

Fri 15 April 2005 (close to Pessah)
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Celebrating the Exodus from Egypt in Egypt

The 601st commandment of the Jewish faith states: "Thou shalt never again dwell permanently in the land of Egypt". [Deut. 17:16]

Well - looks like I blew it from day one.

I was born in Egypt, a permanent dweller. The time was early September. A few days later was Yom Kippur, and already I was learning to beat my breast in repentance. "For the sin that we have committed by dwelling permanently in the Land of Egypt".

So I was born in Cairo in 1949 and lived there until I was 18. Then I came to the United States as a refugee, and have lived here for the past 37 years. And just about every day in these 37 years, I was subjected to... THE GRILLING.

You see, when YOU meet somebody, most of you just say you are from Chicago and move on to another subject. I can't do that. I have to schedule between 20 and 30 minutes for that process.

-Mr Mizrahi! That's an interesting accent you have! Where are you from?

-My accent is French.

-French! I took French in high school. What part of France are you from?

-I am not French. I am Italian.

-Italian! Wow. I should have guessed "Mizarhi" is an Italian name. So did you live in France or in Italy?

-Neither. I was born and raised in Egypt.

-Egypt! I've always wanted to go there and see the Pyramids. And frankly, just between the two of us, I've always had a soft spot for the Arab side, and not the other side, if you know what I mean.

-I am not an Arab. My name, MIZ-RA-HI, is Hebrew. I am Jewish.

-Jewish! But... How come you...

And so on, and so forth. Sometimes I try to make it short and say: "I was born and raised in Egypt, in a Jewish Italian French-speaking family, and now I am an American."

But it doesn't work. Invariably, the response is: "Whoa! Whoa! Not so fast! You say you are... French?"

I tried other tacks:

-I am an African-American. I was born and raised in Africa.

-I am a Hispanic-American. My ancestors were Spanish.

For some reason, they don't work either.

I am still open to suggestions on how to avoid telling the story of my life to everyone I meet, without lying or being rude. (Just kidding. You can ask me any question you want.)

Indeed, my family, like so many Jewish families outside the US, is a linguistic and cultural zoo.

In Israel, I would be called Sephardic. But in reality, there are the real Sephardic Jews, or descendants of the Jews of Spain, and the Mizrahi Jews, or Eastern Jews, who never left the Middle East. My father was a real Sephardic Jew. His name was Mizrahi, even though he was not Mizrahi. My mother **was** Mizrahi, even though her name was not Mizrahi. Clear?

So, being half Sephardic and half Mizrahi, I had no choice but to marry an Ashkenazic woman. She is known in Gentile circles as "Ms. Rahi".

My native language is French. I was educated in French, then in Italian, then in both French and Arabic, then in English. These switches were all forced on me by the political winds. My brother was educated in French, then in Arabic. My sisters were educated in English. My father's native language was Ladino -- Judeo-Spanish -- and he was educated in Italian. My mother's native language was Arabic, and she was educated in French. Her family hailed from Syria and Lebanon. My grandfather was from the island of Rhodes

and my grandmother from Salonica, Greece, where Greek was spoken. My great-grandfather, Rabbi Yomtob Mizrahi, was from Smyrna, Turkey, where he built a synagogue and spoke Turkish. And, of course, everybody went to the synagogue and prayed in Hebrew!

Pay attention - there will be a test afterwards!

My children's native language is English. I wonder what THEIR children's native language will be? Hebrew, perhaps? My relatives are now scattered all over the world: Israel, the US, Australia, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and I am probably forgetting some. Such is the lot of the Jew.

A Jewish community has existed in Egypt since time immemorial. Alexandria had a large community 2500 years ago, and it flourished for hundreds of years. Maimonides lived and worked in Cairo more than eight centuries ago. The Cairo Genizah, that treasure trove of Judaica discovered in the 19th century, attested to a long unbroken Jewish presence in Egypt.

But the community was uprooted, like all other Jewish communities in Arab countries. The Jews of Egypt were close to 100,000 strong in 1948, when Israel was created and Egypt promptly sent its Army to destroy it. Then the noose began to tighten around their collective neck. Only 10,000 remained after the 1956 Suez war. Only 1,000 remained at the time of the Six-Day War in 1967, including myself. I left in late October 1967, one of the last Jews to leave Egypt. Today fewer than a dozen elderly Jews remain in the country.

But since Passover is just a few days away, let me not dwell on the bad times and tell you a little about our Pessah customs.

In Egypt, as everywhere else, Pessah was always a happy time. But still, you can imagine the incongruity of sitting at the seder table year after year, in Cairo, Egypt, to celebrate how God took us out of the Land of Egypt, the land of slavery, with a strong hand and an

outstretched arm, and wondering: What are we still doing here, when things are getting from bad to worse for us Jews year after year?

As is the custom with Jews everywhere, the Passover season would begin right after Purim, with vigorous spring cleaning. Let me rattle off a series of recollections, in no particular order:

- Traditionally, the first-born male children fast before the seder. In Egypt some families made the first-born girls fast as well!

- We had to get rid of the hametz by 9 am the day of the first seder. My mother gathered it all in the middle of the dining-room table, and gave it to the maid

- Passover foods were special-ordered weeks ahead of the holiday. No Passover display at the corner grocery store!

- Our matza was round, a foot or more in diameter, and much thinner than the Ashkenazic boxed type.

- A favorite staple was the special round Pesach cookies, about 5 inches in diameter. They were yellow and soft, and their taste was 'taam haman' - heavenly! Another was hard Greek cheese.

