

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XVIII No. 3

Nissan 5765/April 2005



בראשית

HOW I ENDURED ZAYDEH'S SEDER AND LIVED TO TELL ABOUT IT

Rabbi Mark Golub

I loved my Zaydeh with all my heart. A humble tailor from Kiev in Ukraine, he and his two brothers escaped conscription ordered by the tzar and fled from the Russian Pale of Settlement in the early years of the 20th century. He arrived in America with nothing but the clothes on his back and ten rubles in his pocket. The only picture of him that I have ever seen is a blurry daguerreotype depicting a young man newly arrived on these shores with his hair parted in the middle, a look of bewilderment on his face, and an astonishing resemblance to his grandson—me.

We used to visit my Zaydeh and Bubbeh every Sunday. My sister and I made up skits for their amusement and looked forward to the special aroma of gribbenes, flanken, kasha varnishkes and the other kosher dishes Bubbeh had inherited from generations of her family. These pleasant odors emanated from a cramped little kitchen where Bubbeh plied her kosher culinary magic for us always-famished kids every week of my youth. I still remember the pages of *Der Fahrvertz* (*The Forward*) strewn on the floor, the plastic-covered (cont. on p. 2)



CATAPULTING INTO REDEMPTION

Hadassah Rosenthal

When I was little, I loved Passover. It was my favorite Jewish holiday. We always went to a Seder, either at the community center or at my grandparents. My two favorite parts of the meal were when the rabbi acknowledged my grandfather's great love of horseradish and when we looked for the *afikoman*. When the meal was over, we drove home.

Several years ago, I found my way into traditional Judaism. I'm not so little these days, and I no longer drive on Shabbat or Jewish holidays. This was neither an easy nor a simple transition. It began with a few questions, and continues with a few questions.

For instance: When did the holiday – our liberation from slavery – become a time of stress? When I became an observant Jew and began observing *halacha* (Jewish law), I noticed that many people regarded (cont. on p. 3)

HOW IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER?

Rachel Bell

When I was young, my family shared Passover with the Goldman family. Every year, we made the first Seder at the Goldman house and the second one at our house. We went around the table reading the Haggadah paragraph by paragraph. Regardless of the seating arrangement, the paragraph about Rabbi Yossi (written in the Maxwell House Haggadah as Rabbi Jose) was always given to my brother Gary. He was so cute when he used the Spanish pronunciation, José, instead of the Hebrew pronunciation.

As the baby of the family, I always loved when it was my turn to read out loud. The Sedarim were the only time of year when everyone got to participate equally. It made me feel part of something important and connected to something bigger than just my own life. Our Seder always ended about halfway through the Haggadah. After dessert, most of us schmoozed and laughed (cont. on p. 3)

HOW I ENDURED (cont. from p. 1)...furniture on which we were never permitted to sit, the overstuffed sofas and the dim lighting of that apartment in Brighton Beach where they lived their final years.

More than anything else, I remember *Pesach*. Each year, we had one of the Seders in Bubbeh and Zaydeh's apartment. I am certain that the same scene was, and is, played out in countless Jewish homes: Thirty or so people pushed together on folding chairs around a table meant for twelve, the matzah-flecked, wine-stained, dog-eared Maxwell House Haggadot at every place—and Zaydeh.

Zaydeh, this mild, humble tailor from the Old Country, who blanched under the ever stern and critical eye of my Bubbeh at every turn of life, suddenly morphed into the Incredible (Jewish) Hulk!! Sitting at the head of the table, his soft eyes became steel slits. His trembling hands turned sure and steady. His quiet voice grew to an ominous growl. I feared this monster who annually emerged from its henpecked alter ego. He seemed to me a creature with evil intent awakening from a year-long hibernation with the sole purpose of making this little boy frightened out of his wits!

In my worst nightmares during the weeks leading up to Passover, I would anticipate the horrible moment: "*Avram Mayshe, macht mit der fier kashes!*" ("Abraham Moses, ask the Four Questions!")—a command that was punctuated with a fist hitting the table with such force that more than one wine glass teetered on the verge of destruction. Every evening, after my homework was done, I would sit with a copy of the Haggadah, which I had purloined from Zaydeh's drawer, staring at the Four Questions, perfecting the chant and memorizing the words. My Bar-Mitzvah was still years away, and yet I knew that the pressure I felt preparing for my big moment at Zaydeh's Seder was as great as any I would experience learning my Maftir (Bar Mitzvah Torah portion) and performing it before the people attending my rite of passage into Jewish manhood.

