

# BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## PESACH NOSTALGIA

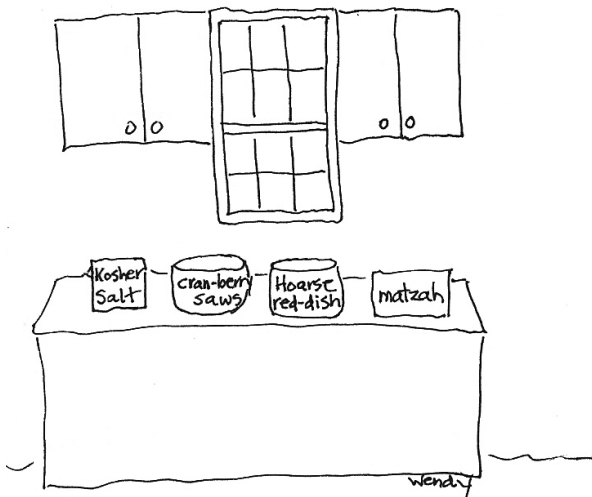
Rabbi Avi Billet

When I think of Passover (Pesach), the most vivid memories I have are about turning the house over in preparation for the family seder and the role my grandparents would play leading up to that exciting evening. They always spent the holiday with us and would often come a few days in advance of the holiday to help with the cleaning and cooking. And of course, they looked forward to spending quality time with us, their grandkids.

My grandmother would chase us around the house helping us clean (and probably wound up doing most of the cleaning herself). Most of her time, however, was spent preparing goodies that conform to the holiday rules of no *chametz* (leaven - flour and water). I really thought she had invented potato starch and matzo meal.

She made rolls and honey cookies and muffins and noodles. And she used eggs -- boy did she use eggs! From her classic "grammy-eggs" and matzah brei, to her noodles for the chicken soup, to the crepe-like omelettes that became the outside of her famous cheese blintzes. Many of my memories of those days are colored yellow. Grammy doesn't do too much cooking now, but we still give her credit for all the delicacies we have grown accustomed to eating on Passover.

My grandfather also had an important role in the kitchen, though his creativity was limited to the things he made best: (cont. on p. 2)



GRAMMY'S UNIQUE SENSE OF HUMOR WOULD COME OUT IN THE WAY HE LABELED SOME OF THE JARS FOR PASSOVER

## OUT OF EGYPT

Joyce Bloom

Passover is coming, and this year, as has been the case for the last twenty plus years, I have begun remembering my own personal exodus from Egypt in order to receive the Torah. It was 1985. I had been living in Cairo on and off for two years. I thought I was going there to establish a business. Little did I know, at that time, of the *hashgacha pratit* (personal Divine intervention) that awaited me.

I grew up in a traditional household. I spent lots of Shabbat lunches with my grandparents and their friends. For many years, I took wonderful after-dinner walks with my grandfather who told me stories on those walks --stories I would later find in the *Agadah* (Talmudic stories) and *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers). He talked, I listened; we walked.

I remember being fretful on the way to my grandparents' apartment in Rockaway Park to inform them that I had decided to live in Egypt. I was bracing for some unhappiness on their part since I vaguely remembered hearing about some scriptural prohibition about "not going back that way again." To my amazement, my grandfather had a good belly laugh (cont. on p. 3)

## FLATBUSH, MATZO BALLS & THE JEWISH FUTURE

Meir Solomon

We lived in Brooklyn. Our neighborhood, Flatbush, was entirely inhabited by two types of Jews: old Jews who couldn't afford to relocate to Miami and young Jewish couples who couldn't afford to relocate to Long Island. This was fine with Justin, my brother, and me. We had friends with whom we played ball and old people who would stuff *tzedaka* into our blue and white JNF *pushkes*. In tonier neighborhoods our building would be located at the end of a cul-de-sac, but in Flatbush, we had dead-ends instead.

Growing up Jewish in Brooklyn was like baseball. It was comprised of 4 bases: **Home**; **First** - Public School, each morning's destination; **Second** -Talmud Torah two afternoons a week; **Third** - playing ball. Even if I wanted to escape my faith, how could I? In my Brooklyn the bases weren't square, they were a constellation of Stars of David.

