

ברשת

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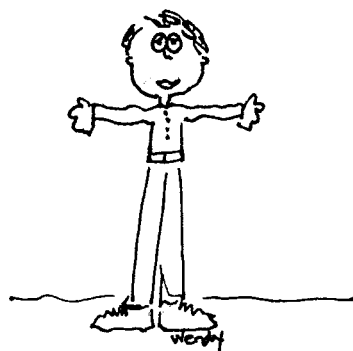
BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Nisan 5761/April 2001

IT'S NO COINCIDENCE

by David Solomon

"I'M TALKING TO YOU!
TAKE A HEBREW READING
CRASH COURSE!"



I think I fit the mold of the typical Jew on the North Shore of Chicago. I was raised in a semi-observant home (i.e. we kept kosher, went to services on the High Holidays, had Passover Seders, etc.) and was provided with a traditional Jewish education. I went to Hebrew School from ages 8-13 and had my Bar Mitzvah on my 13th birthday (complete with a fancy party for all of my friends and family at the Standard Club).

However, after "becoming a man" in the eyes of the Jewish community, and even though I promised the rabbi, my parents and family on the day of my Bar Mitzvah that I would, I took very little interest in pursuing my Jewish education. Instead, I busied myself with sports, hanging out with my friends, studying for college entrance exams, and generally being a teenager in all other ways. Other than going to temple on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and attending my family's Passover Seders, I did not utilize the wonderful skills that I now realize were a privilege to learn in Hebrew School. I did not take advantage of reading from the Torah or leading the Saturday morning service. I did not pursue the various activities offered by my local USY Chapter or the Hillel during my days as an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan. In fact, I did not even join a synagogue until this past year, even though I married a Jewish woman who was also raised as (cont. on p. 3)

CLEANING HOUSE

by Beth Seewald

Passover, to me, always involved a Seder, the family coming together, and lots of matzah over the course of the holiday. However, one thing that we never did in my house while growing up was clean for the holiday. As I started to learn more about Judaism, I discovered that Passover was not only about eating matzah during the eight days of Passover, but also about the preparations prior to the Seder. Several years ago, therefore, I decided to institute the tradition of cleaning my apartment before the start of Pesach.

Cleaning for Passover was no easy task (embarrassingly enough). I was living with two other women, and although we did clean our apartment regularly, we certainly did not usually do the extremely thorough cleaning that Passover requires. In addition, my roommates were not into this business of cleaning for Passover, so I had to do it on my own. Of course, they did not complain - they were going to get a thoroughly spotless apartment, after all! Thus, giving myself about three days before the start of Passover, I started to empty my cabinets in the kitchen and scrub down the surfaces. I also removed the coats from the hallway closet, swept it out, and (cont. on p. 2)

THE JEWISH DAY OF INDEPENDENCE

by Rabbi Andrew Cohen

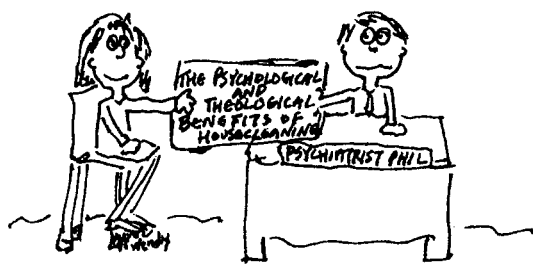
The Jewish concept of time is cyclical: a spiral in which each month passes through a field infused with a spiritual energy conducive to that season's holidays. For instance, from the beginning of Elul (the month preceding Rosh Hashana) until Yom Kippur, there is an energy of repentance. Immediately following the Rosh Hashana season is Yom Kippur, a 25-hour period of atonement for sin, and spiritual rebirth. The upcoming holiday of Passover is known as *Zman Cheiruteinu - The Time of Our National Spiritual Liberation*.

Passover (*Pesach*) commemorates our Exodus from Egypt and our salvation from spiritual annihilation. Our Sages teach that the Egyptian enslavement had dragged us down to the 49th level of spiritual impurity, and that had we delayed in Egypt even one moment more, we would have descended into the abyss forever. Egypt was the most decadent, anti-G-d place on the earth, and we were in a veritable crucible, about to be consumed entirely, were it not for G-d's infinite love and mercy.

