

# Collected Insights into the Pesach Seder

## Every Day Lessons from the Exodus

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The Pesach Haggada suggests that in addition to the theological importance of the Exodus from Egypt—themes such as the Omnipotence, personal intervention and faithfulness of God vis-à-vis His People—the story should have an important impact upon our psyches as well. “And the Exodus has stood for our fathers and ourselves”. Why? Because Jewish history is perceived as cyclical, eternally repeating itself in one form or another. “Because there was not only one alone [Pharaoh] who has arisen against us, but rather in each generation they arise against us with the intent to destroy us and the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Saves us from their hands.”

R. Simcha Ziesel of Kelm deeply personalizes this message of the Haggada:

*All aspects of a person's life are to be derived from the Exodus from Egypt. And all of the actions and ways of a person during his entire life will be found in the Torah within the context of the Exodus from Egypt. And all of the actions and events that affected our ancestors, this is the principle regarding what will happen to every person on a conscious level, the Exodus from Egypt is like an introduction to everything that will happen to the Jewish people in the future.<sup>59</sup>*

This giant of mussar advances the evocative suggestion that we should strive to look at the Exodus as a touchstone for our daily, individual existences. Three possible applications come to mind.

On one level, our attention should be directed to the personalities who played key roles in the Exodus, including not only Moshe and Aharon, but also the midwives (Shemot 1:15-21) as well as, according to Shemot Rabba 1:12, Jewish women in general. Each of us regularly faces uncomfortable situations in our work, our families, and our communities. We would do well to emulate the examples of the Jewish heroes of the Exodus and act with courage and resolve for the Sake of Heaven. Secondly, the entire period of the Jews' leaving Egypt was marked by myriad miracles. Assuming that hidden miracles are everywhere to be discerned if only we care to seek them out would be another important lesson of the Exodus. And thirdly, the importance of being able to forthrightly declare our Jewish identities was part and parcel of the Exodus story, at least according to one rabbinic view in Mechilta D'RaShBI, Parasha 6. In Shemot 12:7, the Jews

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<sup>59</sup> The quotation of R. Simcha Ziesel's concept is attributed to R. Meir Rosenstein of Lomzhe in Shalom Meir Volk, Haggada Shel Pesach, Leket Ma'amarei Raboteinu Gedolie Tenuat HaMussar, Tevuna, Tel Aviv, 1988, p. 133.

in Egypt were instructed to place the blood that had been extracted from their Paschal sacrifices on their doorposts. What is unclear is whether the blood was to be placed on the inside or the outside portion of their dwellings. While R. Yishmael and R. Natan posit that the blood was to be placed so that only the Jews inside the house would know that it was there, R. Yitzchak disagrees and may be indicating that the Jews were proud of who they were and were prepared to publicly state their identities, despite the persecutions and difficulties to which they were being subjected. The contemporary implication, at least from the perspective of R. Yitzchak's interpretation, would be that we should be prepared to stand up and identify who we are and what we stand for, even at times when this might be discomfiting and unpopular.

## The Jewish Evolution

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The founder of Chassidus, the Baal Shem Tov, makes a cryptic comment. He says that the primary idea of the Egyptian exile was that *da'at* (knowledge) was in exile. Therefore, without knowledge, which contributes to our ability as human beings to speak, it follows that speech was also in exile.

What does this mean that *da'at* was in exile? At the top of the Kabbalistic chain are three attributes – *chochma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding), and *da'at* (knowledge). These attributes are the big three and are known as “the mothers.” *Chochma* is the initial flash of energy when an idea first reaches the mind. *Bina* is when one begins to try to understand this flash of inspiration. *Da'at* is when one tries to relate to this new found information. Knowledge then is the ability to successfully integrate the material that we learn. This was temporarily lost while in Egypt.

In regards to the Exodus, the Torah teaches:

*13. And all of your first born donkeys shall be redeemed for a sheep, and if not you shall break its neck, and all of your first born sons shall be redeemed. 14. And when your son shall ask you 'what's this,' you will say to him that G-d took us out of Egypt with a strong hand from the house of slaves.*

#### Shemot 13

(ג) וכל פטר חמר תפדה בשה ואם לא תפדה וערפתו וכל בכור אדם בבניך תפדה: (יד) והיה כי ישאלך בנך מחר לאמר מה זאת ואמרת אליו בחזק יד הוציאנו ה' ממצרים מבית עבדים:  
שמות פרק יג

What's the connection between these two verses? Moreover, why did G-d command that the first born donkey be exchanged for a sheep?

