

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

YEARNING FOR THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Lori R. Cohen

Pesach--a time when we celebrate our release from bondage in Egypt by slaving away in the house and kitchen, cleaning and cooking. Pesach is not my favorite holiday.

I remember how hard my mother worked at Pesach. Truthfully, compared to Orthodox families, my upbringing was not that religious. But, of all my friends, our family was the most traditional. We changed the dishes, and took all the *chometz* out of the kitchen. My mother stuck half-empty bags of egg noodles, boxes of Tam Tams, canned peas and soups and whatever else we had, into baskets, and put the baskets in the basement. There they sat all Pesach, off-limits for a single week.

My mother cooked and cooked, making dozens of individual gefilte fish balls, grinding liver by hand, chopping and frying vegetables, and beating endless eggs for sponge cakes. The only thing not hand-made were the matzah balls; to this day, our matzah balls come from Manischewitz, or, preferably, Croyden House (we like their enclosed MSG mix better). We don't know how to make matzah balls from scratch, and we like them big and fluffy, not hard little golf balls.

And then there were the guests. As the only traditional member of the family, making both seders fell to my mother, year after year. To this day I can't hear "Dayenu" without hearing my Aunt Tamar's voice. As a small child, I was always confused about what the "rest" of the Haggadah was--we only read the half before the meal, and somehow we never returned to finish the rest. Thinking back, I find it rather amazing that they even bothered with *Maggid*. The seder was really about the food. *(cont. on p. 2)*



THE SENIORS' SEDER

Rabbi Daniel Braune Friedman

You know Passover is coming when Jewish newspapers fill up with advertisements for kosher trips to anywhere imaginable. From Israel to Alaska, Greece to China, people decide that a nice way to alleviate some of the pressures of the massive cleaning and catering efforts that go into Passover, is to travel. I once even saw a trip for Passover to Egypt. (I am hoping that was just a leftover Purim joke.)

Early on in our marriage, my wife, Hannah, and I were caught in the middle of a common tug-of-war that many newlyweds face: Where to go for Passover? Both our families claimed that Passover belonged to them, that it just wouldn't be the same without all their children. As a solution, my mother found a small retreat facility situated halfway between both families. It was the perfect plan; Hannah and I would be there for the festival days, and our families (who are not as traditional) would come up in time for the seder.

Hannah and I took a bus from Manhattan to get to the facility. As soon as we boarded, we sensed that something was slightly odd, and we quickly discovered that the program was actually for senior citizens. Although we were warned that there might be a minority of young couples, we had no idea that we would be the only ones. Additionally, since the first night of Passover was *(cont. on p. 2)*

PERSONAL FREEDOM

Batya Graber

I feel as if I grew up in a bubble. We lived in a safe town. I had friendly neighbors. I went to an excellent public school. I have ethical, kind, loving parents. Our home was always open for informal get-togethers and holiday parties.

Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call myself a "Jew raised in captivity." Truth be told, there is nothing traditional about my family. While we knew we were Jews, we didn't keep kosher, we didn't keep Shabbat and we didn't even live in a slightly Jewish neighborhood! I do not share this apologetically. I'm not embarrassed. My two brothers and I were raised with the best Jewish education that our parents knew to give us. We went to "Hebrew High" on Wednesday evenings and Sunday school. My family belonged to the synagogue for years, but the extent of our involvement in Jewish life was a basic reflection of scheduling conveniences.

I was blessed as a musically gifted child. My parents acknowledged this gift and encouraged me to pursue my talents in singing and with instruments through private lessons. They *schlepped* me to musical rehearsals, professional children's choir, marching band competitions, jazz choir and student musical festivals. *(cont. on p. 3)*

THE SENIORS' SEDER (cont. from p. 1)...Saturday night, Hannah and I also had to be with the seniors for the Shabbat before the holiday.

In the end, we had a lovely time. We were treated like all the other guests and sat at a table with the "younger crowd." Our table included a man in his fifties and his parents in their eighties. The older couple had lived through the atrocities of the Holocaust, as children in Auschwitz. There was also a lovely Russian couple who didn't speak the best English, although their English was much better than our Russian. Finally, seated next to Hannah, was a man who had just lost his wife. Unable to be with his children that year, he chose to join this group instead.

