

# BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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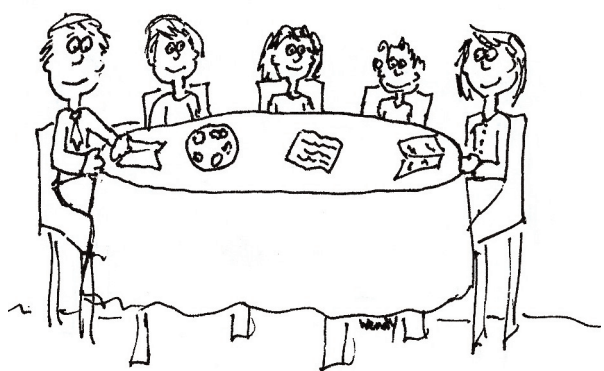
# בראשית

ג'ס"ד

## PASSOVER WITH GRANDPA JULIUS: WHERE MEMORY TRANSCENDS TIME

Tuvia Berzow

"Reaching down, deep within ourselves,  
we find that hidden place where  
memory transcends time."



### PASSOVER WITH GRANDPA JULIUS

Passover is a special time of year for Jewish families, and my childhood home was no exception. Although I did not grow up in a home with weekly Shabbat celebrations (the only other holidays celebrated were Chanukah and the High Holy Days), on Passover our house was transformed. The first signs of this change began on the day that the special Passover food began to appear in the kitchen. Slowly over the days that followed, a special holiday feeling built up, culminating with the arrival of my grandfather, Julius Brzozowski, from Brooklyn.

My dad's father, an old-world European Jew who first set foot in America on the planks of an Ellis Island dock, came to this country as a young teenager in 1922, long before the horrors that would later ravage the Poland in which he was raised.

There was something about Grandpa that reminded me of a world I never knew; a world much more steeped in Torah, a world much more Jewish. "Pop," as my father called him, usually came the night before Passover, signaling the beginning of what was my favorite Jewish holiday. By the time he arrived, the house was already full of the smells of chicken soup and other delicacies. I remember sitting in the kitchen on the evening he

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## CULTIVATING A SENSE OF WONDER

Rabbi Zvi David Romm

If, as the old Yiddish expression goes, it's difficult to be a Jew -- it's perhaps even more difficult to be a *Ba'al Teshuva*!

*Ba'alei Teshuva* -- those who adopt religious observance later in life -- often feel that they are perpetually playing "catch-up" in both their knowledge base and their sense of familiarity with Jewish tradition. It can be frustrating to come to synagogue and watch a congregation zoom rapidly through the prayers with the comfort that comes from years of practice, while the *Ba'al Teshuva* stumbles slowly through the difficult Hebrew.

The following insight into a familiar section of the Haggadah can provide the newcomer to Jewish practice with needed encouragement -- and all of us, regardless of our Judaic backgrounds, with an important lesson.

One of the best-known parts of the Haggadah begins with the Hebrew words *Mah Nishtana*:

*How is this night different from all other nights?*

*All other nights we eat either leavened or unleavened bread;*

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## THE MAN ON THE BIMAH

Rabbi Avi Shafran

He ascended the steps to the *bimah*, the platform where the Torah is read, with the strangely hurried movements of someone who would rather be traveling the other way.

This middle-aged fellow, apparently something of a stranger to a shul, had just been "called up" from his seat in the back of the small *shul* to make the blessing on the Torah.

They get so nervous, I thought to my cynical, teenage self that day several decades ago; they should really come more than just a few times a year, if only to get the feel of things. The blessings, after all, are not very long, the Hebrew not particularly tongue-twisting. "*Asher Bochar Banu Mikol Ho'amim* (who has chosen us from among all nations)" -- I prompted him in my mind -- "*V'nosan lonu es Toraso* (and has given us His Torah)."

*C'mon, man, you can do it.*

His life was passing before his very eyes; you could tell. The occasion, for the man on the *bimah*, was both momentous and terrifying.

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**GRANDPA JULIUS** (cont. from p. 1)...

arrived, with all those beautiful odors wafting through the air, watching him play pinochle with my father.

The next morning, Grandpa would sit at the kitchen table ready to work. He peeled and shredded potatoes for latkes, then cut the apples and walnuts for his famous *charoset*. With his rough hands and wrinkled eyes, he seemed to me as a visitor from the past, bringing with him old stories from a world full of long-bearded, Yiddish-speaking Jews.

That evening, Grandpa sat at the head of the long dining room table and expertly orchestrated the Seder. There was, I remember, a glow about him, a mistiness in the eyes, as he guided three generations of Jews on a journey through a shared past. We read of the plagues and dipped our fingers in the wine (and I was always careful never to lick the wine off my small, sticky fingers). We read the Haggadah taking turns around the table; my father and mother, my siblings, my mother's parents, her brother and sisters, her aunts and uncles, and finally Grandpa Julius, who was often the only relative from my father's side of the family at the table. He carefully broke the matzah, handing the larger part to my father to hide as the *afikomen*. We read of the splitting of the sea. We sang *D'yeinu*. The voices of Rabbi Gamliel and Rabbi Yose hovered over the table, like witnesses.