Several facts about apartments in my building: each was rent-controlled, and each was guarded by a small *mezzuza* on the front door. Usually the *mezzuza* was of inverse importance to its size as there was *only* one for each house-some were even paint-free! In every dining room there was a breakfront drawer (cont. on p. 2)

**PESACH NOSTALGIA** (cont. from p. 1)...charoset, cranberry sauce, horseradish, and the white, super-bitter marmor that he would grind by hand and seal in a glass jar. His unique sense of humor would come out merely in the way he labeled some of the jars: "Cran-berry Saws" and "Hoarse Red Dish" became household pronunciations for the two red specialties his European hands would grind on their own.

I have never had charoset quite like Grampy's, because he would peel and chop the apples with a knife (no grating!) and had his own unique blend of nuts and wine that he must have brought from the old country (when he came in 1938). I am still traumatized by his super-hot marmor, and, to this day, I have difficulty even *trying* to eat it.

Grampy would also take on menial tasks no one else wanted to do. He would clean our garage or our wine closet (which was usually loaded with new bottles from all the gift-baskets brought a month earlier on Purim). One time he spent a day cleaning the dark spots on our pots and cooking sheets with sandpaper from the local hardware store. While Grampy is no longer with us, we still fondly remember him and the role he played leading up to and at the seder.

What can I say about the seder? Every family has their own set of memories. It is quite amazing how the seder is one ritual that has carried through all walks of Jewish life. I would guess that it has much to do with the family component, the reunion that enables the family to experience the Exodus from Egypt together.

The Exodus is, after all, what really made the Jewish people. From a group of slaves with no identity beyond a common ancestry, we experienced the plagues, the Exodus, the splitting of the sea and the revelation at Sinai together to become the first monotheistic nation that shared both a belief in G-d and a family dynamic. Indeed, the Jewish people are really one big family, and we remind ourselves of this on a yearly basis when we gather at the seder.

At the seder, we invite everyone who is hungry to come and eat. We pay tribute to our ancestors, and tribute to future generations, through the "four sons," which refers to different kinds of children who all absorb information in different ways. The Haggadah is a story, and the seder is the ultimate story time.

For me, the most poignant moments in the seder are the two declarations of "*B'chol dor vador*": (1) In every generation the enemies of the Jewish people try to destroy us, but G-d saves us, and we've survived until this day, and (2) In every generation we are supposed to try and experience the Exodus at the seder. Some have the custom to wear traditional garb and act out this role as

**FLATBUSH** (cont. from p. 1)... stuffed with pastel-colored satin *yarmulkas* recalling a family *simcha*, and in the living room a carved miniature of a *Bubbe* wearing a head-scarf and a *Zeide* carrying a *siddur*.

My elementary school, P.S. 152, was perhaps the most Jewish of my stops. Of the 35 kids in my class, all but 3 were Jewish, and our teachers, in successive years, were named Schwartz, Klein, and Rotter. And the best Yiddish of all was spoken by my music teacher, Mr. Johnson, a Baptist African-American from Oklahoma.

Hebrew school had fewer Jews but more Jewish content. Many synagogues in those days in Brooklyn preferred to employ rabbis decidedly more observant than the congregation. It was one thing for a member to eat non-kosher food or keep *Shabbat* less than rigorously, but it would be a *shanda* (shame) if the rabbi were to commit such a sacrilege, and Rabbi Weitzman, my first rabbi, was no exception. All of our Hebrew school teachers were observant. We prayed from the Birnbaum *siddur*, the precursor to Artscroll, the now ubiquitous prayerbook in American Orthodox shuls.

Ball playing on the dead-end street that ran between the red brick apartments of my Flatbush was a daily event interrupted only by "Acts of G-d" such as snow or rain, or Jewish holidays. As bad weather occurs randomly, perfect ball-playing weather was expected on the High Holidays. Annually, we would stand around in our *Yom Tov* suits, hands in our pockets, and question why G-d would so cruelly test us, sending such glorious weather on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Hey, if Sandy Koufax could pass on pitching in the World Series, I could take a day off as well.

they literally walk around the table with matzah on their backs pretending that they are currently leaving Egypt! Others invoke this feeling through the intense recitation of these statements and through telling the story with different interpretations and teachings based on the ancient words of the Haggadah.

My parents and siblings are no longer together for the seders. Some of us live abroad or are married and are spending the holiday with extended family. But wherever I am, and I am sure this is true for my siblings as well, there is one ritual that we inherited from our grandfather that we always remember to share with those around our seder table.

When we recall the ten plagues in the Haggadah, the text speaks of a three word acronym created by Rabbi Judah to help remember the ten plagues -- "*D'tzakh A'dash B'achav*." My grandfather, who smuggled the famous blood libel edition of the Nazi propaganda paper *Der Sturmer* out of Germany, would always mention the blood libels at this point in the seder. He said that Rabbi Judah's acronym stood for an accusation by the accusers, and was also a response by the Jews.

