

ברשת

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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CELEBRATING THE SEDER WITH ABBA

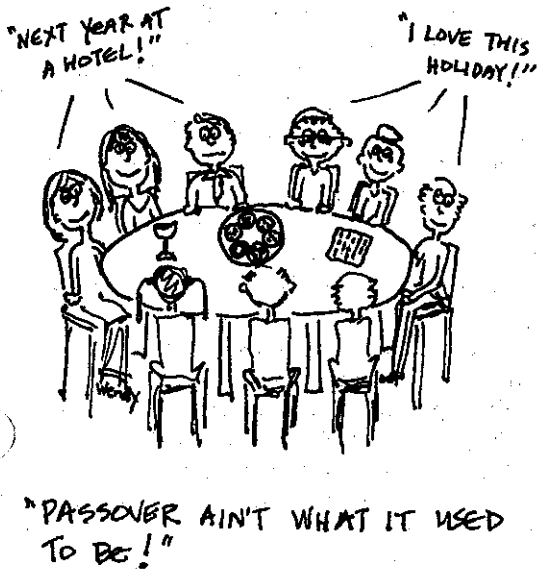
by Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

American Jews who have some traditional background usually speak of "conducting" a Seder. My friend, RL, once told me that most assimilated Jews who attend a Seder use a different expression: They "sweat it out!"

My father of blessed memory, never "conducted" a Seder, and certainly never "sweated it out". Abba (father) always "pravadt" (celebrated) a Seder, as he said in Yiddish. William Safire would probably say he exulted, jubilated or reveled in the Seder.

Abba was the type of Jew who feverishly anticipated Pessach's arrival, and began preparations for his beloved festival long before the customary 30 days. Born in Poland, and arriving at these shores in 1919 at age 16, Abba vividly recalled (and made certain that his "Yankee" wife and 3 children recalled) what it was like preparing for Pessach in Biala Podlowska, a small shtetel of 10,000 Jews and 4,000 gentiles near Poland's northeastern border with Russia. The house was literally taken apart piece by piece. The straw mattresses were changed with great fanfare. The shtetel Jews were so poor, that it was usually only at Pessach time that the Hebrew greeting "Tischadesh" ("wear it in good health") was heard, for those lucky enough to have new clothes especially tailored for Pessach. Abba's vivid

(cont. on p. 3)



THE FOUR SONS: EVERY FAMILY'S SEDER

by Sarah Rochel Reid

When I was a child, sitting at my grandparents' Seder table, I never thought much about what was going on. Sure, there was the annual refusal of both my younger cousins to ask the Four Questions, but that just gave *me* my chance for some extra attention. And there was the dollar we earned if we found the *afikomen*, although I suspect that grandpa would have given it to us even had we not found it. But the Seder was, for the most part, a long, ho-hum event that ended with a feast of delightful treats from grandma's kitchen.

The tale of the Four Sons, however, always interested me. Perhaps I related to it because I was a child, and they were discussing children. Years have passed. My grandparents are gone, and the Seder is now held at my brother's home. The Four Sons, however, continue to intrigue me, perhaps because I see our Seder as a gathering of those proverbial Four Sons.

The concept of the Four Sons, one wise, one rebellious, one simple, and one who does not know

(cont. on p. 2)

HOW TO BE A GOOD SEDER GUEST

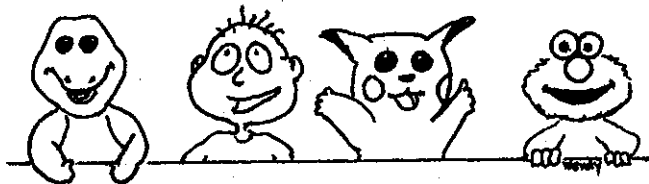
by Shlomo Gewirtz

I was a terrible Seder guest, myself, many years ago when I accepted a number of invitations as a Beginner. Not that I didn't bring a bottle of fine wine or add appropriate commentary on the message of the evening. Nor did I ever refrain from complimenting the hostess on her matzah balls. And I'm sure, if I remember correctly, I was always dressed nicely, and sang "Dayenu" with gusto. But when it came to listening to the children in the family speak, I must say I tuned out and wished they would go away and play. As often as not, I recall, the children were reading from prepared notes that had been xeroxed for them by their teachers, using vocabulary words they couldn't pronounce in Hebrew or mangled in English. For some of the children, actually, all that mattered was the fact that they were able to get through the questions while, at the same time, provoking smiles and words of encouragement from mommy and daddy. But the joy of the parents was anything but contagious. Apart from