Year after year, I listened to my young sister recite the Four Questions, to my grandmother always mispronounce Rabbi Yose's name as "Rabbi Jose," and to Grandpa Julius, Haggadah in hand, proudly leading the family through the evening's order until the very last page, when we read "Next Year in Jerusalem." We had our own traditions, our own story within the larger

story of Passover. They were familiar stories, both the one in the Haggadah and the one happening around the table. Jews, both young and old, reaching out from the struggles of the modern world to grab hold of something more ancient, more permanent.

Our tradition teaches us that every Jew has within them a holy spark of one of the 600,000 souls present at Mount Sinai. When we are commanded to "remember the Exodus," it is not enough to just remember what happened in some distant ancient past, we have to reach down, deep inside ourselves, and find that hidden place where memory transcends time. We have to remember the Exodus and the wondrous ways in which we were brought from slavery to freedom. We need to recall the miraculous events at Mount Sinai as if we were actually standing there amidst the roaring thunder and enveloping cloud.

Perhaps our Seder was not the most orthodox, there was a lot we did not know or understand, but the story was in our hearts, etched into our souls like DNA. It gave us, at least for this one day each year, a tangible reason to have faith in G-d.

In April of 1991, on Erev Pesach, my Grandpa Julius passed away peacefully in his sleep. He was 84. It was a difficult holiday that year, but we managed to make it through. The next year my father took on the mantle of Seder leader, a role he has maintained to this day with great dignity and a reminiscent hint of his father before him. I no longer live close enough to my family to join them each year, but soon, G-d willing, I shall lead the Seder for my own family and I know that my memories of Grandpa Julius will guide my way.

*Tuvia Berzow, teacher and writer, lives with his wife Rivka Yehudis, in Portland, Oregon.*

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**CULTIVATING A SENSE OF WONDER** (cont. from p. 1)...

*tonight we eat only Matzah.*

*All other nights we eat all sorts of vegetables;*

*tonight – bitter herbs.*

*All other nights we don't dip our food at all;*

*tonight we dip twice.*

*All other nights we eat either sitting or reclining;*

*tonight we recline.*

First mentioned in the Mishna approximately nineteen centuries ago, this passage is commonly referred to as the Four Questions (in Yiddish *Di Feer Kashehs*) and is generally recited by a child at the beginning of the Seder. Our Sages indicated that the Seder is supposed to be conducted in a question-and-answer format; hence, the "Four Questions" are generally understood to fulfill that requirement.

But a closer look at the *Mah Nishtana* reveals an entirely different picture.

Reading the text of the *Mah Nishtana*, we realize that the "Four Questions," strictly speaking, are not really questions at all! At most, the opening line is a question, while the following lines are really four statements that illustrate -- or perhaps even answer -- the basic question. ("How is this night different from all other nights?") Moreover, it is striking that Maimonides

(*Hilchot Chametz U'Matzah* 8:2) indicates that *Mah Nishtana* is recited by the Seder leader alone, even when children are present. Why would the leader ask the questions to himself?

The answer to these questions lies in revisiting the opening sentence of the *Mah Nishtana*.

Generally speaking, the sentence is translated as a question: "How is this night different from all other nights?" The subtleties of Hebrew syntax, however, allow us to translate the phrase equally well as a statement: "How different this night is from all other nights!" What follows is an elucidation of the uniqueness of the Seder night, as manifested in four different ways. With this understanding, it is easy to understand how Maimonides assigned its recitation to the Seder leader. The child asks his *own* questions to begin the evening; the *Mah Nishtana*, according to Maimonides, is already part of the leader's answer.

If the *Mah Nishtana* is not a series of questions, what role does it play? Why should the Seder begin with a mission statement listing the oddities we will encounter during the course of the evening?

The answer is relevant every night of the year -- not just on Seder night.

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## THE MAN ON THE BIMAH (cont. from p. 1)...

Then he did something totally unexpected, something that made me smirk at first, but then made me think -- and made me realize something profound about our precious people.

He made a mistake.

Not entirely unexpected. Many a shul-goer, especially the occasional one, leaves out words here and there, reverses the order, or draws a traumatic blank when faced with sudden holiness of the Torah. That would have been unremarkable. But this congregant was different.

His mistake was fascinating. "*Asher bochar bonu*" he intoned, a bit unsure of himself, "*mikol*," slight hesitation, "...*haleylos shebechol haleylos anu ochlim*."

The poor fellow had jumped the track of the Torah blessing and was barreling along with the Four Questions a Jewish child asks at the Passover seder! "Who has chosen us from...all other nights, for on all other nights we eat..."!!

For the first second or two it was humorous. But then it struck me.

The hastily corrected and embarrassed man had just laid bare the scope of his Jewishness. He had revealed all the associations Judaism still held for him -- all that was left of a long, illustrious rabbinic line, for all I knew.

My first thoughts were sad... I imagined a *shtetl* in Eastern Europe, an old observant Jew living in physical poverty but spiritual wealth. I saw him studying through the night, working all day to support his wife and children, one of whom later managed to survive Hitler's Final Solution to make it to America and gratefully sire a single heir, the man on the *bimah*.