Finally, I would feel ready to face my harrowing task. Throughout the trip to Zaydeh and Bubbeh's apartment, I would review everything in my head. I had memorized every word and chanted syllable. My confidence would grow high and I would picture the scene in my mind: "*Avram Mayshe...*" standing up, throwing my shoulders back, and in the high-pitched voice of my pre-teen years, regaling everyone there with my Hebraic excellence, then leaving the English translation—the easy part—to my lowly younger sister sitting next to me. Like George Washington standing at the prow of his ship, cutting through the waves of the Potomac, I would lead the charge toward my ultimate goal. I was supremely prepared, eager, ready to succeed beyond my wildest dreams.

For about five seconds. I would come back to earth when the strident voice of Zaydeh permeated my fantasy, the fist hit the table, and my moment of truth was upon me. As the Seder began, I would start to perspire, my knees wobbled, nausea crept into my stomach and my nervous system issued urgent messages as all eyes turned toward me. I just knew that I would surely mess up again as I did every year, stumbling over this word or that, forgetting the *nusach* (tune), dying the little deaths I endured each year, knowing in advance that I would fail and disappoint my family. And I always did. "What kind of a Bar Mitzvah are you going to have if you can't chant something as simple as the Four Questions?" my mother would say to me on the way home. My father would only shake his head, perhaps

remembering his own days of being the youngest one present and having to chant those indomitable questions. My sisters giggled at my plight, perhaps thanking G-d that they didn't have to stand up and face Zaydeh's fiery eyes and fierce condemnation the way that I did.

As the years passed, I began to wonder how long I'd have to be the youngest one present to chant the Questions. Didn't we have anyone else coming along who was younger than I who could absorb this annual torture?

Then, one year—the year of my Bar-Mitzvah—my salvation came. One of our relatives would be moving back to the Boston area the following year. They would surely attend Zaydeh's Seder, and they had a son who was ten years old!! No longer would I have to endure that Satanic stare, hear that cataclysmic blow on the table, or abide the criticism of failed performance.

I only had to do it ONE MORE TIME!! I prepared as always, intent on memorizing everything and reaching the pinnacle of perfection that I had never attained throughout all my early years.

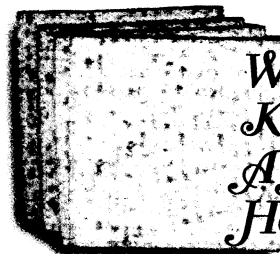
That long awaited evening finally arrived—my last hurrah with the Four Questions. It was truly a turning point in my life, not because of how I recited the Questions, but because I became aware of the people around me. For the first time, I noticed how old my Zaydeh was, how shrunken his body, how sparse the remaining strands of white hair on his head, how his hands shook from Parkinson's and how unsteady his walk. It seemed as if he had grown so old in just a year, but in reality the disease was advanced and his time left with us was too short.

When it came time for the Questions, I stood up and my legs didn't turn to water but remained steady. My voice, although changing, didn't quaver but remained clear and strong. I did not perspire. Then it happened, for the first time I chanted the Questions perfectly. Suddenly, I realized that I was no longer just a little boy, but I was becoming a man and was no longer afraid.

In the years to follow, as another perspiring, wobbly little boy took my place and I was relegated to a chair further down from Zaydeh's chair, I remembered my years of torture, fear and failure. I remembered how hard I had prepared. Now, however, I knew how much my Zaydeh wanted me to succeed.

And then he was gone. Bubbeh followed soon after, and that cramped little apartment, once filled with familial love and joy, became silent. In my mind, however, it will always remain warm and alive, and the little boy who learned to survive Zaydeh's Seder will always occupy a beloved place in my heart.

Rabbi Mark A. Golub, a frequent "client" of NJOP programs, is the Spiritual Leader of Congregation Agudas Achim-Ezrath Israel in Malden, MA. He is married to Alice and is the father of two sons, Jonathan and Phillip.