Passover is unique as it is the only holiday where we are commanded to learn from each other, the way we do at the seder. One of the main commandments is to teach your children about the events that occurred upon leaving Egypt. The rabbis tell us that even if there are no children at the *seder*, the same mitzvah applies, and that we must teach ourselves and others about these events. Each year, as families gather, many of the same stories are shared and even the same insights into the Haggadah are repeated. The strange comedy of events that brought us together with the seniors would give us the chance to ask a different set of four questions, in addition to the ones written by the Haggadah's author. We would get a chance to hear about the joys and sorrows of other families.

Every ritual of the seder night, from reading the Haggadah to eating the matzah together with the bitter herbs, engages us in reliving the Passover experience laid out in the Talmud, *B'chol dor vador chayav adam leer'ot et atzmo ke'elu hu yatz'a mee'Mitzrayim*, "In every generation one must look upon himself as if he/she personally had gone out of Egypt" (*Pesachim* 116b). When it comes to the food we eat and the stories of the traditional text, it's obvious that we are talking about an historical Egypt. So how is it possible to feel that *we ourselves* had gone out of Egypt? The Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, has a deeper meaning than a mere geographical place where the Israelites were slaves. Grammatically, the word relates to the struggles that people face, which not only could include anti-Semitism, but also any number of individual challenges we may face annually, and even daily.

None of us are without our own struggles, no matter what our age. The seder at the senior citizen retreat allowed Hannah and me to share a different set of narratives than those we had previously experienced with our own families. It was a great chance for our new friends to enjoy a new audience for their stories. We had the opportunity to hear a range of stories that affected the Jewish people, and, in actuality, stories that affect all people.

Feeling as if we ourselves were slaves in Egypt is not simply a means to review the painful past. We must feel as if we have left *Mitzrayim*, and, perhaps, this process of sharing reminds us of the struggles we have faced and left behind. For 363 days a year we may feel the pain of our own struggles, but for one or two days a year we share the emotion of the struggle of others and, in this way, help lighten their burden.

Seder at the senior retreat reminded us that although we are all different--in age, mother tongue or in countless other ways--we are all very much alike, not only through our connection to life's struggles, but also by our need to be released from that struggle through sharing.

Rabbi Daniel Braune Friedman works with his wife, Hannah, for University Jewish Chaplaincy, as the chaplains for Oxford University and Oxford Brookes University in the United Kingdom, where he proudly runs NJOP's Hebrew Reading Crash Course and Crash Course in Basic Judaism. Their daughter, Eliana Shayna is 10 months old.

YEARNING (cont. from p. 1)...

One year, though, when I was about twelve, we had only one seder with guests. The next night, we sat at the kitchen table for a quiet seder, just the seven of us. We read through *Maggid*, probably in record time. As we ate, my mother, for the first time ever, reminisced about her childhood.

My mother's hometown, Rawa Russka, was in Poland when my mother was born, but now lies in the Ukraine. My mother came to Canada in 1935, four years before the Nazi killing machine claimed the aunts, uncles, and cousins left behind.

"In some ways, it was much easier there (in Europe)," she told us. "Here, I'm cooking for a week. There, we didn't start making Pesach until the day of, or the day before." There was no fridge to empty or bread in the freezer to worry about. Back then you bought what you needed for one or two days. That made "Pesach cleaning" so much easier. Her mother would sweep the house, removing whatever crumbs adhered to the dirt floor. Then she would go to the market. She selected some chickens, which the *shochet* (butcher) killed right then and there. My grandmother had to "flick" (de-feather) and eviscerate them herself. Those chickens, along with potatoes and other vegetables, perhaps some fish, would be the Yom Tov meals.

Meanwhile, my mother's grandfather baked the matzah. It was a communal endeavor--all the men gathered and made the matzah together, baking them in a large oven over the course of a few days. They baked enough for the entire holiday.

How much easier, yet more complex, Pesach has become. I take many shortcuts that my mother couldn't--the food processor makes carrot salad a five-minute job, and my gefilte fish comes ready-made from someone else's freezer. Yet, with the technology comes higher expectations. There's only so much you can do by hand. With gadgets and extra freezer space, why not make an extra kugel? More desserts? Homemade sorbet, brisket and meatballs and two kinds of chicken--why not? Many people these days have a special Pesach kitchen, enabling them to start preparing weeks in advance. It seems to me they make more food for eight days than some people can eat in a month. Something about Pesach brings out the obsessive-compulsive in us.

