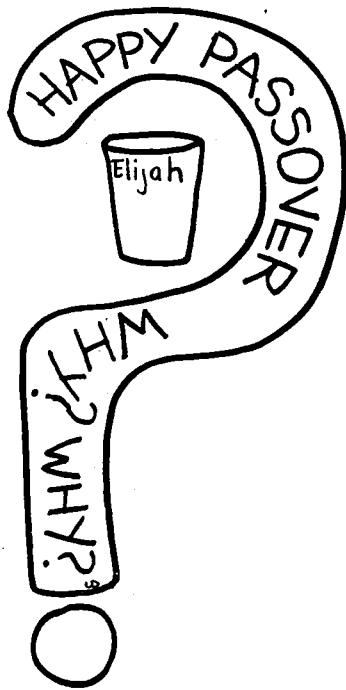


ברשת

PASSOVER - THE HOLIDAY OF QUESTIONS

by Rabbi Mark Dratch



We Jews are known for our questions. We ask them. We even answer other questions with them. So what better time to focus on the significance of the she'eilah (Hebrew for question) than on the Holiday of She'eilot, Passover. "Why is this night different from all other nights?" "Who knows one?" "This matzah which we eat, what is its meaning?"

The story is told of the Malbim, the acronym for Rabbi Meir Loeb ben Yechiel Michael (1809-1879), a great rabbi, preacher, and biblical exegete. It was Shabbat haGadol, the Sabbath prior to Passover, when rabbis delivered one of their two major annual discourses. A certain year, when it came time to stand before the congregation and deliver the sermon, the Malbim remained silent. The people, waiting for the rabbi to stand before them, sat patiently and quietly. As time passed, the congregation grew restless, wondering why their rabbi was behaving so oddly. Finally, one of the leaders of the congregation meekly approached the rabbi and asked him why it was that the

(cont.p. 2)

HEADING HOME

by Bryan Gundle

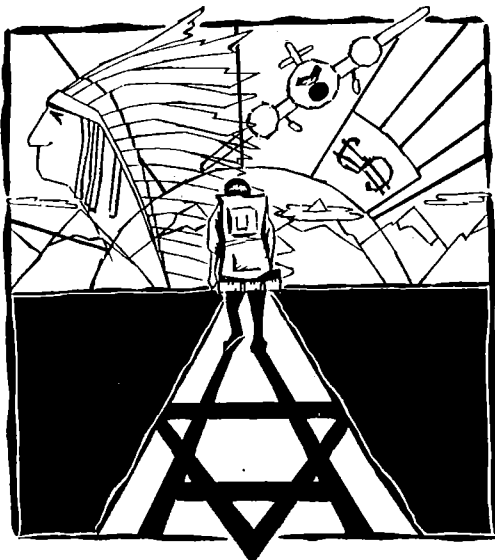


Illustration by Daniel Cohen, a graduate of the Beginners Service at the Jewish Learning Exchange, London, England.

I awoke with a start. My heart was thumping in my chest, and my body was in a cold sweat. It was 5:45 in the morning and I was late for choir practice. I practiced daily for an hour each morning. Services were held daily following practice, and again in the early evening. You may have been thinking this sounds like a morning routine at Yeshiva Shem v'Eber. But no, no such luck.

Ever since I could remember, I had wanted to go to boarding school. And so I found myself at an Anglican boarding school, set in the rural suburbs of Pretoria.

I came from a "typical" South African Jewish background, which included guilt trips and kneidlach. I didn't know much about Judaism besides that, but then again, I didn't know there was that much more to know.

I suppose you could say my Jewish upbringing was rather limited. For several years I attended a Hebrew School on Saturday mornings, followed by a seemingly endless service

(cont. p. 2)

PASSOVER - HOLIDAY OF QUESTIONS (cont. from p. 1)

rabbi was not delivering the traditional Shabbat haGadol discourse. The Malbim biting answered, "The Talmud teaches 'We are to begin asking and expounding upon the laws of Passover thirty days prior to the holiday.' Thus, we learn that the Derashah (sermon) comes in response to questions. This year no one asked any questions, so this year there will be no Derashah."