***Wishing you a Chag
Kasher V'Samayach,
A Happy and Kosher
Holiday!***

CATAPULTING (cont. from p. 1)...Passover as a “real drag.” Cooking, cleaning, staying up late...there was no sense of fun or passion about the holiday. It was then that I realized that some things in life are a drag, and some things are *practiced* like a drag. The Passover Seder is one of those things that can be practiced like a drag, but doesn’t have to be.

A Family Minhag

For years, I lived as a Jew in my own unique way. It wasn’t until the year 2003 that I began living and struggling with Jewish ritual and practice. In 2004, I celebrated my first *halachic* Passover in Israel – no, not in Jerusalem, but in Arad (near Beer-Shebah). I spent Seder night with an eclectic Israeli family who lived in the B’nei Akiva (Modern Orthodox) world and with ties to *Chasidut*. I had always learned about the *spirit* of Passover, but I had never learned how to observe it *halachically*. Thus throughout my childhood and early adulthood, we started the Seder early – early enough to enjoy the words and get home before the children got too cranky. Alas, this is not the case when one practices *halacha*. A *halachic* Seder has many components, one of them being a late start to ensure that the holiday has actually begun (that the sun has fully set). At my first Seder in Israel, I learned that while the story of Passover is ultimately one of joy and liberation, there is an element of discomfort we *all* get to experience – not just by eating the bitter herbs, but by experiencing the pain and suffering of trying to stay awake when we feel truly fatigued.

Of course, there is joy after the crankiness, just as there is salvation after the bondage...call the meal salvation, if you like. In Arad, however, I learned that salvation can also be found in *tchatchkes* (little things).

The Israeli family with whom I ate that first Seder has a custom: sometime before the search for the afikoman, they deliberately create a *balagan* (a situation that appears to be completely out of control, yet somehow manages to be a state of controlled fun). All the adults stand and begin tossing presents in the air. The children gleefully jump toward the presents looking for the one with their name, noisily open them, say “thank you” and 10 minutes later are able to sit quietly at the table refreshed and ready to continue the Seder. Not only do the children get to hear the story, but they also experience “affliction” (the crankiness of sleep deprivation) and “redemption” (as they are revived by the joy of jumping – no, catapulting – toward their rewards).

While I, as an adult, did not get to jump around catching any goodies, I found myself thoroughly reinvigorated by the spirit of the children. Thus, I too returned to the Seder table energized to proceed.

“WHERE’S MY PRESENT? WHERE’S MY PRESENT?”



The Next Year

The next year, I brought my fiancé, Daniel, to Arad for the Seder. I wanted him to experience a new kind of liberation: one of joy. Over and over again, I assured him that this Seder would be different from anything he’d experienced – and from all that he had told me, there had not been many good Seder experiences in his past. In fact, I don’t think Daniel believed me when I told him how much fun the Seder would be. As Passover approached, he humored me and tried to put on a good face.

The basic tenets of the Israeli Seder are no different than the U.S. Seder – except, of course, that the words, including the explanations, are spoken in Hebrew, rather than English. But the *balagan*, well, that was different. When the adults stood up, Daniel asked me what was going on. I smiled, and simply said something like: “I forgot, but I think they did this last year.”

Our Minhag

Daniel and I are married now. As we approach our first Passover as husband and wife, we are slowly adopting our own family customs. Indeed, as we are expecting our first child this summer, we have no doubt that this deliberate *balagan* is a Passover *minhag* (custom) that we will, *b’ezrat Hashem* (with the help of G-d), share with our children.

After all, don’t children deserve to jump into redemption?

Hadassah Rosenthal is originally from Northern California, and recently moved to Passaic, NJ, from Israel. She and her husband, Daniel, are expecting their first child in July.

HOW IS THIS NIGHT (cont. from p. 1)...ourselves, while the Goldman’s adult children, all of whom had attended Hillel day school, sang quietly at one end of the table, finishing the Seder rituals without us. Even though I listened to the conversation and played with my brothers, I always felt drawn to the quiet singing and disappointed that the Seder was over.

When I was a teenager, my family suddenly changed our tradition. While we still did one Seder at home with guests and one Seder out, we experimented with different families and different styles. Whereas the Goldmans had been traditional, using a Maxwell House Haggadah, the Resnicks were...more creative. They used a six page photocopied Haggadah that consisted of a description of the Seder plate, the Four Questions and the four cups of wine. To be quite honest, my family felt a little cheated that year, but none of us could quite explain why.

