

**BERESHITH**  
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

*Rabbi Gershon Litt*

Passover is a very holy time of the year. It is a time of personal reflection, a time of national pride, and a time of great joy for millions of Jews worldwide. The Passover Seder is known for many things, and most Jews have fond memories of their Seders. Those who have attended a Seder know that many questions are asked. Here are some familiar questions that are heard the world over on the first night of Passover. "When are we going to be done?" "How much longer is this going to last?" "Will we be able to catch the end of the game or is this thing going to be schlepped out all night?" "They are not going to continue with this *after dinner* are they?"

These questions are very common, and very unfortunate. They stem from a lack of understanding of, and preparation for, one of the most powerful experiences a Jew can have in the Jewish calendar year. How can a Jew prepare himself or herself for this awesome night? The following is one idea that will hopefully inspire readers as much as it inspires me.

We all know that Jews do not eat "*chametz*," leavened products, on Passover. The basic reason for this law is that the Jews left Egypt in a hurry and did not have time for the bread to rise. Therefore, we, who are now remembering that very Exodus, also do not eat leavened products. (cont. on p. 2)



THE LESSONS OF PASSOVER

## PASSOVER CLEANING DOES A BODY GOOD

*Esti Berkowitz*

Believe it or not, preparing for Passover can be fun for the entire family. That's right, kids *can* get excited about cleaning the house and getting rid of all of the "*chametz*." Not convinced?

Many Jewish families start cleaning for Passover at least six weeks before the first Seder. This can be quite challenging with young children running around the house with a cookie or Cheerios in hand. The best solution for this is to make a comprehensive list of the entire cleaning process and the order of cleaning. For example, the Jacob family has a list that reads "clean car on Sunday, closets on Tuesday, drawers on Wednesday, high chairs, car seats, strollers, purses, diaper bag, coat pockets on Thursday, etc." With all of this effort going into removing stray Cheerios lodged in the couch cushions, the Jacob family has good reason not to allow snacks upstairs all year round. The Jacob family also has a rule, starting one month before Passover, (cont. on p. 3)

## OPENING THE DOOR

*Ilya Welfeld*

As I wind down from 30 days of Pesach prep it is with both a sigh of relief and fair measure of guilt that I realize how drastically Passover in my home differs from that of my childhood.

In my childhood, surrounded by good food and a motley crew of family friends, I often felt like a polite spectator at what could have been a precursor to reality TV. Most years, my ever-patient, deeply knowledgeable and good spirited stepfather would answer endless questions, settle raucous debates, sing his vocal cords hoarse, toast my mother and down the four obligatory glasses of wine.

Our tiny home played host to an-ever evolving crew of the downtrodden. Each year, the cast changed slightly but without fail, those most in need of open arms and warm *kneidelach* would find their way to our doorstep where they would join the regulars: four children of a single mother, two ex-wives of abusive husbands, three recent converts, a non-Jewish neighbor, an ex-con and his family. (cont. on p. 2)

MIRROR (cont. from p. 1)...

I would like to propose a deeper reason for this practice that is based in rabbinic literature. I believe this reason will give more Jews a greater sense of purpose when thinking about Passover. Let us examine what not eating bread on Passover really means and how it can make a true difference in our lives as Jews.

What is a leavened product? It is a product whose ingredients include flour and water that has been given the opportunity to rise. While bread is the most common example of such a product, there are countless examples of other foods that also fit into this category and consequently are not permitted to be eaten on Passover.

In Judaism, the observance of commandments is always related to the improvement of our lives in some way. People often tell me that the reason they do not observe specific commandments is because those commandments do not mean anything to them, or do not “touch” them in any way. How can the commandment to refrain from eating leavened products on Passover make us better people?

We defined “leavening” as a chemical process. This happens after allowing the leavening ingredients to be left alone for a specific amount of time. During that time, the product gets larger and larger until something happens that stops the process, such as kneading and baking. Our rabbis suggest, rather surprisingly, that the leavening process is parallel to human character development. If a person has a character trait that they would rather not have and they leave it alone, will it just go away, or will it get worse and continue to grow?

