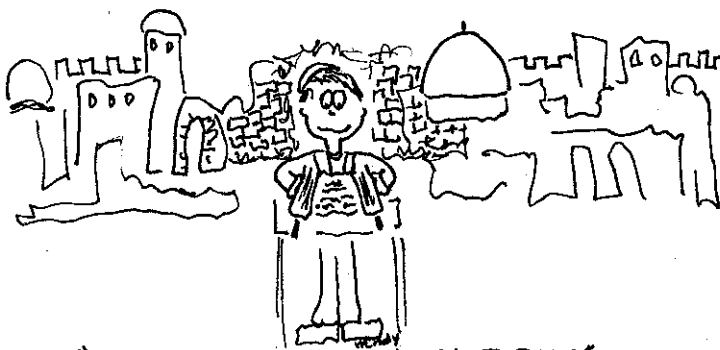
Then the impossible happened. I was there the day Josh no longer required a urinary catheter. I thought of Abayei's *asher yatzar* prayer. Pointing out that I could not imagine a more meaningful scenario for its recitation, I suggested to Josh, who was also a Yeshiva graduate, that he say the prayer. He agreed. As he recited the ancient *bracha*, tears welled in my eyes.

Josh is my son.

Kenneth M. Prager, MD lives in Englewood, NJ where he is a member of Congregation Abavath Torah. This article first appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

THE SEASON OF...(cont. from p. 1) kept us from reaching our spiritual potential. The Exodus liberated us from the yoke of the Egyptians, the external impediment; while receiving the Torah liberated us from the impediments within ourselves. Enslavement to our own whims and desires can stunt our growth as much as religious persecution. Torah enables us to achieve the self-mastery to free ourselves from our internal taskmasters. Pesach, like all Jewish holidays, is not merely a commemoration, but a reliving of a past event. As in the times of the Exodus, we have the opportunity to renew ourselves spiritually by overcoming barriers to our spiritual growth.

I feel it is especially appropriate, at this time of year, to share a personal redemption that occurred in the spring of my life. When I was in high school, my parents sent me to Israel for an eight-week intensive course in Jewish history at the Alexander Muss High School in Israel program to further my Jewish identity. The program consisted of a breathtaking tour of Jewish history in the inspiring atmosphere that only the Holy Land can provide. But for me, it was even more-- it was a new beginning. For the first time in my life, I had considerable contact with observant Jews. I found that these Jews intrigued me and challenged my perception of myself as a 'good Jew'. I was able, thank G-d, to continue my connection to observant Jews, and become one, in college, at The Harvard Hillel, and in various yeshivas and other settings.



Being an observant Jew has brought many blessings into my life, such as a wonderful wife, a sense of community, and the privilege of meeting great people. But there is another significant blessing that should not be overlooked, and it relates closely to the redemption we celebrate this time of year. From my early youth, I had a gnawing feeling that there was something more to life than what I was experiencing. Parties, prom dances, and rooting for the Phillies provided experiences that were sometimes exciting, but they did not fulfill my deepest yearnings. I knew something was missing.

With Judaism, I was taught that we can become closer to the Creator-- and fulfill our purpose in this world-- through Torah and mitzvot. Furthermore, I learned that life can be a continual process of spiritual elevation, with each level reached providing an impetus to strive for the next one. I had found what I was missing, and my *neshamah* (soul) was delighted.

The life of a Jew resembles a spiral. Each year, the sequence of special times is the same, but we can experience them on a new level as a result of our spiritual growth.

May the upcoming season of redemption be a time for all of us to experience new heights of redemption, and express thanks for the manifold personal redemptions each of us has experienced.

Moshe (Marc) Tritel is a fourth year Ph.D student in Cell Biology at the Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences. His wife Beryl Rush Tritel, works at the National Jewish Outreach Program.

PESACH...(cont. from p.1)Plagues, we no longer need to resort to abstract philosophical arguments, nor to design proofs of His existence. We know He exists because we have seen Him act. For this reason G-d introduces Himself as the Master of the Exodus, that we have seen, rather than as the Creator, which we can only imagine.

2. Rav Avraham Ibn Ezra, a bible commentator from the 11th and 12th centuries, offers another view, seeing in the Exodus not simply an indication of G-d's existence, but proof of Israel's destiny. For in Egypt, G-d concerned Himself with us, the Jewish People, and visibly demonstrated that concern, by overcoming the natural course of events to send us on our way to the Torah and Israel. The Exodus therefore reveals G-d's commitment to the Jewish people, and the unique opportunities this relationship affords us.

3. A third approach is found in numerous places throughout the Torah. G-d's redemption of our people from slavery creates a reality that our "freedom" is indeed owned by Him. The original terms of our release from the slavery of Egypt were that we would move from there to serve G-d on Mount Sinai. "*Shalach Ami V'Ya'avduni*: Send out my people and they will serve me." We moved from being the *servants of Pharaoh* to being the *servants of G-d*, "*Hallelu Avdei Hashem, V'Lo Avdei Paroh* -Praise Him servants of G-d, and not servants of Pharaoh."

The first element is simple enough. Every religious individual is assumed to possess a belief in G-d, even as some are able to incorporate that faith into their daily consciousness more effectively than others. The Exodus and its constant presence in our memory can only build and support that belief. The second and third elements

(cont. on p. 4)

PESACH... (cont. from p. 3) however present the alternating challenges of religious life. This constant swing-between a sense of opportunity and one of responsibility-characterizes religious life. In fact it characterizes all relationships and situations. A couple during courtship or in the early stages of marriage easily feels the "inspiration" of their relationship, until the realization of the relationship's growing commitment and responsibility set in. An individual may choose a career that he or she finds enjoyable, yet that feeling wanes as the individual recognizes the inescapable routine that the work brings. Responsibility often precludes inspiration.

And equally, inspiration precludes responsibility. If I insist on only doing things that excite me or touch me spiritually, I will inevitably fail in my duties to G-d as a religious person. The inescapable result of G-d's freeing us from the slavery of Egypt is our responsibility to Him. This responsibility, like the slavery it replaced, is absolute.

It is there whether we appreciate the Mitzvah or not; it is there whether we feel like it now or not. This perspective is one which is lost in our society where the ultimate value is personal autonomy. We are *not* free. Pesach, "The Festival of Our Freedom," frees us from Pharaoh. But it binds us to G-d.

Is Pesach "Mission Impossible?" Can we be inspired by what Pesach teaches us about our role in G-d's world even as we are reminded of our inescapable responsibility to serve Him? Jewish tradition is obviously saying that if we can love the families we are bound to support, then we can love the G-d whom we are obliged to serve. *Asbreinu Mab Tov Chelkeinu!* How fortunate we are, how good is our portion!!

Rabbi Moshe Hauer is the rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jacob, Baltimore, MD, and the driving force behind its outstanding outreach program and Beginners Service.

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