We have so much to set right, I mused, so many souls to reach, just to get to where we were a mere 70 years ago.

But then it dawned on me. Here stood a man sadly inexperienced in things Jewish, virtually oblivious to rich experiences of his ancestral faith.

And yet, he knows the Four Questions.

By heart.

When he tries to recite the blessing over the Torah, the distance between him and his heritage cannot keep those Four Questions from tiptoeing in, unsummoned but determined. The Seder is a part of his essence.

I recall a conversation I once had with a secular Jewish gentleman married to a non-Jewish woman and not affiliated with any Jewish institution. His *en passant* mention of Passover prompted me to ask him if he had any plans for the holiday.

He looked at me as if I were mad.

"Why, we're planning an elaborate Seder as always."

Astonished at the sudden revelation of a vestige of religious custom in his life, I told him as much. He replied, matter of factly, he would never think of abolishing his Passover Seder. I didn't challenge him.

When living in Northern California, I became acquainted with other Jewish families seemingly devoid of religious practice. I always

made a point of asking whether a Seder of any sort was celebrated on Passover. Almost invariably, the answer was... *yes, of course*.

It is striking. There are more types of *Haggadahs* than any other volume in the immense literary repertoire of the Jewish people. The Sixties saw a "civil-rights *Haggadah*" and a "Soviet Jewry *Haggadah*." Nuclear disarmament, vegetarian and feminist versions followed. At the core of each was the age-old recounting of the ancient story of the Jews leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah. It is as if Jews, wherever the circumstances may leave them, feel a strange compulsion to preserve the Passover Seder and its lessons whatever the costs, and whatever the form most palatable to their momentary persuasions.

Events that took place millennia ago -- pivotal events in the

history of the Jewish nation -- are regularly and openly commemorated by millions of Jews the world over, many of whom do so out of an inner motivation they themselves cannot explain. They may not even realize what they are saying when they read their *Haggadahs*, beyond the simplest of its ideas: a Force saved their forefathers from terrible enemies and entered into a covenant with them and their descendants. But that is apparently enough.

A spiritual need that spawns an almost hypnotic observance of the Seder by Jews the world over is satisfied. And even if, after the Seder, mothers and fathers go back to decidedly less than Jewishly observant lives, their daughters and sons have received the message.

As did their parents when they were young, and their parents before them.

The seed is planted.

The Seder is indisputably child-oriented. Recitations that can only be described as children's songs are part of the *Haggadah's* text, and various doings at the Seder are explained by the Talmud as intended for the sole purpose of stimulating the curiosity of the young ones.

For the children are the next generation of the Jewish nation; and the Seder is the crucial act of entrusting the most important part of their history to them, for re-entrustment to their own young in due time.

And so, in the spring of each year, like the birds compelled to begin their own season of rebirth with song, Jews feel the urge to sing as well. They sing to their young ones, as their ancestors did on the banks of the Red Sea, and the song is a story. It tells of their people and how the Creator of all adopted them. And if, far along the line, a few -- even many -- of us fall from the nest, all is not lost. For we remember the song.

Just like the man on the *bimah*.

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Rabbi Shafra is director of Public Affairs for Agudath Israel of America.





## CULTIVATING A SENSE OF WONDER (cont. from p. 2)...

If we do not begin the Seder by acknowledging its uniqueness, we will not be impressed by it. We must first prepare ourselves by declaring that we are about to experience something special. The *Mah Nishtana* forces us to take note of the fact that the Seder night is indeed something different -- and we should allow ourselves to be inspired.

The key to inspiration is appreciating what is unique in our experiences. The uninspired Jew sees a constant repetition of Shabbat, Yom Tov, daily prayers and blessings, and is unmotivated by what he or she perceives as endless and meaningless repetition. The Jew with a spiritual soul realizes that every Shabbat, every Yom Tov, every prayer and every blessing has its own unique power and touches one at a unique point in one's life -- and he or she finds endless sources of inspiration.

This message is particularly relevant to *Ba'alei Teshuva*.

Often, it is precisely those Jews who are still new to religious observance who appreciate the uniqueness of the Torah lifestyle in a way "old hands" at Judaism may not. The struggle to carry out

the observances of Judaism coexists with a deep sense of wonder and freshness -- a constant awareness of *Mah Nishtana*. *Ba'alei Teshuva* should cultivate, not spurn, this sense of wonder. The rest of the observant community would do well to learn from those who make *Mah Nishtana* an integral part of their lives.

May we view all of life through the lens of *Mah Nishtana*!

*In loving memory of my  
grandfather, Mr. Albert  
Woodrow  
Avraham Ya'akov ben  
Menachem a"h*

*Rabbi Zvi David Romm is  
the rabbi of Bialystoker  
Synagogue in Manhattan's  
Lower East Side. He is also  
an instructor of Talmud at  
the Isaac Breuer College of  
Yeshiva University.*

"How is this night different  
from all other nights?  
Well, for one thing, this is my  
first real seder!"



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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*



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