The answer to proper character development can be understood by following the laws of Passover properly. By abstaining from leavened products, we can internalize the idea that we must actively do something to control and mold our character. If we do nothing, then any desire we have to change and be better people and better Jews will always remain theoretical. Judaism teaches us that we must never allow character

development to be theoretical. Before the Passover Seder, it is our tradition to vigorously search our homes for leavened products. We then recite a statement renouncing and nullifying our ownership of any leavened products that may be in our possession. The following morning, we take any *chametz* that is left and physically burn it.

The parallel lesson regarding personal character development can be life changing. If a person takes the time before Passover to think about their character, their personality, and their relationships, then they will have a solid picture of who they are and what they should work on. Following this exercise, a person can then “search out” all of the personal character traits that they would like to change and write them down. Then, on the morning of Passover take the list of things that need to be changed, the character traits that the investigation revealed, and burn that list with the actual *chametz*.

What is the parallel between bread and bad character traits? Just like bread will continue to rise unless some external agent acts upon it, so will our bad habits. If a person angers easily, that anger is not going to stop simply because someone wants it to stop. Concrete steps need to be taken in order to change the habit.

Perhaps Michael Jackson said it best when he said that you have to start “with the man in the mirror.” Make this Passover one of change and meaning. Make it one where the questions are not about “When will it end?”, but rather “When and where can I start?” The more we learn about Passover before the holiday begins, the more powerful it will be for us and our entire family.

*Rabbi Gershon Litt is the Executive Director of the Norfolk Area Community Kollel in Norfolk, VA.*

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OPENING (cont. from p. 1)...

Newly observant (my mother, brother and I joined my stepfather on the journey when I was mid-elementary school), I was sorry my beloved aunts, uncles and cousins rarely partook in the ritual festivities. But my parents made quite the effort to fill our home with celebration. Eager “newbies,” we took to heart the charge to open our doors for the lonely, tired and poor of our community (*Kohl Dichfin...*) And we took care to race through *Shfoch Chamatcha* without translation, taking into account my funny, non-Jewish best friend, invited in part because my parents knew I would be in need of some comic relief.

Even at the time, I was immensely proud of my parents for fulfilling the mitzvah of *V'ahavta L'reyacha* (loving one's neighbor) and each year, my heart would tug as I thought about the challenges faced each day by our guests. It was so easy to appreciate all I had, when witnessing their gratitude in the face of such troubles.

Yet, I often dreaded those nights; I remember joking that I was partaking in the mitzvah of experiencing the pain of leaving Egypt. I was somewhat jealous of the brilliant postulations offered by our young guests, exhausted by their tireless questioning and toneless singing and more than a little resentful of the attention so kindly doled out by my parents during *sedarim* that often lasted mercilessly into the wee hours of the morning. I smiled, tried to keep my eyes open and helped shuttle soup and sweet potato casserole to and from the kitchen, all the while longing for a quiet, drama-less, family-only *seder* culminating in a pre-midnight *Chadgadya*.

Now, a parent myself, I am still surprised that my husband and I are old enough to hold a seder, let alone (cont. on p. 4)

CLEANING (cont. from p. 1)... restricting the purchase of any cereal made of *chametz*. They even suggest introducing “Passover friendly” cereals at this point so the kids will be excited about the new special Passover cereal. (It may be challenging to keep children sitting at the table, but this is highly recommended in order to effectively keep all *chametz* in the kitchen--which, of course, is cleaned last.)

When one thinks about the fact that matzah is actually made with flour and water, perhaps this is all very confusing. So why isn't matzah considered *chametz*?

The message is in the *timing*. If unbaked flour and water remain together for longer than 18 minutes, they automatically begin to leaven and rise (unless the mixture is being actively kneaded). It is critical that every step of the matzah baking process be exact. From mixing, baking, and scraping every morsel from the previous batch of matzah, this exactitude is uncompromising. Even though all this sounds pretty serious, kids can get excited about eating matzah for eight days straight. Still not convinced? Read on.

In order to make matzah matter for children, schools often take children on a tour of a local Matzah bakery. This tour is a great way to get kids excited about eating flat, tasteless, squares of flour and water for eight straight days--honest! Once kids have a “tangible,” hands-on experience making matzah, they feel more connected to the mitzvah of eating matzah.

