

# BERESHITH

## "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

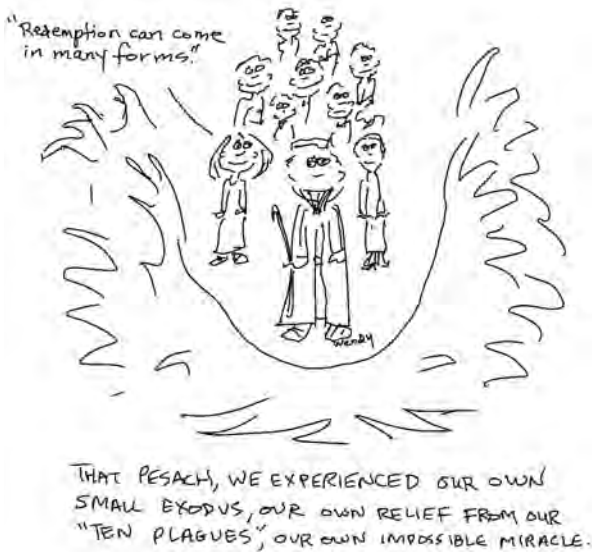
## OUR OWN PASSOVER MIRACLE

Jessica Cavanagh-Melhado

Passover is a time when we think about babies and miracles. Imagine all the pieces that had to come together for baby Moses to be born, let alone to survive in Egypt at a time when all male Israelite babies were supposed to be killed at birth!

All babies are miracles, but some feel a little more so than others. The truly miraculous, at least emotionally, are those babies who "took their time" while their parents waited and prayed. Our struggle through infertility made children seem like an impossible miracle. Impossible miracles, however, is one of the major themes of Passover.

Exactly three years ago, just a few hours before the first Seder, I took a pregnancy test. I took it just to check, knowing that there would be four cups of wine later in the evening, but without any real expectation that it could be positive. By then, it had been two very long years since my husband and I had decided, also during Pesach, to begin our family. At the beginning, we had been hopeful, but each month became harder. With the passing of more time, I started researching infertility and the options available through our insurance. *(cont. on p. 2)*



## PASSOVER POSSIBILITIES

Rabbi Dovid Grant

The incredible opportunity to work as an Aish HaTorah Campus Rabbi at one of the world's biggest party schools (Penn State) comes with its own unique spiritual challenges. Three hours away from the nearest major Jewish community, my wife and I are now responsible for assisting the approximately 5,000 Jewish college students on campus for Passover. It is one of Aish Penn State's biggest tests, from both a practical *and* a spiritual perspective. This is particularly true in a year like this, when both seders take place during the school week, toward the end of the semester, as finals loom in the not-too-distant future. Most students won't be going home for the holiday and will instead remain on campus.

These are remarkable and pivotal times for the Jewish people, demographically, socially and politically in America, Israel and elsewhere. It is projected that this upcoming year will see the majority of the world's estimated 14 million Jews residing in Israel, for the first time since *(cont. on p. 3)*

## TRADITION BOUND

Rochel Goldner

I grew up with two parents, four siblings, a handful of cousins, and barely any family traditions. When asked to describe the way one performs basic tenets of Judaism using only one word, I believe a common choice would be what Tevye the Milkman said: 'Tradition.' When you think about it, most of the daily actions of an observant Jew are based on the actions that other Jews have been doing for millennia before us. There are different reasons for each daily ritual and those traditions that surround it. Our actions, however, aren't those of a single person, but rather they are linked to the millions of Jews who came before us.

I grew up in a *Baal Teshuva* home, so I know the impact of traditions and the impact of the lack of tradition. There were many customs that my parents simply didn't have, as their own legacy had been somewhat compromised due to the lapse in faith of the generations before them. Therefore, their rabbi guided them as to what was *(cont. on p. 2)*

**PASSOVER MIRACLE (cont. from p. 1)...**

Infertility felt like a punishment, like the ten plagues, but we were not exempt as Jews had been in Egypt. Every few months we would realize another kind of ache to add to our already longing souls. Each pregnancy announcement from friends elicited a dual reaction – that of joy for the friend and a deep sense of sadness and failure for ourselves. Every holiday was a reminder of what we had been hoping for. Two years in, babies who had been born when we started trying were becoming big siblings.

Where was God's hand in this process? Surely, it wasn't in our feelings of being plagued! I knew I had to find the positive in order to begin to feel like I could possibly understand. I found it in quiet ways. In my Torah study, I found that, generally, infertility is not a punishment from God, but rather something from which God heals women. A friend, knowing our situation, gave me the text of a prayer of thanksgiving for hard times. It helped me put into words the deep sadness I felt while also maintaining the faith that things would work out in some way, even if, perhaps, not the way I had planned or hoped.

