

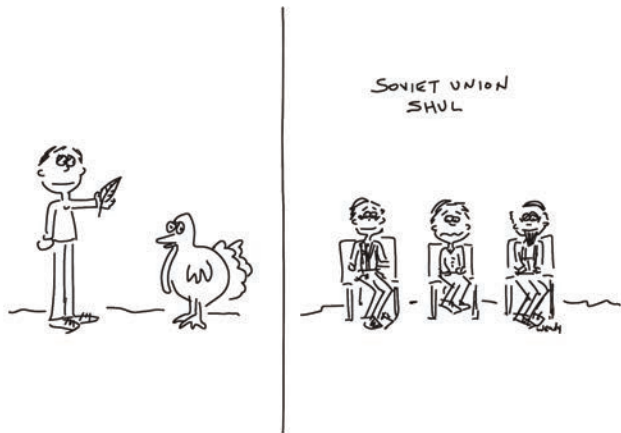
**BERESHITH**  
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית



"IN EACH GENERATION A PERSON MUST REGARD HIM/HERSELF AS IF HE/SHE HAD PERSONALLY COME OUT OF EGYPT"

## TWO PASSOVER REMINISCENCES

Bernie Kabak

The famous phrase from the Haggadah "how different is this night from all other nights?" applies not just to the night of the seder but to Passover in its entirety.

Passover differs from all the other Jewish holidays in so many ways. Special foods must be eaten. Certain other foods may not be eaten or even retained in one's possession. The central ritual, the seder, is performed at night. We truncate the *Hallel* prayer of praise to take account of the suffering endured by our oppressors. And we are bidden in the Haggadah to engage in psychological time-travel by regarding ourselves as if we had personally come out of Egypt.

Another example unique to Passover hadn't occurred to me until I came across it in Eliyahu Kitov's ever-illuminating Book of Our Heritage. Whereas the *mitzvot* of the other holidays are performed only on the holidays proper, one *mitzvah* that is part and parcel of (cont. on p. 2)

## PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION

Dr. Debbie Akerman

It seems that we live in an era that focuses on the search for perfection. From the time we wake in the morning we begin our quest for the perfect cup of coffee (ok, I admit that good coffee might be a necessity) and search for the perfect outfit to make us look great. Then we go off to the land of "perfection": school, where perfection is honed, and the workplace, where perfection equals success and the demand for more perfection. We search for the perfect recipes for snacks and suppers, and scour the internet for perfect rainy day projects.

And then comes Passover: Our determination for the perfect Passover begins early with women's blogs and Facebook pages full of cleaning and shopping tips, and it begins around Tu B'Shevat (the fifteenth day of Shevat, the new year for the trees that is celebrated in January/February)! What to clean, with what and when? When to shop, with whom and for whom? What to cook, how much, what is freezer-to-table, vegan, no meat, no chicken, no carb, no sugar, all taste... And the outfits. Perfect in every way – matching siblings, beribboned, bowed, tulle, starched, suited! All of it perfect, except the price, which is, of course, perfect for heart palpitations -- but hey, what's life without some excitement? (cont. on p. 3)

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FREE?

Rabbi Avrohom Czapnik

Freedom - a great American value. The Star-Spangled Banner concludes with the words "... the land of the free and the home of the brave."

During the upcoming holiday of Passover, we celebrate our freedom from Egypt – but, what does freedom really mean? When we think of freedom, we think of being able to do what we want - to be free of any external limits, restrictions or responsibilities. But let's look deeper.

My father, of blessed memory, was a Holocaust survivor who, toward the end of World War II, miraculously managed to escape the Nazis and was liberated by the Russians. Sometime after the war's end, he was walking down the street in his hometown of Cracow, Poland and stopped at an intersection. He suddenly realized that he was free to continue straight, go right or left, or even return to from where he had come. He didn't have to look over his shoulder to see if a Nazi was coming or a Pole was following him. He was free! He could go whichever way he wanted! Though he had been physically freed several weeks earlier, now he had reached a new milestone of freedom. He was free to make choices.

