

בראשית

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BERESHITH: "In the Beginning"

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REFLECTIONS ON PESACH

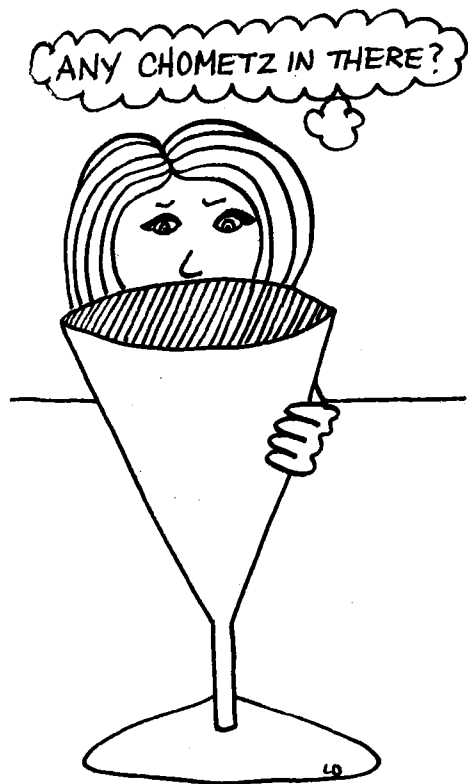
by Ariella Sofia

My first thought about Pesach this year is it's hard to believe it went by so fast. All those preparations. First locating the chametz which lurked seemingly everywhere in my apartment. It was obvious in the boxes of pasta, but even in my tamari sauce? Then the cleaning. A new definition for Spring: that's the time when an observant Jew becomes intimately familiar with every square inch on his/her stove.

Now plan a menu for the first night's seder. Out to the supermarket for "kosher l'Pesach" foods. I can't wait for Mashiach to come. Haven't any of these vendors learned that a sophisticated shopper can't live by salt, pepper, and paprika alone? The hour for candlelighting is approaching. Rush, rush, prepare an *eruv tavshilin* so there will be food on Shabbat which arrives right after the second day of Yom Tov. Somehow it all comes together with a few moments to spare. My kitchen is wrapped in aluminum foil and looks like it just stepped out of a Woody Allen movie. My guests are due any minute.

I go over to the candles, pick up a match. A scratching sound, the acrid smell of sulfur as the match tip bursts into flame. "Baruch attah..." Despite fatigue, my smile comes from deep inside me.

This is the second year I've actually conducted a seder myself. That makes two years in the past seventy that there's been a proper Orthodox (cont. p.4)



A CONTEMPORARY LESSON IN PASSOVER

by Reuven Kahane

"As in the days of the Exodus from Egypt I will show you miracles." These words of Hashem are "the words of a living G-d" ringing true in every generation with the promise of freedom from bondage. Like the Jews of Egypt, we are witnessing once again this miracle in our day in the Soviet Union, with the release of hundreds and thousands of Jews from the Soviet Union.

The clarion call for freedom, the quintessence of the Passover story, peals across Eastern Europe. For years the calls for freedom went unheeded, and while the Havel and Walesa's were persistent in their demands for liberty, Nathan Scharansky recently reminded us that it (cont. p.3)

A JEWISH FAMILY IN MUSLIM MALAYSIA

by Dr. Carol Laderman

In 1975, when I was preparing to leave for Malaysia where I would do anthropological research for my dissertation, a professor warned me not to reveal my religion. Trengganu, the Malaysian state that would be my research site, is known throughout the Malay Archipelago as *Dural Iman*, the Realm of Believers. My professor feared that their pious adherence to Islam would preclude their rapport with a Jewish anthropologist. Feeling troubled, I called my family together. We decided to make our religion known to our Malay neighbors and face the consequences.

Despite my professor's trepidations, our religion (cont. p. 2)

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proved an asset to my work. My prospective landlady was, at first, concerned that "white people" might pollute her house by bringing pig meat into it. She was reassured when she learned that eating pigs was against our religion, too. Word quickly spread that Jews were living in the village, people who, as far as some of them knew, no longer existed in the modern world. *Orang Yahudi* (Jewish people) were the ancient people of the Book, the younger brothers of the *Orang Islam*, just as Isaac was the younger brother of Ishmael. Could we really be their descendants, practicing a true religion, or were we actually pagans or some new type of Christian? A telling question that occurred to several Malays was "What do you think of Jesus?" Our answer, "He was a very good man, but surely not G-d," was exactly in accord with their own belief. Since our beliefs seemed so similar to theirs, we appeared to be just a step away from Islam. "Only accept Muhammad," they said, "that is all you need to do." Proselytizing died down after I explained that six million of my fellow Jews had recently died for their religion, and so we must continue to be practicing Jews, at least for their sake.