The Almighty planned our Exodus during the time of year richly endowed with the spirit of liberation. (cont. on p. 2)

CLEANING (cont. from p. 1)... searched in all corners for any traces of *chametz* (leaven and any product in which wheat, oat, barley, spelt or rye come in contact with water for 18 minutes or longer without kneading or manipulating). Then I mopped the kitchen and living room floors. However, even with doing all of this, I was not even close to being done with the cleaning, and Passover was to start the next day! What should I do? The effort to clean my entire apartment was genuine, but it just seemed impossible in the amount of time that I had given myself.

You may think – why all this cleaning anyway? Why not eat the matzah for the eight days of Passover and then move on with life? Well, that fateful year of my first Pesach cleaning, I had learned something that resonated within me. In cleaning for Passover, not only are we physically cleaning our houses or apartments, but we should be looking inside of ourselves and "cleaning out" the parts of our lives or our personalities that need to be changed. We look into the corners of our souls and see what needs to be scrubbed out of our own lives.



The year of my first Pesach cleaning, I did not finish cleaning the whole apartment. However, I did investigate and sanitize areas that had not been looked at in months. Similarly, as I searched for *chametz* in my residence, I was able to search for things in my life that were holding me back personally, and attempt to rid them from my life (or at least make a concerted effort to do so). I did not get to the "whole house" that year, but that may be because I did not give myself enough time. It could very well be that I may not have been ready to clean out the entire apartment. Similarly, I may have been ready to change and improve parts of my life but, perhaps, I was not ready to start on others, or did not have enough time to do so.

Now, several years later, I clean my whole apartment for each Pesach. I have help from my current roommates and yet I still, at times, forget to check certain areas of the house for *chametz*. As we clean this year, may all we try to eradicate from our lives the *chametz* that is holding us back, but realize that it may be okay if we are not yet ready to rid ourselves of all of the "bad stuff." The essence, after all, is in the effort to clean and the attempt to get rid of all of the *chametz* that may be obvious or hidden.

Beth Seewald is involved with the Beginners Program at Congregation Ohab Zedek on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

INDEPENDENCE (cont. from p. 1)... Through the events of the Exodus, the Jewish People were able to see into the depths of Creation, to perceive G-d's glory through a detailed perception of the mechanics of Divine will. Each year, as we pass through this time-zone of freedom, there exists the potential for us to tap into the wellsprings of salvation, and to elevate ourselves and our relationship with G-d. This is not merely a symbolic or amorphous feeling; it is not an imagined euphoria, or an artificial high. The sense of growth that one can experience on Passover, though an externally-induced gift from the Almighty, is very, very real. And it is ours for the asking, if we follow the guidelines through which G-d channels the blessings of spiritual liberation.

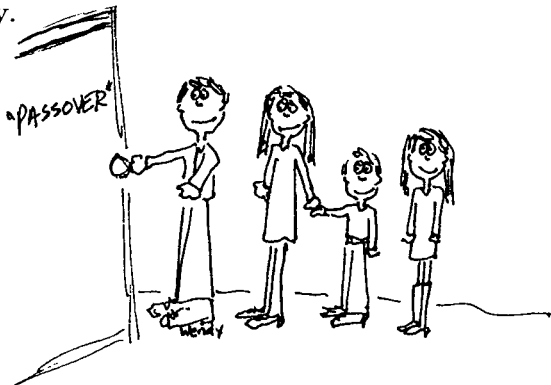
On *Pesach* we recount the miracles that G-d performed for us in the Exodus from Egypt through the recitation of the Haggadah. Through retelling, indeed, almost reliving, the story of our liberation, we are reinforcing the basic cornerstone of our belief in G-d, and in His unassailable love for the Jewish People. The parent teaches the child, and implants this core belief across the generations. There is no generation gap, but rather an unbroken chain stretching back to those who witnessed these wonders--and the child's soul becomes united with the faithful Jews of every generation who relived and retold this story of the Exodus. As Nachmanides (a medieval commentator) points out (Deut. 4:9): G-d did all these miracles for us in order that we should learn to love and fear him, and to ensure that our children remain connected to Jewish eternity throughout all generations.

