

# בראשית

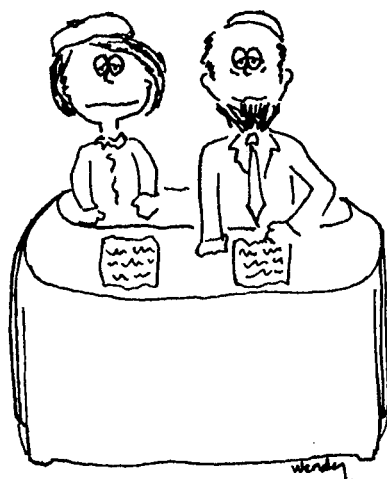
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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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## HOLIDAYS THAT NEVER END

Yossi Felgenson



"SPARE US! PASSOVER ALL YEAR LONG?"

When we think of the festival of Passover, we conjure up images of matzah, the four cups of wine, bitter herbs and reclining on a pillow. These traditional rituals help us recall the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt. At the same time, we are grateful that the winter has finally thawed out, and that the promise of Spring is upon us. And so, on Pesach we pray for the summer dew, and spend time with family and friends.

Yet, Pesach presents those who observe it with a fair share of difficulties. Before Pesach we need to thoroughly cleanse our homes, to insure that there is not a speck of *Chametz* around. (You won't believe the odd places where food can be found). Then on Pesach itself we are severely limited in the foods we are allowed to eat, as all breads and grains that have risen are banned. However, since Pesach is only eight days long, we happily accept these difficulties.

Now, imagine what life would be like if we had to observe the rules of Pesach all year round.

(cont. on p. 3)

## A STORY OF PASSOVER- A STORY OF FREEDOM

Morris E. Spector

It was Spring in the year of 1912 and the place was Ellis Island in New York Bay. It was evening and the eating hall was crowded with immigrants. Most were from Eastern and Southern Europe - Poles, Russians, Jews, Greeks, Slavs, Italians and so on. They were perfect examples of the line from Emma Lazarus' poem "the wretched refuse of your teeming shores". They were the poor, the uneducated, the unskilled. In Europe, they were also the unwanted and Europe did its best to rid itself of them. All of them had heard the wonderful tales of America, the "Golden Land", a land which seemed so much like a dream to them. And so they came to America by their hundreds and by their thousands and by their tens of thousands.

One of them was BenZion Yehuda, a Jewish bootmaker from a small village near the city of Talna in the province of Kiev in Czarist Russia.

With him was his son, Nissan, a boy around 12. His wife and his other smaller children were still back in the village surviving as best they could. BenZion didn't desert his family. Not at all. He intended to find a place in America to live and a place to work, then save some money (cont. on p. 2)

## BABY STEPS

by Michael H. Cohen

Many of us were not raised in observant homes. Much of the body of Torah and its laws and customs may be foreign to us. We feel our Judaism inside of us, but how do we bring it out to make it part of our everyday lives? How do we make the connection with G-d, when we really don't know where to start? It seems so overwhelming -- there is so much to know -- and there appears to be so little time to learn.

This is the challenge faced by every unaffiliated Jew who wishes to return to Judaism. How do you advance spiritually when you feel your *Neshama* (Jewish soul) wanting more of a connection, but you come from an unaffiliated background? How do you balance career, family, and recreation, with your yearning for more of a spiritual connection?

In the paragraphs ahead, you'll find some ideas for taking on this challenge, the first of which I call the "Big Mountain" theory.

When I teach beginners how to ski, the first thing I tell them is not to look down at the bottom of the mountain. It's very overwhelming to stand on top of a mountain and look down -- thousands of feet, miles in some cases, to the bottom. How in the world can I get to the bottom (cont. on p.3)



**A STORY...**(cont. from p. 1) and send for his family. It was not an unusual arrangement. Many other men had done the same thing and many more were to do it.

BenZion had no love for Russia, the place of his birth. Although he had served the Czar in the war against Japan in 1905 his only reward was the hostility and pogroms of the anti-Semitic czarist government. Given the chance to leave for anywhere - he snatched it.

The journey from his village to the German ports was a very long one and took several weeks. Most of his meager savings he left with his wife to provide for her and the children. The little he kept for himself was just a bit more than the cost of passage. He and Nissan walked much of the way, and where they could, they walked barefoot to save their boots.

The boat trip across the Atlantic wasn't any easier. Like hundreds of others, BenZion and his son traveled in the steerage, the massive cargo hold converted into living quarters for the poorest immigrants. The food the ship company supplied was the cheapest that could be found, but it was filling. For the immigrants, cheap, filling food was no hardship. They had long existed in their homelands on cheap, filling foods. The ship rocked on the cold North Sea, the wind beating against anyone foolish enough to stand exposed on the deck. Many got seasick and only wanted to return to land - any land - just to leave the ship. But the ship plowed on slowly through the heavy seas for nearly four weeks before land came into view. Their first glimpse of America was a great statue standing out in the harbor - the Statue of Liberty.

