

ברשת

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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PASSOVER: WHAT'S THE POINT!

by Anonymous

Passover equals stress - at least that's how I perceived it when I was a kid. I guess it had to do with all the cleaning and the expense of buying the special products that showed up in the grocery store - you know how they put the Passover stuff at the end of the aisle as if it is some theme that you should buy into like "Italian night" with spaghetti and tomato sauce, but rather for us it's "Matzah night." As the holiday neared, the stress level rose, and all of the anxiety was coming from my parents' generation. All the women in the community would talk as if a hurricane were coming and that we would be locked in the basement for a few weeks at the very least. Then again, perhaps I couldn't appreciate the anxiety of trying to clean a house with 7 rooms while 4 little kids flung around baggies of Cheerios™ in rooms that were already cleaned.

When I started becoming more observant, I asked my mother if I could help her clean the house for Passover. She said yes, of course.

"I used to clean the whole house, when you kids were little," she told me. The annual cleaning had stopped, she explained, because we all used to help. But then, when we grew up, no one wanted to (cont. on p. 2)



STRESS!!!!

SEDER MEMORIES: A Few Remembrances of Seders Past, From Child to Adult

by Chaim Berger

I have always been struck by the intensity of the memories which flood my consciousness when I sit down to a Seder. A few images come to mind...

I am a little boy, sitting at the table, with parents, siblings, aunts and uncles. I am nervously anticipating my big moment, when I'll be reciting the Four Questions of the *Ma Nishtana* ("Why is this night different from all the other nights?..."). Will I be able to remember it all? More importantly, will my father be able to find the *afikoman*, the half-matzah that I (not so) surreptitiously have taken from the table and hidden, with my mother's help. I expect to negotiate a gift in return for producing it later on, when it will be needed after the meal. I wonder, too, what are these "shares of General Motors" someone keeps prompting me to ask my father for, in return for handing over the *afikoman*. I end up asking for something useful, a toy. (Incidentally, that reminds me of one child, at a Seder I attended years ago, who thought that the best way to hide the *afikoman* would be to flv it down the toilet!).

When the main meal has ended, Grace After Meals has been said, and we're ready to resume the rest of (cont. on p. 3)

CELEBRATING FREEDOM

by Rabbi Yaakov Rosenblatt

Some ten years ago I heard a congregant ask his rabbi about the "facts of life." That is, the facts of the *end* of life.

"Why do we fear death, and how are we to overcome that fear?" the middle-aged man queried. The octogenarian rabbi, a great sage named Rabbi Avigdor Miller, replied without hesitation.

"To the contrary, we *should* fear death," he said. "Death is the termination of life, which is our most valuable possession. Life is the opportunity to accomplish. G-d gave us commandments in order to inspire us to accomplish more."

That same theme is the essence of the story of the Exodus from Egypt. After 210 years of enslavement, G-d decided to free the Children of Israel, and chose to create a nation that would promulgate His will. G-d gave the Children of Israel the opportunity for great accomplishment.

The Exodus from Egypt is a critical point in Judaism. Indeed, it is the cornerstone of the Jewish calendar around which the three major Jewish holidays revolve:

PASSOVER: When the Torah mentions Passover it says, "You shall observe... the Pascal-sacrifice (cont. on p. 4)

Passover (cont. from p. 1)...participate. It certainly wasn't worth her energy alone. I was so glad that I had asked, and that I was once again cleaning for Passover with her. In fact, since then, I have made it my own personal custom to always go home in time to help my mother clean the house and put away the chametz (bread products).

As a result of my journey deeper into Judaism, I have had the privilege of spending the last two years studying Judaism in Israel. As Passover approached and we learned in-depth about the holiday and what it represents, I was shocked at how much I didn't know. The more we involved ourselves in understanding the story of the Jews coming out of Egypt and what it was really like for them, the more enjoyable Passover preparations became. We also learned how important it is to tell over the Passover story to the children at the Seder table. Then it dawned upon me -- a reason for the annual increase in the anxiety of Jewish women and why my mother decided not to clean the house so thoroughly years ago.