Similar to the Malbim's community, many members of our own do not ask questions. Some don't take Judaism or Jewish commitment seriously; they don't care enough to ask. Some, who do care, are Jewishly illiterate and inarticulate; they don't know how to ask. And others, who are Jewishly educated, are either too embarrassed that they don't already know the answers, so smug that they think they know all of the answers, or simply indifferent to the intricacies and subtle nuances of the Torah's ritual and ethical demands.

How are we to respond to this silence? One way is to remain silent ourselves, to sit alone with our books and our answers, writing off the uninterested, uneducated, and uncommitted. Another way (the one which I find more religiously responsible) ~~discuss~~ follow the ~~of~~ of the Mishnah which states that ~~1040~~ we to begin the recounting of the Exodus from Egypt with questions asked by the children. But, if the children are unable to formulate queries of their own, their parents are to teach them to recite the Four Questions.

We must learn from the parents of the Mishnah to pique the curiosity of the Jewishly unconcerned, to inspire the religiously indifferent, and to challenge the minds of the uneducated. If questions are not asked, we must teach the art of questioning. We must teach Jews why they should care about their Jewishness, how to appreciate the beauty and rewards of prayer and Shabbat, to love the land of Israel, and to understand the significance of Mitzvot. We must make Jews want to enter and feel comfortable in the Bet haMidrash (study hall). After all, Bet haMidrash literally means the House of Questioning!

What we ask and what we are answered are only incidental to the fact that we ask questions in the first place. Questioning is a sign of life and an indicator that we care about who and what we are as Jews. Questioning is proof of a vibrant, dynamic and meaningful Jewish future.

And so, if you already know how to ask, teach others to do so. If you don't know how to formulate Jewish questions, attend a Beginners Service, go to a class, read books and learn how. And if you have a question, ask! Every rabbi is only too happy to be asked a she'eilah, a Jewish question!

May this holiday of Passover, the Holiday of Questions, be the beginning of a lifetime of search and inquiry for us all. May these questions bring fulfillment in our personal lives and redemption to the Land of Israel and to the Jewish people everywhere.

Rabbi Mark Dratch is the Associate Rabbi of Congregation Kehilath Jesburun in New York City, one of our newest and most successful Beginners Services.

HEADING HOME (cont. from p.1)

- most of which I skipped. I was a secular Jew who molded his religion to fit his daily life - when I thought of it at all. After bar mitzvah, I left for boarding school. For the next five years, I was the only Jew out of 500 students. I chose as one of my majors Biblical Studies - which for us meant the Synoptic Gospels. (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, for those not *au fait* with the New Testament.)

After I was graduated from high school, I was marched off to do military service for two more years. As you can imagine, this did nothing to further my Judaism.

On completing my military obligations, it then became appropriate to go and study business. So I went to the USA, where I graduated from New Hampshire College, with a BSc in Finance and Economics. The way was now paved: I would work for a few years, get some experience in the field (under daddy's wing, of course) and then go and earn an MBA, get married, buy a house, etc.

But this did not suit me; I wanted something different. So two months after I graduated, I donned a backpack and flew to South America. I spent six months travelling through South America and then headed north to Mexico. From there I went to Arizona where I spent some time with the Navajo Indians. Then I flew to Japan and got a job teaching English. With the money I had saved, I went to Borneo and then on to Indonesia.

I had lived on ashrams, worked in secluded communities, shared with the native American Indians, and with the Iban and Punan peoples of Borneo. I was on my way to India, when I suddenly realized that what I had been searching for was not to be found in India. Nor across the sea, or in a far-off land. After close to eighteen months on the road, I realized that my search had really only begun. Slowly, I headed home...to Judaism.