Unlike my mother, I have two fridges to empty and clean, and little girls whose room is filled with candy in odd places. I have two floors to vacuum, and this year I have the added worry of what to feed the dog. (Answer--make him chicken, or pay \$144.00 for a week's worth of grain-free, CRC-approved, canned dog food imported from Chicago.)

My daughter reports that some of her friends have finished their Pesach cleaning. I am an anomaly among most of the people I know. I will make a *chometz* Shabbat the weekend before the seder. After Shabbat, I will clean and kasher the kitchen. I will cook Sunday and Monday, and, with the help of my niece and other assorted relatives, I hope to make enough to feed 15 people for two seders and two Yom Tov lunches.

I don't have to watch the *shochet* kill my chicken; I don't have to flick it myself. (If I did, it would be a vegetarian seder!) I have floors I can wash, not dirt floors to sweep. I have so much "more" than my mother and

grandmother. Yet, a part of me yearns for the simplicity of the *shtetl*, where just doing what you had to do, was good enough. In those days, no one expected a "super seder."

I'm not turning in my food processor, but I'm going to try to retain the idea of what Pesach is supposed to be about: freedom from slavery, including the slavery of expectations.

Lori R. Cohen was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and graduated from Joseph Wolinsky Collegiate (now Gray Academy). She has graduate degrees from the University of Toronto and McGill University, and currently resides in Montreal.



Because the leadership of our synagogue would often encourage me to participate in the Shabbat and holiday services, in addition to assisting with the youth choir, my parents developed a dream that I would use my talents, and my leadership skills, to help other Jews connect with Judaism. I always laughed them off--there was *no way* I would or could do anything like that! I barely knew Hebrew! I didn't know how to read the "troppe" (musical notes for Scripture reading)! I didn't know much about Judaism in general. In order to participate in synagogue services, I basically memorized the words and melodies by listening to recordings. At the time, the idea of being a leader within the Jewish community was intimidating, overwhelming, and unappealing. Thanks, but no thanks.

College decisions approached. For a good teenager (like I was), with my life immersed in music, the direction I would take was obvious, right? I panicked. It occurred to me that I really *couldn't* assure myself that my passions (such as music), goals in life and personal demeanor were really who I *was*, or were they rather a reflection of whom I assumed everyone else expected me to be.

College was my opportunity to clarify and explore the seemingly blurry personal beliefs I held back home, some 500 miles away. What I quickly realized was that there is so much to learn. Events in life can be frustrating, intimidating, and unappealing--and it's all too easy to become a slave to those personal inhibitions. We make excuses for everything! And I learned that as Jews, we were given blueprints to maximize our potential for a life of purpose and joy--this is our Torah.

The more I learned about Jewish observance, the more small steps I took to integrate the lessons into my life. By doing so, I gained a better sense of self-control, self-respect, and self-motivation. In taking a healthy approach, I was well educated and dedicated. I no longer felt like I was a Jew living in captivity, because I chose to live as an observant Jew. And along the way, I managed to learn Hebrew too!

During my college years, I grew in my knowledge and observance of traditional Jewish life. I learned that the Jewish people have a "collective memory" more than a "history." Events are not forgotten because we re-live the lessons and experiences of generations past in order to help us move forward as a people. And if we do not learn those lessons, if we only remember them, we will continue to be challenged in these areas.

Pesach is the Festival of Freedom, the opportunity to reflect upon and commemorate the events in which Jews were freed from slavery in ancient Egypt. Alexander Hamilton penned the adage, "Those who stand for nothing, fall for anything." Today many of us are still slaves. When I left for college, I discovered that I had been a slave to being a people-pleaser.

We are slaves to our personal insecurities, to making money and spending money, to gossiping, to eating, to the internet, to worrying too much about what others think. Where is our self control? We can be too busy to help our friends and neighbors, and yet, we often find ourselves saying, "I just wanted to check my email," and find an hour had passed in the blink of an eye.

We read in our *Haggadahs* that Pharaoh sent his army to re-enslave the Hebrews once the reality hit him that he had lost his entire workforce in a matter of minutes. He then directed the chariots of the Egyptian army toward the fleeing slaves who were approaching the sea. The Israelites were trapped. The situation looked hopeless, why bother trying anything to change the inevitable? Wrong. Nachson ben Aminadav took the first steps into the sea. The water came as high as his nose before parting, such was the test of his faith. And what man deemed impossible, God willed possible.

