

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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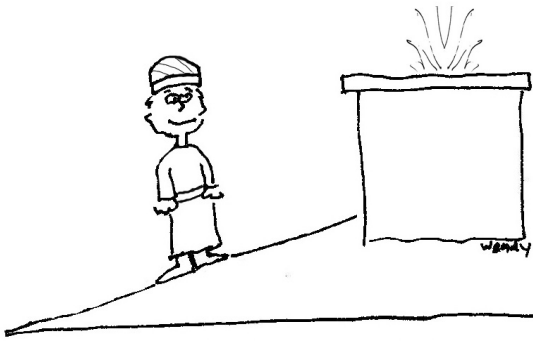
בראשית

PASSOVER: PROGRESS NOT PERFECTION

Debbie Akerman

It seems that we live in an era that focuses on the search for perfection. From the time we wake in the morning we begin our quest for the perfect cup of coffee (ok, I admit that good coffee might be a necessity) and search for the perfect outfit to make us look great. Then we go off to the land of "perfection": school, where perfection is honed, and the workplace, where perfection equals success and the demand for more perfection. We search for the perfect recipes for snacks and suppers, and scour the internet for perfect rainy-day projects.

And then comes Passover: Our determination for the perfect Passover begins early with women's blogs and Facebook pages full of cleaning and shopping tips, and it begins around Tu B'Shvat (the fifteenth day of Shevat, the new year for the trees that is celebrated in January/February)! What to clean, with what and when? When to shop, with whom and for whom? What to cook, how much, what is freezer-to-table, vegan, no meat, no chicken, no carb, no sugar, all taste... And the outfits. Perfect in every way -- matching (*cont. on p. 2*)



LIKE THE PRIEST OF OLD,
WE ASCEND A RAMP, FOR
STAYING STATIONARY WILL
CAUSE US TO FALL BACK

PESACH - NOW WE ARE FREE

Devorah Avrukin

I am up to my elbows in lettuce when the phone rings. It is a friend of mine calling to ask if I have one more seat at my family's seder, the seder that is in just a few hours. "I know I should have called earlier," she says, "but I was waiting for my plans to firm up. Can you fit me in?"

I am trying not to read between the lines here. The little devil on my left shoulder is saying, "Oh, now that she doesn't have anywhere better to go, she wants to come?" It has been a long day: setting a table for thirty, chopping apples for *charoset*, cleaning pounds of lettuce, rolling matzah balls for the soup, keeping the kids away from previously-mentioned table and *charoset*, and now this? In this so-called "holiday of freedom," where is *my* freedom?

I mentally put my friend on hold for a (*cont. on p. 3*)

OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE

Rabbi Idan Scher

About six months ago, my family and I moved from Baltimore, Maryland, to Ottawa, Ontario, so that I could assume the position of Rabbi in one of the synagogues here.

Ottawa has been quite different from Baltimore. We love it here, but everything seems new. The cultures of the cities in general, and of the Jewish communities more specifically, are two very different worlds.

Back in Baltimore, my wife and I were part of a population of almost 100,000 Jews. The Ottawa community is much, much smaller. There is very little comparison between being two of so many in Baltimore and being community leaders in a much smaller collective like Ottawa.

Since our move, we are constantly asked by others how we are adjusting. The answer we always give is that we have adjusted in the smoothest possible (*cont. on p. 4*)

PROGRESS NOT PERFECTION (*cont. from p. 1*)... siblings, beribboned, bowed, tulle, starched, suited! All of it perfect, except the price, which is, of course, perfect for heart palpitations -- but hey, what's life without some excitement?

In all of my years of making Passover I have been guilty of all of the above. While snow lay thick on the trees and the days were still short and cold, I organized, scrubbed and cleaned (toothpicks are really marvellous little cleaners) with unbelievable zest and perseverance. I admit, and I am not certain if I say this with pride or shame, that one year I scrubbed off all of the indicators on the stove -- you know high, low medium -- with a lethal mix of soft scrub and ammonia. Then I was incredulous that anyone was upset. "Gosh, you can SEE how high the flame is. You don't need a KNOB to tell you that! Do you think your grandmother had little indicators that told her how high or low to cook the chicken soup or farfel? Sheesh." I felt very religious, very holy, as I scrubbed and cleaned tubfuls of toys and poked toothpicks into every crevice. I looked proudly at my hands at the end of a GOOD day's work, skin puckered and the smell of Easy Off wafting past as I drifted off to sleep. (It was probably chemically induced -- but I wasn't a therapist specializing in addiction at that time.)