Whether or not we have children, we discuss these events, ask the Four Questions, and gain insight into the realization that we are a People because G-d led us out of Egypt to serve Him. And it is by virtue of our adherence to His Divine Code, the Torah, that we are a people. Through our connection to the eternal commitment to retell the Haggadah, we deepen our appreciation of G-d, and the Torah. G-d, in turn, intensifies His commitment to us – as we say in the Haggadah: *“Even if we were all people of wisdom, understanding, experience, and Torah knowledge, it would still be obligatory to tell about the Exodus from Egypt. The more one tells about the Exodus, the more one is praiseworthy.”*

It has been said that Judaism is a gastronomical experience; *Pesach* is no exception. Through eating certain foods, our souls reconnect to the suffering in Egypt, and the subsequent salvation that G-d performed for us. The famous Four Cups of Wine, the Sages tell us, correspond to the four expressions of redemption used by G-d: *V'hotzeiti*—I will bring you out; *V'hitzalti*—I will rescue you; *V'gaw'alti*—I will redeem you; and *V'lakachti*—I will take you to Myself. In addition, wine refers to liberation in another way: it is the choice drink of kings, and we imbibe it, after the requisite blessings, while reclining on our left sides. The mystical sources teach that G-d's right hand corresponds to His attribute of mercy, and His left hand to the attribute of strict justice. We lean on our left sides in order to connect to the concept of G-d's mercy dominating over His strict justice, as He took us to freedom.

The other symbolic foods – the *matzah*, the bread of affliction, and the *maror*, the bitter herbs, recreate in us a sense of poverty and bitterness. They are dipped in the *charoset* – the sweet apple, cinnamon, and nut mixture, which represents the mortar we used in our hard labor. Each of these food

INDEPENDENCE (cont. from p. 2)... items is required in order to touch a specific chord in our souls. We must eat a certain prescribed measurement of them within a specific time limit in order to reconnect our souls to the communal sense of suffering and bondage that we experienced. Just as in the physical world, medicine is administered in set dosages, and one would be foolish to say, "What difference does it make if I take 30 mg of penicillin or 150 mg? It's all just symbolic." So, too, in the science of Jewish Spirituality (Torah observance), the set amounts of *matzah*, *maror*, and wine are necessary for our souls to achieve the sense of bitterness and liberation. A little sip of wine won't do; a nibble on some *matzah* is not doing the mitzvah properly. A tiny dab of horseradish smothered in *charoset* is not what the Torah instructed us to do in order to log into the sense of affliction and slavery.



WALKING THROUGH A TIME-ZONE OF FREEDOM

It is not the form of the act that is key, it is the content. Through complying with the carefully determined measurements in terms of quantity and time, our souls revisit the primal scream of our ancestors in Egypt, and then throughout the rest of the Seder we set out to achieve a full redemption, in spiritual terms, on a personal level, and as individuals in the body of the Jewish People. And G-d willing, as our Sages teach, "*B'Nisan nigalu, u'bNisan atidim l'higael*" -- In the month of Nisan we were first redeemed, and in the month of Nisan we shall again be redeemed," speedily in our days.

Rabbi Cohen is a chaplain in the USAF, a graduate of the Ohr LaGola Program of Yeshivat Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem. He and his family are currently stationed at Scott AFB just outside of St Louis.

COINCIDENCE (cont. from p. 1)... a traditional Jew and have two children that we intend to raise as traditional Jews.

Despite my inability or unwillingness to connect with my Jewish heritage for almost twenty years, certain changes in my life have affected the way I feel about the strength of my faith in G-d over the past two years. These events (and my recent affiliation with the good people of the Chicago Community Kollel, especially Rabbi Zev Kahn), have reinforced my belief that nothing in this world happens by accident. In November 1999, I received a flier regarding a class being held in conjunction with "Read Hebrew America," the NJOP campaign to help people who had not pursued their Jewish

education, learn how to read Hebrew. Although I had not taken advantage of such opportunities for nearly two decades, something inside pushed me to begin attending these classes.

At the first class I met Rabbi Zev Kahn, my teacher, who described himself as the "Rugby Rabbi from South Africa." After adjusting to the strange nickname and even stranger accent, I began to learn to read the Hebrew words which were used in all the familiar prayers I had learned in my childhood. And through Rabbi Kahn's words of wisdom, the spiritual meaning behind these words and prayers came alive. After the first two weeks, I began to re-connect with my Jewish roots that were developed as a student so many years ago.

As it turned out, this re-connection with my Jewish faith could not have come at a better time for me. Shortly after beginning the "Hebrew Reading Crash Course" and developing my new relationship with Rabbi Kahn, I experienced two separate events of personal crisis which would test the faith of any Jew who believes in a merciful and compassionate G-d. On November 9, 1999, my father was diagnosed with Stage IV Pancreatic Cancer, a disease that is fatal 98% of the time. Two weeks later, my 90 year-old grandfather died suddenly of a stroke after suffering from Alzheimer's Disease for nine months.