While I only remember the first three words of the accusation, "*Dam Tzree'chim Kool'chem*" -- All you [Jews] need blood, I remember the complete response to the accusers: "*Divrei Tzor'rim Kazav*" -- the words of the enemies are false, "*Alilat Dam Sheker*" -- the blood libels are false, "*Bnei Avraham Chalilah B'dam*" -- the children of Abraham would never touch blood!

I believe it was Ahad Ha'am (Russian Hebrew philosopher and essayist, 1856-1927) who said, "Thank G-d for the blood libels." He explained that anyone who knows anything about Judaism knows that Jews are absolutely forbidden to eat any blood. After years and years of hearing the enemies of the Jews make many terrible accusations against the Jewish people, we might come to feel that we are actually guilty and responsible for these horrible claims. But once we hear about the blood libels, which are so blatantly false and impossible to have ever taken place, we know the other lies our enemies have related about us are also just that - lies and falsehoods.

Indeed -- *B'chol dor vador* ("In every generation") they tried to destroy us. But we are still here. And as long as we keep the tradition alive and pass it on through the memories we create with our families, we will continue to survive, despite what the world tries to do to us.

*Chag Sameach*

*Rabbi Avi Billet writes educational initiatives for NJOP and is NJOP's Executive Learning partner. He is also a mohel.*

**OUT OF EGYPT** (cont. from p. 1)... at the news. He blessed me to "go in peace and come in peace and enjoy it as much as I could." Not the reaction I was expecting, but certainly a great relief. I was now able to set out on my journey with no personal or emotional obstacles. I felt great.

My arrival in Cairo in January 1984 was a bit of a shock. It seemed I had traveled 5,000 miles and just as many years back in history. Cars, people, animals all sharing the same roadway, barely any paved streets, fewer traffic lights, no fire hydrants was the norm. I had spent a whole year studying in order to be able to speak and understand Egyptian Arabic, but I hadn't realized that because I was so far from the cultural realities there, I would, for quite a while, understand all of the words but none of the sentences. The language and the culture were one, and I had only studied one half of the equation.

On my first trip, my reconnaissance trip, I climbed inside the Great Pyramid. I had read two books about pyramids and the possible benefits to a person's enlightenment from being inside the pyramid at the point of 'perfect north.' Again, I never expected what happened when I came out. As with all tours to the pyramids, my private guide led me to a papyrus shop. I looked at all the options and chose a piece of papyrus that had the Ten Commandments written on tablets in gold lettering. No pharaohs, no Horuses, instead, the first thing I bought in Egypt was the Hebrew tablets of the covenant.

Then I fainted. Water was supplied, and I was assured that it was just typical tourist dehydration. Did it occur to me that there are no coincidences at the time? Not consciously.



Learning to shop in Egypt was a big challenge. The first time I bought chicken I had to give it away. It was the first time that I realized I had ordered the death of a specific animal so I could eat it. I just couldn't do it. It was still warm when the seller gave it back to me. Needless to say, my relationship with the food I ate changed dramatically in Egypt.

My days and nights in Egypt were one vignette after another. I still recall them fondly.

In 1985, however, I packed my bags, said goodbye to the friends that I had made, left my really lovely apartment and boarded an airplane bound for New York, still thinking I'd just pick up where I'd left off, and maybe add some Torah study.

If you've read this far, you must be smiling, having by now realized that nothing at that time of my life was to work out quite as I expected.

By that time, I realized that I *needed* to study Torah. I had studied the New Testament in college as literature. I had read the Koran in preparation for my stay in the Middle East. I had studied a variety of other religions and philosophies in college and as a hobby. Something in Egypt, or maybe more correctly, everything in Egypt, made me realize that I had never given the same time or interest to the heritage that was mine. True, I followed the little that I was taught. I was certainly not marrying out, but I was not in a meaningful relationship with my people either. I had many friends, but no community. I had many interests, but no grounding. While I had a love for the work I did, I was detached from the game and its players since I seemed to be more interested in finding a Torah teacher.

Finding "my" teacher was not as easy as one would expect. On the suggestion of a friend, I approached one rabbi and then another and then another without finding "my teacher." Finally, I went to a Chabad class for women in the diamond district taught by Rabbi Shloma Majeski. I had found my entry point. Since then, I have had many more teachers who have helped to direct and guide me, who have taught and explained both law and concept to me.

