

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXVI No. 4

Nisan 5773/March 2013



בראשית

PASSOVER THEN, PASSOVER NOW

Yonah Ringlestein

Even though I did not grow up in an observant home, my parents still instilled in me a strong sense of Jewish identity, especially at Passover. Each year, we would host a large seder in our home. With no family members living near us in the suburbs of Philadelphia, we always invited guests to join us at our seder so they could share in the joy of the holiday with us. Although these guests were often not Jewish, they were curious about Passover and the meaning of the seder rituals, and my parents were happy to welcome them into our home to learn about this important holiday in the Jewish year. Some years our guests were neighbors and other years we welcomed students from a local university.

Even though religious practice was not central in my childhood home, there was something special that I sensed about Passover each year. It was not often that my family would go through such extensive preparations for a meal. We usually had very casual dinners. On Passover, though, everything was different. The house needed to be organized and cleaned. The dining room table had to be decorated for the seder. The beautiful white seder plate had to be prepared. The food had to be cooked, and it was my mother who would spend the entire day making a delicious meal for everyone.

I fondly remember helping mother make the charoset, which was one of my favorite Passover foods. I chopped the apples, added the walnuts, and my mother showed me how to measure just the right amount of wine. While we (*cont. on p. 2*)



COMING HOME

Miriam Lottner

When I was 16, I was lucky enough to win a scholarship to the very first March of the Living. The program, nearly unheard of at the time, involved a trip to a still-communist Poland (hey, I'm old...OK) to visit the concentration camps and then Israel. For me, Israel was a place of childhood dreams and Jaffa oranges. While I did not totally understand the connection between all of the parts of my Jewish identity, having been raised in a mix of different and not-very-formal communal associations, one thing I did know was that Israel was a central part of whatever it was I believed being Jewish meant.

I still remember getting off the plane in Israel and dancing at the terminal as if we were at a crazy Bar Mitzvah celebration. It was a feeling of being home like no other place in the world, so it is not surprising that I ended up settling in Israel.

Not long ago, my parents sold my childhood home in California and shipped all of my childhood mementos and journals to me. (My kids were disappointed to get packages from America full of journals and old pictures. They had been convinced any large bulky items from the States would be filled (*cont. on p. 3*)

A PRICELESS OPPORTUNITY

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

It is commonly noted that the Passover seder is specifically designed to arouse the curiosity of the children, and to involve the children as much as possible in the experience of the Exodus. Consequently, the rituals of the seder are much different from the standard Shabbat rituals. The seder plate is, at times, covered, uncovered, removed from the table and returned to the table. The "Mah Nishtanah" (four questions), the *afikoman* (the hidden matzah), the four cups of wine, washing the hands before eating the vegetable—all these odd elements are included in the seder in order to arouse and maintain the children's interest. Likewise, in order to keep the focus on the children, the reading of the "Four Sons" is included in the Hagaddah, which speaks of the wise son, the prodigal son, the simple son and the son who doesn't know how to ask.

The actual verses that are the source for the Hagaddah's statements regarding three of the four sons—the prodigal son, the simple son and the son who doesn't know how to ask—can be found in the Torah reading of parashat Bo (Exodus 10:1–13:16). The source for the wise son is found in *parashat Va'etchanan* (Deuteronomy 6:20).

It is significant to note that, with the exception (*cont. on p. 2*)

PASSOVER THEN, PASSOVER NOW (cont. from p. 1)...

cooked together, and throughout the week of Passover, my mother would give me special Passover treats. (My favorites were the delicious chocolate lollipops.) Seeing my parents go through their own special preparations made me realize the importance of celebrating Passover and understand that seder night was different from all other nights. My special responsibility was preparing the family-friendly Haggadah for each seder guest. Each year I would collate the pages and place them in individual bright blue binders. Then, I placed each binder in just the right spot on the beautiful seder table. My excitement for the holiday and for the seder was hard to contain, and, to this day, my father enjoys reminding me of the time I even stood outside for over an hour to ensure that all the guests knew where to go when they arrived.

