

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בס"ד

בראשית

SEDER WITH UNCLE MICKEY

Tal Gilboa

I did not grow up in an observant home. In fact, my childhood home was only barely traditional. I went to afternoon Hebrew school and my brother had a Bar Mitzvah. We lit Chanukah candles and went to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Passover just happened. My mother would say that she "spent a lot" if her Passover order was \$50 (today, that's my last mad dash total!), and we either held some form of a seder at home and/or went to one at the synagogue. During the rest of the holiday, my sandwiches were made with matzah, but there was no guarantee that everything else was *chometz* (leaven) free.

When I had a family of my own, I decided to send my children to the community day school from a very young age. Soon they came home and started teaching me about Jewish living, so grew my desire to have a more traditional (eventually fully observant) home. First kosher meat came into the house, then we began separating milk and meat and, next we started changing our dishes for Passover. Every year something new was added. Eventually, I became

(cont. on p. 2)

"UNCLE MICKEY"

"I'm starting the seder.
Anyone joining me?"



FINDING NEW MEANING IN PASSOVER

Laura Frayman Wagensberg

Over the years, Passover has brought a mix of emotions for me. On the one hand, I feel excited and uplifted; on the other hand, I am thoroughly exhausted, and even confused.

We are told in the Haggadah that we are to feel as if we ourselves came out of Egypt. This has always bothered me. How are we supposed to imagine that we were there? Personally, I have never even been to Egypt. And even if somebody has been there, how would a person be able envision being there 3,300 years ago and living through all those experiences?

Every year I search for a significant lesson from Passover, one that I can take with me for the rest of the year and for the rest of my life. At the same time, I also wonder what meaningful message I can share with my family and friends at the seder table.

This year, two points stood out and

(cont. on p. 3)

SPAIN WANTS US BACK

Rabbi Daniel Friedman

Last year, the Spanish government announced that it will offer instant citizenship to any Jew of Spanish descent whose ancestors were expelled in 1492. Similarly, a senior Egyptian official invited all the Jews who were expelled by Nasser to return to the country. What is our reaction to these munificent gestures? Suddenly we are overcome by warm fuzzy feelings of nostalgia for our ancestral countries. The distant, but somehow familiar memories of culture, food and life flow through our veins as we yearn to return to the exotic places that we once called home.

On Passover, we celebrate our freedom from Egypt more than 3,300 years ago. In the middle of the night, Pharaoh drove the Israelites out of the land, barely allowing us enough time to make sandwiches for the trip. Not that we were sad to see the last of Egypt – we had suffered miserably as slaves for 210 years. But being physically expelled from the land had a

(cont. on p. 2)

UNCLE MICKEY (cont. from p. 1)...

Shomeret Shabbat (Sabbath observant). My second husband is also a *Baal Teshuva* (one who has become more traditional) and is also observant.

Today in our home, Passover cleaning mode begins the day after Purim. I start with the bedrooms and make my way through the house, until no *chometz* can be found. Before I became observant, I thought people were *meshugah* (crazy) for cleaning drawers in the bedrooms and checking their pockets for *chometz*, etc. That was until the day I opened a drawer in my daughter's room and found Cheerios stuck to a blanket. My daughter, who lives in Israel, would only come home for Passover and summer vacation! To think that those Cheerios were stuck on that blanket since the end of August--yuck! At first I was in shock, and then panic mode began. I realized that I had become one of the *meshuganehs* myself--I had to clean every cupboard, every drawer, vacuum the beds and check coat pockets, and Passover was just around the corner!

Those few Cheerios, and the sense of panic that they created in me, really made me want to go away for Passover. I wanted to "sell" my house (the *chametz* within), lock the doors and go someplace where I would be pampered and taken care of instead of being in a cleaning and cooking frenzy for an entire month! I raised the idea with my husband, who looked at me and said, "And where would our children go? Where would my cousins go? Where would my 91 year old uncle go?"

Uncle Mickey was the one that hit home immediately. For a 91 year old, he was in pretty good shape. He did not need a cane, could be left alone for a couple of hours and enjoyed a *l'chaim* or two on Shabbat. His memory, however, was not great, except on seder night.

It was, and still is, amazing that Uncle Mickey is in the shape that he is. You see, Uncle Mickey is a Holocaust survivor. He was taken by the Hungarians to a camp of their own before he was shipped off to Auschwitz. He felt that he was only days away from the gas chamber before the camp was liberated. After the war, Uncle Mickey took the first boat he could to Canada and joined his brother in Montreal. In 1951, Uncle Mickey was set up on a blind date by a Jewish-Hungarian factory owner. It was love at first sight, and these two survivors began their life together in Montreal, where they raised their family. Shabbat, holidays and all the traditions were observed faithfully in their home. Today, my husband and I share many of our sacred moments with Uncle Mickey and his family.

When my husband asked me what would happen to Uncle Mickey should we go away for the seder, I thought of how much a part of our seder Uncle Mickey had become. On seder night, Uncle Mickey takes his seat next

to my husband. The joy in his eyes lights up the room. He cannot wait to begin and often starts the seder on his own even before everyone is seated! As noted above, Uncle Mickey's memory is not the best--a true statement for everything, except the Haggadah. So many of the words, prayers and songs flow from his mouth with ease; it is as if he is a young man back in Hungary. After the first year that he celebrated at our home, he told his daughter that he would not go to anyone else's home for a seder, just to ours.