Finally, the magical night of the seder. The house shone. The books were all in order. The playroom was pristine. There were fresh linens on all the beds and the children were scrubbed and dressed in their holiday finery. Recalling from my youth, when a plastic tablecloth was unheard of, I always held my breath until the first cup of magenta wine spilled on the blinding snow white tablecloth. To my mother's credit, she made the same joke year after year. "Good, now I can relax."

Back to our seder, where things happen to make it clear that perfection isn't always possible. Potatoes -- shoot, did I forget to make those? Quick, boil the water and slice the potatoes small so that they will cook on time! Or one year, the shank bone -- I thought for sure I had ordered it from the butcher. Oh no, that must have been the moment that the baby threw up and the toddler had to go to the bathroom. No shank bone. Is Passover ruined? Am I a bad Jew? A sinner? A bad member of the exalted tribe?

Blessedly, the years continue to pass, and, with time, I hope I have gained more wisdom and learned to appreciate imperfection. Let's look at this wonderful holiday of Passover and what it really means. We, the Chosen People, left Egypt on a moment's whim -- without even enough time to bake loaves of bread, the

staple of life. Instead we had flat, misshapen, big, clumsy crackers that did not even rise. We ran with only what we could handle and proceeded on a forty YEAR journey until we reached our destination. There was no instant perfection, no immediate panacea, just trials, tribulations, tears, retributions, forgiveness and slow progress. Even after the open miracles of the ten plagues, the nation of Israel was still traumatized and questioned their faith and even questioned God.

Perfection for Passover? Far from it. Instead, the exodus from Egypt, which is something that we are commanded to remember every day and which we mention twice daily in our prayers, was a journey of the most fundamental type. A literal journey across the desert and the figurative journey of our lives, which do not -- nor should not -- proceed with perfection and the quest for it.

This Passover, let us focus on the beauty of the process -- the process of getting ready and the memories that we can create with this time. Let us focus on the proceedings of the holiday itself, with its unique foods, tastes, textures, songs and customs. Lean into the pillows and don't fret if they don't match. Cook more simply and allow little and big hands a chance at culinary creativity. Let us focus on the process that our children are engaged in at this moment -- walking, talking, and learning to read, to ride a bike, to question, to ponder the world and their place in it. Let us act like the Jews of the Holy Temple -- the Temple that did not have stairs to the altar but rather a ramp; for on a ramp one must always go up, for staying stationary will cause one to fall back. Progress not perfection -- the hallmark of an individual -- and of our nation.

Debbie Akerman of Passaic, NJ, is a social worker whose work focuses on addiction, recovery and trauma. A wife and mother to 11 biologic and 8 chosen children, Debbie is currently a PhD student working on her dissertation in Social Welfare. Debbie Akerman brings her own personal experience of trauma and loss to her work and now to the public sphere as an inspirational speaker. To learn more about Debbie, visit her website DebbieAkerman.com or contact her at hdebbieakerman@gmail.com

**NJOP wishes you and
yours a very
Happy Passover**



NOW WE ARE FREE (cont. from p. 1)... moment while I contemplate philosophy. One of the laws of the seder is that we must lean during parts of it. We are now a free people, and we must go through the seder with that mentality. In the days of aristocracy, only the wealthy and those who had lives of leisure could lean while they ate, and we too are now counted amongst those people.

What is this leisure we speak of? It is the leisure to properly contemplate the Hagaddah and the personal freedom we have been given. This, of course, is in stark contrast to our 21st century mindset of freedom which means sitting on a beach somewhere with a little umbrella drink and no iPhones to bug us. On Passover, that is not quite the freedom for which we strive. On Passover, we strive for freedom from the everyday limitations that keep us from seeing the glory of G-d. Now that we are a free and leisurely people, we now have the time to get around to all of those spiritual matters that we don't have time for in our busy, busy everyday lives. On the seder night, we are set free from these distractions. We are free from the limitations that include our pettiness, our iPhones, our focus on "I can't do that," and anything else that prevents us from reaching for higher spiritual growth.

On Passover, we lean! We lean, we let go, and we connect to our Maker. We lean to connect to the One Who redeemed the Jewish people. We lean and let go of whatever is going on outside of the seder room. We lean to sit back, relax, and remember that this night is about the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. We indulge in the leisure and freedom to explore who we are and what we are spiritually capable of being.

Jewish people were enslaved to the Egyptians, and then, in one night, G-d swept in and freed us from captivity. We are supposed to enact the seder as if we ourselves are coming out of slavery. In a holiday filled with cleaning every corner of the house, preparing pounds of lettuce and matzah, cooking without any kind of bread product, being

trapped in an hours-long meal with very specific guidelines, and starving for carbs for 8 days...where does the freedom part come in? What does freedom mean to G-d?