I was additionally blessed that my grandparents were still alive to teach me as well. Although my grandfather and I sat rather than walked, he patiently showed me source and verse. He answered many questions and taught me to wait for the answers to some other questions. In time, my grandmother, who years earlier had declared that I'd never be a *balabusta*, took me into her kitchen.

As is, I suppose, the case with many or most *Ba'alei Teshuvah*, the more I learned, the more I started to observe. It has been some twenty plus years now since I left *Mitzraim* (Egypt).

I am hoping that this Pesach, at the latest, the A-lmighty will take me and all of us, out of *Galut* (exile).

*Chag Kasher v'Sameach*

*Joyce Bloom is the author of All I Can See, (2006, Remez Press) a mystical fable; a story of transition.*

**NJOP**  
wishes you a  
**Chag Kasher**  
**V'sameach**  
**(A Happy and Kosher Holiday)**



**FLATBUSH** (cont. from p. 2)...

The convergence of my favorite interests came in April. As Pop began to focus on the midpoint of the month and making the April 15<sup>th</sup> tax filing deadline, my brother and I geared up for the first nice Sunday of April and the midpoint of the Jewish month of *Nisan*, in other words: Little League baseball and the Pesach Seder, respectively.

Spring returned bearing these two events like gifts to the Solomon home. As not to interfere with the cycle of Jewish life, my kid brother and I belonged to a Jewish Little League conference. All games were played on Sunday, and no games were played on Pesach or Shavuot if these holidays happened to fall on Sunday. This too was fine with me. Chanukah may bear presents and Purim might have the best treats, but Pesach was the pinnacle of the Solomon family's Jewish year.

Our parents both came from proud, but under-educated, Jewish homes and ensured that Justin and I would have a solid Jewish upbringing. Consequently, it was left to me and my brother to lead the seder. We quickly ran through the lengthy part of the seder, making it all the way to the meal, and then proceeded to sing all the songs we learned at Hebrew School. What our seders lacked in length was made up for in enthusiasm and personally experiencing being taken out of Egypt. And of course, my mother's matzo balls! I never realized how much I treasured Mom's matzo balls until years later, several seders after I became observant, when I experienced a distressing feeling of betrayal and neglect at the first seder I attended at which they did not eat *G'brochts* (matzo meal mixed with any liquid). Seder soup is not soup without Matzo balls.

Jump ahead a generation. Again, I lead the seder, but now I am Pop, the Abba to two wonders, Dovid and Sima, and the husband to "Wonder Woman." My wife, Jenny (a doctor-she's my folks' favorite), makes the seder and follows Mom's special matzo ball recipe scrupulously-two eggs, salt, one box Streit's Matzo Ball mix). I lead the seder, much as Justin and I did back in Brooklyn, singing the same melodies that Rabbi Weitzman taught us almost 40 years ago and still longing to be in Jerusalem next year.

Of two things I am certain: soon our children will know more than their parents and will lead the telling of the Exodus, and soon all of Israel will sing "*This Year in Jerusalem*."

*Meir (Matt) Solomon, originally from Brooklyn, NY, now lives with his wife, two children, and dog in Passaic, NJ. A lawyer by training, he has worked as a political speechwriter, editor, and educator, bouncer and baseball coach.*



Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



*Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt of the National Jewish Outreach Program. 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 write or call: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 646-871-4444, e-mail [info@njop.org](mailto:info@njop.org) or visit [www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org).*

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DATED MATTER



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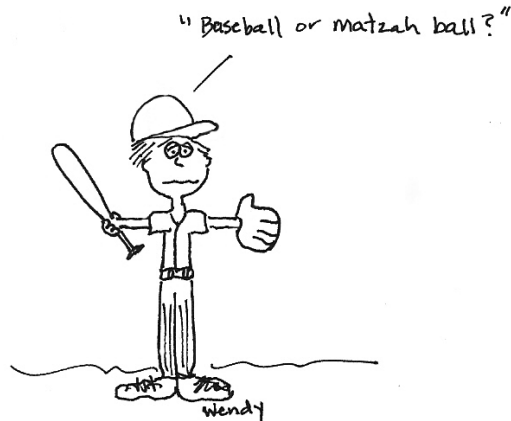
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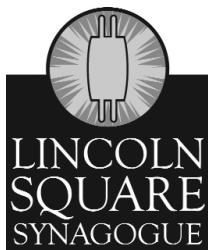


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