Uncle Mickey is now 95 years old, and the thought of cleaning the house and getting ready for Passover turns my hair grey faster than usual. I continue to flip through the Passover travel ads in the magazines and newspapers and dream of going away, not having to cook and clean, being fed, being entertained and being able to sit back with a good book. Then I think of Uncle Mickey and know that it is still a dream. Maybe one day, but hopefully not too soon.

Tal Gilboa lives in Montreal, Canada, where she is part of the administrative team and coordinator of student services at Yeshiva Gedola elementary school. The proud mom of a 3+2 blended family, she is also completing the McGill Graduate Education Leadership certificate and is involved in her local shul including being the program coordinator for the group bat mitzvah program.

SPAIN (cont. from p. 1)... curious effect on the mind-set of the people. At the end of the day, it was not our choice. In fact, our Sages tell us that many people were so entrenched in Egyptian culture that they refused to leave and perished during the plague of darkness.

But even those who left with the Exodus of the Israelites could not let go. "We remember the fish that we would eat freely in Egypt; the cucumbers and the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic," the people complained to Moses (Numbers 11:5). They were eating manna from heaven and they still pined for life in Egypt! And, as Rashi points out, they weren't just talking about physical food -- they missed the Egyptian culture.

Why do we gather around the seder table each year and recall our flight to freedom? Because Exodus is not a one-time affair. Exodus is a process with which we are constantly engaged...even to this day. We are all products of our genetic and environmental DNA--our nature and nurture. Some of it is positive, some of it is negative. Everybody has 'hang-ups' or bonds of slavery from which they need to break free. Passover is our annual reminder that it is okay to let go, to move on and to embrace our 'new selves.'

This explains why, somehow, despite our quality of life, free from all religious and physical

(cont. on p. 4)

FINDING NEW MEANING

(cont. from p. 1)...caught my attention. First of all, it occurred to me that God did not rescue the Jewish people until they called out to Him for help. Secondly, the Jews had to decide what they would pack and take with them.

These two ideas made me think about how relevant this holiday is for us even today in our modern world. Regarding the first thought, we all go through our "Mitzrayims" (*Mitzrayim* is the Hebrew name of Egypt, but also translates as "from the narrow places") in the journeys of our lives. These can be trying life situations or, for many today, enslavement to internal urges. Some of us are imprisoned by uncontrollable urges for food, while others are shackled to alcohol, and yet there are people who are caged in to drugs, or whatever addiction it may be.

Passover has taught me that if I really want to escape my own prisons, I have to call out to God from the depths of my heart. This also means acknowledging that help can come from those who have been Divinely gifted with talents to help pull people out from their darkness. There are many support groups made up of God's angels that can really help, so long as we ask for it.

Looking at our own lives, at the challenges we have faced or are facing, is how we can see ourselves as coming out of Egypt. Our sages never said to envision ourselves coming out of "The Land of Egypt," but rather stressed visualizing ourselves coming out of "Egypt," Egypt represents any thing to which we feel chained.

By envisioning our personal redemption, we fill ourselves with hope that we can overcome our challenges. With this newfound awareness that we are not alone and need to depend on a Higher Power, we can take the necessary steps to get there.

When I noticed the fact that the Jews had to decide what to pack and take with them when they left Egypt, I had to ask myself what it is that I would take with me if I had one piece of luggage limited to fifty pounds with which to leave my home suddenly and never return.

It is a question that makes me consider what my true valuables are. I would like to share with you my response to the question. If I had to choose one thing to pack, beyond the basic necessities of food and clothing, it would

RELIVING THE EXODUS



be the statue of flowers that my husband gave me for our second wedding anniversary. I love this gift for two reasons. One, is that the flowers are bright and cheery, just looking at them makes me smile. Secondly, when I look at them, I remember how much effort my husband put into getting them for me. He searched high and low because he knew I loved them. These flowers represent how precious my family is to me, and how my family is the most valuable thing in my life.

Once I focused on the importance of my family, I realized how easily one can get caught up in the narrow focus of preparing for the holiday. That is why, this Passover, my personal resolution is going to be to try and spend more quantity and quality time with my family and friends.

Life is a journey, and our spiritual journey is meant to take us from slavery to freedom. It is important to remember that, at the end of the journey, no one wants a tombstone marked, "She was a successful lawyer or wealthy computer programmer." Rather, when all is said and done, one wishes to be remembered by the beautiful and meaningful relationships one established. It would mean everything to me if the best description of me is as a devoted wife, loving mother, and good friend.

May this Passover serve as a springboard of for self-growth and true values, and may we experience personal and global redemption.

Happy Passover.

Laura Wagenseg, a native of Ohio and a former elementary school teacher, now lives in Jerusalem, Israel.

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



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DATED MATERIAL

SPAIN (cont. from p. 2)... persecution, living in an age of freedom that our forebears could only have dreamed of, we still yearn for life *'in der Heim'* (in our homeland) whether that means Ashkenazic Europe or Sefardic Spain or Mizrachi Egypt. Truth is, life was never that great *'in der Heim.'* Look at the Middle Ages, when we were expelled from, and invited back to, France and England a number of times. And each time we fell for it, because we just couldn't let go.

On Passover, we are instructed to remind ourselves that 'this year we are free.' Life is better than ever, and one day we will be completely freed of the shackles of our external and internal taskmasters. Let us embrace the freedoms that we have, without looking back. Let us strive for even

greater freedoms as we escape our personal bonds. And let us pray for the ultimate freedom – next year in Jerusalem.

This article was originally published in the L.A. Jewish Journal last year.

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