R. Yosef Dov Fishof suggests that the answer lies in the distinction between a donkey and a sheep. There is no animal lower than a donkey. It is worked tremendously hard and it does the majority of load bearing. The food it is given is of the lowest quality. The sheep, on the other hand, is treated as the best of all animals for it has a faithful shepherd leading it through the greenest of pastures. When the Jewish people were in Egypt they were at the level of donkeys, they worked literally like animals, day and night without stop. But G-d had different plans and He eventually took them out and lifted them to the level of sheep. They also had a faithful shepherd in Moshe,

who led them in the right way. This is the connection between the two verses. The Egypt experience taught us that we must evolve.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* (Mitzvah 310) notes that on Pesach the *Korban HaOmer*, the Barley Offering is brought. Seven weeks later we bring the שתי הלחם, actual bread. Why? This is to symbolize our progression, going from animal food, to human food, thus indicating that the Omer process is a time when we work on becoming humans. This is a Jewish Evolution. It is about bringing knowledge out of exile (to use the words of the Baal Shem Tov). In Egypt we were made to feel almost subhuman. We lost the quality that distinguished us from animals – our ability to think freely.

There is a famous debate as to when the Jewish People were commanded to build the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). According to Rashi (*Shemos 31:18*) the commandment came after the sin of the golden calf. The Ramban (*35:1*) assumes that while the initial commandment to build the Tabernacle came before the sin of the golden calf, the Jewish people were given the commandment again to build the Tabernacle after the second tablets were given.

Why is the building of the Tabernacle supposed to arise in context with the Sinai experience? Some suggest that the Mishkan, then, was supposed to be our personal Sinai wherever we may go. There's only one problem with this approach: why not ask the Jewish people to build something that looks like Sinai, a mini mountain model if you will? It is clear from numerous verses that the Mishkan was in fact supposed to look like a human being (see 25:2, 5, 10, 20, 26, 31, 26:4, 19, 20, 24, 14). The Torah uses its description in terms that are in fact similar to human body parts. The reason for this is because the Tabernacle was supposed to reflect Sinai in the sense that at Sinai we learned how to become full fledged human beings. Full fledged in the sense that we knew how to operate with *da'at*, knowledge. As the Talmud in Sotah states – “there is no knowledge like the knowledge of Torah.” Therefore, the Bnei Yisrael were commanded to build an edifice that looked like a human being, which was what they had truly become after the giving of the second tablets.

## A House with Many Rooms and One Table

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Knowing that each of the four questions personified as the *arba banim* heralds from the Torah, the Netziv in his commentary to the Haggadah, *Imrei Shefer*, looks back at the original *psukim* in his analysis of the source of the confrontation with the *ben ha-rasha*:

*And it will come to pass when your children say to you, 'What is this service to you?' You shall say, It is a Pesach sacrifice to Hashem, for He passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, and He saved our houses. And the people kneeled and prostrated themselves.*

**Shemot 12:26-27**

וְהָיָה כִּי יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה  
הָעֵבֶר זֶה הַזֶּה אֶת לָכֶם: וְאָמַרְתֶּם זִבְחַ פֶּסַח  
הוּא לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל בְּתֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
כְּמַצְרִים כְּנִגְפוּ אֶת מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת בְּתֵינוּ  
הִצִּיל נִיֶּקֶד הָעַם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ:  
שְׁמוֹת יב:כו-כז

While the Haggadah quotes the question verbatim, the answer deviates from the one offered by the Torah, substituting instead a harsh retort aimed at deflecting the impact of the verbal assault:

... Blunt his teeth and say to him: “because of this Hashem did for me when I left mitzrayim”

נֹאֵף אֶתְּהָהּ הַקִּקְהָה אֶת שְׁנֵי נְאֻמֵּי לֹ: בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה יי לִי בְּצִאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם.

The Netziv infers that the Haggadah derives this strategy of response based on the wording of the reply found in the Torah itself, where the expression “*v’amartem*” - “and you shall say,” lacks an addressee. If the Torah meant for us to engage the combative pronouncement on its merits, the language of “*v’amartem lahem*” - “and you shall say to them” works better. Instead, the Netziv believes that the Haggadah bids us to listen for the music of the question—tone and language matter—before deciding whether and how to reply. Insults and imprecations spewing from the cynical mouth do not necessarily justify endless debate.

Nonetheless, despite the lack of direct response to the barbs of the *rasha*, the reply which appears in the Torah warrants attention. Why does the Torah mention the saving of houses at the time of *makat bechorot* (“*v’et bateinu heetzeel*”)? Considering that the *Mekhilta* teaches that a Jew in an Egyptian house during *makat bechorot* would be spared even as an Egyptian in a Jewish home would not escape punishment, why does the Torah make the affirmation of our service on Pesach on account of saved houses? The Netziv reads the word *bayit* in this *pasuk* as a reference to households, a proverbial reference to family. As a house contains different rooms—respectable and dignified versus degraded and strictly functional—so must a family include different types of people. A complete household both recognizes an array of rooms even as it keeps everyone seated around the same table—and guides the conversation—lest a room of one’s own soon lead to a house of one’s own. At the time of *yetziat mitzrayim*, but for the merit of a connection to the rest of the family, some of the redeemed did not truly merit their own rescue. Yet, their accompaniment of the rest of the family to make it a “complete house,” permitted their salvation. The reply in the Torah is where we offer our thanks to the Almighty for saving us as “houses,” despite the ongoing reality of the sometimes fractious relationships. To a People that is not yet redeemed, hearing about the very possibility of these impending conflicts with wayward children is a reason for thanks; it both recognizes the prevalence of the challenges of child-rearing, and instills the hope of ongoing dialogue.