(cont. on p. 4)

Last night I started to read a book that had been sitting on my shelf for more than a year. The book, entitled, *Were We Our Brothers' Keepers? The Public Response of American Jews to the Holocaust, 1938-1944*, was written by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun. As with most books dealing with the Holocaust, I knew I had to wait until I was in the "right" mood to pick it up. After reading Elie Weisel's forward and Rabbi Lookstein's preface, I realized that for me this book would be like no other I had read because this book involved *MY* family. While the Holocaust was happening, my family (thank God) was safely ensconced in America.

Questions came to my mind that never occurred to me before. What exactly did my family do while atrocities against Jews were being committed? When did they hear about Kristallnacht? Did they publicly protest? When exactly did they first hear about gas chambers, and what did they do when they heard about them? As these questions were racing through my mind, I closed the book and called my mother, the only living relative of mine to whom I could address these questions.

My mother was born and raised in Manhattan. She was twelve years old when Hitler came to power in 1933, and seventeen when Kristallnacht occurred in November of 1938. At that time she was living on Broadway and 81st street. My mother's first response to my questions was that there was no leadership, no organization. She knew of no calls to demonstrate or march to heighten awareness of what was happening in Germany, or to call for intervention by the United States government. From her perspective, there was an absence of Jewish leadership. And I remember her telling me that if there *had been* the right leadership, people willing to organize the Jewish populace, certainly she would have participated.

My mother did hear of one group of Jews who had been protesting the Holocaust but were beaten up as the police looked on. There was also a great deal of anti-Semitism at that time in the U.S.. Locally, if Jewish and gentile boys were fighting in the street, the police would not act if the Jews were losing, intervening only if they were winning. She remembers walking home with her parents and her brother on Broadway after seeing a movie. Her brother offered to help a drunken woman lying on the street. As he started to help her get on her feet, she said "What are you, a #@%!! damn Jew? He promptly dropped her. Anti-Semitism was extremely common throughout the country, causing many Jews to be fearful.

Interestingly, while answering my questions, my mother kept saying "There was no Israel. There was no place to go."

Thirty-five hundred years ago, our ancestors set out for the Promised Land. They had been beaten. They had been enslaved. They stayed in Egypt thinking that they had no place to go, until Moses gave them God's word. And so they went up to the Land of Israel



PERSONAL FREEDOM (cont. from p. 1)...

It took the Hebrew slaves forty years in the desert to change their mentality from that of slaves to that of free men. Even Moses, the greatest leader of the Jewish people, had personal challenges to overcome. He was then able to utilize the strength of character he gained in overcoming challenges to strengthen his leadership skills. It all begins with baby steps.

This year, let Pesach's message ring out loud and clear, and let us strengthen ourselves to take the necessary measures to achieve a real life of freedom.

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(cont. on p. 4)

OUR BROTHERS' KEEPERS (cont. from p. 3)...

and created a home. When the Nazis began their rise to power, our people had been exiled from that land for over 2,000 years, but in 1948, it was reclaimed.

"There was no Israel. There was no place to go." I repeat these two small sentences, and I write this article for a purpose. Today there is an *Eretz Yisrael*. There is a place to go, and I know in my heart that it is up to us to protect her.

Today we are organized. Emails are sent out alerting us to what is happening and what we CAN DO about them. Rallies are held in cities throughout the country, and we can expect the police to keep us safe. Living in a democratic society, we can also lobby safely, without fear of consequences.

We must take advantage of our freedom and make ourselves heard. God forbid another holocaust occurs, and your children or grandchildren ask: "What action did you take?"

This year, on the eleventh of Adar, the day of the Fast of Esther, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein held a memorial service for the slaughtered members of the Fogel family of Itamar. Rabbi Lookstein was kind enough to inscribe my copy of his book. I now extend to you the invitation in Rabbi Lookstein's inscription: "May You Be Our Brothers' Keeper"

Elizabeth Schultz is a retired physician living in Manhattan and married to Dr. Jerald Zimmer. She encourages all to involve themselves with lobby groups such as Zionist Organization of America, AIPAC or NORPAC. For anyone wishing to get information on rallies (particularly in New York and D.C.), you can contact Elizabeth at elizabethschultzmd@gmail.com

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A HUMBLE AND HUMBLING PASSOVER EXPERIENCE

Rivka Weinstein

The call I had dreaded for months came seven days before Passover. I was in the middle of emptying dozens of shopping bags in my New Jersey home, filled with goodies for Passover when my father called to alert me that my mother had taken a turn for the worse. We did not know if she would live another day, or maybe a couple of days, or maybe a week. Only G-d knew how much time was left. What I knew was that I had to catch a plane to Germany immediately--Passover or not--to be with my mother. Originally, my husband Ed and I were to host Passover for the first time in our home; a much anticipated event that I had looked forward to and planned for months now. I was to go to Germany to see my mother the day after Passover. But, as we say in German, humans plan, G-d steers.