Three years ago, on the eve of Pesach, I got my very first positive pregnancy test. We had been seeing doctors, done lifestyle changes, but this was the first time I had ever seen those two pink lines. The shock was palpable. I had no elaborate plan for telling my husband, and in any case we were rushing to get ready to go to friends for the Seder. No matter though - my husband can still describe in detail the moment he found out. Indeed, going directly to shul for services after finding out was profoundly moving. Never have either of us prayed with such gratefulness. The Seder, though enjoyable, was less deep, as some of our focus was on discreetly switching my wine with grape juice in an intimate group of friends and family. We were both thrilled and a little terrified. There is so much unknown over nine months. However, that Pesach, we experienced our own small exodus, our own relief from our "Ten Plagues," our own miracle. It brought so much meaning to all the special prayers of Pesach, the Seder and even our time with friends and family, who would not be let in on our secret for several months. This was all made sweeter by the healthy birth of our daughter on the eve of Chanukah that year.

I first told this story at the naming ceremony we did for her. It was useful for us to share this part of our lives with our community, and, as we had hoped, helpful for those who heard it. One couple, friends of ours for years, told us afterward that they, too, were struggling. They, too, were glad to know of our struggle, and they asked if we could talk more later? We were able to give them hope, and a little solace, in a deepened friendship. Their hopes were answered, too, with the blessing of a baby boy a little less than a year later.

As Pesach comes again, I am reminded of that moment. She is now a beautiful toddler, and, thank God, has a little sister who is now almost six months old. We have left much of that time behind us – the fear, the uncertainty. Some of it remains with us, as all things in life change us. But I share this to give hope. Pesach is a time of impossible miracles, and my wish is that they may all be fulfilled, speedily in our days. *Chag Samayach.*

*Jessica Cavanagh-Melhado is the Program Coordinator and Rebbetzin of Congregation Kahal Joseph in Los Angeles, California. Born in South Africa, and having lived in Canada, she spent most of her childhood in a small town in the midwest where she was active in the Reform synagogue in town. She met her husband while becoming a Baalat Teshuva in college, and after spending time in Chicago and New York City, they moved to Los Angeles in 2015.*



**TRADITION BOUND (cont. from p. 1)...** the best path to take for some traditional rituals; for others, he let them choose their own.

There are those who believe that every tradition a family may have is a must do, because the family has been doing it for generations and therefore it is now equivalent to an ordained law. This is not always true. It depends on what the custom actually is. For example, for Passover, most families have certain tunes that they use to sing the special songs of the seder and specific foods that are served at every meal, if only because that was what their great-grandmother had back in Europe.

I grew up with none of that. I grew up being seen but not heard, as all the girls in my class would chatter happily about their special family customs, bragging about how their songs came from their great-grandfather's zaide back in the "Old Country," boasting about how they still make the same gefilte fish recipe that their Bubby had growing up in the shtetle, and describing the yearly routines of their beloved relatives. My parents didn't have any of the previously mentioned familial customs. Growing up, they had barely understood what Passover even represented.

Most people, if asked to describe Passover in one word, would choose the word 'freedom,' since the holiday commemorates the fact that we were freed from our horrible Egyptian slavery. For me, however, this holiday meant anything but freedom. I felt trapped, trapped by the inability to present even one family custom that linked my parents to their previous generations. Among my high school friends, I longed to mention just one item on the long list of seder traditions that would prove that I too was part of the club. Freedom, ha! Passover was (cont. on p. 4)

**PASSOVER POSSIBILITIES (cont. from p. 1)...** Solomon's Temple stood in Jerusalem, 2,500 years ago.

At this interesting time of change in the Jewish world, how relevant is Passover 5777 in providing a narrative of Jewish identity to these college-aged millennials? So, my Four Questions for Passover this year are:

- 1) Why do I feel sad that many students won't be going home to their families for seder night this year?
- 2) Why is Passover night different from all other nights, festivals and Shabbats of the school year? If most of the students on campus are disinterested, non-practicing Jews during the rest of the year, why should I want Passover to be any different?
- 3) Why, if we have developed Aish Penn State into a true home away from home for our students, shouldn't this opportunity to welcome so many new students into my home and my community excite me rather than awe me?
- 4) Why do students choose to Jewishly identify for Passover by utilizing the Kosher for Passover meal plan that we run for PSU, but not at other times of the year?

I believe that my four questions, and my general sense of unease this year, are actually a reflection of a much larger question that I believe most students, most Jews in general, may be asking themselves: How can I - or do I - identify as a Jew at this point in history? Put another way: when asked about the relevance of Judaism, students will question why they need religious rituals, arcane mitzvahs like eating matzah, and general restrictions in their perpetually connected and fast-paced lives. And yet, it seems that when opportunities are presented, many students have a deep-seated Jewish conscience that kicks in, and they grab opportunities to "do something Jewish" - as long as it's easy and familiar.

Not long ago, Aish HaTorah's Rabbinical Program cited the statistics that Passover is the most widely observed Jewish holiday, with 90% of Jews participating in some form of a seder. Yet, my own anecdotal evidence calls this statistic into question. I constantly hear stories of Jewish students who grew up in "nice Jewish homes" who aren't participating in a Passover seder. On campus, throughout the year, students are pulled in many directions by their friends, professors, fraternity and sorority obligations and their own internal and social desires. However, even those students who I would have assumed would be committed to observing at least some parts of Passover, often tell me that they are not, simply because "they've already got plans on those nights." This disconnect is where my sadness starts to creep in.

