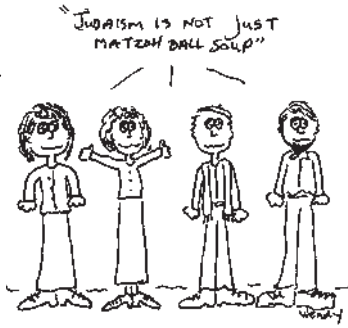


BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

PASSOVER THROUGH THE GENERATIONS

Dr. Jack Mensch

When I was growing up, my grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins used to come to our house on Passover for the seder. My grandfather, who grew up in Russia, had a traditional upbringing and spoke Yiddish and Hebrew. After gathering most of our large family to the table, my grandfather would attempt to recite the entire Haggadah, word-for-word in Hebrew, which proved to be an exercise of great frustration for him and for the entire family.

The children and most of the adults, who had limited religious backgrounds, had no idea what was happening. They soon began their own personal conversations and often wandered away from the table to distract themselves with different activities until it was time for the meal. Out of respect for my grandfather, those who remained would say the four questions together, sing *Dayeinu*, pour out the drops of wine during the announcement of the ten plagues, and eat hard-boiled eggs dipped in salt water. In this manner, we tried to maintain some connection to our Jewish roots.

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IF GRANDFATHER COULD ONLY SEE US NOW!

"We didn't realize then, how much grandfather's seder meant to us!"



WHY IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT THAN ALL OTHER NIGHTS?

Rabbi Naftali Hanfling

Passover is almost upon us and this question will soon be reverberating at seder tables across the globe. So why, indeed, is this holiday actually different?

Well, one reason is because Passover seders, along with Hannukah presents and Yom Kippur break-fast meals, are rapidly becoming the most commonly, and often the only, Jewish traditions celebrated by young American Jews.

As many secular Jews increasingly regard their Judaism as merely cultural or a collection of traditions, those holidays celebrated by the broader society that are rich in interesting cultural traditions may appear more attractive and play front-and-center to this group. In this regard, Passover wins the day because it serves "one big family" meal full of fun and unique rituals, including the four cups of wine, matzah, *marror*, *charoset* and, of course, the search for the *afikomen*. Contrast this to the holiday of Shavout, for example, and you will see why despite the tremendous

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MEMORIES OF PASSOVER

Dasha Rittenberg

It was 80 years ago, and, as a ten year old girl, I was filled with anticipation. After all, for a child, *Pesach* (Passover) is an amazing, happy holiday.

The day after Purim, the atmosphere in Bedzin, Poland (Bendin in Yiddish), already felt like *Erev Pesach*. Even at my young age, I distinctly remember a combination of fear, anticipation and pleasure all wrapped up into one. There was so much to do. There was that sense of fear that permeated our entire home of whether we'd be ready in time for *Pesach*. The sense of anticipation and the surprises that were to come: the new shoes, the beautiful new dress and a home sparkling with cleanliness. Then there was the pleasure of reciting the *Mah Nishtana* in Yiddish and awaiting the eighth day of *Pesach* when we could eat the delicious "wet matzahs," known as *Matzah Brei*.

Growing up in a family of Gerer Chassidim in Bedzin, in southwest Poland, also meant that you felt the energy

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PASSOVER THROUGH THE GENERATIONS (cont. from p. 1)

As the cousins grew older, the seders grew shorter, and fewer members of the family remained at the table until dinner was served. Eventually, I went away to school, and when my grandfather died, my father tried hard to maintain some of the rituals with the remaining family members. When I met my wife, we both decided to learn more about our Jewish roots together, in preparation for someday having a family of our own. We learned about Judaism through various groups and programs, including Rabbi Buchwald's Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue. Blessed to have children of our own, we have tried to pass on to them what we ourselves had learned. We started hosting our own family seders, which our parents also attended.

I must admit, that although I spent many hours preparing for these seders, I was a little more than insecure—not only about keeping the interest of our parents and hoping to win their approval, but wondering if, with my limited background, I had created an authentic seder. And, of course, with little children crying, fighting and running around the room, I wondered whether I was effectively teaching my children the things I was supposed to pass on to them. Would they grow up with the same traditions, knowledge and relationship with Hashem as the children of “frum-from-birth” (born religious) families? I think that as the children of *baalei teshuva* (religious returnees), they were also a little insecure about whether we were doing everything properly, like their friends. I did take solace in the fact that the few times that we shared seders with other religious families, our seder was similar, and realized that the Haggadah was the great equalizer, since everyone was working from the same script.