You may want to know: How long does the cleaning process *really* take? Even with toddlers running around, cleaning for Passover can be fun for the entire family. First of all, if needed and affordable, get extra help! Most people call in a cleaning person, or if you have a regular cleaning person, ask for extra help a couple of times a week in the month preceding Passover. Even a babysitter can pitch in and clean out a drawer or fold some laundry. Alas, with the financial challenges facing many in today's economy, this is a luxury many families are not able to afford. Therefore, prepare to divide and conquer!

Everyone in the family can take on personal cleaning tasks! Take, for example, cleaning out the car. The Jacob family made this a family affair last year and their children, 4 and 2, really loved being involved. They helped fill up several garbage bags with empty juice boxes, plastic wrappers, sand, a bag of opened crackers, and crumbs in various shapes and sizes. (It's not all the kids' mess in the car. Don't forget the coffee holder in the front seat, stained with many accidental spills of hot coffee.) The Jacob family uses baby wipes (the duct tape of cleaning) for removing small particles from the dashboard and the steering wheel. Last, but not least, the big sweep. Clean the floor of the car with a vacuum. That may not get everything, so a brush may be necessary to finish the job.

And for families with really little ones, don't forget the other crumb zones--the car seats and strollers. The best thing to do, if possible, is throw the fabric or seat cover into

the washing machine. Some good advice, ban all cookies, crackers and pretzels from the car a couple of weeks before the Seder.

Whatever you do, don't make Passover cleaning harder than it has to be. It will not be good for you to be burnt out even before the guests arrive for the Seder. It is important to remember the reason we have Passover; and to remember what our ancestors had to endure for their freedom. Imagine yourself in their shoes (or at least their sandals). Get the picture? It is a lot less than what they had to go through to be free!

Whether you have extra cleaning to do, or not so much extra, make Passover cleaning a family affair and don't be afraid to ask for extra help.

Hope you have a happy and meaningful Passover Seder. And don't forget to try chocolate covered matzahs, the entire family will love them.

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OPENING (cont. from p. 2)...

host family of our own. We celebrate with three and even four generations, sometimes at my parents' (they have retired from hosting the world) or in-laws homes' and sometimes in ours. Here, we have created our own traditions. I like to fill the table with plastic cattle and throw little green frogs and toy vermin around from time to time. I set blocks in the living room so the younger children can build pyramids while we read through *Maggid*. We even walk through a sea of parted blue cellophane before we break out the brisket. In time, these antics will soon annoy and embarrass my children and our *sedarim* will surely evolve.

But for the time being, these are intimate, family affairs, full of little questions from small children eager to lean to the left, sip sugary grape juice and stay up past bedtime. Yet each year, another question lingers in my mind, am I depriving my children of the experience I once resented? Surely my kids have fewer questions about the agenda of the night because they benefit from a yeshiva education. They and their peers are blessed to ask questions from the perspective of children who know, who believe and who are secure. And these blessed facts sometimes make me wonder whether as we



open the door for Elijah, leave the glass on the table ... they feel less in need of salvation, less beguiled by the possibility of an open door than did I, new to it all, surrounded by those in real pain and need for more.

So, as I switch dishes and swap pans, I am struck by how honestly grateful I am to my parents for opening the door of our

small home to let the needy in ... and the world with it. I hope that while I may not yet have the proclivity to invite the downtrodden en masse to my table, I might be able to impart to my children some of the empathy learned in my youth.

My wish this year for my children, and for everyone else who is safe and sound, is that without suffering ignorance, loss or pain you may learn to love and appreciate the freedom to retell our story, practice our religion and ask questions. And that each year, you may exercise the right, the obligation, to look around the table and to appreciate the food, the traditions, the history and whatever motley crew surrounds you.

*Ilya Welfeld is a wife, mother, and communications professional who stops to cherish the chaos, writing about balancing work, life and religion. This article was originally published by The Jewish Star, issue of March 25, 2010/10 Nisan 5770.*

Rabbi Buchwald's  
Weekly  
Torah  
Message



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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*



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