On returning to the West, I got a job working in Finance with a medical manufacturing company based in Connecticut, USA. Although I found the work stimulating and challenging, it was

(cont.p. 4)

BEGINNER MAN

Written and Sung to Billy Joel's Piano Man (c. '73 CBS Records) by Paul Stregevsy - In honor of Rabbi David Silverman at Beth Jacob's 1990 Purim Dinner in Atlanta, Georgia.

It's ten-n-n o'clock on a Saturday;
A dozen lost souls wander in;
A blue-jeaned gir-r-rl falters up to me
Wearing lines where a smile'd once been.

She says "Rav, can ya teach me Aleph Bais,
"See I can't seem to lear-r-rn it alone;
"Lord I can't even pray:
"I was absent that day
"In the world that I used to
call ho-o-ome."

Laah-la-laaah-diddee-daaah, la-
laah-diddee-daaah,
duh-dah.

She says "Teach me t'filla,
Beginner Man;
"Reach me with song, today;
"Well we're all in the mood
to learn Shacharees,
"And you got us wannin' to
pray."

Now Menahhh-chum Deutch
is a friend a' mine,
Gets me seats at Yom
Kippur for free;
And he's quick with a p'shat
or to kasher your pot
But there's someplace that
he'd rather be.

He says "Dave, this is not what I davened for,"
As his yar-r-rmulka slides from his head,
"Well I'm sure that I could be a pulpit rav;
"Then I could give orders to Fred."

Oh laah-la-laaah-diddee-daaah, la-laah-diddee-daaah,
duh-daaah.

Now My-y-ya's a New Age Kabbalist
Who seeks Truth in her crystals and pearls,
And she's talkin' with Paul
Who comes late, if at all,

Just to meet vegetarian girls.

And the feminist twists my apology,
And the atheist drowns my reply,
Friends, we're all bahlee-t'shuvvas,
And it would behoove us
To bid Him good faith or good-byyyye.



Sing me "Teach us t'filla,
Beginner Man;
"Reach us with song today;
"Well we're all in the mood
to learn Shacharees,
"And you got us wannin' to
pray."

Well the restless are
waving their Seikos,
And I can't raise a soul to
his feet,
But I've com-m-mme a long
way
From the shores of L.A.,
And I got a big mortgage to
meet.

And the newcomers shuckle
toward Lenox Square,
As the regulars croon out of
key;
Though Rav Feldman

couldn't take it--
They can't even fake it--
There's no place that I'd rather be.

Oh laah-la-laaah-diddee-daaah, la-laah-diddee-daaah, duh-dah.

Croon me "Teach us t'filla, Beginner Man;
"Reach us with song, today;
"Well we're all in the mooood to learn Shacharees,
"And you got us wannin' to pray."

*Paul Stregevsy has been writing and song parodies
since 1976. When he's not being irreverent, he
writes for The Nuclear Professional magazine.*

HEADING HOME (cont. from p.2)

not intrinsically satisfying. From an early age I was involved with health care. My sister had severe scoliosis, and she was in a brace from her neck to her waist 23 hours a day for 5 years. I used to massage her aching back during her only relief hour. My interests in massage and medicine continued, but only as a hobby. Now I decided to make it a career. So I left the company and entered osteopathy school in London. It was there that I finally met my sister-in-law to be, who introduced me to the Jewish Learning Exchange.

Just a few weeks ago I completed the Crash Course in Hebrew Reading, and I have become a regular participant in the Saturday morning Beginners Service - but this time only a fool would play truant.

Through Rabbi Rashi Simon and the Jewish Learning Exchange, I am able to meet like-minded people, but more important, I am now exploring my heritage - a heritage that for 25 years had not only been an almost complete mystery, but had barely impinged upon my consciousness.

Next summer I hope to go to Israel (one of the few omissions in my previous travels!) to study at the Ohr Somayach Yeshiva. My search continues, but now I know that I am headed on the proper path. The plains of Torah and the mountains of the Talmud loom before me, but I have a good guide and I am anxious to resume my journey.

Bryan Gundle studies osteopathy and attends the Beginners Service at New West End Synagogue in London, England.

Illustrations by Lynne Doynow
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