Baruch Hashem, our children have grown up to be wonderful adults. Some are even married now and have children of their own. The ultimate feeling of success as a Jewish parent, is witnessing your children raising their own children with the same beautiful Jewish traditions and life lessons that we and the larger traditional community have inculcated into them. It feels very much like a validation, that those, somewhat uncomfortable, insecure seders, even those going back to my grandfather, helped create a link in the chain of Torah and Jewish tradition going back to *Moshe Rabbeinu*, which ultimately is the purpose of a seder.

I once heard the principal at one of our local day schools say that he heard that the Yiddish word *einekel*, (meaning grandchild), comes from the Torah portion in which *Moshe Rabbeinu* comes upon a burning bush, that is described as *ainenu oochal*, burning, but not consumed. Seeing one's grandchildren being raised in a Torah home of one's children, is the ultimate validation, that no matter how insane the world around us is, that the successful transmission of our Torah from one generation to the next,

will continue to ensure the success and immortality of the Jewish people.

Dr. Jack Mensch is a physician in New York who, when he is not at work or in shul, enjoys spending time with his family.

MEMORIES OF PASSOVER (cont. from p. 1)

...and the focus on *Pesach* preparation everywhere you turned. It seemed like wherever one looked, everyone was preparing for *Pesach*, and it was true!

Everyone was involved in the preparations. The children had to collect the beets, the potatoes and the eggs. My father was a winemaker, so there were big glass jars and filters all around the house as the wine was made. My brothers would set up the table outside in the courtyard and remove all the *sefarim*, the Jewish religious books from the house, and *klap* them, hitting each one as they fanned the pages to remove any trace of *chametz* crumbs that might have found a resting place inside.

I remember my father and brothers leaving for the



matzah bakery and returning with the matzahs all wrapped up in clean white pillowcases. The night before *Pesach* began, we would check for *chametz*. I recall being punished for letting my father know in advance exactly where my mother had hidden the pieces of bread, so it would be easier for my father to find them as he held his candle, walking through the house during the search.

I can still see the fresh, live carp being brought into our home and placed in a bucket of water. The arrival of the chicken and meat had to be well coordinated since there was no refrigeration in which to store it for days before *Pesach*. Every one of the eggs had to be washed before they could be used. The kitchen was such an exciting place!

On the morning of *Erev Pesach*, we were sent outside to eat our breakfast. Then, after a change of clothing, it was back to the kitchen for a most anticipated moment when the special, once-a-year, dishes would be brought out of the closets. I waited with great excitement for the silver *bechers*, the *kiddush* cups, that we would use at the seder. It was something I looked forward to each year.

All this changed suddenly in 1939. The Polish hooligans took the liberty of breaking windows and marching in front of Jewish stores imploring Polish passersby to avoid

WHY IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT... (cont. from p. 1)

spiritual endowments of the holiday, its relative lack of fun traditions has resulted in the fact that most Jews today barely recognize the name of the holiday, let alone show up to partake in its celebration.

As enjoyable as traditions can be, they alone are not a compelling enough reason to influence important life decisions. Even if this generation of Jews may still be showing up to munch on some matzah or enjoy the matzah ball soup, unfortunately, many more see no reason why things can't be more ecumenical, and why their children can't be raised with a broad range of traditions which may include both matzah and Christmas trees. And really, who can blame them? Given the high rate of assimilation and intermarriage, many seem to assume that if Judaism offers us some beautiful traditions, then why not offer them to your children along with an assortment of other beautiful traditions which may come along with whomever you happen to fall in love.

I once saw an ad for an online dating site which showed a picture of a man feeding a woman matzah ball soup and the caption read, "Because matzah ball soup recipes don't get passed down on their own." It seemed like they needed a reason to convince young Jews why they should use their dating site and not a competitor's. In an effort to convince young Jews why they should marry Jewish, the best they were able to come up with was, "Because matzah ball soup recipes don't get passed down on their own." This, in a nutshell, explains why the Jewish intermarriage rate is above 70% in certain circles. Traditions, even on-trend traditions like going gluten free for a week, are not enough to compel someone to prioritize their Jewish heritage.

