

# BERESHITH

## "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## PESACH MEMORIES

*Nachum Wiesel*

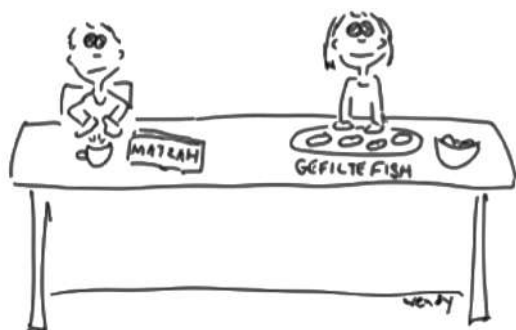
Although I don't have many memories of Pesach as a child, one that always makes me smile is a vivid memory of my father crumbling matzah into his morning coffee. I also remember my mom making her own gefilte fish. Most of the memories I have are of the meals we had at my uncle's house. Though the food was good, the evening was not particularly spiritually uplifting.

Following my father's death, the holidays were a sad time each year for my mom, a time when my father's absence was most deeply felt. My mother's parents had not been observant, and she had no religious experience to fall back on. We refrained from eating bread, but we were completely unfamiliar with the rules of Pesach.

At a very young age, I recall seeing a Chassidic family walking down the street as we passed by in our car. I asked my mom who they were. She told me that they were Orthodox Jews, the kind of Jews who kept all the laws of the Torah properly. Many years later, I realized that my mom's succinct response planted a seed in my mind. I think on a

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## MY VIVID PASSOVER MEMORIES



"I RECALL MY FATHER CRUMBLING MATZAH INTO HIS MORNING COFFEE AND MY MOTHER MAKING HER OWN GEFILTE FISH."

## WHY IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT THAN ANY OTHER AFTERNOON?

*Amy Litzenblatt*

It wasn't until I got married and grew in my Jewish observance that I learned two things about the Passover Seder that blew my mind: 1. It starts after nightfall; 2. It continues after the meal.

This new knowledge was exciting and eye-opening. But it presented a big problem for me when I finally decided to take that giant step and host a Seder in my own home. I didn't think anyone would come.

Growing up, my family had a traditional Seder with a long table that extended almost into the adjacent room. It was filled with three generations of relatives who traveled great distances to be together. We read from the Haggadah, sang the four questions and *Dayeinu*, spilled wine all over the table when reciting the 10 plagues, and tore the house apart while searching for the *Afikomen*. But once the meal was served, the Haggadahs were put away and the rest of the evening was spent enjoying each other's company.

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## THE SECRET TO IMMORTALITY: HAKOL B'SEDER!

*Rabbi Elly Krinsky*

Rabbi Chaim Meir Hager, the fourth Vizhnitzer Rebbe (also known by the name of the book he authored *Imrei Chaim*), emigrated to Israel after the Holocaust and rebuilt his hassidic dynasty in the central city of Bnei Brak. A quip of his, overheard by one of his followers, perhaps best summarizes our responsibility on Passover. Upon moving to Israel, Rabbi Hager heard the native Israelis constantly responding, "*Hakol B'seder*" - all is ok. Living in the shadow of the horrors of the Shoah and embroiled in the reality of neighboring nations seeking Israel's destruction, the notion of *Hakol B'seder* became either a soothing optimistic slogan, a euphemism for trouble, or perhaps an alibi of denial. To Rabbi Hager's holy ears, however, the ubiquitous phrase was heard differently. He heard the Israelis around him declaring not only that all is ok, but that all is in the seder - *Hakol B'seder*. The Rebbe felt that so much of what

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## PESACH MEMORIES (cont. from p. 1)

...subconscious level, I realized that my relationship with G-d was lacking. Deep down, I hoped that one day I'd be able to raise my relationship with the Al-mighty and my level of observance to be like theirs – like the people who kept all the laws of the Torah.

Many years went by. One day a friend knocked on my door and excitedly told me about an inspiring seminar she had attended. She urged me to attend one as well, and told me the date and time when it would be offered next. I attended, and was surprised by the strong positive impression it made on me. It really got me thinking. For the first time, I saw the Torah in a different light: not as an obscure scroll in a language that I didn't understand, but as a message directly from the Creator, meant for the Jewish people, an instruction book on how to live life. Carefully studied, protected and handed down from generation to generation, I felt an urgency to find out what the message was.