A few years later, I went to Israel on a program called *Livnot U’Lehibanot* (To Build and To Be Built), which focused on getting young Jews more involved with their Judaism and Israel. During the weeks leading up to Passover, the *Livnot* participants studied the Haggadah and the exodus story in preparation for the Seder. We learned that Moses led the Jews out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai, and that every Jewish soul – past, present and future – was there to accept the Torah. We also learned that the “proper mind-set at a Seder is to imagine oneself as actually leaving Egypt and the bonds of slavery.

That Seder night in Jerusalem was wonderful. Everyone at the table was deeply committed to fully experiencing the event: the children put on a play about leaving Egypt, and all the participants interrupted the Seder numerous times to ask questions and discuss the importance of the night. There were also new and fun traditions. For example, each place was set with its own *afikoman* (the hidden matzah). People swiped each other’s *afikoman* and refused to return them without a promise of some sort. I snagged my *madricha’s* (group leader)

(cont. on p. 4)

HOW IS THIS NIGHT (cont. from p. 3)...*afikoman* and wouldn't give it back until she promised to take me off mopping duty.

When I came back to the States, I slowly became part of the traditional community. One of the great things about becoming part of this community is getting to see the vast variety of family traditions. Since my *Livnot* days, I have joined over ten different families for Sedarim. Without question, the Sedarim I like the most are the ones that encourage everyone's participation. Among those, my favorite Sedarim are the ones that last until the wee hours of the morning, the ones where each participant has a different Haggadah with different commentary and stories. When each participant has different comments, questions and stories to share, the Seder is richer, fuller and engenders in me a greater sense of connection to every other Jewish soul.

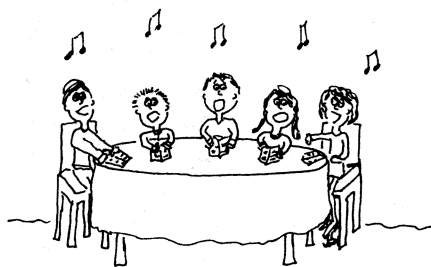
When I was at *Livnot*, I learned that when Moses led the Jews out of Egypt, he led them from forced slavery to Pharaoh to voluntary servitude to G-d, from a life based on the whims of man to a life based on the will of G-d. Moses led the Jews to Mount Sinai so that they could receive the Torah and become *ovdei Hashem*, servants of G-d. That is why, on the second night of Passover, the night after the first Seder, we begin to count the 49 days to Shavuot (the day we celebrate the giving of the Torah). For me, the connection to Torah and the appreciation for the beauty of G-d's gift stems from my recognition of my place within the Jewish nation. That is why Passover makes me feel a pro-

found sense of my link to the Jewish people, why it seems to inspire an extra spark within my soul. For me, the connection I feel to the act of receiving the Torah stems from the connection I make on the Seder night. Was I able to successfully "relive" the exodus at the Seder, to really feel as if I was being led out of servitude? If I was successful, only then am I truly able to recognize the beauty of G-d's Torah as a gift to His people.

In a way, the connection to the past and the future that springs from the Seder experience fuels my entire year. On Pesach, we celebrate G-d's redemption of the Jewish people as a nation, and on Shavuot we celebrate His gift of the Torah. In the fall, on Sukkot, we celebrate G-d's caring for His people in the wilderness, and on Simchat Torah we celebrate the Torah once again. What is the next festival after Simchat Torah? Pesach again, and the cycle continues. What do all these holidays have in common? They are communal celebrations of our nationhood. More than that, they are the glue that binds the Jewish people together.

With the knowledge I have gained thus far, I now recognize that the sense of belonging that I felt as a child during my first Seder experiences was only a shadow of the connection and belonging that every Jew has to one another. That is why I look forward to learning more traditions and experiencing more Sedarim, and feeling ever closer to G-d and my fellow Jews.

Rachel Bell is a graduate student at Binghamton University.



THE SEDERS I LIKE THE MOST ARE THE ONES WHERE EVERYONE PARTICIPATES ENTHUSIASTICALLY.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson of the **National Jewish Outreach Program**. 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 NJOP programs, please write or call: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, (646) 871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.

Readers: This is your newsletter and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.



**989 SIXTH AVENUE, 10TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10018
1-800-44-HEBRE(W)
www.njop.org**