

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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QUESTIONING THE STORY FOR CHOICE

Rabbi YD Schwartz

Many of us remember asking the "Four Questions" in our squeaky voices before we grew to hear others asking the same questions. And, every year on Passover, my first thought is about my grandmothers' matzah balls - an iconic tradition on a holiday inundated with tradition. The deeper truth of Passover, however, is that while every Jewish holiday has great potential to inspire change, the way that the Jewish people have adopted Passover has it poised in a unique position to make, perhaps, the greatest lasting impact on ourselves and on the next generation.

Let's start with the whole purpose of the Passover seder: the mitzvah of *Sippur Yetziyat Mitzrayim*. Classically, we translate this as the telling of the story of the exodus from Egypt, relating how the Israelites went from bondage to freedom and the miracles that were done on behalf of the ancient Israelites. However, if we take a more critical look at the term *Sippur Yetziyat Mitzrayim*, a more accurate (and also confusing) translation is "the story of Egypt's exit." Take a pause and think about that. What does that mean? What story is that? It's a slight paradigm shift from the way we usually think about the exodus. All of the miracles (cont. on p. 2)



DISCOVERING THE WONDERS OF PASSOVER

Sam Heiblim

When I was growing up, Passover was one of my least favorite holidays. Everything I loved to eat was forbidden during the holiday. When I would see my parents buying the Kosher-for-Passover food, I would begin to mentally prepare myself for the days ahead without moist cake or pasta. During the holiday itself, I would just count the days until I could eat my favorite foods again, and I would dream about all those delicious foods.

Food wasn't the only part of the holiday that I dreaded. I didn't really like the seder, either. To me it was just a long wait before dinner. I would spend the entire seder counting the pages that remained before I could eat. I spent so much time counting pages that I never really got much out of the seder itself. Other than the meal, the only part of the seder that caught my attention was searching for the *afikoman*. I was always amazed at how the *afikoman* vanished in the middle of the seder. My siblings, extended (cont. on p. 2)

HOW IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER?

Rachel Bell

When I was young, my family shared Passover with the Goldman family. Every year, we made the first seder at the Goldman house and the second one at our house. We went around the table reading the Haggadah paragraph by paragraph. Regardless of the seating arrangement, the paragraph about Rabbi Yossie (written in the *Maxwell House Haggadah* as Rabbi Jose) was always given to my brother Gary. He was so cute when he used the Spanish pronunciation, José, instead of the Hebrew pronunciation.

As the baby of the family, I always loved when it was my turn to read out loud. The *sedarim* were the only time of year when everyone got to participate equally. It made me feel part of something important and connected to something bigger than just my own life. Our seder always ended halfway through the Haggadah. After dessert, most of us schmoozed and laughed among (cont. on p. 3)

DISCOVERING THE WONDERS (cont. from p. 1)... relatives and I would run around the entire house searching for the *afikoman* after eating a huge seder feast. The only rule was that no furniture could be moved to find the *afikoman*, otherwise we would have torn the house apart. While I usually failed to find the *afikoman* before someone else, those few times when I found the *afikoman* first are still special memories for me.

It wasn't until college, when I hesitantly accepted a friend's invitation to his family's seder, that I saw the beauty of the Passover holiday. The first thing that I noticed was how excited his family was. They all saw it as an incredibly fun event, even the kids. I couldn't understand how any child could look forward to a seder with such excitement, but I soon found out why. The seder that their family conducted was entirely interactive. The seders that I experienced growing up were people just reading the Hagaddah. There wasn't any discussion. My friend's family's seder was very much like a conversation and game show. The kids were constantly asked questions, and they enjoyed it. Each child tried to be the first to answer the question. They not only got to impress their parents with their knowledge, but the first person to answer correctly received candy. This reinforced the children's desire to learn as much as possible, so that, in the future, they could quickly answer questions before any of their siblings.

Even eating at this seder was a learning experience! I realized that I had never eaten enough of any of the seder table foods. Who knew that there were minimum requirements for each type of food? And, I never tasted hand-made *shmura* matzah before that seder, or even heard of it. This was the matzah that was missing from my seders growing up. I'll always remember the expression on my friend's face while he ate that *shmura* matzah. It was as if he were eating a delicious dessert-like cake, chocolate, or ice cream. He ate the *shmura* matzah slowly, savoring every single bite as if his body and soul were craving it and couldn't get enough of it. Since that night, I've found myself doing this every year.

I was amazed that, in just a single night, I discovered so much about the holiday that I had never understood during my childhood seders. One of the important things I learned that night was that the holiday is not just a bland story that has to be read again and again each year. Passover is an experience. It is interactive, educational, spiritual, and fun. The seder can lead to fascinating side discussions and debates, and everyone attending the seder should welcome this. After all, while the holiday is about teaching the next generation about what happened to us all in Egypt, it is also an opportunity for reteaching it to ourselves. There is a huge difference between the type of seder that I grew up with and the new understanding I had as to what a seder could be. After this night my perspective about the holiday would never be the same.