Similarly, When G-d took us out of Egypt, He wanted His people to be free - not only from the suffering, tyranny (cont. on p. 2)

TWO PASSOVER REMINISCENCES (cont. from p. 1)

...Passover -- the removal of leaven or *chametz* -- must be performed before the holiday has begun. The process of removal culminates with *bedikat chametz*, the search for *chametz*. On the night before Passover, (this year, two nights before Passover) after nightfall, a search for any residual *chametz* is conducted by the light of a candle. A feather is used to sweep out *chametz* that may have lodged in any cracks or crevices. For most of my years, the feather was just a workday tool of little interest. But the feather I used in 1974 made the search that year stick in my mind.

The story begins, actually, the year before. With the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, I went to Israel to work as a volunteer replacement for a kibbutz member called up for army duty. Earlier that year, my assigned kibbutz, Be'erot Yitzhak, had decided to enter into turkey farming. With the first shipment of hatchlings about to arrive from Holland, the volunteers were immediately put to work constructing and equipping two turkey runs, each the length of a football field. Notwithstanding our inexperience and lack of skill, we managed to finish the job on time. Good thing, too, because now we volunteers were put in charge of tending to thousands of fowl of the genus *Meleagris*. Happily for me, my turkeys (I now took a proprietary interest in them) were prolific shedders of feathers. So, come Passover, it was one of these feathers, from a bird I had known from its infancy, that I picked off the floor of the turkey run to use in that memorable search for *chametz* in 1974. It was not your father's *bedikat chametz* (unless your father was one of those 20th century Jewish chicken farmers around Vineland, NJ).

Passover 1977. I am in the Soviet Union. I've gone there to spend the holiday with "refuseniks," Soviet Jews who have been refused permission by the government to emigrate to Israel. Now pariahs, their lives have been upended. They are unemployable, and in countless other ways are unable to go about their daily lives without constant surveillance and harassment. My traveling companion and I are there to offer the refuseniks moral and material support and to bring back with us information about the Jewish condition in the land of the Soviets.

Not all our contacts are with refuseniks, clandestine teachers of Hebrew, or other Jewish activists. In the synagogues we meet everyday Jews who strive to maintain however much of the traditions of their forebears the religion-hostile regime will tolerate. In Kyiv, a synagogue official places us in special seats purportedly reserved for "honored guests," but which in reality are intended to keep us from mingling with the locals. When I leave my seat to exchange brief words with members of the congregation, the synagogue official, who is, of course, a spy for the KGB, becomes agitated and escorts me back to my seat. Later, though, he comes over and, in a whispered apology, says to me, "understand that you will go home, but we must stay here." My estimate of him shifts from his being a suffocating

informer to being an aerating current keeping the Jewish flame, reduced to a flicker, from dying out altogether.

That synagogue official was right about Jews being compelled to stay in the Soviet Union. But his perspective held true only for a short while. Little more than a decade later, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the gates of freedom sprang wide open for Jews by the millions to emigrate to Israel, the U.S. and other free lands. These Jews did not need the Haggadah's directive to see themselves as if they had personally come out of Egypt -- a feat of imagination; for them the escape from bondage was reality.

*Bernard Kabak joined Lincoln Square Synagogue circa 1970, but met Ephraim Buchwald (not yet a rabbi) a decade earlier. From the start, he believed L.S.S.'s welcoming attitude toward all Jews was its greatest strength, and still does. He wishes everyone a chag same'ach v'kasher, a happy and kosher Passover.*

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FREE? (cont. from p. 1)



"WHAT IS FREEDOM?"

...and slavery of the Egyptians, but also to be free to choose G-d!

As G-d told Moses, "Tell Pharaoh, 'Let My people go so that they shall serve Me'" (Exodus 7:26). It wasn't just freedom for freedom's sake, it was much more.

A woman I know had an excellent job opportunity in another country, but turned it down only because she was in the middle of the conversion process to become a Jew. She took it so seriously that she did not want to stop - even though she would lose the excellent job opportunity.