My then seven month old daughter Aviva and I were on our way to the airport an hour and a half after I hung up with my father. My husband would stay at home and await word from me. Knowing I would have to spend Passover in Germany, in a small town with no synagogue or any kosher stores nearby, I took the essentials I thought I would really need: Three boxes of matza, a jar of jam, a can of coconut macaroons for a little treat, a small bottle of Kiddush wine, my travel candle sticks, and a Hagaddah. Because German food ingredients are strictly supervised and clearly labeled, I was sure I could buy dairy products that would be acceptable and of course vegetables and potatoes would be no problem either. For dishes I would simply use disposables and devised a plan to kasher the second stove and set up an area for myself. Looking back, it surprises me that I had the strength to consider Passover, as I was packing for a trip which I knew would be a farewell to my mother forever. But I did.

Thank G-d, my mother was still alive when we arrived in Germany, and seeing us seemed to give her wind under her wings. We were able to spend time together. Her cancer had ravished her body, but not her mind or her ability to smile. Passover came nearer with every day, and I was wondering what to do. I would not go to Frankfurt or Cologne for Seders, because I wanted to be within walking distance of my mother, and not "stuck" out of reach.

I was able to get everything I needed for the Seder plate--substituting a beet for the shank bone. So we had our Seder. Because of my mother's poor state of health, we kept to the mandatory essentials of the Seder like remembering the Exodus from Egypt and eating the bread of affliction. Our *Shulchan Aruch*--the festive meal--consisted of spring potatoes, lox, and scrambled eggs with chives. Not quite the meal I had planned for our Seder at home in the States with turkey and brisket and "wonderful" flourless desserts. But, nevertheless, a Seder it was.

The same night, in the middle of the night, my father received a call from the hospital that my mother had peacefully died. My father was in great distress. After four decades together, being left behind had not seemed possible to him, even after months of eventually unsuccessful chemotherapies through which he had to see her suffer. When Silke, my mother's pastor (I am a Jew by choice) came to our house a while later, she comforted him by saying "Juergen, remember, tonight was the bread of affliction, when it is said that, 'now we are slaves but tomorrow we are free.' Anne is free now."

I was stunned; this was certainly not what I had expected her to say. When the funeral day had to be set, it was Pastor Silke who pointed out that Shabbos would be very difficult for me. My father agreed and because of a national holiday in Germany my mother was not buried until the eighth day of Passover. I was worried about what songs and prayers my husband and I would hear, but, no matter what, there was no way I was not attending my mother's funeral. She had been so supportive of my chosen faith and such a positive power in my life. How could I not be there? Well, my mother surprised me one more time by her love and foresight. She had in fact chosen the songs

and prayers for her service and made sure I could be there. There was only talk of G-d--nothing and no one else. I will be forever grateful for her ability to reach beyond herself.

But I think there is something more to learn here beyond tolerance, outreach and a mother's love: Passover does not have to be the expensive, lavish affair it often turns into. It does not have to cost hundreds of dollars. In fact, I am convinced that here, less is truly more. Maybe my experience was a little too bare bones--after all, it is a joyous celebration. But the experience will help me keep things in check. "Duck sauce?! I don't buy it all year, why do I put it in the cart because it's kosher for Passover?" These thoughts are my guide as I am again in the middle of planning and preparing for the first Weinstein family Seder in our home, G-d willing.

In loving memory of Anita "Anne" Schulz, ob"m.

Rivka (Cathrin) Weinstein lives in Margate on the Jersey Shore with her husband Ed, daughter Aviva and dog Winston. She works for a medical publisher in New York City where she develops medical student products. She is a physician, but her love for books and pedagogy prevailed.

"Well, I guess that covers the basics for Passover in Germany."