Even though I did not attend a Jewish day school and did not know much Hebrew, I was always up to the challenge of reciting the four questions. As the youngest Jewish child present at the seder, it was my yearly responsibility to do so. In the days leading up to our seder, I would practice regularly so that I would be able to recite the Four Questions accurately and convey the beauty and significance of the holiday to everyone present. Even at a young age, I was proud of my Jewish identity and history, as well as of the fact that I was able to share it with others. I eagerly answered our guests' questions about the meaning of the various items on the seder plate and loved to read aloud from the Haggadah so that our guests would be able to understand the meaning and importance of Jewish traditions. Indeed, the most vivid seders from my childhood are the ones when we had the most curious guests.

There are many memories of our seder, as well. The younger seder guests and I would open the door for Elijah to enter into the house, and Elijah's cup of wine would be empty when we returned to the table. I regarded this event as quite miraculous. Years later I found out that my father drank the wine. Still, I have fond memories of puzzling over this mystery with the other children and welcoming Elijah as another guest. The other children and I also loved when my father would hide the afikoman. We would close our eyes, and he would walk around and rustle items all around the room so we would not have any idea where he hid the afikoman. At the end of the night, the children would help me search for the afikoman, which was always a highlight of the seder for me. As I got older, my father made the hiding places increasingly difficult, and eventually we needed a little

A PRICELESS OPPORTUNITY (cont. from p. 1)... of the prodigal son, all the responses that are offered to the questioning children in the Passover Hagaddah, faithfully follow the texts that are found in applicable biblical verses.

The statement regarding the "*Rashah*" that is found in the Hagaddah reads as follows: "*Rashah, mah hoo oh'imer?*" What does the prodigal son say? What is this ritual of yours? "*Yours*" he emphasizes, but not "*his*." To this question, the author of the Hagaddah responds: Because he [the prodigal son] excluded himself from the community and denied the principle of acknowledging G-d, so should you dull the sharpness of his sarcasm (literally, make his teeth stand on edge!) and reply to him: "This is because of what G-d did for me, when I went out of Egypt." He did it for "*me*" and not for "*him*." Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed!

The Hagaddah's response to this questioning child seems to be rather stern and severe. Make his teeth stand on edge! Tell him that had he been in Egypt he wouldn't have been redeemed! But that's not at all what the Torah says! If we check the actual text, Exodus

help from him through "hot or cold" hints. I always felt triumphant and accomplished when I found the afikoman, and my parents always handed out small prizes to all of the children.

I will forever be thankful for my childhood Passover experiences through which my parents instilled in me the important mitzvah of *hachnassat orchim*, welcoming guests into the home. In fact, my parents demonstrated one of the major lessons we learn from Passover—to never treat others as the Israelites were treated in Egypt. This lesson comes to life today each time I invite guests into my own home for Shabbat. Our fellow human beings, our friends, our neighbors, and even complete strangers, must be treated with the utmost respect and dignity.

I recently made the decision to increase my religious observance and enhance my involvement in Jewish life, and, as I reflect on these childhood memories of Passover, they take on an entirely new meaning and significance. The transition from being a "cultural" Jew to being an observant Jew has been challenging at times, but each step I take, no matter how small, has been well worth it. Learning Hebrew has enabled me to pray with more *kavanah* (awareness). Observing Shabbat has enabled me to experience the serenity of this special day and to spend quality time with friends and family. Studying Judaism in formal and informal settings has enabled me to connect on a profoundly spiritual level to my heritage, to the Jewish people, and to G-d. It is through all these experiences that I have discovered that the Torah and its teachings remain a vital living tradition with enduring relevance for modern life—far more profound than just being proud of my Jewish identity.

Passover this year will be quite different for me. Although my family enthusiastically participated in the more well-known parts of the seder, this year I will participate in my first ever full-length seder, remembering and reliving in a whole new way the hardships of the Jews in Egypt and rejoicing in the freedom brought about by the wonders of G-d. By remembering the hardships of our ancestors, celebrating freedom, and spreading the message of kindness and hospitality among those present at our Passover seder, we can continue to serve as a "light unto the nations" and bring G-d's holiness into the world, one guest at a time.

Yonah Ringlestein is an intern at NJOP.