A man I know, who is an executive for an entertainment company, was in the midst of negotiating a major deal on a Friday afternoon and was offered a bonus of tens of thousands of dollars by his boss to finish the negotiations that day. This would mean that he would desecrate that Shabbat. He unequivocally refused! Shabbat came first!

These are people who have real freedom. They chose the holy "high road," rather than what was easier or more rewarding in the short term. However, choosing G-d is not that simple. On the one hand, our sages teach us "There is no freer person than one involved in Torah study and the performance of *mitzvot*." (*Ethics of our Fathers* 6:2). On the other hand, there are so many Torah

(cont. on p. 4)

## PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION (cont. from p. 1)

In all of my years of making Passover I have been guilty of all of the above. While snow lay thick on the trees and the days were still short and cold, I organized, scrubbed and cleaned (toothpicks are really marvelous little cleaners) with unbelievable zest and perseverance. I admit, and I am not certain if I say this with pride or shame, that one year I scrubbed off all of the indicators on the stove --you know high, low medium -- with a lethal mix of soft scrub and ammonia. Then I was incredulous that anyone was upset. "Gosh, you can SEE how high the flame is. You don't need a KNOB to tell you that! Do you think your grandmother had little indicators that told her how high or low to cook the chicken soup or farfel? Sheesh." I felt very religious, very holy, as I scrubbed and cleaned tubfuls of toys and poked toothpicks into every crevice. I looked proudly at my hands at the end of a GOOD day's work, skin puckered and the smell of Easy Off wafting past as I drifted off to sleep. (It was probably chemically induced -- but I wasn't a therapist specializing in addiction at that time.)

Finally, the magical night of the seder. The house shone. The books were all in order. The playroom was pristine. There were fresh linens on all the beds and the children were scrubbed and dressed in their holiday finery. Recalling from my youth, when a plastic tablecloth was unheard of, I always held my breath until the first cup of magenta wine spilled on the blinding snow white tablecloth. To my mother's credit, she made the same joke year after year. "Good, now I can relax."

Back to our seder, where things happen to make it clear that perfection isn't always possible. Potatoes --shoot, did I forget to make those? Quick, boil the water and slice the potatoes small so that they will cook on time! Or one year, the shank bone -- I thought for sure I had ordered it from the butcher. Oh no, that must have been the moment that the baby threw up and the toddler had to go to the bathroom. No shank bone. Is Passover ruined? Am I a bad Jew? A sinner? A bad member of the exalted tribe?

Blessedly, the years continue to pass, and, with time, I hope I have gained more wisdom and learned to appreciate imperfection. Let's look at this wonderful holiday of Passover

and what it really means.

We, the Chosen People, left Egypt on a moment's whim -- without even enough time to bake loaves of bread, the staple of life. Instead we had flat, misshapen, big, clumsy crackers that did not even rise. We ran with only what we could handle and proceeded on a forty year journey until we reached our destination. There was no instant perfection, no immediate panacea, just trials, tribulations, tears, retributions, forgiveness and slow progress. Even after the open miracles of the ten

plagues, the nation of Israel was still traumatized and questioned their faith and even questioned G-d.

Perfection for Passover? Far from it. Instead, the exodus from Egypt, which is something that we are commanded to remember every day and which we mention twice daily in our prayers, was a journey of the most fundamental type. A literal journey across the desert and the figurative journey of our lives, which do not --nor should not -- proceed with perfection and the quest for it.