And now here was BenZion with his son in the eating hall at Ellis Island, two foreigners in a strange land. Though his journey had been long and difficult, one thing BenZion hadn't forgotten over the many weeks was to observe the Sabbath. He also knew that this evening was the first night of Passover. Jews call Passover the "Festival of Freedom" because that is when Moses led them out of Egyptian captivity to freedom. Most of Europe's Jews had been released from their ghettos within the past hundred years, but not so in Russia. In Russia there still was very little freedom to celebrate. Czarist Russia was not much different from ancient Egypt. Celebrating the Festival of Freedom in Russia always seemed a mockery.

Fortunately for BenZion, New York's Hebrew Immigrant Society had just visited Ellis Island and distributed matzoh to the incoming Jews. Now they had the one food item absolutely necessary to celebrate the holiday. But still missing was the lamb-shank, a reminder of the sacrificial lamb. Missing was the green vegetable symbolizing Spring. Missing was the salt water symbolizing the bitterness of slavery. Missing was the bitter herb, a reminder of the pain and suffering man causes man. Missing were the chopped nuts and apples symbolizing the sweetness of freedom. Missing was the wine from which to pour off ten drops symbolizing the Ten Plagues. And missing also was the egg reminding us of the eternity of G-d.

Because he spoke Yiddish and Russian, BenZion approached a Russian family who were enjoying a plate of chicken. He asked them for the bone from a chicken leg. Stupid Jew, they thought. What good is a bone from a chicken that hasn't any meat on it? They gave him the bone. The green vegetable was a piece of pale green cabbage leaf a Pole gave him from his plate of boiled cabbage. Salt and water were right at hand on the table. The bitter herbs were a pinch of sour salt

BenZion begged from a Romanian. From a Hungarian he bought a small, dried, gnarled apple. There was no wine. Alcoholic drinks were forbidden both to the immigrants and the American employees. But there was tea and it was in plentiful supply. It substituted for wine.

But the roasted egg. That was a problem. None of the immigrants had any eggs. Then BenZion noticed one of the Irish security guards. He was a big, burly fellow with a face slightly flushed. He was eating something. He was eating a hard boiled egg. BenZion watched him with eyes of envy. Then he noticed the Irishman put his hand into his pocket and take out another egg. BenZion jumped to his feet and ran toward the Irishman. The guard, thinking he was about to be attacked, lashed out with his clenched fist. He struck BenZion and knocked him to the floor.



"TONIGHT IS TRULY OUR FESTIVAL OF FREEDOM!"

Surprised, but not hurt, Ben Zion slowly got to his feet making gestures to the guard that he meant no harm. He then pointed to the egg which was still clenched in the Irishman's hand. Reaching into his pocket, BenZion pointed to the egg and offered the guard some of his dwindling supply of money - Russian money. Now the Irishman understood. The immigrant just wanted to buy the egg. But what good was Russian money in America? No good at all. Somehow the Irishman knew that egg meant something special to the Jew. It wasn't just an egg to him. Besides, the guard wasn't really hungry. He had already eaten his dinner and the eggs he carried in his pocket were just an extra evening snack. Then the guard remembered how pleased with himself he always felt when he did a good deed, and when he looked at the poor, bedraggled Jew asking to buy an egg, he was moved. Refusing the offer of payment, he gave BenZion the egg and felt a glow within. That was reward enough for him.

BenZion was thrilled. Now he had everything necessary for a Passover Seder. He turned to Nissan, his son, and before his son could ask him the Four Questions, he said, "Always in the past, ever since you were a little boy, you asked me the Four Questions on the First Night of Passover. Tonight the answers will be a little different. Tonight I'll tell you why this night is different from all other nights. On all other nights, although we were in Russia, we were like our ancestors, the slaves of Egypt, but tonight we are free men in a free land. Tonight is truly our Festival of Freedom."

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**BABY STEPS...** (cont. from p. 1) without breaking my legs? Don't worry about the bottom of the mountain; worry about the top -- that's where you are! In your spiritual quest, the analogy fits (except that you're at the bottom looking up). I tell my students to look just a few yards in front of where they are. Focus only on the next few turns you have to make.

In Judaism, focus on the next few turns, or in this case, just a few *mitzvot* ahead of you. Jerusalem wasn't built in a day, either! Don't look at a Hasidic master to see where you're going; look at someone who is just slightly more advanced than you.

This brings us to the next concept, which I term the "Baby Step" theory. In the movie "What About Bob," Richard Dreyfus, the therapist, tells Bill Murray, the patient, to take baby steps in trying to overcome his fears. When trying to advance in Judaism, take baby steps in the pursuit of your connection with G-d.

Let's say you now do nothing to observe Shabbat, but you want to be more connected to this beautiful day. Don't do it all in one big step -- take baby steps. Pick one thing that you routinely now do on Shabbat -- for example, balancing your checkbook or doing laundry -- and do it some other day of the week. When several weeks have passed and you are now accustomed to doing laundry on Sunday mornings, you can take another baby step.



Another helpful idea is the "Everest Corollary" of the Baby Step theory. When attempting to climb Mt. Everest, climbers stop at four different base camps on the way up, in order to acclimate their bodies and minds to the higher elevations. Even experienced climbers, after years of going to Nepal, spend several weeks in camps on the mountain, before moving on to the next, higher camp. It takes months of acclimatization before they can begin the final assault on the peak, which itself takes only about one day.