12:26 states: "*V'hah'yah kee yom'roo ah'lay'chem b'nay'chem: Mah bah'ah'vohidah bah'zot lah'chem?*" And it shall come to pass, when your children say to you: What is this ritual of yours? The Torah doesn't indicate here that the child is prodigal, wicked or recalcitrant. In fact the Torah says, "When your children say to you." The truth is that every thinking Jewish child will (or should) at one point say to his parents, teachers or friends: "Why do I need to be Jewish? Why do we need to keep kosher? Why do we have to observe the Shabbat? Why do I have to wear a yarmulka and put on tefillin?" The verse doesn't say "*if*," it says "*when*!" Every thinking Jew has to face these questions: Why am I a Jew, and what do these religious rituals mean to me?

The response that the Torah itself offers to this questioning Jew is entirely different from the response that we find in the Hagaddah. Exodus 12:27: "*Vah'ah'mar'tem zeh'vach Peh'sach hoo la'Hashem.*" The Torah says, tell those questioning young people that this is a "celebratory Passover meal for G-d," because G-d passed over the houses of the Jews in Egypt when He (cont. on p. 3)

COMING HOME (cont. from p. 1)... with Hershey's kisses and M&M's.) It was among those mementoes that I came upon my journal from my March of the Living trip. In that journal, I had written a note to myself that said: "I don't yet understand this place, and it all feels so foreign, but it also, amazingly feels like home. I don't know how or why, but I know I'll live here some day. It seems to me that the future of the Jewish people is and must be here, and nowhere else."

Was I strangely prophetic or just a little tipsy from the welcome party? I made Aliyah less than 4 years later.

When I look back on the incredible journey that took me from Poland to Israel, to California, to Stern College in NYC, and then back to Israel, I am always struck by the incredible Divine intervention that played a major role in the process. Every door that was opened to me, every opportunity, was more than mere coincidence.

There are many moments that stand out in my mind as turning points. One is boarding the March of the Living plane proudly wearing my high school swim team t-shirt while sporting serious dreadlocks and finding myself seated in the middle of the MTA (Manhattan Talmudic Academy) boys' section. Another is when, a few months later, I was given a giant gold antique Jewish star necklace by a co-worker who wanted to get rid of it when her great-aunt died and left no Jewish children. That necklace turned out to be a historical antique passed from generation to generation. I also won't forget the chance I was given to learn in Israel for the year, followed by an amazing opportunity to make Aliyah a few months later with only a dream and a few hundred dollars to my name.

For me, the past 19 years living my dream has been a constant reminder of the tremendous sacrifices that Jews have made in every generation to keep their faith alive in their own hearts and the

A PRICELESS OPPORTUNITY (cont. from p. 2)... struck the Egyptians with the plagues and He saved us. What kind of answer is this for the searching Jewish child who has religious questions?

I believe that the response found in the Torah is based on a fundamental and well-known educational principle—the issue of “readiness,” of which we all need to be cognizant. Answers can not be forced down a student's throat, particularly when the student is not capable of hearing, and is far from being in the “listening mode.” It is the teachers' and parents' responsibility to motivate the questioning person to listen. How is this done? “*Vah'ahmar'tem zehvach Pesach,*” the Torah advises us to invite the questioner to our Passover seder, to our “celebratory meal.” Without any preconditions, invite the disinterested child to your home. Avoid talking about philosophy or theology. Sing, dance and celebrate with him/her, give him/her four cups of wine—to “loosen him/her up!” Avoid scripted lines or threats. Fill his/her stomach with a good meal and his/her heart and soul with a meaningful experience. The questioning child will soon sense the abundant (cont. on p. 4)



hearts of their children. When I imagine the lives of the Jewish people who have come before me, I often think of Passover. How much faith it takes to leave your country and everything you have ever known in order to strike out against the odds to a land that you have never seen before, but only dreamed of, as did the Israelites. How courageous it is to hope and dream of freedom when it is something you and your family have never even known. The faith that the Jewish people demonstrated when leaving Egypt is what strengthens me every time I

think that a challenge is too great, or the risks too high, or the chance of success too small to ever bother trying. I am reminded of thousands of years in exile after our Holy Temple was destroyed—the jobs given up because of Shabbat observance, the traditions buried or hidden for fear of attacks and pogroms, the secret seders, and underground matzah factories and mikvehs built over frozen streams.

My own journey wasn't so remarkable, or hard or scary. It simply was what it had to be.

