

# BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

Vol. XXXV No. 3

Nissan 5782/April 2022



# בראשית

"Even when Passover is over we should remember: Torah study and caring for others"



## HASHEM SPEAKS TO US!

Louis Glinn

Our Sages tell us in the Talmud that on Passover "Every person is obligated to see him/herself as if he/she left Egypt." I think about this a lot every year. It's not so easy, to be honest. In this day and age, we all tend to live pretty good lives. We live in a country where we can observe our religion openly, we can afford many more luxuries than our ancestors were able to, and we don't generally want for food or shelter, like many of our forefathers did. So how are we supposed to really think of ourselves as having been redeemed from slavery in Egypt?

Truth be told, my family has been going through a bit of a difficult time lately. A few months ago, we were hit with a double whammy. Our newly finished basement, which we had transformed into 3 bedrooms, a full bath, a kitchen, and playroom was all destroyed by a flood from Hurricane Ida. Because we didn't have flood insurance (most people don't have flood insurance if you don't live in a flood zone, which we don't...need to think about that again!), the damage wasn't covered. Meanwhile, our basement accounted for almost half our living space. About a month after the flood, whammy #2 came along...I unexpectedly lost my job. It wasn't just a job, though. It was a great job! It was a job I worked very hard to get and put me in the executive ranks of a (cont. on p. 3)

## PASSOVER: HOLIDAY OF TEXTS AND OF TENDERNESS

Rabbi Zvi Romm

On the Sunday following Purim, nearly a million people crowded the streets of the Israeli city of Bnei Brak to bid farewell to a rabbinic leader who held no official position and did not preside over a synagogue or a Yeshiva. Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, who passed away at the age of 94, was renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge of the entire gamut of Torah literature. His wide-ranging knowledge had a unique connection to Passover: Every year, Rabbi Kanievsky would review the entire corpus of Talmudic literature and would mark his review on the eve of Passover with a small celebratory meal (a "Siyum").

But Rabbi Kanievsky was not simply an ivory tower scholar. Beyond his vast Talmudic knowledge, Rabbi Kanievsky was renowned for the connections he created with people. Every day, countless people would enter his home to receive his blessings, request his advice and prayers, and share their burdens with him. Even a few moments of his time (cont. on p. 2)

## EGYPT ON MY MIND

Seth Litzenblatt

*Please note: This essay is written by an unabashed and unrepentant "Rabbi Buchwald Groupie." If you've never taken a class with Rabbi Buchwald, you may not be able to appreciate the finer nuances contained in this message, so please bear with me..*

I mention Egypt every day. Every day.

Who knew it would come to this? Well, likely Rabbi Buchwald.

For those who may not know him, Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald, director of NJOP, developed a "Beginners Service" in the 1980s for those with limited or no synagogue experience. When I first entered Lincoln Square Synagogue's "Beginners Service" in New York City, circa 2006, I had no idea that Egypt or *Mitzrayim* would become part of my daily prayers, my *davening*.

If you're a Beginner now and puzzled by these comments, not to worry – I'll explain all this in a moment. If you've "graduated" the Beginners program, you may have a smile on your face. Perhaps you had a similar realization at some point when you started to daven more regularly.

Take the *Shema* service and its blessings. As I discovered much later, shortly after saying *Shema*, we also say: "From Egypt You redeemed us, Hashem, our G-d, and from the house of slavery You liberated us." In the second (cont. on p. 2)

## PASSOVER: HOLIDAY OF TEXTS AND OF TENDERNESS (cont. from p. 1)

made people feel uplifted and bestowed upon them a sense of direction as they struggled with the issues life inevitably brings.

Perhaps even more astoundingly, Rabbi Kanievsky devoted part of one day each week to answer hundreds of letters addressed to him with questions of Jewish law and practice. Every week, he answered all of the queries. All of them, without exception. His responses were famous for being extremely terse, sometimes consisting of a word or two. But respond he did, without fail. Anyone who has “drowned” in endless emails or texts can appreciate what it means to answer hundreds of complex questions without overlooking even a single one.

These two dimensions of Rabbi Kanievsky – love of Torah and love of people – both loom large in the message of the upcoming holiday of Passover.