Although I certainly wish neither of these events would have occurred, I am grateful that I was able to read enough Hebrew to recite the Mourner's Kaddish for my grandfather at his funeral, that I could pray for my father's recovery from his illness and that I could read Psalms for my father with the prayer book Rabbi Kahn gave me on September 20, 2000, the night before my father ultimately passed away. In fact, my family and I were so grateful that we decided to sponsor the Torah Learning Center's recent "Hebrew Reading Crash Course" in honor of my late father.

Based on my experiences, I believe that my desire to re-learn Hebrew was no coincidence and that the opportunity to study with Rabbi Kahn was G-d's way of preparing me for the tough times that lay ahead. While I hope that no other "typical" Jew like me will have to suffer through a personal crisis to begin exploring an enhanced Judaic education, I truly believe that everything happens for a reason and that G-d has a purpose.

As we approach the season of Passover, I can see from reviewing the Haggadah that my experience is the Jewish experience. In order to take hold of their heritage and accept the Torah at Sinai, the Jews needed to suffer through slavery. Therefore, I would encourage anyone with a desire to re-connect with their Jewish faith to do so without the "suffering" and to attend the fine programs available through NJOP and your local outreach centers.

David Solomon is an attorney in Northbrook, Illinois. David and his wife Tanya are involved with the outreach programs of the Chicago Community Kollel and the Torah Learning Center of Northbrook. They have two children, Matthew (4) and Mollie (2).



WHOSE SEDER IS THIS, ANYWAY?

by Lloyd Epstein

We usually have upwards of 20 people at our Seder. Most of our guests are beginners or highly assimilated relatives. Our three children are usually the only ones with any yeshiva education. This creates a "5th question" which we have never been able to satisfactorily answer: Does the real Seder begin when the guests arrive, or when they go home?

One year, Yoel (then 7), interrupted himself in the middle of the *Mah Nishtana* and asked, "Why is there no question on the paschal sacrifice?"

Ben, who was 9, immediately stood up, smiled as though he had been waiting for this moment his entire life, and began, "In *Masechet Pesachim Perek Yud Mishna*... [Tractate Pesachim Chapter 10, Mishna . . .]" But then he stopped in mid-sentence. He surveyed the table and realized that no one understood the word "*Masechet*," no one understood the word "*Pesachim*," and certainly no one was really interested in "*Perek*" or "*Mishna*," or even the letter "*Yud*." Ben didn't say much else for the rest of the evening.

When the guests left, I asked Ben what the problem was. He responded, "Why do we have to invite so many beginners to our Seder?"

THE HAGGADAH ASSERTS: "One might think that the Seder should be conducted on Rosh Chodesh (the first day of Nisan . . ." The Haggadah's notion of the Seder on Rosh Chodesh Nisan is intriguing. According to the Biblical commentator Rashi, the commandment to sanctify the new moon is so central that it might be the starting point for the entire Torah. What a fitting symbol for an enslaved nation's new found freedom: a declaration by the Sanhedrin, the High Court, that, with the new moon, the nation is now master of its own time, subject to no human power.

Imagine how a Seder on Rosh Chodesh would look. It is precisely the Seder about which the budding scholar might dream! There would be a discussion of the rules of the Sanhedrin. How should the court cross examine witnesses to the new moon? What if the witnesses' description of what they saw conflicts with science? There would be contemporary issues – like why did the Torah command us to recount the Exodus on a day most closely associated with women?

But the Haggadah rejects Rosh Chodesh as the time of the Seder. The Seder must be conducted "when the matzah and the maror are set in front of you." That is, the Seder is not about the technical rules of declaring the new moon, nor about the legitimate striving for self-fulfillment, or even about the technical details of the paschal sacrifice. It is about matzah and maror – about a suffering and joy which precedes all sophistication. And it is also about the realization, which is so difficult for the budding scholar, that G-d not only redeemed the wise one, but also the Rebellious Child, the Naive Child, and the Child who can't think of any questions.

Perhaps this is why, according to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a 20th century giant among scholars, the Sages in B'nei Brak spent the Seder proper immersing themselves in the story of the enslavement and the redemption, striving to become one with the masses in Egypt. Only after midnight, when matzah and maror were no longer before them and, perhaps, when the guests had gone home, did the Sages fully celebrate by discussing the technical aspects of the laws.

This suggests an obvious solution to Ben's complaint and our 5th question. There is just one problem. Unlike the Sages in B'nei Brak, children can't stay up all night.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

Lloyd Epstein is a Partner at Epstein and Weil and a Professor at New York Law School

בראשית

Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about programs of NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450, e-mail info@njop.org.

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NEW YORK, NY 10017
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