I used to ask myself why I was given that seat next to the Orthodox MTA boys on the plane and not one of the countless other non-affiliated Jewish kids. That Orthodox high school boy whom I sat next to on the plane, who challenged every belief and idea I presented in our conversation on our 11 hour journey to Poland, is still a good friend. Why was I lucky enough to sit next to someone willing to ask me hard questions, listen to my answers and continue to engage me in dialogue? More so, why did he care enough to follow up and write to me to encourage me for years after I started on my own journey toward a more traditional lifestyle?

It took me a while, but I finally recognized that G-d chose me the way He chooses us all. Choices are given to each of us every day at every moment. We can choose to answer the call of our ancestors and our hearts, or we can choose to ignore them. I don't believe that I have been given more chances than anyone else, I just made the choices that got me where I am today. I listened to the call, took a leap and bounced as softly as I could when I fell.

At Passover, we clean our homes and our hearts. It is an amazing opportunity to start fresh and make different choices. When we do make mistakes, we can take comfort in the fact that even when Moses led the Jewish people, they made mistakes, they sinned, they wandered and they questioned. Eventually, however, they overcame and found their way home.

I wish you a fulfilling, challenging and mindful journey home, wherever that may be.

Miriam Lottner is the CEO of Tech-Tav Documentation, Ltd. (www.tech-tav.com), the founder of Portraits for Charity Israel (www.facebook.com/PortraitsForCharityIsrael) and proud mom to 5.5 year old twin girls. Miriam lives in the South of Israel and is always happy to have Shabbat guests. You can follow Miriam on FB <https://www.facebook.com/miriam.lottner> or Twitter (@mlottner) or via her blog: www.manageitwrite.com.

A PRICELESS OPPORTUNITY (cont. from p. 3)... love and become less defensive. After a number of such positive experiences, the child will develop a sense of trust and will hopefully be able to hear your message. Only then can the philosophical discussions begin. "Celebrate with me, drink a little with me, have some charoset, enjoy the meal, sing 'Chad Gadya' with me"—those elements are far more important, at least initially, than any discourse on Maimonides, Kant, and the 48 proofs of G-d's existence!

I am not really certain why the author of the Haggadah presents such a harsh response, instructing that one should dull the sharpness of the child's sarcasm. Perhaps it is because the reading of the "Four Sons"



comes after the singing, dancing and celebrating. It is after the drinking begins (*kiddush*), after the vegetables are dipped in salt water, after the *afikoman* is broken and hidden, and after the recitation of

the *Mah Nishtanah* (four questions). This child witnesses the warmth and joy with which you are celebrating Passover, and the great lengths that the parents went through to include him, and he still asks what it means to you and not him. It is time for action.

Then again, perhaps it is because the Roman influences on Jewish children at the time were so great, that there was little opportunity to employ nice educational theories like "readiness." In that time period, when the formal Haggadah was being finalized, a more hard-lined response seemed necessary. The rabbis of the Talmud therefore concluded, that the best way to dull the teeth and remove the sarcasm of the questioner, was to drive home the message of accountability. "Had you been there in Egypt, you would not have been redeemed." In other words, you will pay the price if you continue with your skepticism and sarcasm. You will eventually assimilate and be lost to the Jewish people!

To my mind, it is the gentler and more patient approach presented in Exodus that is urgently needed to be heard in the broader Jewish community today. While we face the existential threats of assimilation and alienation, screaming, threatening and bemoaning our fate serves little purpose. What we need urgently, is to give our young people positive, joyous, Jewish experiences, to open their hearts and their ears. Our seders may be the perfect setting to accomplish this. We must seize this priceless opportunity.

Rabbi Buchwald is the Founder and Director of NJOP.

Rabbi Buchwald's
Weekly
Torah
Message



Words of Torah for everyone!

To receive Rabbi Buchwald's exciting and provocative weekly e-mail message, please send an e-mail to: ezbuchwald@njop.org

To receive Juicy Bits of Judaism, daily, from Jewish Treats, please send an e-mail to: jewishtreats@njop.org



To find NJOP and Rabbi Buchwald on the web, visit www.njop.org, www.jewishtreats.org and www.youtube.com/user/JewishTreats

בראשית *Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt of NJOP. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about NJOP programs, please contact us: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 646-871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.*

Readers: This is your newsletter and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



**180 AMSTERDAM AVENUE
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10023**

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
New York, NY
PERMIT #5047

DATED MATERIAL