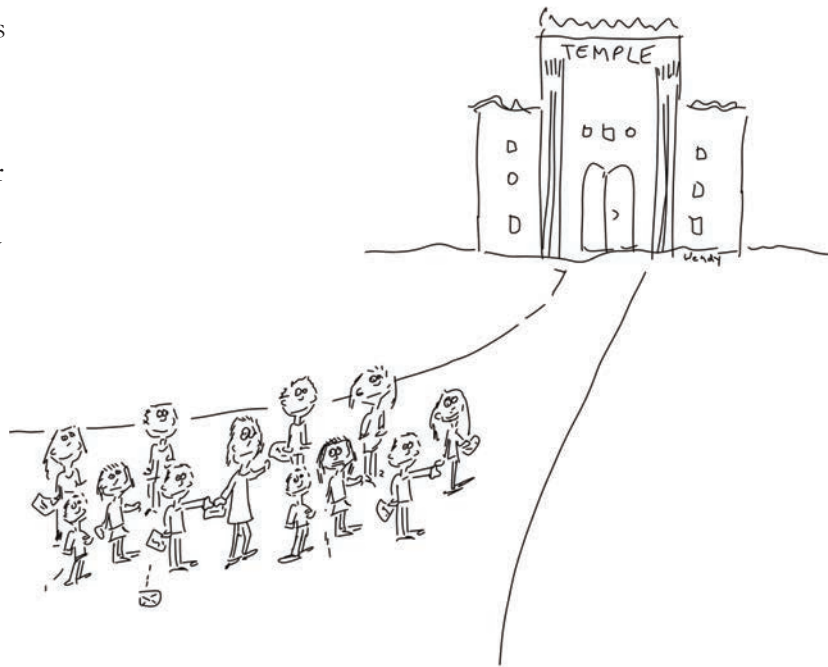
This Passover, let us focus on the beauty of the process -- the process of getting ready and the memories that we can create with this time. Let us focus on the proceedings of

the holiday itself, with its unique foods, tastes, textures, songs and customs. Lean into the pillows and don't fret if they don't match. Cook more simply and allow little and big hands a chance at culinary creativity. Let us focus on the process that our children are engaged in at this moment -- walking, talking, and learning to read, to ride a bike, to question, to ponder the world and their place in it. Let us act like the Jews of the Holy Temple -- the Temple that did not have stairs to the altar but rather a ramp; for on a ramp one must always go up, for staying stationary will cause one to fall back. Progress, not perfection -- the hallmark of an individual -- and of our nation.

The article originally appeared in the April 2015 edition of Bereshith.

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"PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION"





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### DATED MATERIAL

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FREE? (cont. from p. 2)  
 ...requirements and restrictions! (e.g. keeping kosher, honesty in business, observing the holidays, refraining from speaking ill of others). The list goes on and on, and can be daunting.

Why is this called freedom? It seems restrictive and confining, rather than liberating and empowering. The answer lies in the words of author and Nobel Prize winner in Literature (1913), Rabindranath Tagore. He said, "I have on my table a violin string. It is free to move in any direction I like. If I twist one end, it responds; it is free. But it is not free to sing. So, I take it and fix it in my violin. I bind it and when it is bound, it is free for the first time to sing."

Torah-true Judaism binds us to be able to play G-d's music in this world and to fulfill our mission on Earth. The clarity, vision and purpose that the Torah gives us, allows us to be free to make real choices, un intimidated by societal norms and pressures.

In Hebrew, the word for Egypt is *Mitzrayim*. That is related to the word in Hebrew for "restrained." Just as our forefathers were restrained in Egypt before they were freed, we need to ask ourselves what is restraining us from being the best we can be?

Victor Frankel (psychologist and author) said, "Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for." What then is holding us back from living a life of meaning with a closer relationship with G-d and those around us?

Is it inertia? Is it fear of change? Is it a fear of what others would say? Is it the challenge of going against the tide?

As Victor Frankel also said, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: The last of human freedom. To choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way." He added "A human being is a deciding being."

This Passover, is an opportunity to exercise our true freedom. Each of us can decide to make choices, to commit ourselves to devote more time to Torah study, to ensure more Jewish education for our children and to perform more acts of lovingkindness.

This Passover, may we strive to be truly free to become our holiest best! Have a very Happy Passover!

*Rabbi Avrohom Czapnik (pronounced Chapnik) is the Director of the Jewish Learning Exchange in Los Angeles. He teaches free classes on Zoom and in person. He can be reached at [rabbi@jlela.com](mailto:rabbi@jlela.com).*

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