Now, every year, I look forward to the wonderful Passover holiday. I invite my entire family to my home and try to share with them the beauty this holiday contains. I wish you all a beautiful holiday and hope that you always learn something new.

Sam Heiblim grew up as a Reform Jew in NJ. While in college, he learned more about Judaism and slowly became observant. Currently, he is enjoying teaching his children all that he has learned.



QUESTIONING THE STORY (cont. from p. 1)...in all of their glory depict not only Jewish salvation, but also Egyptian destruction. The story we tell could be told from a different vantage point, from a place of thinking about the Egyptians and the fact that Egypt did not survive. But we focus on the idea that we were slaves and that G-d took one nation from within another nation.

Let's add an additional question: If the point is telling a story, what's with all the questions? We, as Jews, are told to be inquisitive, particularly at the seder. The format of the seder and some of the different practices that we do "are in order to encourage the children to ask," which really applies to the adults as well - each on our own level.

The seder night is meant to be a night of generating creative and interesting questions. But why do we emphasize this character trait of inquisitiveness particularly during this time of year, and particularly on the seder night?

The two agendas of telling and questioning seem to be at odds with each other. On the one hand, we are to retell a story with focus and drama, while on the other we are to engage ourselves to the point of intellectual side-points and queries.

Before we try to reconcile these two ideas, let's first understand the overall theme of Passover.

The Jewish calendar is a cyclical one, and at every point on the path we are meant to engage with the spiritual content and motif of that time in order to better appreciate the particular spiritual potential that lies within. Passover is the time when we made the choice to become a nation. But not any nation; a nation tasked as the (cont. on p. 3)

QUESTIONING THE STORY (cont. from p. 2)... Public Relations department of "G-d, Inc." This was not a choice like choosing between chocolate and vanilla, it was more akin to choosing between two possible life-paths. We look back on it only with our post-decision perspective, but the Torah tells us that at the time it was a difficult choice for the Jews to make, even to the point that the Midrash tells us that 80% of the Jewish people didn't want to leave Egypt and were abandoned there during the plague of darkness.

The story we tell, allows us to imagine the events as if we were there, and, in so doing, we try to create the conditions for a true free-will choice. And what better way to dive into a story than by asking questions, making it a quest of the mind, and striving to make the experience as real as we can. These questions facilitate our ability to enter the story. Though the choice has already been made for most of us, as we are already part of the Jewish people, the goal is still at the core of what it means to be a Jew: Choose! Choose to engage in positivity, instead of negativity. Choose to allow the Torah and mitzvot to be the guiding force in our lives, instead of viewing them as either a part of our path or obstacles to avoid. Choose to develop a relationship with G-d, instead of ignoring the messages that the Infinite is constantly sending us.

Developing our free-will muscles is not as simple as listening to a story. It comes from experiences. Think about the most defining events in life. Are any of them rooted in a solely intellectual endeavor to probe the depths of understanding? Probably not. Not that those times don't provoke deep introspection, but they usually surround a powerful event, whether a painful or a joyful one. So too, every year we are given an opportunity to have a powerful experience that can foster our free-will choices. However, instead of it occurring to us, as much of our life does, we get to create it.

The world in which we live today is one that avoids real choice, and, if presented with choice, tends toward the option that leads one away from spirituality. Telling the story of Egypt's exit and connecting it to a sense of our own exodus experiences can transform Passover from a holiday of food into a formative experience for all present. It becomes a powerful message that G-d is looking out for the Jewish people's best interest, even in the most troubling of times.

This twofold experience builds within us a sense of gratitude and privilege that we have the good fortune to be Jews, and strive toward perfection.

Tell your family and friends what G-d did to the Egyptians, tell them how we were slaves and were freed, and tell them how we received the Torah and settled Israel, transforming it into a holy Jewish homeland. Let them get swept away by the ultimate story, giving them the power to choose.

Rabbi YD Schwartz is a Torah educator, currently working at the Denver Academy of Torah as a 7-12th Judaics teacher. Before that he was a campus Rabbi at both Boston University working with the OU and at University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana working for Olami. He received Semicha from Rabbi Zalman Nechamiah Goldberg. With his wife, Chava, they are raising their two wonderful children.