Passover is the only holiday on which the Torah itself mandates Torah study as an integral part of its observance. The core of the Haggadah is Torah study; we recite four verses from the Book of Deuteronomy which summarize the story of our Exodus from Egypt and proceed to analyze those verses’ deeper meaning. That analysis is the very essence of Torah study. We are not merely telling the story of the Exodus; we are studying it. Passover is the holiday on which we seek to inspire the next generation with a love of our tradition and heritage; the Haggadah shows us that Torah study, shared between generations, is the best way to ensure that continuity.

But Passover also bids us to focus on people. The very word *Pesach* – the Hebrew name for Passover – is translated by many ancient scholars as “compassion.” Thus, the holiday of “Passover” is actually the holiday of “compassion.” It is a holiday on which the Al-mighty showed His compassion for the Jewish people suffering in Egypt, bringing them to freedom and redemption. It is also a holiday during which Jews have opened up their wallets and doors to the less fortunate. The weeks before Passover are marked by the age-old custom of collecting “wheat money,” funds that are used to help people have food – and clothes and other needs – to celebrate the holiday. The seder opens with the declaration, “Whoever is hungry, let him come and eat.” Ensuring that everyone has a place to observe the holiday is a hallmark of the observance of Passover.

Although the Passover holiday is only observed once a year, we are supposed to feel its impact throughout the year. I would suggest that we consider making two types of resolutions this Passover, resolutions to extend the spirit and message of Passover even once the matzah has been finished and we have resumed eating leavened bread:

First, let us all resolve to make more time in our lives for Torah study.

Second, let us resolve to make time for people.

We can each find five to ten minutes per day in our busy schedules to read, listen to or watch some Torah-based material. And we can all think of people in our lives who would benefit from some extra attention – a call to see how they are doing, an invite for a Shabbat or holiday meal, or perhaps some financial help.

The warmth and beauty of Passover need not end when the holiday is completed. Let us ensure that the spirit of Passover accompanies us throughout the year.

*Rabbi Zvi Romm is the rabbi of the historic Bialystoker Synagogue on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He also serves as the Administrator of the Manhattan Beth Din for Conversions and is an Instructor of Talmud at Yeshiva University's Isaac Breuer College.*

## EGYPT ON MY MIND (cont. from p. 1)



paragraph of the Grace After Meals, the *Birkat Hamazon*, we recite: “...You took us, Hashem, our G-d, from the land of Egypt and You redeemed us from the house of bondage...”

Israel, I would have expected.... But Egypt?!?!)

With time, I’ve come to appreciate the concept that daily repetition is so important. By mentioning Egypt, we remember how far we’ve come, thanks to *Hashem’s* blessing and mercy. In Egypt, we were not only slaves, but as Rabbi Buchwald taught us, we also had a slave’s mentality. We were at a low point, and of course, we had not yet received the Torah, which brought about morality and civility.

But as I’ve learned to “think Egypt” every day, I realize there is also a challenge: How do we keep Passover fresh? How do we keep it meaningful? I can remember a time – pre-daily prayers – where it was easy to feel, “Wow, it’s Passover – I’m ready to tell the story of leaving Egypt. It’s that time of year to talk about our Exodus.” But what about when it’s the daily story, the “same story” every day?

As we enter Passover this year, I’d like to suggest two approaches that will help keep the story “new and exciting.”

First, think about redemption and Passover in personal terms and what it means to our character

(cont. on p. 4)

HASHEM SPEAKS TO US! (cont. from p. 1)

terrific company, doing work that I loved. It still hurts, several months later.

So, here my family and I found ourselves with significant damage to our home, no insurance or federal funding to help us, and no income anymore. Wow! Talk about a tight spot.

I pray to *Hashem*, to G-d three times a day, and I wanted answers! Why did this happen to us? What did I do wrong? When are You, *Hashem*, going to fix it?

After a couple of weeks with this perspective, I started to ask myself if I truly believe that everything *Hashem* does is not just for the best, but actually good (and I always thought I truly believed that), then how can I complain about this stuff? Doesn't that mean that these events, although seemingly terrible, are actually good for us too? I realized that perhaps my faith and trust in *Hashem* were not quite as strong as I thought, and that bothered me tremendously.

The great 12th century sage and commentator, *Ramban*, Nachmanidies explains that the Ten Commandments were all said in singular form because *Hashem* was informing us that the commandments are directives to each and every individual personally. Moreover, the commentators explain that even though everyone heard the same words emanating from *Hashem*, each individual perceived a distinct, unique meaning in those words. While the Torah was given to all the Jewish People, the focus remains on the individual. On the one hand it appears as if each individual is part of a single, larger world. Yet, on the other hand, *Hashem* created an entire world specifically for each and every one of us.