Surrounded by devout Muslims, we became not only sympathetic to their beliefs but felt more Jewish than ever before. In New York City where I was just one Jew among millions it had not seemed urgent to express my Jewishness. Observing our Malay neighbors at their five daily prayers made us feel that something essential was lacking in our own lives. I began to light Sabbath candles, although they were not the familiar thick white ones I knew in America. The closest I could come were the long thin red candles that Chinese Buddhists light for the Kitchen Gods.

ITS AMAZING HOW JEWISH WE FEEL HERE.



We also found ways to celebrate major Jewish holidays. Our seder featured the shank bone of a goat, but our matzohs were Manischewitz, straight from New York City. After drinking the third cup of wine (actually orange squash, so as not to offend Muslim sensibilities), we opened the door for Elijah the Prophet. He may or may not have entered (since he is

invisible, one is never sure), but our neighbors entered en masse. We offered them matzohs and recounted the Haggadah in Malay.

During the month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from sun-up to sun-down, we tried to curb our appetites and never ate where we could be observed. When Yom Kippur arrived and we informed our friends that we intended to fast for 25 hours, they worried for our health. No one could fast for that long, they felt, without serious consequences. When Yom Kippur ended and we were still alive and well, we were congratulated for our stamina as much as religiosity.

One of the local healers (*bomoh*) was particularly interested in the mezuzahs I nailed on the doorposts of my house. When he asked me what use they were, and why I placed them there, I answered that G-d had commanded the Jews to do so. As I found out later, he evidently took my answer for the type of reply Malays give when they think someone is being nosy (Where are you going? Just walking around. What's in the bag? All sorts of things.). Although known to be secretive, the *bomoh* decided to teach me a spell after my assistant assured him that Jews were pious people who neither ate of the pig nor drank of the fruit of the vine (I never corrected the latter statement). He was convinced that the mezuzahs had magical power and was disappointed when I refused to leave them behind when I returned to America.

Rather than being treated as outsiders due to our religion, we were very popular. The Malays thought my family was gorgeous. Having never seen Jews before, they associated our looks with the Arabs they so admired. The parents wanted my twelve-year old son to marry their daughters, and the daughters were very willing, if he would only convert. In every way, we appeared to be fitting nicely into Malay village society, except for a serious problem that arose in Michael's schooling. One of the required subjects was Islamic religion. Michael studied it with interest at first but soon started coming home from school looking dismal. The *ustadz* (teacher of religion) taught his pupils about the evils of Israel, pointing to Michael as the local representative of that accursed nation. "He is not fit to touch our Holy Book with his dirty hands," he said. On hearing that, I ran down to the school and demanded to speak to the headmaster. He was sorry about the *ustadz's* actions, but could do nothing, since the *ustadz* was under the direct control of the Office of Religious Affairs. He excused Michael from attending Islamic religion class for the rest of the term. Several days later, we received an invitation to celebrate the completion of Koranic study by a classmate. Her parents were wealthy and respected, having made the pilgrimage (*haj*) to Mecca. It made an impression on the assembled guests when the *haji* handed his Koran to Michael, saying, "He can certainly touch the Holy Book. He is as pure as we."

(cont. p.3)

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When my husband and I returned to Malaysia five years later, we were immediately struck by an obvious trend to more fundamentalist attitudes toward religion. While I stayed in the village, my husband painted cityscapes in the capital. He was invited to show his work at the National Museum. The show promised to be a great success, but complaints followed its opening: How could they dare to show the work of a Jew in the National Museum? This was just the first indication of growing anti-Semitism in a country with almost no Jews but a deep admiration for Arabs, who they hoped would contribute to Malaysia's economy. It was not long after that the world became aware of anti-Semitism as official Malaysian policy. The New York Philharmonic was forced to cancel a concert after being forbidden to play Bloch's "Hebrew Rhapsody." A government spokesman proclaimed that Malaysia had no need of Jewish science or culture. The Prime Minister denounced the press, claiming "the well-known media organizations are controlled by the Jews" who aim at the destabilization of the Malaysian government. A significant opposition party, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, organized an "Anti-Jewish Day," during which a youth leader stated "that our determination is to destroy the Jews."

