

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

I WANT TO BE A MATZAH

Chaya Houpt

I just heard this awesome story from Rabbi Hanoch Teller about a rabbi who realized right before the seder that his housekeeper had fed all the *shmurah matzah* to his children for breakfast. [Literally “guarded matzah,” *shmurah matzah* is matzah that has been specially supervised since before the wheat was cut to make certain that it did not become *chametz*. This practice is based on Exodus 12:17, “And you shall guard the matzot...” It is preferable to use *shmurah matzah* for the seder.]

This was the 18th century. Those [*shmurah matzot*] weren't matzot that the rabbi had ordered from his shul or picked up at the local kosher mart. He had cut the wheat himself and separated the chaff and ground the grain to flour and mixed it with water and kneaded the dough and shaped the matzot and poked them full of holes to discourage rising and rushed them into a hot oven and baked them to perfection. And through all this hard work, I'm sure he meditated on the symbolism of matzah, yearning to be “flat” and free of the *chametz* [leaven] of ego and striving to perform the mitzvah with beauty and clarity. And in an instant, all that work was gone, munched (*cont. on p. 2*)



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 aloe 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 (*cont. on p. 2*)

FREEDOM IN OUR TIMES

Michael Bloch

On the 15th of Nissan, Jews around the world celebrate the holiday of Pesach. The centrality of the holiday is unquestioned: along with Yom Kippur, it is the most popularly observed holiday, one that even very unobservant Jews celebrate. Pesach symbolizes the liberation of the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt and celebrates G-d's intervention on behalf of His people. However, it also serves as a paradigm of the multiple persecutions that the Jews have had to endure throughout the centuries, and celebrates our renewed victories.

Many are the reasons why even Jews distant from their Judaism understand that Pesach is so important. On the simplest level, (in the words of the Pesach Haggadah) “*Avadim hayinu l'Pharaoh b'Mitzrayim*,” “We were once the slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt. And if our fathers had not been liberated, then we would still be there.” More significantly, the liberation from Egypt is one of (*cont. on p. 3*)

MATZAH (cont. from p. 1)...into breakfast crumbs. But the rabbi didn't freak out and yell at his employee; he just asked his wife to obtain some regular matzot, and they proceeded with the seder.

I shifted in discomfort when I heard this story. I thought of how I might react if, say, a side dish for the seder meal doesn't turn out the way I want.

I have big plans for the weeks ahead. I want to empty myself of all the traits that hold me back. I want to fill myself with lots of ideas and insights and inspiration. I want to review the details of my holiday plans so I don't get to Pesach and think, "Wait, how much *maror* (bitter herbs) do I have to eat? What [actions] can I do on *Yom Tov?*" etc." I want my house to be free of *chametz* and clean and beautiful for the holiday. I want to find beautiful clothes for my kids and myself to wear. I want to plan fun things to do together during *Chol Ha'moed* [days 3-6 of the holiday of Passover]. I want to host my visiting father-in-law in comfort and serenity. I want to plan and cook delicious, nourishing meals. I want to be organized enough so that I don't have to keep sending my husband out for things I forgot to buy. I want to have an inspiring, joyous seder and I want to be well-rested enough to enjoy it.

But these are just my goals. Like the rabbi whose matzah didn't meet the fate he'd intended, I actually have no idea what the reality will be. I don't know what's in G-d's plan for me. I have no control over anything that happens. The only thing I have control over is my attitude.

And that's the incredible victory I heard in the [rabbi's *shmurah*] matzah story. *Chametz* represents haughtiness and ego. When I empty my home of *chametz* and refrain from putting it in my body for a week, I have the opportunity to do the inner work as well: to find the vestiges of arrogance, dominance and entitlement inside myself and say, "This isn't who I want to be anymore." I can re-imagine myself as a matzah: gloriously flat! Humble, empty, present, still, accepting.

The holy rabbi of the story faced a test of having his dreams hit up against G-d's reality. He could have ignored the message of the matzah and yelled at the housekeeper, "What do you mean you fed the *shmurah matzah* to my kids??? That wasn't supposed to happen! What's wrong with you?" He could have sunk into despair and sulked through the seder. But, instead, he accepted the reality, and recognized that while all his physical labor and efforts didn't result in a matzah that he could make a blessing on and eat at the seder, his spiritual work was not in vain. He didn't get to eat the perfect matzah, but he did manage to *become* the perfect matzah.

Chaya Houtp blogs at allvictories.blogspot.com. She currently lives in Jerusalem with her husband and three children. "I Want To Be A Matzah" was published on her blog in March 2011.

SECRET (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 (*afikoman*, 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.*

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



FREEDOM (cont. from p. 1)...the events that shaped the destiny of the Jewish people. It was the proof of G-d's interest in the well-being of the Jewish people and of His intervention in history to fulfill the covenant made with our forefathers.

But is that all? Is Pesach simply the commemoration of our glorious past, or is there more? Is there a lesson in Passover that would be relevant to us today, in our daily lives?

I want to argue here that the liberation from Egypt was not only an historical event but is actually a continuous process. Each generation needs to gain its own freedom, although on different terms.

