

MY SWEET "ALONE" PASSOVER

Alan Magill

'Stay on the West Side.' 'Be with new friends.' 'A whole new life is opening up to you. Be a part of it.' 'Rabbi Buchwald can find you a place to sleep and set you up with spirited seders.'

These were some of the thoughts going through my mind as Pesach approached a number of years ago, when I was in my beginning stages of embracing Orthodox Judaism. My embrace of a totally new lifestyle was being reciprocated by the Lincoln Square Synagogue community which welcomed me with open arms as I arrived every erev Shabbat, suitcase in hand, wanting to be nurtured by a faith that had been mine from the beginning.

But someone else had been there from the very beginning: my beloved mother (may she rest in peace). As Adar gave way to Nissan, the treatments for her illness were becoming more pronounced. She was also dealing with the loss of her husband of 50 years (my father, may he rest in peace) around seven months prior. My mother continued to live in the city of her and my birth - Philadelphia - while I had moved to New York two years prior to immerse myself in the glittering world of entertainment as a writer and performer. But then I met Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald at the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service and something he said there - "I'm not asking you to give up everything you're doing, I'm just asking you to put Judaism first" - made me want to come back again and again.

To be sure, I was still writing scripts, but I was writing a different script for my life, and as Pesach approached the conflict I was experiencing was the stuff of drama.

I had to make a choice - stay on the West Side and enjoy the spiritual and social benefits of dynamically run seders or go to Philadelphia and have the seders with my mother in her apartment. If I went to Philadelphia, it would be the first time I would be leading a seder and it would have to be done at a unique time as all the treatments my mother was getting made it difficult for her to stay up late.

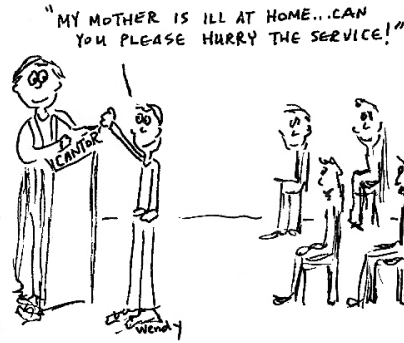
My mother, although not religiously observant, had a religious heart, and she wanted me to be with my new friends. She encouraged me to stay in New York, reminding me that it would be hard for her to stay up for the seder. She intimated that we could get together soon after the first two days of Passover. She had an aide who came during the daytime and had friends and family who often visited.

My mother was certainly making it easier for me to stay in New York. It would be easier for me to go to seders where I wouldn't have to arrange to bring Kosher food and all the symbols of Passover, as I would need to do if I went to my mother's. To go to seders where I might even meet someone whom I would eventually marry, something that my mother wanted so dearly for me.

The decision seemed like a no-brainer, but I didn't go with my brain on this one. I went with my gut. If I was truly to "put Judaism first" I needed to be with my mother. "Honor your Father and Mother" is such an important part of our religion. My parents had certainly honored me when I had become religious and they accepted it 100%, even though I couldn't do things at the times they were used to doing them with me, and I couldn't eat in their house, unless special preparations were made.

For the first time in my life, I made all the preparations for a seder and drove to Philadelphia with shankbone in tow. In greeting my mother, there was a mixture of sadness and joy. The former for how weak she appeared; the latter, for no matter what was happening to her, her strength of spirit always shone through. In seeing her smile, I knew that the whole endeavor was immensely worth it.

The first night of Passover was approaching. My mother told me that she usually went to sleep around 7 p.m. I needed to go for a 6:30 p.m. *Minchal Maariv* to say *kaddish* for my father and told her I'd try to get home as close to 7:30 p.m. as possible, but it might run a little later. "It's all right if you're sleeping when I get back," I told her. But she told me with a conviction that



only a mother could have, that she would not go to sleep until I was back in the apartment. I felt badly for every extra minute she would stay up.

But I felt glad for the "seder" we would have. Her illness had taken so much from her, but she was not going to lose out on this experience. At 5:30 p.m., way before sunset, I did the best that I could for her. With shankbone and horseradish and charoses and egg and salt water and grape juice and everything else associated with the seder, I had the privilege of leading us in a retelling of what happened to our forefathers in Egypt. It wasn't the halachic time, but it was the only time that would work for my mother.

Someone else, looking at the two of us from a detached viewpoint, might call it an educational session we were having about Passover. But I knew it was much more than that. It was a son who had received so much of great value from his mother, returning something of great value to her.

It was heartening to see that despite her physical weakness, she remained interested and involved throughout the retelling. After "Next Year in Jerusalem" I kissed her on the forehead and we wished each other a Happy Passover. As I left for shul, I tried the impossible, saying, "Mom, you don't have to wait up for me." She just smiled, and I knew her eyes wouldn't close until I walked back through that door.

I walked the seven blocks to shul and davened Mincha. It was also erev Shabbos. We waited around 20 minutes after Mincha and when I saw a man go up to lead, I was relieved in anticipation of Maariv starting. It looked like I wouldn't be getting back so late after all. Then the man who would be davening said, "We will now say *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs)," something I had never heard in any shul in which I had davened. Without even realizing it, I spontaneously blurted out, "Oh no." I thought it could add 15-20 minutes to the service.

The man who would be davening came up to me and asked, "What's wrong?"

I said, "My mother is ill at home and won't go to sleep until I get back. I didn't know we'd be having this in the davening."

Without missing a beat he smiled and said, "I'll finish this very quickly."

I don't know how he did it, but he managed to finish *Shir HaShirim* in about two minutes. I felt such gratitude to him. Some 15 minutes later when he finished Maariv, I thanked him and bolted out the door. When I got to my mother's apartment, she was waiting up for me. Soon after seeing me, she went to sleep.

And then it was me, all alone at the dining room table. I couldn't be going to sleep just yet. I still had a seder to run. And run it I did, at the halachically correct time, with all the symbols of the Yom Tov in front of me. If it all sounded familiar, it did because I had gone through the whole experience two hours prior with my mother.

The memory of that "seder" made this experience oh so sweet. I wasn't sitting at that table alone as I read the Haggadah. I felt a strong connection to Hashem. I felt I was doing what He would want me to do. I made Kiddush, broke the middle matzah, hid the afikomen, spilled drops from my glass on the table to remember the plagues, sang *Dayenu*, had another glass of wine, ate the matzah, ate the maror, ate the sandwich, had the meal, searched for the afikomen (it wasn't hard to find), *bentched*, had two more glasses of wine and once again said "Next Year in Jerusalem." All the while gratified that I could be connected to my mother and to our tradition.

Wishing everyone a Happy Passover and the joy of making the decisions that may not be the easiest, but are the most meaningful.

Alan Magill is a playwright who also writes a weekly "Senior Forum" column for "The Jewish Press." He is director of programming for Scharf's Ateret Avot Senior Residence in Brooklyn.