When I met my wife, she had also recently attended a similar seminar and had the same reaction as I did, feeling a strong desire to learn more and connect spiritually. We both began learning about Judaism. I attended an NJOP Hebrew Reading Crash Course and slowly began reciting some of the prayers in Hebrew. It felt great to be able to pray in the original language of my ancestors. A few months after getting married, my wife and I made the decision to keep Shabbat, just on Friday night. Then all day Saturday. Then we began keeping kosher. Soon we were learning more and more and raising our level of observance.

Our local rabbi invited us every year for the Pesach seder. It was an unforgettable experience. We were fascinated at the level of excitement and the enthusiasm. Not just a retelling of the exodus from Egypt -- we felt that we were actually reliving it. The seder included many questions, and if the children answered correctly, they would get a treat. This certainly kept them engaged. The rabbi would relate fascinating words of Torah which always kept us interested. The seder would last well past midnight.

We went to our rabbi's house for Pesach for many years. Finally, our oldest child became too big for the stroller, which meant I had to carry him home after the seder as he slept. After eight wonderful seders with our rabbi, we decided, with some trepidation, to conduct our own seder. With the experience from our rabbi serving as the blueprint, we were able to make an authentic seder that left us and our children feeling not only inspired, but exhilarated. We were even fortunate enough to be able to invite my mom and my brother to join us. I think that the experience made a positive impression on them as well.

We continue to look forward to the seder nights each year and are grateful that we are privileged to be Jews who are committed to Torah, who strive to follow in the

footsteps of our ancestors.

*Nachum Wiesel is a financial analyst, who grew up in Philadelphia. He currently resides in Highland Park, New Jersey, with his wife and three children.*

## SECRET TO IMMORTALITY (cont. from p. 1)

...it means to be Jewish can be found at the Passover seder. The alpha and omega of Jewish continuity and observance rests upon the seder ritual.

How true! Statistics reveal that the seder consistently represents one of the most widely observed Jewish rituals. Thank goodness for that, because what happens at the seder impacts on nothing less than the future of the Jewish people. *Hakol B'seder!*



Here are a few major Jewish goals that are stressed at the Passover seder:

### The Jewish Commitment to Social Justice

Our people's commitment to social justice weaves its antecedents through our ancient narrative. There are those in the Jewish world who, on seder night, take literally the mandate to see ourselves as if we really were slaves to Pharaoh. The more we re-experience the shame of servitude and the glory of freedom, the more sensitivity we will exhibit toward the plight of others experiencing that shame. We ought to be proud of Jewish participation and leadership in campaigns to emancipate various underprivileged groups throughout human history. It is precisely because of our annual return to slavery that we are sensitized to these movements. *Hakol B'seder.*

### The Jewish Commitment to Torah Education

The architects of the seder liturgy, influenced by Joshua ben Gamla's (a High Priest in the first century CE) system of universal Jewish education, fully appreciated the art of pedagogy when crafting the seder ritual. The seder's emphasis on differentiated instruction (the four children with different comprehension and behavior styles), the Socratic Method (question and answers), visual aids (the seder plate, spilling wine, dipping, covering, uncovering and lifting), incentives (*afikomen*, providing goodies for participation) and fun (songs and the modern custom to use toys to illustrate the narrative) are all cutting-edge didactic tools. If we are to succeed in imparting our national narrative, we must make sure that we communicate it successfully, so all participants can absorb and appreciate it. *Hakol B'seder.*

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

I don't know exactly when or why my family began the tradition of starting our Seder at around 5:00 p.m., but that's what we did (and I loved every minute of it).

I knew my invitation for beginning our Seder after 7:30 p.m. would be difficult for some family members—especially those with young children.

We had a small gathering that first year (and the year after that), and it was lovely. My parents really enjoyed it, and they helped us set up, too. It was actually a perfect number of guests for an amateur host who was also learning how to be a mom of two kids under the age of 3. But it felt incomplete.

When I think about my childhood Seders, my mind fills with happy memories. My Dad singing *Chad Gadya* with such sweetness, reminding us of when he used to sing it as a kid. My aunt rallying for one more verse of *Dayeinu*, after everyone's enthusiasm wanes. Feeling so big using grown-up dishes and wine glasses even though I was at the "kids" end of the table. My older cousins rescuing me as my voice wavered trying to find the courage to sing all four questions in front of an audience. Taking turns with my cousins watching my uncle closely to see when he got up from the table to hide the *Afikomen*.