(cont. on p. 4)

FOUR SONS (cont. from p. 1)... how to ask a question, seems to me to be a metaphor representing the Jewish people today. In fact, when we gather for our family's Passover Seder, we have them all. Let me explain:

I am a "Baalat T'shuvah," one who has come to religious observance. In my case, I have moved to the right of the observant community. At the same time that I was learning and growing, my brother met and married a wonderful young lady raised in the modern Orthodox world. Our parents, however, have little religious training, and, while approving of our choices, they are quite happy with their own non-observant lifestyle. My sister-in-law's parents are, like her, modern Orthodox; and her sister is finding her place in that world as well. Her brother, on the other hand, is a brilliant young man who is just stretching his wings and deciding how to show his independence. Our Seder is also joined by relatives who have no religious affiliation, or are only starting to explore their Jewishness. This combination of people who participate in our Seder, reflect the four sons of the Haggadah.



THE FOUR CHILDREN CIRCA 2000!

Looking at the list of sons in reverse order, is the son who does not know how to ask. Last year, as we went around the table, each reading a section of the Haggadah, this paragraph fell to my mother. She read it, looked up, and smiled as if to say, "Hey, I relate to this." Raised in a house with no religion (her father, of blessed memory, was a declared atheist), my mother had taken her own steps of religious growth by marrying my "Conservative" father. She sent us to an Orthodox Day School, but could be of little assistance with our religious studies. She smiled as we were bar/bat mitzvahed, but had no memories of her own to share. As she watched both of her children begin to keep Shabbat and Kosher, she declared Thanksgiving to be the great family weekend, as it was her only remaining chance to have us for a holiday. Yet she rarely asked for explanations, and, as she glanced up from the Haggadah, I understood -- she did not know how to ask her questions. We are told that, in response to this "child," we must initiate the discussion by starting the answer without the question. From this child, I learned that my parents would not ask the questions, but would listen with great interest when I tell them of the life that I am leading.

The simple son asks a simple question, "What is this?" Two years ago, my cousin joined us for the first time at my brother's Seder. This same cousin who had years before refused to recite the "Four Questions" at our grandparents' home, now came to experience her first "Orthodox" Seder. Arriving several hours before the Seder, when the house was bustling with activity, she went to her room and waited. And as we lit candles, welcoming in the holy-day, she respectfully copied our words and actions. She

took her seat at the table and watched silently as the Seder began. Then, hesitantly, at *Karpas*, she leaned over to question: "Why do they have a potato instead of celery?" "Why is he breaking the middle matzoh?" she whispered, not wanting her lack of knowledge to be noticed. For such "children," Haggadah tells us that we must say to them, "With a strong hand did Hashem take *us* out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." This says to me that we must demonstrate and emphasize that this Seder includes her, so that she may truly feel part of the experience. This Seder is for all Jews, and our traditions, whether the same or different, underscore G-d's love for all our people.

The rebellious son asks "What good is all this to you?" Before the last Seder, my brother approached me and, half-joking, mentioned that his brother-in-law had been instructed not to incite me into a fit. As I mentioned earlier, he is a brilliant young man who is trying to assert his recent independence. A rebellious child is one who knows his heritage, but has yet to see the value in it. This perfectly describes my brother's brother-in-law. He understands the meaning of the Seder, the deeper concepts introduced from the Talmud, and the relevance of the different customs; yet he wields this knowledge to throw as a dagger of confrontation...a challenge, as if to say: "Go ahead, argue with me." The Haggadah goes on to say: "He says 'to *you*' and thereby excludes himself from the Jewish people...this means he is denying G-d, the basic principle of Judaism...you must tell him: 'It is because of this that G-d did so for *me* when I went out of Egypt.' ...had *he* been there, *he* would not have been redeemed." At first glance, this response seems cruel and antithetical to the idea of embracing all Jews. If you look, however, at what the sages say of the Children of Israel who were not taken out of Egypt (and there were such people) it is those who sought to stop the Exodus and deny their brethren the chance at freedom. So too, today's rebellious son seeks to blunt the growth of those around him. Since he is not yet ready to take his place in the Jewish world, he tries to make certain that no one else is happy and satisfied in that world. When I sit at the Seder table and listen to the subtle baiting in his questions, my task is to demonstrate my love for Torah and our heritage, to show him how it can be embraced, and perhaps to draw him back to Judaism.