This was demonstrated during the plagues in Egypt. In the plague of darkness, for example, while the Egyptian was unable to move in the darkness and was stuck completely motionless, in the very same room walked the Jew in complete daylight. Although the two were in very close proximity, they were living in two totally different worlds.

The great book of Jewish ethics, *Mesillat Yesharim*, says that *Hashem* created an individual world for each and every person. It follows that everyone has his/her own unique connection with his/her Creator as well as his/her own

unique obligations.

This concept is a fundamental aspect of the seder night, when we are instructed to inculcate into ourselves and impart to the next generation the fact that *Hashem* is personally involved not just with the world as a whole, but with every aspect of our life as well. While understanding this brings us obligations, it can inspire us to an even greater level. In fact, it can free us from the shackles of our daily existence and enable us to reach incredible heights of achievement and connection to *Hashem*.

What can be better than a personal connection with the One who created each and every one of us, and created our personal world? The understanding and acceptance that the Father who created us loves us more than anything else, and is always looking out for His children, is incredibly liberating! So, while I haven't fixed my basement yet, and haven't found a new job yet, I have a happiness and contentment that it will all happen when the time is right. Would I like to know when that is? Perhaps, but I don't really need to know. I make all the efforts a person is supposed to make to rectify the situation, but I take comfort in the fact that I am trying to grow to the

best of my ability as a person and as a Jew, and depend on *Hashem* to deliver the rest. Ultimately, that's what we are supposed to do in this world and that is true freedom.

Have a *Chag Kasher v'Sameach*, a wonderful and uplifting Passover!

*Louis Glinn lives in Highland Park, NJ with his wife and daughter. He and his wife also have two married sons and two adorable grandsons.*





1345 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, 2<sup>nd</sup> FLOOR  
NEW YORK, NY 10105-0014  
1-800-44-HEBRE(W)  
[www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org)

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
New York, NY  
PERMIT #5047



In partnership with  
Lincoln Square Synagogue

## DATED MATERIAL

EGYPT ON MY MIND (cont. from p. 2)

development, personal growth and acceptance of taking on more *mitzvot*.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson notes, "This is the purpose of the seder on *Pesach* [Passover] eve: to provide every individual with an opportunity to experience an exodus from his own personal 'house of bondage.' Though we may never have been in Egypt, nor experienced actual slavery, redemption can be real for us, for, as *Chassidic* thought explains, Egypt is not only a geographical location but also a state of mind. In fact, the Hebrew name for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, is almost identical to the word *meitzarim*, which means straits or limitations. In other words, our personal exodus from Egypt involves self-transcendence, lifting ourselves out of our natural limitations."

To paraphrase – I hope correctly – another point from the Rebbe – we have our own personal chametz to get rid of, and we have to ensure that we're taking all the right steps to exit our own Egypt.

My other suggestion: Channel your own Rabbi Buchwald

speaking style when at the seder, especially if you're hosting. If you've ever attended or watched a service led by Rabbi Buchwald, he teaches in very personal terms. Using an animated, bold voice, he'll say something to the effect of, "He took YOU, YOU Litzenblatt, out of the land of Egypt. He redeemed YOU!"

Meaning, read from the Haggadah, of course, but look at the redemption in terms of your own life, and get everyone at the table to try and do the same.

Make no mistake about it, Egypt is still our past, and while it is part of our daily liturgy, it is Israel of course, that is the place of redemption and our ultimate future.

May we merit to experience that redemption speedily in our days. *Chag Kasher v'Sameach!*

*Seth Litzenblatt (Linden) lives in New York City with his wife and two daughters. He plans to conduct part of his family seders using a "Rabbi Buchwald speaking style."*

**Words of Torah for everyone!** To receive Rabbi Buchwald's exciting and provocative weekly e-mail message, please send an e-mail to: [ezbuchwald@njop.org](mailto:ezbuchwald@njop.org)

To receive a juicy bit of Judaism, daily, from *Jewish Treats*, please send an e-mail to: [jewishtreats@njop.org](mailto:jewishtreats@njop.org)



*Bereshit: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Larry Greenman and Rivka Bornstein of NJOP. 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 NJOP programs, please contact us: 1345 Avenue of the Americas, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10105-0014, 646-871-4444, e-mail [info@njop.org](mailto:info@njop.org) or visit [www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org).*

*Readers: This is your newsletter and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.*

*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*