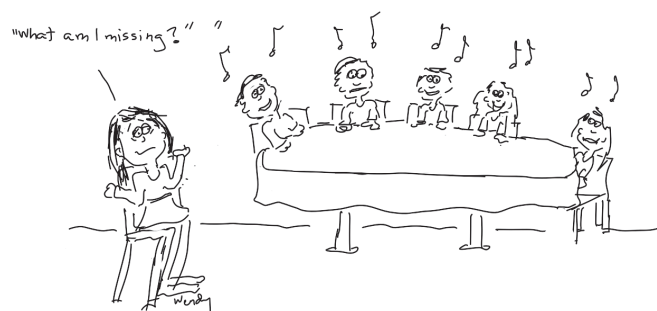
HOW IS THIS NIGHT (cont. from p. 1)... ourselves, while the Goldman's adult children, all of whom had attended Hillel Day School, sang quietly at one end of the table, finishing the seder rituals without us. Even though I listened to the conversation and played with my brothers, I always felt drawn to the quiet singing and disappointed that our seder was over.

When I was a teenager, my family suddenly changed our tradition. While we still did one seder at home with guests and one seder out, we experimented with different families and different styles. Whereas the Goldmans had been traditional, using a *Maxwell House Haggadah*, the Resnicks were...more creative. They used a six page photocopied Haggadah that consisted of a description of the seder plate, the Four Questions, and the four cups of wine. To be quite honest, my family felt a little cheated that year, but none of us could explain why.

A few years later, I went to Israel on a program called *Livnot U'Lehibanot* (To Build and To Be Built), which focussed on getting young Jews more involved with their Judaism and Israel. During the weeks leading up to Passover, the *Livnot* participants studied the Haggadah and the exodus story in preparation for the seder. We learned that Moses led the Jews out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, and that every Jewish soul -- past, present and future -- was there to accept the Torah. We also learned that the proper mindset at a seder is to imagine oneself as actually leaving Egypt and the bonds of slavery.

That seder night in Jerusalem was wonderful. Everyone at the table was deeply committed to fully experiencing the event: the children put on a play about leaving Egypt, and all the participants interrupted the seder numerous times to ask questions and discuss the importance of the night. There were also new and fun traditions. For example, each place was set with its own *afikoman* (the hidden matzah). People swiped each others *afikoman* and refused to return them without a promise of some sort. I snagged my *madricha's* (group leader) *afikoman* and wouldn't give it back until she promised to take me off mopping duty.

When I came back to the States, I slowly became part of the traditional community. One of the great things about becoming part of this community (cont. on p. 4)





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HOW IS THIS NIGHT (cont. from p. 3)... is getting to see the vast variety of family traditions. Since my *Livnot* days, I have joined many different families for *sedarim*. Without question, the *sedarim* I like the most are the ones that encourage everyone's participation. Among those, my favorite *sedarim* are the ones that last until the wee hours of the morning, the ones where each participant has a different Haggadah with different commentary and stories. When each participant has different comments, questions and stories to share, the seder is richer, fuller and engenders in me a greater sense of connection to every other Jewish soul.

When I was at *Livnot*, I learned that when Moses led the Jews out of Egypt, he led them from forced slavery to Pharaoh to voluntary servitude to G-d, from a life based on human whims to a life based on the will of G-d. Moses led the Jews to Mount Sinai so that they could receive the Torah and become *ovdei Hashem*, servants of G-d. That is why, on the second night of Passover, the night after the first seder, we begin to count the 49 days to Shavuot (the day we celebrate the giving of the Torah). For me, the connection to Torah and the appreciation for the beauty of G-d's gift stems from my recognition of my place within the Jewish nation. That is why Passover makes me feel a profound sense of my link to the Jewish people, why it seems to inspire an extra spark within my soul. For me, the connection I feel to the

act of receiving the Torah stems from the connection I make on the seder night. Was I able to successfully "re-live" the exodus at the seder, to really feel as if I was being led out of servitude? If I was successful, only then am I truly able to recognize the beauty of G-d's Torah as a gift to His people.

In a way, the connection to the past and the future that springs from the seder experience fuels my entire year. On Pesach, we celebrate G-d's redemption of the Jewish people as a nation, and on Shavuot we celebrate His gift of the Torah. In the fall, on Sukkot, we celebrate G-d's caring for His people in the wilderness, and on Simchat Torah we celebrate the Torah once again. What is the next Biblical festival after Simchat Torah? Pesach again, and the cycle continues. What do all of these holidays have in common? They are communal celebrations of our nationhood. More than that, they are the glue that brings the Jewish people together.

With the knowledge that I have gained thus far, I now recognize that the sense of belonging that I felt as a child during my first seder experiences was only a shadow of the connection and belonging that every Jew has to feel for one another. That is why I look forward to learning more traditions and experiencing many more *sedarim*, and feeling ever closer to G-d and to my fellow Jews.

This Article was originally published in Bereishith in April 2005. Rachel Bell currently resides in Passaic, NJ.

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