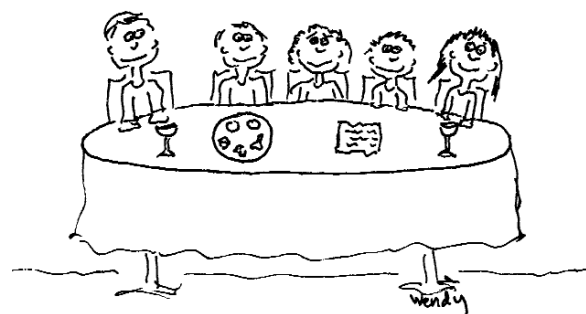
It is well established in our tradition that past events have a meaning which go well beyond their historical dimensions. For instance, before the eighth plague, locusts, G-d tells Moses (Exodus 10:2) that the plagues are signs "for your children and the children of your children." Later, G-d makes it clear (Deuteronomy 29:14) that the covenant with the Israelites is between those that were standing there to hear at the time, and even those who are not here yet (i.e. the future generations). Finally, the Talmud (*Pesachim* 116b) relates that "In every generation, a man must regard himself as if he came forth out of Egypt."

Therefore, we need to understand what gaining our freedom means to us today. To do that, we must realize that there are different types of freedom. In Egypt, the Hebrews asked to leave of Egypt for three days to celebrate their tradition, and it was refused. "Slaves don't rest," said Pharaoh. Today, physical freedom is often taken as a given. But while we may be physically free, we are often not free spiritually. Society around us frames our lives (and often controls it) and encourages certain modes of behavior, while we often don't even realize it.

Spiritual freedom, or free will, is often defined as the human's ability to choose between two paths based on certain values that will help us decide which decision is best. Unfortunately, very often, the society in which we live, imposes on us some of its own values, which then limit our decisions and restrict our behavior. Yet we all feel there must be more to free will than simply following along.

Take, for instance, the "modern" idea that professional ambition is a prime driver in life, and that everything should be put aside to pursue one's career. I have been meeting an increasing number of people who are quite successful, but totally unsatisfied, because they finally realize that there is more to life than working 70 hours a week, pursuing money and promotions. Too often, we don't ask the question "What do we really want from life?" but simply stop thinking and accept society-imposed values.

Entertainment is another area where the society at large might be mistaken. One survey shows that kids today spend more time during the week in front of a TV or on the computer, than studying in school. Another survey concludes that (*cont. on p. 4*)



"ON PASSOVER WE RECALL THE ANCIENT ISRAELITE SLAVES AND RESOLVE NEVER TO BECOME ENSLAVED OURSELVES TO CONTEMPORARY LIFE."

SECRET (cont. from p. 2)...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.

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FREEDOM (cont. from p. 3)...the average American family spends less than one hour per week discussing matters of interest to the family other than the trivial ones (picking up the kids, shopping, etc.). It is impossible to disconnect these disturbing practices from the increasing number of divorces, or the growing gap between a small elite, which possesses the greatest part of this country's wealth, and the masses of uneducated and impoverished people.

Jewish tradition has much to say on how one decides to lead his or her life. A simple example is the notion of Shabbat. On this day of rest, one turns away from all distractions in modern life to focus on regenerating oneself through discussions within the family. On this day, we focus on the spiritual, through study and prayer. This is so radically different from traditional entertainment. One of the elements of the Shabbat ritual, wine, also illustrates how different Jewish tradition can be from outside practices. We use wine to sanctify the day and mark its special significance. That same night, bars everywhere will serve gallons of wine, beer and other alcoholic drinks to allow people to stop thinking, in the hope of offering them superficial enjoyment.

In actuality, we are facing the same problem that our ancestors did: we live in a society that worships false gods. Only today, the sun and the Nile have been replaced by television and unbridled ambition. Clearly, the choice for a modern Jew is not to reject society as a whole: TV and ambition have their place in society when properly mastered. TV and ambition "simply" need

to be used in the right context and for the right purpose. It is clear to me that Jewish tradition has much to teach here. The laws of kashrut, for instance, teach us self-discipline, how to make use of the world while realizing where good things come from; how to use these good things and why. Spiritual freedom, therefore, means liberating ourselves from society-imposed values, taking a step back, and making our own choices. This is in the spirit of our tradition that tells us in Deuteronomy (30:15): "I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil. And you shall choose life." It also means that those of us lacking background will need to learn, to increase our knowledge of Judaism, its philosophy, traditions and observance.

This is a long journey, just as the Hebrews in the desert needed seven weeks and lots of learning to be deemed worthy of receiving the Ten Commandments, and many more years before entering Israel. Rabbi Tarphon says in Ethics of the Fathers (2:21), "You are not required to complete the task, but neither are you free to completely withdraw from it," and his colleague, Hillel, says (Ethics of the Fathers 1:14), "And if not now, then when?"--This is the challenge of freedom in our times.

Michael Bloch, Ph.D., a partner in an international business consulting firm, recently moved with his family from Belgium and France, and now resides in Raanana, Israel. This article was originally published in the Passover Bereishith 1997.



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