Now back to my friend, still on hold.

I straighten up and brush that little devil off my shoulder. I am, after all, preparing myself to be a free woman. I let go of my petty thoughts and gripes. I embrace the idea that this is a time to connect to my fellow Jew, a Jew who needs a place for the seder. "Sure," I say, "we would love to have you!"

I look down at the lettuce waiting to be finished. Okay, I am not totally free, but I look forward to sitting down and leaning in a few hours. I am almost there.

Devorah Avrukin lives in Palo Alto, CA. In addition to being a full time mom, she teaches 7th and 8th Grade English and History at South Peninsula Hebrew Day School. She has contributed articles to Chabad.org and JewishMom.com.

Passover Crepes With Mushroom Sauce Rachel Goldberg

5 eggs	1/2 cup of potato starch
pinch of salt	3 tablespoons of water

Mix all ingredients. Heat a small circular skillet with a bit of oil. Pour in some of the batter. Pick up the pan and rotate it, so the crepe leaf is thin. Once it has cooked through (about 40 seconds to 1 min) pick up the pan and bang the leaf out on to a clean dish towel. Repeat until all batter is used up.

Filling: Boil 4 potatoes, mash with fried onions and salt. Fill leaves with potato mixture, fry.

Mushroom Sauce:

2 onions	2 cups diced mushrooms
2 heaping tablespoons of potato starch	
1 teaspoon of sugar	1 cup water
1/4 cup of dry white wine	salt and pepper to taste

Saute 2 onions, add 2 cups of diced mushrooms. Add salt and pepper to taste + 1 teaspoon of sugar. Slowly stir in 3/4 cup of water + 1/4 cup of dry white wine. Add 2 tablespoons of potato starch mixed with 1/4 cup of cold water. Stir constantly until mixture thickens (about 2 minutes). Pour over crepes and serve immediately. Garnish with fresh parsley, if desired.

For more Passover recipes, visit
<http://njop.org/resources/holidays/complete-guide-to-holidays/passover1/recipes/>



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OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE (cont. from p. 1)...way due to the wonderful people in our community. However, there have certainly been challenges. There have surely been times when we have been forced to “sink or swim.” But, these instances have given us the opportunity to broaden our horizons in ways we never have had to before, and have allowed us to grow, hopefully, into more sensitive and sophisticated people.

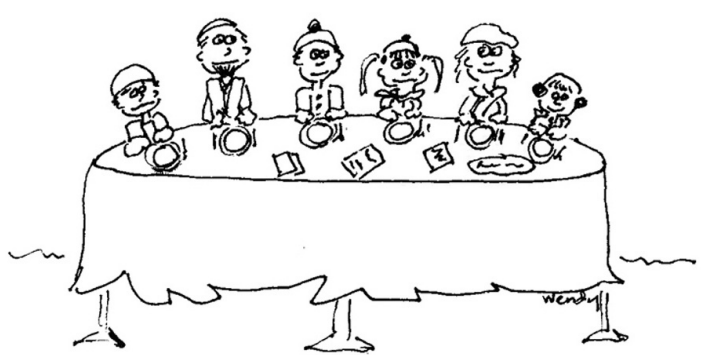
Transcending one’s comfort zone to realize one’s potential is an important theme of Passover. One of the

most popular verses in the Passover Haggadah goes something like this: “In every generation all are obligated to see themselves as having come out of Egypt.”

How are we, who have no specific recollection of coming out of Egypt, supposed to relate to such a concept? Perhaps the exodus from Egypt being referenced in this verse refers not merely to the physical freedom we enjoyed upon leaving the slavery of Egypt so many years ago, but is rather a call to focus on freeing ourselves from the shackles of everything that may impede us throughout our lives. The “Egypt” of this verse may be symbolic of any mindset or set of circumstances that is keeping us from achieving our potential. It is on Pesach that we are tasked with the all important endeavor of focusing on freeing ourselves from this type of slavery.

Pesach is the time to think, what can I improve on? How can I make progress? How do I build on past success to become everything I know I can be? Pesach is about stepping out of our comfort zone to take one step closer to becoming the best possible version of ourselves.

Rabbi Idan Scher started out as campus Rabbi at University of Maryland Baltimore County. Six months ago, Rabbi Scher and his family moved to Ottawa, Ontario, to assume the position of Associate Rabbi at Congregation Machzikei Hadas.



BRRR... Celebrating Passover in Ottawa. is really different from celebrating in Baltimore!

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

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<p>Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message</p> 	<p>JEWISH TWEETS & TREATS</p>
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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