- Dry-roasted salted nuts - almonds, pistachios, walnuts - were an annual Passover treat, too expensive to have the rest of the year. My favorites were hazelnuts. I was good at discovering their special hiding places (different each year) and stealing a few every day ahead of the holiday. One year I overdid it and there were only a handful left when Pessah came. Boy, was my mother mad at me!

- We did not cook with matzah meal. Instead, we used matzah and eggs. Matza, whole or crumbled, was dipped in water and mixed with eggs or meat in casseroles. A favorite my mother made was the "Mina" or "Mayina". It consisted of layers of matzah, spinach and ground beef cooked with hard-boiled eggs thrown in. The eggs were cooked at low temperature for a very long time. In Ladino, they are called Huevos Haminados, or "browned eggs".

-Our haroset was based on dates, not apples. You use what's plentiful in your country: In the Middle East, it's dates! The dates are crushed, boiled and pureed, then sprinkled with crushed dried nuts. The result looked exactly like mortar, as it was supposed to!

-Our maror was romaine lettuce; sometimes celeri stalks. Boy, was I surprised when I ate horseradish for the first time in this country! Quite a different taste from romaine lettuce!

-Sephardic Jews, like all other Jews, prohibit the use of the five basic hametz grains on Pessah. These are barley, rye, oats, wheat, and spelt [BROWS]. However, unlike Ashkenazic Jews, they permit the use of other grains, or kitniyot, such as chick peas, corn, beans, peas, lentils, and, most importantly, rice. An important part of our 'shulchan orech' - our 'set table' - was grape leaves stuffed with rice, meat and spices! I hear that a lot of Ashkenazic Jews become Sephardic on Passover!

-Our Haggadah was a local edition in French and Hebrew, and we used both languages during the seder. [Show scan]

-Sephardim recite the Four Questions in the following order:

1. "On all other nights, we do not dip even once. Why on this night do we dip twice?";
2. "On all other nights we eat bread or matzah. Why on this night do we eat only matzah?
3. "On all other nights, we eat all kinds of herbs. Why on this night do we eat only maror?
4. "On all other nights, we eat either sitting or reclining. Why on this night do we eat only reclining?

I could not find a source explaining the reason for the difference.

-Now let's talk about the ten plagues. There was no dipping of fingers in wine. We were much too refined for that! My mother would walk up to my father with a large bowl and a glass of water. My father would recite the plagues one by one, and for each plague he would pour a bit of wine in the bowl from a special large wineglass, and my mother would pour a bit of the water. It was all done under the table - nobody was supposed to look at the "plagues" for fear of being "contaminated"! Then my mother, without looking directly at

the bowl, and with the rest of us looking in another direction, would go to the bathroom and flush the "plagues" down the toilet! I remember fear traveling down my spine...

The wine was said to represent justice and the water mercy. Justice tempered with mercy is how God operates in the Jewish tradition.

-The Jews in Egypt also had a peculiar local custom. Each participant would sling the napkin containing the matzah over their right shoulder. Then the leader of the seder would ask them "Where are you from?", and they would answer "Mitzrayim -- Egypt". The leader would then ask again, "And where are you going?". They would then sling the napkin of matzah over their left shoulder and answer: "Yerushalayim -- Jerusalem!".

-It gets better. In some families, the leader would take the seder tray and go around chanting and lightly banging the tray over each of the participant's heads! Some say this is to place each person under the "protection" symbolized by the seder plate. Each person was "passed over", as it were!

-Before the meal, unmarried young women would hide behind a door to eat a hard-boiled egg - a symbol of fertility suggesting that marriage was in the not-too-distant future.

-Finally, we did not hide the afikoman matzah or have a Cup of Elijah - although our seders were every bit as long as the next Jew's seder.

Well, a few months before my 18th seder in Egypt, it was time to go. My exit visa came on October 20th, 1967. Pharaoh decided to let THIS Jew go. It gave me two weeks to leave. On both sides of the exit visa stamp, there was a red "Y" in Arabic between quotation marks, added by hand in red ink. It stood for Yahudi -- Jew. A signal to those who would later check this visa to harass me as much as possible. [Show visa]

Years later, when I started having children, I stuck this exit visa in our family Passover Haggadah, next to the traditional words, "B'chol dor vador, hayyav adam lir'ot et 'atsmo, k'illuhu yatsa mimmitzrayim -- In

every generation, every Jew must consider that *he, himself* was *personally* rescued from Egypt." That's always been easy for *me* to say!

I must say that the Lord indeed works in mysterious ways. I am a lot happier living in the United States than I could ever have been in Egypt, even under the best of circumstances. On this 350th anniversary of the coming of the Jews to America, I, and all of us, should be thankful for the many blessings our great country offers, help protect them, and never take them for granted.

The Haggadah says:

Vehi sheamda lavotenu velanu

The promise made to our forefathers holds also for us.

Shelo echad bilvad 'amad 'alenu lechalotenu

For not just one enemy has risen against us to destroy us.

Ella shebechol dor vador 'omdim 'alenu lechalotenu

But in every generation they rise against us to destroy us.

Ve haKadosh Baruch Hu matzilenu mi-yadam

And the Holy One Blessed Be He saves us from their hands.

Shabbat shalom and chag pessah sameach v'kasher to all.

Maurice Mizrahi's exit visa from Egypt, 28 Oct 1967
 Gives two weeks to leave.
 Note red "Y" -- meaning Yahudi [Jew] -- on either side of the visa

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