Passover is different from all other nights of the year because it represents the narrative of our people. The picture of our people in the present, however, remains complex,

especially when looked at through the lens of college campus outreach. While the statistics state that most Jewish students want to celebrate Passover, to at least sit at a seder and eat some matzah, unless the opportunity is right in front of them and as easy to grab as their smartphone, it's unlikely that they'll be autonomous enough to go against the prevailing social tides and go to the Passover seder that conflicts with their "Greek" social life.

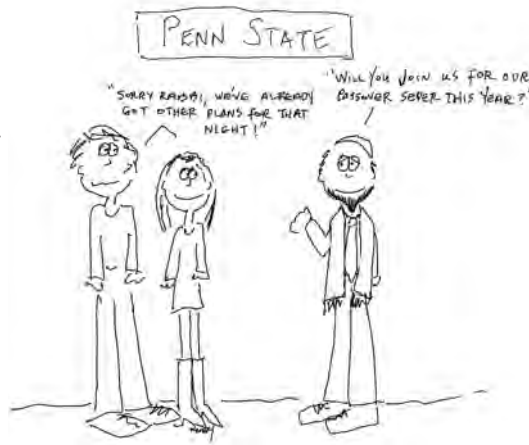
But we all know that with Passover comes the unique spiritual energy of freedom, and this also applies to college students. We see that each year more and

more students "break free" from whatever holds them back during the rest of the year, and come out of the woodwork to participate in our on-campus seder, eat at our Kosher-for-Passover dining option, and come into our home. (The administration at Penn State has also noticed this phenomenon and will be opening a year-round kosher dining commons on campus in the coming months.)

Students sometimes consider the Passover story irrelevant, so I'd like to share an idea showing its importance. The oldest complete Haggadah, dating from about 900 CE, which was discovered in the Cairo Geniza, is now stored in the University of Pennsylvania's library and is striking in its sameness to the modern Haggadah. Students, who are usually 18-22 years old, typically have 70-80 year old bubbies and zedies who are doing seders at home. This equates to a 60-year generational gap. Imagine, over the last 2,500 years of Jewish diaspora, a Haggadah of the same general structure as the famous "Maxwell House Haggadah" has been read. Indeed, dating the "Penn Haggadah" to the last time that the majority of Jews lived in Israel and celebrated the Passover feast in the Temple was just twenty or so '60 year grandparent/grandchild generational chains.'

If thought about in 'generational-chain' terms, it really wasn't that long ago that we were last there either. For us to 'be real' when we say 'Next year in Jerusalem' at the end of Passover night this year, we should try to find a way to share our national story of miraculous survival. When we provide a chain of transmission with whomever we interact - most importantly to our next generation of young minds - only then may we feel confident that we did our maximum effort in assuring a bright future for the beautiful chain of Jewish life.

*Rabbi David Grant is the Moore Scholar and Director of Aish Penn State, where he lives with his wife Esther and their two daughters. After completing a degree in Business Economics and a Law Degree, David studied at Aish HaTorah and Mir yeshivas in Jerusalem. Eight years later he came to Penn State. In addition to his Rabbinic Studies, David took a Masters of Psychology and began teaching classes and designing outreach programs for Aish Jerusalem.*





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**DATED MATERIAL**

*TRADITION BOUND (cont. from p. 2)*... anything but freeing for me. I waited for other girls to laugh at me or make scornful remarks at our lack of tradition.

As I grew older and began to truly learn about Passover and the full meaning of the Haggadah, I began to feel ashamed of my feelings. Here I was, presented with such an amazing opportunity year after year, only to have thrown it away based on some silly schoolyard conversations and my misplaced fear of being singled out. On an annual basis, I had been presented with the opportunity to renew myself, to



come toward G-d afresh, yet all I had been thinking about, for almost a decade, was the fact I didn't have songs to sing or family recipes to share. The reality was that I did, but I just hadn't realized it. I only saw specific family customs as special, and in doing so I had overlooked the fact that there were so many special Passover customs that made the holiday so different from the rest of the year, so unique.

Slowly, with time, I have begun to understand what Passover truly means and the opportunity that it represents. For so many years I had been bound by my inner-torment over our lack of family traditions, but in letting go of that misconception, I was finally free. I was free to realize that Passover wasn't about those traditions, free to understand that Passover was deeper than that. Passover meant being free to serve God, to give to Him without anything holding us back. My lack of understanding of just how special this holiday truly was had held me in chains. Once I saw how beautiful Passover was, what it truly represented, all those chains melted away and I was free.

*Born and raised in Passaic, NJ, Rochel Goldner (nee Gershonowitz) was always surrounded by a loving and religious community. She notes the strength and courage it must have taken for her parents, both from small towns in PA, to relocate to an insular Orthodox community. They did this so their family could easily live their lives as religious Jews.*

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**בראשית**

*Beresith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt 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: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 646-871-4444, e-mail [info@njop.org](mailto:info@njop.org) or visit [www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org).*

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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*