Perhaps at this point you think that I am going to say that the wise son is the one who has become religious, the figure we should all strive to emulate. This is not so. Each of the four sons has flaws. It is true that I place myself as the wise son, but not for praise alone. What does the Haggadah's wise son ask? "What are the laws, statutes and ordinances which the L-rd our G-d has commanded you?" We are then instructed to explain these laws, down to the details of not eating after the afikomen, to him. Each year I spend many frustrated and futile moments trying to get others to look at a fascinating word play in the Haggadah, or a law that can make an interesting inference for today. Often my comments have been returned with blank stares, yawns, or coughing to move on. What have I, the "wise son," overlooked? The rebellious, simple, and silent sons are not yet ready to delve into the complex laws and *midrashim*. They first come to understand the spirit of the Seder. Now I understand that the "wise son," rather than focusing on his own need of learning discourse, should use what he has learned to energize the Seder for the other sons. Our redemption from Egypt was the first step in the formation of the nation of Israel. (cont. on p. 3)

FOUR SONS (cont. from p. 2)... This nation is made up of all people, learned and unlearned, and they too are part of the Seder and must be included. Therefore, I must bring the entire family into the Seder instead of only focusing on what I can get out of it.

I have mentioned four specific participants of my family's Seder who represent the Haggadah's Four Sons. What of the others who attend? As with all things, between the black and the white there are shades of grey; so too, participants in the Seder have qualities from each of the four sons.

This summer, my sister-in-law will, please G-d, give birth to the next generation of our families. (For my family, this will be the first child in over 100 years to be raised in an observant home.) This will solidify the bond between our families, a bond which grows each year as we gather about my brother's Seder table. Like many Jewish families, we are not all Orthodox or all Reform. We are a microcosm of the Jewish people, a nation which thrives because we are composed of the four sons who make the story truly intriguing as we continue into the next generation.

Sarah Rochel Reid is the Editor of NJOP Publications.

CELEBRATING (cont. from p. 1)... memories of Europe never seemed to leave him for even a moment of the 72 years he subsequently dwelt in the USA. My big sister, 12 years my elder, and my little sister, 2 years my elder, and I watched with eyes aglow, as Abba, usually late in February or early March, started taking down the special corrugated boxes marked "Pessach" in Hebrew, filled with the dishes and utensils. By then, Abba had already prepared his special "Kosher for Passover sink" -- a new wooden fruit box obtained from the local market. He built it to fit perfectly in the bathtub, where he washed each Pessach plate, glass, spoon, fork, knife and silver utensil with special care and devotion, making sure that nothing touched the walls of the sink. Abba loved his Pessach dishware with a passion. Each year he would, on numerous occasions, excitedly call in his wife and children into his Passover "kitchen" to kvell with him over the beautiful long stemmed exotically colored glass which he had just polished to a high sparkle. (Being one of America's all time great bargain hunters, Abba had probably bought the glass for less than a nickel at Gimbel's or Macy's "double close-out basement remnant sale," long before the cellar had become the fashionable boutique it is today.)

Mother prepared the Seder meal with great care, of course, according to Abba's tastes and abundant instructions. There was a palpable sense of excitement when the Seder began, which is probably not uncommon in many homes. But Abba's enthusiasm was so contagious, that each member of our family approached the Seder in an emotional state approaching ecstasy. We truly felt the Divine Presence.

The Buchwald family did not "read" the Haggadah, we "chanted" the Haggadah text with the special chanting melody Abba had learned in Biala. All of us were expected to master that chant, and Abba would often repeat a portion of the Haggadah if one of the designated readers missed the proper intonation while leading the chanting. Many songs were sung, often in harmony, and amazingly Abba joyfully allowed his younger children to intrude on his Biala traditions by singing the Passover songs we had learned in the Soloveitchik Yeshiva choir. Everyone was

expected to lead a portion of the Haggadah reading -- even poor mother, whom my father often described as having the "dearest" (most expensive) Hebrew, having taken countless Ulpan Hebrew classes with limited success. Inevitably, we would convulse with laughter and tears when mother really savaged a particular Hebrew word in her assigned reading.