Despite all the gloom and doom, there are many young Jews today who are thirsty for a vibrant and meaningful Judaism, a spiritual and relevant Judaism--if only it would be offered to them. The very first class of a seminar that we offer in my role as a campus Rabbi at UCLA, addresses this basic question of, "If Judaism is just a bunch of traditions, then why should I really care what it has to say?" Time and time again students share with us how much this question resonates with them and the idea that Judaism could be so much more than "bagels and lox" (or matzah and lox) and is incredibly exciting. I was once asked by a student why we have no class on why to marry Jewish. My reply was that the entire course is about why to marry Jewish. If Judaism is meaningful, relevant and central to your life, then you will certainly want the same to be true for your life partner. In contrast, if it's just a collection of

traditions and delicious recipes, then you probably will not. Another student, when comparing the Passover seder he

grew up with to the rich and vibrant seder he experienced as a student, remarked, "The Judaism I grew up with is not a Judaism worth passing down, but this has so much more depth that is worth actually passing on."

The ironic part about Passover being celebrated for its traditions and rituals is that the rituals themselves are there to spark meaningful discussions about Judaism's foundational beliefs. They are there to trigger conversations about the origin of our people, our personal and collective journeys, our faith and our relationship with G-d. In fact, certain rituals are included as part of the Passover seder solely to provoke "the

children to ask what we are doing."

Questions are the key to learning, and transmitting our beliefs to our children is the key to our survival. In this way, the rituals are only there to serve as a springboard to further Jewish education. When the rituals are celebrated merely for tradition's sake and are devoid of meaning and spirituality, it is a cruel caricature of what a Passover seder ought to be and what the purpose of Passover is--to pass down the cornerstone of our faith, and to learn how we came to be who we are.

And, all this learning starts with a question, or better yet, four questions. Four questions for four children remind us that there are many types of Jews, many ways to ask questions and many paths to connections. But we must ask, we must engage and we must connect--for that is the purpose of it all. We must all hear the questions of our fellow Jews, and reach out to establish a connection. And, perhaps, in the case of the fourth kind of Jew, the *Sheb'ay'no yo'day'ah lish'ol*, the one who doesn't know how to ask, help her find her voice.

On Passover we become a link in a powerful chain. We receive a weathered-and-worn baton from the generations that came before us, many of whom sacrificed much in order to pass the tradition on. We must each ask ourselves the pivotal question--do we care enough to pass this on? This is the question that will not only define our own lives, but will define the generations to come.

Rabbi Naftali Hanfling currently works for JAM, a campus outreach organization, at UCLA where he lives with his wife, Chayi and four children. He previously worked as the campus Rabbi for the University of California, Santa Barbara. After completing a Masters in IT from Touro University, Rabbi Hanfling received his Rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits at the Jerusalem Kollel.





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MEMORIES OF PASSOVER (cont. from p. 2)

...shopping at Jewish stores. Thinking the war would end quickly, I was sent off by my parents to Szczekociny to stay with relatives. But with the outbreak of war, the situation turned tragic. Synagogues were torched, often with worshippers inside.

I was eventually deported to the Sudetenland (former Czechoslovakia) where I was forced to work in a textile factory. Sadly, *Pesach* during the war presented an extra yoke, an extra bit of suffering. Despite suffering of hunger, I don't think we ever ate *chametz*. Those who were observant would trade bread for potatoes.

Somehow, together with one older sister, I survived the war. My parents, three brothers and a middle sister did not. My sister and I spent *Pesach* in 1946 in the port of La Spezia, Italy, aboard a ship called *Dov Hoz* that was bound for Palestine. We ate some matzah, but it no longer felt like a holiday. The joy of *Pesach* had vanished.

I look back 80 years to *Pesach* as a child, to the pleasures of a child, and especially long for the beautiful silver cups

that I loved that were hidden away all year. My father was king of the house. But that was then.

Some 25 years ago, a Polish man found a book with Hebrew letters and was told to take it with him to Brooklyn as he was traveling to the United States. After showing it to a Jewish man, inquiries were made and a cousin of mine contacted me to tell me that he had been given a *Pesach machzor* (holiday prayerbook) that bore my father's name. When I was given the *machzor*, I was suddenly, and miraculously, reunited with my childhood. In the section of the Haggadah found in the *machzor*, I was able to, and still do, touch the stains where the wine drops that fell from my father's cup landed. It is the only thing that remains with me from my childhood to return me to the joy of *Pesach* that once was.

I'd rather have the pain of remembering than forgetting.

Dasha Werdyger Rittenberg resides on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

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