In Judaism also, it is good not to go too fast; acclimatize at each level. When you feel comfortable at one level, move on to the next. If you go too fast, it's easy to fall. When you take small, deliberate steps, your feet will be firmly planted when you make your next move. And plan your moves carefully.

There are some religious observances that are very important, but require very little time or effort, such as lighting Shabbat candles on Friday night. Be real. Lighting two

candles on Friday night won't adversely impact your career, but it will bring the warm glow of Shabbat into your life and can be done even while traveling. Other observances are just as easy, like taking a few seconds to recite the *Modeh Ani* prayer ("I thank thee O Lord") upon waking and the Shema prayer at bed-time. In fact, these are particularly great mitzvot to do together with your children. Review the translation of the texts with them. It's incredibly moving.

You may not even realize that you're already doing some things that are considered full-blown mitzvot, like honoring your parents. Do you visit them, send them cards, call them? Look at what you're already doing, you may be further along than you think. This brings up an interesting point to ponder, how do you evaluate where you presently are?

Use the "ladder" theory. There's an old Hasidic question: Two people are standing on a ladder, one is one rung from the top; the other one rung from the bottom. Who is higher? The answer: It depends in which direction each is moving. If the "upper" one is heading down while the "lower" one is heading up, the seemingly-lower person will overtake the other in no time and reach the top!

In Judaism, it's not important where you are, but in which direction you're going. Someone who is not very knowledgeable or observant -- but committed to learning more and doing a few more mitzvot -- is considered to be at a higher level than someone who is more observant or knowledgeable but starting to learn less and do a few less mitzvot. So, if you're at the bottom of the spiritual ladder on your way up, take heart in knowing that you may actually be at a higher level than you may think.

Finally, it's important to find a mentor in your journey. Find someone with whom you are comfortable sharing your thoughts, and use them as both a guide and a resource. Remember, other people, myself included, have been where you are now standing and successfully made the journey. Hopefully, your journey will never end, because the more you learn and do, the more questions you will have.

I hope this has given you food for thought and the confidence that you can successfully climb the mountain.

Remember: "Baby steps."

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**HOLIDAYS...** (cont. from p. 1) If you're getting the chills just entertaining this thought, don't fret, because you're not alone. Quite honestly, we would be hard pressed to find even one person who would welcome this challenge. Surely, anyone weighed down by a constant routine of cleaning and searching for crumbs would most likely become grumpy and tired.

Allow me, however, to suggest that we could, and perhaps should, infuse a bit of Pesach into our lives year round without upsetting the delicate balance of our existence. Jewish holidays in general, and Pesach in particular, have many lessons and customs from which we can draw energy for the whole year. And, if we could do so, we would achieve the added benefit of remaining on the high spiritual plane which we achieve on the Holidays.

(cont. on p. 4)

**HOLIDAYS...** (cont. from p. 3) There are countless rituals and customs associated with Pesach. The central theme of Pesach, of course, is to recall and to celebrate the redemption of the Jews from Egypt. To further commemorate the event, we eat matzoh (unleavened bread), and at the same time, we avoid eating chametz. The lessons to be learned from these mitzvot can be understood by exploring their inner meanings.

Chametz, which literally means leavened bread, or risen bread, represents *ga'ava*; pride, haughtiness. The yeast in the flour makes it rise. Before Pesach we are instructed to eradicate all chametz from our midst, by searching every nook and cranny. This should include the "spiritual chametz" represented by such things as the pursuit of honor and self aggrandizement. The commandment of searching for chametz tells us to be in a constant state of "searching and destroying" our sometimes inflated egos.

On the other side of the spectrum is the matzoh, the unleavened bread that we eat on Pesach. Matzoh is flat, contains only flour and water, and is relatively tasteless. The Talmudic term for matzoh is *Lechem Oni*; poor man's bread. Matzoh, in effect, represents humility. By eating matzoh we are demonstrating the fundamental tenet of serving G-d. We thereby acknowledge that there is a G-d to whom we are

subordinate, and that we will serve Him with humility.

How often do we find ourselves victims of stress? How many times do we want to do the right thing, but seem to be held back by some inner force? How do we find the "moment of freedom" that we are taught is our American birthright? This lesson can also be found in the story of the redemption of the Jews from Egyptian bondage. The ancient Jews needed to be released from slavery in Egypt before they were capable of receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. We too, need to release ourselves from the limitations and constraints that hinder us, our own personal Egypt. One good channel for this is to set aside a few moments each day for prayer. When we pray to G-d, we can, for those few moments, distance ourselves from our limitations and constraints.

The Talmud states; "*Ma'alim Bakodesh, Vain Moridin*," Jews need to be in a state of ascending holiness and not descending. If so, what should we do when the holiday ends, and we are in such an elevated spiritual state? There seems no place to go but down! May I suggest therefore, that, with the end of Pesach, we strive to continue our ascent into holiness by incorporating the lessons of the holiday into our daily service of G-d, and thus insure that Pesach doesn't really ever end.

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#### Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



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