Each year Abba would tell the same stories -- about the old widow who opened the door for Elijah the Prophet. The sudden light scared the bearded goat, who jumped into the old lady's hut, and made shambles of the table. The little old lady, who had already imbibed three cups of wine, begs the "guest": "Reb Elya (Elijah), eat, drink -- but please don't break the dishes!" Or the limerick about Pharaoh losing his pants. It was more than fun, it was more than spiritual. It was fantasyland come true -- something Disney could never match.

When we received a "slinky" or a climbing-ladder-man as a reward for returning the Afikoman -- the children were ecstatic. (Much more excited by that gift, than the walkman or CD disc player kids receive today!)



We danced with great fervor at *Leshana Haba'a Bi'rushalayim* (Next Year in Jerusalem), and sang *Adir Hu* and *Chad Gadyah* until the wee hours of the morning. In his traditional steadfastness, Abba would announce each year that if he moved to Israel (which was his lifelong dream), he would insist on celebrating *two* Seders, because you can't fully appreciate the first one, being too exhausted from the preparations.

Last year [1992], Abba celebrated his Pessach Seder for the first time without his beloved wife of 59 years. He refused to join me or my sisters in Israel, the hotel or at our homes. He wanted to be with his beloved Passover utensils. Sure enough, more than a month before Passover, he began his regular ritual of preparation -- letting us know at each step how beautiful things looked. And so at age 88 1/2 years, he celebrated together with an elderly gentleman friend of his, whom he had invited over for the holiday, and regaled him with his customs, melodies, witticisms, Torah, and the delicious food he had cooked -- the traditional Buchwald fare.

Pessach without Abba will never be the same -- despite the wonderful traditions which he bequeathed to us as our legacy. When Moshiach comes, I have a sneaky suspicion that it will be Abba who is called upon to lead the intercelestial Seder.

Ephraim Z. Buchwald is the Founder and Director of NJOP, and he has led the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue for the past 24 1/2 years. This article first appeared in Bereshith in 1993.

HOWTO (cont. from p. 1)... (maybe) asking the children where they went to school, I cared little about drawing them out, dismissing them as mere appendages to an adult celebration. They bored me, and when their little heads finally fell on the table, asleep and dead to the world, I was relieved. At last we would make some headway on some serious discussion, and I would get my four questions worth.

But twenty years later? Married and with three children of my own, now ages 17, 15, and 12, I look at the guests my wife and I have at the Seders and on Shabbat and holidays and the funny thing is, I see myself as I was back then in so many of them. Only now, because I am able to see my own children respond from week to week, I am also able to understand how this lack of attention by our guests affects them greatly. When the kids were little, they understood how guests couldn't have cared less about them and, so, succeeded in getting the attention they deserved through their disruptive antics. When the kids got older, however, they merely announced they were leaving the table: "G'night, everyone." Of course, I still love bringing home beginners who, through their excitement and passion, make us aware how easy it is to take for granted so many of the traditions that were once so new and original and fresh and inspiring to me. But I keep coming back to the kids. If they

get cropped out of the picture, what sort of family portrait does this become?

So if you find yourself at my house any Passover, when main obligation is to recreate the Passover experience for children, or perhaps another house where there are younger people at the table, I, for one, would urge you to not to be like I was. Forget all the brilliant insights you may have learned from a casual reading of the Haggadah commentaries and focus your attention specifically on the children, treating everything they say and do seriously, or with amusement -- whatever is called for at the time. Tell them they're smart and that they ask really good questions. Ask them about their teachers. Make funny faces. Imagine yourself on the road to the Red Sea with children of all ages passing you by and asking, "Are we there yet?" No doubt there were many Israelites who reached out to the kids with Kosher-for-Passover lollipops and words of encouragement. With every exercise of your imagination, in this way, you become truly a most honored guest, a participant in the community

of the Exodus, rather than a bystander passing the time of night.

Shlomo Gewirtz is a graduate of the LSS Beginners Service and is the Creative Director of Net2Phone.



Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

בראשית

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NEW YORK, N. Y. 10023**

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