The combination of seriousness and silliness that happened at my end of the table made the Seder extra special because it was one of the few times a year I saw almost all of my cousins at the same time. I wanted our daughters to make their own special Passover memories with their cousins, too, and it made me so sad to think that would not be possible.

So, the following year, I made a decision. To do something totally crazy. To give myself more work on a holiday that requires so much work and preparation already -- I decided to make a "Third Seder."

After consulting with Rabbi Elie Weinstock, of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York City, we found a way to make this possible while staying within the proper Halachic guidelines.

My husband and I have learned over the years that speaking to one's Rabbi is helpful when trying to come up with solutions for different challenges. There is often more flexibility than we realize and a creative solution that might not occur to us. With a fresh perspective, an experienced rabbi will listen and work with you. And the answer more often is "yes" and "here's what you can do" than a flat out "no."

For this particular situation, Rabbi Weinstock told us,

"There's nothing wrong with having an educational lunch." But he said it cannot replace the Seders that must take

place after nightfall. He helped us find a way to share a meaningful Passover experience with my family and let our daughters make a new tradition and happy memories.

Our "Third Seder" did not replace the first or second Seders we hosted that year. It fell in between the two, in the afternoon, a time when all the kids were wide awake and no one was hungry for dinner.

We called it a "Kids' Seder" and we let our daughters help us plan and prepare everything. We included all of the symbolic foods of the holiday, but the "main" meal was not so traditional or elaborate. I believe we all enjoyed

meatballs, chicken nuggets, cucumbers, carrot sticks, and cookies—complements of our five-year-old chef-in-training. We used a Haggadah that had bright illustrations and was easy for the kids to read. Our girls also made interactive props for the plagues and songs they learned in preschool.

I had no idea how to lead a "Seder" like this. But after about 5 minutes of uncertainty and awkwardness, something magical happened. Some of the adults looked like they were enjoying themselves as much as, if not more, than the kids. There was singing and laughter and such intense concentration as we went around the table and took turns reading. We did the whole "Seder"—even the parts that came after the meal.

And at 4:00 p.m., it was over. We were exhausted, but it gave us just enough time to prepare for the second Seder that would begin in a few hours.

*Amy Litzenblatt is a writer and editor, who lives in New York City with her husband and two daughters. She and her husband are "graduates" of Rabbi Buchwald's Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue.*







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## DATED MATERIAL

### MEMORIES OF PASSOVER (cont. from p. 2)

#### The Jewish Commitment to Continuity

Our tradition teaches that Eliyahu (Elijah) the Prophet attends our seder. Why is he the visitor? I would have thought that Moses, God's emissary to deliver the Jews from Egypt, should be the heavenly guest. Ironically, Moses' name is only mentioned once in the haggadah and only in passing. Why do we usher in Eliyahu by opening the door for him and setting up a cup for his use? Why him?

While there are many beautiful rationales for Eliyahu's prominence at the seder, permit me to share an historical event that touches me profoundly. During Eliyahu's tenure as prophet, the Jews had sunk to a very low spiritual level. Out of frustration, Eliyahu proclaimed to God that the Jews had forsaken their covenant with Him. As a result, claims the Midrash, God insisted that Eliyahu attend Jewish life events that bespeak of the Jewish people's highest levels of commitment and continuity. When are those times? *Brit Milah* (circumcision) and the Passover seder. Prior to the actual circumcision during the *brit* ritual, the baby is placed on the empty chair of Eliyahu, the "angel of the covenant," with the belief that Eliyahu is present, witnessing the ongoing commitment to our heritage. The other time that we embrace Eliyahu is at the seder, when Jews of all stripes

and backgrounds, gather together annually and proclaim their fidelity to our people. These rites are still very popular among Jews, perhaps because Eliyahu graces us with his holy presence. *Hakol B'seder*.

The People of Israel endure because we remember. The seder is the perfect tool to guarantee our survival. In a celebrated 1897 article entitled "Concerning the Jews," Mark Twain concludes: "All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" Half a century later, Rabbi Chaim Meir Hager answered this question. The Jews could have given up during those tumultuous years between Mark Twain's question and Rabbi Hager's answer, but our heroic ancestors never ceased celebrating the timeless Passover seder, even in the face of the greatest threats.

Let our Passover sedarim be worthy of Rabbi Hager's hype. May we not fail to recognize the importance of the seder, and may we succeed in the sacred task of conveying the richness and beauty of our heritage.

*Chag kasher v'samay'ach.*

*Rabbi Elly Krinsky served as the Program Director of NJOP.*

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**בראשית**

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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*