Granted, this is only my humble opinion, but... I think that because my grandparents' generation was one step closer to our tradition, they knew in their hearts what was so important about Passover. They knew that telling the story of Passover over to the next generation was the only way to keep Judaism alive. They understood that chametz (bread products) is a metaphor for the *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination), and that cleaning out all the chametz from the house is really a self-cleaning process. So, doing all the rituals of Passover was easy for the Jews a couple generations back. They felt it, and lived it. As time went on, however, we lost some of the meaning and of course, what was left? Just the hard part, the cleaning.

Ok, so now I think I know why my mom stopped

cleaning for Passover while other women continued that ritual. The main theme of the holiday of Passover is to tell over the story to our children. When my mother saw that her children were not interested in participating in the holiday, there was no purpose in her cleaning. She realized that the whole picture was fading. It's hard to tell someone, "This is one of the most important parts of your life," if you can't explain why.

My mother, being one step closer to my grandparents' generation, naturally feels in her heart that being Jewish and keeping the holidays is the right thing to do. I, on the other hand, grew up in a community and a generation that demands literal explanations for everything, including faith. I had no natural inclination to celebrate our ancient ancestors' freedom from slavery, because I didn't really "get it." Thank G-d for my mother's heart, or else I am not sure if I would have ever come so far as to be able to write an article such as this.

As for the women who keep on cleaning, I think they are struggling to hold on to something because they know how important Passover is. It is an understanding they transmit not through words, but through action, by taking on the most tangible activity of Passover -- the cleaning. But actions also need words. I think that learning about our history and the meanings behind our rituals is the only way we will keep them alive.

May all our children enjoy a proper Jewish education, and may they always come home to participate in the Passover cleaning.

The author was involved in numerous Beginner Programs in Seattle, WA, and currently resides in the New York Metro area.

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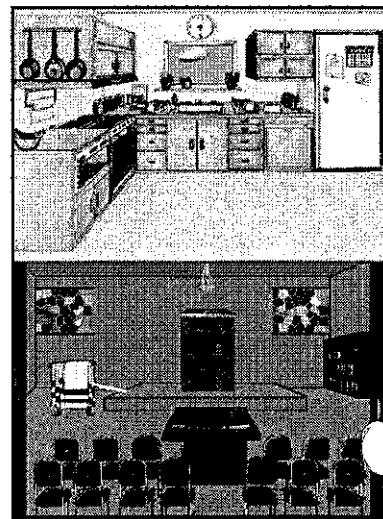
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Seder (cont. from p. 1)... the Seder. The Cup of Elijah is filled and sits on the table as we children are sent to open the front door for the Prophet Elijah (symbolizing our hope that Elijah will come to herald the Messiah). Back at the table, my father draws my attention to Elijah's Cup. The wine within seems to be moving slightly. Is Elijah the Prophet really here, drinking from his cup, I wonder?

A child sits at the Seder, watching ground horseradish used for *marror* (bitter herb), being distributed at the table. His slightly older cousin leans over and whispers that the ground horseradish is like candy, really sweet. Take a really big spoonful of it, the boy is mischievously advised. The gullible young fellow goes for the story--and much too much horseradish--lock, stock and *marror*!

I recall, later on, the nickname I bore proudly for many years at my parents' Seder: I went around filling everyone's cups when needed for the Four Cups of wine. I was therefore dubbed the "*Sar Ha'mashkim*" (named for the "Chief Cupbearer" of Pharaoh, whom Joseph encountered when he was imprisoned in Egypt, and whose dream Joseph interpreted.)

The Haggadah I use has been before me at over twenty Seders now (each member of my family has his or her favorite). I think back to the tender age of eighteen, when I bought this one. How intense I was, as I sought my destiny. I start to understand how Haggadahs used year after year become keepsakes, wine stains, matzoh crumbs, and all.

I've gotten married. I think back to the first Seder that my wife and I first attended as newlyweds. With it came realization that we each would have to contend with subtle differences in the way our two families sang different tunes at the Seder. Once we started holding Seders of our own, sensitive negotiations ensued ("Okay, tonight we'll sing it your way, but tomorrow night my way..."). Somehow over the years, we've managed to



meld (almost). It is amazing how strongly you can come to feel about your family traditions.