WILL WE BE ABLE TO FEEL JEWISH HERE? . . .



Although my Malay foster father keeps a photograph of his "white daughter" up on his wall in the village, and my family regularly exchanges gifts and letters with our Malay friends, we do not expect to return to Malaysia in the near future. Our experiences in village Malaysia were high points in the lives of us all, but official Malaysian anti-Semitism has greatly influenced the course of my research. I have come home to the Baal Teshuvah movement on the Upper West Side in New York City.

(To read more about Carol Laderman's experiences in Malaysia, see *Wives and Midwives* available in paperback from University of California Press and carried by Shakespeare & Co.)

Carol Laderman, Ph.D., is an anthropologist who attends the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York City.

(cont. from p. 1) A CONTEMPORARY LESSON was the Jewish dissidents, the Slepaks, Mendelovichs and Beguns who really were the first to demand human emancipation. Their voices were a cry in the wilderness, but ultimately their dreams dawned into a glorious reality.

When Hashem instructed Moshe to labor for freedom, Moshe resisted with the claim "The Jews will not listen to me, nor will Pharaoh be persuaded." But with the hand of Hashem guiding him, Moshe did go forth and, with ultimate truths, he prevailed. The obvious lesson being, that despite hardship and struggle, one must strike forth with truth, which will assure that righteousness and justice will eventually emerge victorious.

We are all familiar with the beautiful custom of opening the door at the Passover Seder. The commentaries give three reasons for this practice. The first is that we open the door for Elijah, the prophet, who is the herald of the Messianic period. We are taught, that in Nissan the Jews were redeemed and in Nissan we will once again be redeemed, we therefore welcome Elijah, the messenger for the Messianic redemption. A second reason for this custom is that throughout the ages, the Jews were accused of drinking Christian blood at the Seder, and we open the door to let all see for themselves that no such nefarious act is taking place. The Sephardic tradition is to open the door prior to *Ha Lachma Ania* ("this is the bread of affliction"), so that "all who are hungry may enter to be fed, and all who are needy may come in and be satisfied." The commentaries ask why the repetition of *Kol dichfin* - "all who are hungry," refers to physical hunger, *Kol ditzrich* - "all who are needy," is a plea to those panging from spiritual hunger.

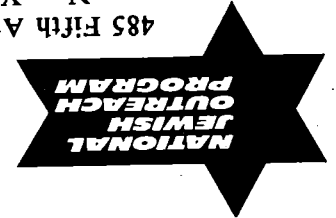
In these days of miracles, when we behold the physical redemption of Soviet Jewry, we need to pay attention to both the physical and spiritual needs of our people. We recall the day envisioned by the prophet, who said, "There will come a day when there will be a hunger, not for bread, a thirst, not for water, but for the word of G-d." Today is such a day.

There exists a great search for meaning, a yearning for Yiddishkeit, and the words of G-d. For those of us involved in outreach, Pesach provides us with the opportunity to mark the physical redemption of the Jewish people, and to underscore the need to assist in the spiritual redemption of our people.

Chag Sameach.

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(cont. from p. 1) (REFLECTIONS)

seder in my family. The second seder is at someone else's house, so I get to relax and give more attention to the Haggadah. What a beautiful piece of writing this is! More than writing really. It's song too, and above all dialogue--dialogue in the Haggadah itself, dialogue with the Haggadah and dialogue with the other people at the table.

The section about the four sons is my favorite part. I discovered this year that it's because even within the same evening I feel like each son a little. I can formulate questions like the wise son, ask general questions like the simple son, and sometimes count on others to open up a line of inquiry like the son who isn't even able to ask a question. And when I get to the multiplication of plagues that Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiba discuss, I'm even like the evil son wishing to separate myself from the whole thing.

Through it all, I'm acutely aware of how incredibly important it is for a Jew to be actively involved in the process called "being Jewish," and also how important questions and challenges are in the scheme of things. Judaism does not demand (like other religions do) that its members be passive, blindly obedient followers. There's room for a minority opinion here.

Even a week of celebrating the season of our liberation seems too short. But then, looking back, now so many days into the counting of the Omer, I think--no, perhaps it wasn't fast enough. After all, ahead lies a greater miracle still: Shavuot, the time of the giving of Torah.

Ariella Sofia is a long-time graduate of the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service. Because of its timeliness, this article is reprinted from Bereshith, May 1982.

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Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of 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 the NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 212, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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