The children of one generation become the parents, aunts and uncles of the next; the generation before turn into grandparents, great uncles and aunts. I recall the joy of Seders at which new family additions, have come on board. I look forward, G-d willing, to witnessing many more. And separately, and sadly, I recall those whom we've come to miss at Seders, as the years have progressed.

I have doted over my children's recitations of the Four Questions, and of Seder songs that they've learned. I've had to move to the gift-giving side of the *afikoman* negotiations. I must also admit that I (like my father) shook the table slightly when the door was opened for the Prophet Elijah, and asked my own children, wasn't that wine moving a little bit in Elijah's Cup? They got wise to me pretty quickly. But hey, it was worth it to see those eyes widen, even if just once.

And so the Seder memories accumulate, as do the images they produce. Now, if I can only find a way to get even with my cousin for that mouthful of horseradish...

Chaim Berger lives in New Rochelle, New York with his wife and children and was the editor of Gateways to Jewish Life and Living. "Reflections: Seder Memories," was first published there in April 1993.

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Celebrating (cont. from p. 1)..before G-d, who took you out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 16:1).

SHAVUOT: When it discusses Shavuot it says, "You shall observe the Shavuot festival before G-d, and you shall remember that you were once a slave in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 16:10,12).

SUKKOT: In regard to Sukkot, it says: "[You shall dwell in Sukkot]... so your children will know that I settled you in booths when I took them out of Egypt" (Leviticus 23:43).

What is it about the Exodus that makes it the cornerstone of Jewish life? One of the greatest Jewish philosophers of all time, Rabbi Yehuda Lowe of Prague (commonly known as "Maharal", 1512-1608), made the following observation: It is not the great miracles G-d performed throughout the Exodus that are the basis of these holidays. Indeed, there is no holiday or commandment to commemorate either the Ten Plagues or the splitting of the Red Sea -- perhaps the two greatest miracles that our people ever witnessed. Rather, it is the Exodus itself -- our transformation into a people willing and able to accept more responsibility -- that is celebrated. The Jewish people's acceptance of an active relationship with G-d is truly the reason for our yearly celebration, much more so than the fact that G-d, in His kindness, suspended nature on our behalf.

In many ways the celebration is similar to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah today. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrates reaching Jewish adulthood, when a Jew accepts the religious responsibility that will enable him/her to grow closer to G-d. So too, the result of the Exodus was the "Bar Mitzvah" of the Children of Israel.

Tradition says that the great Rabbi Elijah of Vilna (the Vilna Gaon - 18th century) cried on his deathbed. Clutching his tzitzit (fringes of his prayer shawl) Rabbi Elijah, one of the greatest Torah scholars in all of Jewish history, said: "In this world, I am able to buy tzitzit for a few zlotys, fulfill the mitzvah of wearing them, and earn a spiritual reward. Soon I will lose that opportunity."

By understanding the idea that the acceptance of responsibility is humanity's great affirmation of life, one can better understand the true significance of the Passover holiday. Both life itself and being part of the Jewish people are causes for celebration, because accepting responsibility is a cause for celebration. Responsibility imposes accountability on humankind for our days and our deeds, and thus encourages us to forge a stronger relationship with G-d and become more spiritual.

The above-mentioned Rabbi Miller? He passed away recently at the age of 91. His dedication to and depth of understanding of the Torah are irreplaceable. Almost until the end, some 130 people would squeeze into his synagogue each Thursday night to hear his thoughtful Torah class. They came from far and near, and spanned all levels of observance. Rabbi Miller knew that life was responsibility, and he understood that the truest celebration of life was the study of Torah and the performance of good deeds.

Rabbi Rosenblatt, a faculty member of the Dallas Area Torah Association (DATA), is a columnist for the Dallas Jewish Week, and is also the author of All I Need to Know, I Learned in Yeshiva, (Targum Press, 1995) and Maharal: Emerging Patterns (Feldheim Publishers 2001).



Joyous TOPICS TO DISCUSS AT YOUR SEDER!

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

בראשית

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