As we go around the table soliciting questions from children eager to learn, the *ben harasha* spits out the *seder* with a dismissive challenge. In response, we may throw his fantasy of self-exclusion from the family back at him with the sharp rejoinder that with his attitude he would not deserve redemption alone—but we do not send him from his seat at the table back to his room.

## The “Not so Bitter” Herb

Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

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There is a discussion within the *poskim* as to what sorts of vegetables are meant to be used for *maror*, that which we colloquially define as “the bitter herb”. Some *poskim* prefer the romaine lettuce to the white horseradish, which we know is the custom at many of our *sedarim*.

Why would romaine leaves be a preferable option to white horseradish, which has more bitter taste? It is rather difficult to explain the ritual to our children as being based on the misery and

hardship experienced by the Jewish slaves if the reenactment on *leil ha'seder* is a rather pleasant endeavor, or at worst, something which mildly disagrees with our palette!

The classic explanation is that the romaine leaves begin with a sweeter taste and end with a bitter and unpleasant taste, as was the nature of the Egyptian servitude.

In this vein Rav Mordechai Yosef of Radzhin, the *Ishbitzer z"l*, in his Haggada, cites:

*And the Egyptians forced the Children of Israel to perform excruciating labor, R' Elazer explained, with a 'soft mouth'*  
**Sotah 11b**

ויעבידו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרך  
רבי אלעזר אמר בפה רך  
סוטה יא:

In other words, there are two distinct traditions as to the nature of the bitterness and the harsh labor in Egypt: 1) that they performed impossible, back breaking work, or 2) that they were seduced with a sweet tongue in a pleasant and alluring manner.

R' Mordechai Yosef adds a fascinating point in explaining this text: According to R' Elazer, the greatest tragedy is not the back breaking labor, but that the Jewish people were led to believe that their experience was not in fact a bitter one at all. They were initially encouraged in their labor and made to feel that it was not particularly arduous.

The greatest exile, he explains, is one of the mind. It is an exile in which man has no idea that he is lost, and no concept of his own pain and grief. That is the *פה רך*, it is the alluring voice which tells us that "it's not truly bitter", that work makes freedom, and that it is actually enjoyable. This perhaps may give us pause when we reflect upon the "fulfilling" nature of certain professions, which have often become nothing short of slave labor, asking employees to put in fourteen hour days, but in an environment equipped with workout rooms, and daycare centers, and other amenities designed to subdue the bite of an endless workday.

Traditionally, the focus of the evening of the seder is to begin in crisis and end in the praise, *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח*. We fulfill the mitzvah of *maror* to remind us that sometimes even *גנות*, suffering, can take the shape of *שבח* as well.

## Avadim Hayinu – Where's Moshe?

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Moshe's name doesn't appear at all in the paragraph of *Avadim Hayinu*. Twice it refers to God taking us out, but nothing about Moshe. To deepen the mystery, Moshe hardly gets mentioned in the Haggada at all. The Vilna Gaon goes so far as to say that it is prohibited to write about Moshe - so as not to attach any 'partnerships' to God. We must understand that it was God, and God alone, who took us out of Egypt.

Why the big secret? Why not make this a night of praise for Jewish heroes as well? Why ignore Moshe's tremendous contribution?

To reach an understanding of this perplexing issue we must first explore Judaism's view on miracles. The Ramban (Exodus 13:16) explains that miracles, and our commemoration of them,

are “faithful witnesses to the truth of the existence of the Creator and the truth of the whole Torah. Because God will not make signs and wonders in every generation for the eyes of some wicked man or heretic, He therefore commanded us that we should always make a sign of that which we have seen with our eyes and transmit that to our children.” This means that God will perform a miracle every once in a while to remind us who is in charge.

Why are only some generations chosen to receive miracles? I would also like to receive a handout from God every once in awhile. Am I undeserving?

Rav Soloveitchik (*Emergence of Ethical Man* p. 188) explains that God’s presence in the natural world, without miracles, is the true ideal. Judaism’s frequent references to the long-ago Exodus from Egypt are to remind us however, that at certain times there is a need for God’s clear, supernatural involvement. “Miracle expresses the idea that whenever the covenant comes to a crisis in its eternal struggle with the forces of indifference, the historical motives will overcome.” Supernatural miracles are only required when there is no other way. In times other than these dangerous and threatening predicaments, we must rely on our God given natural devices to rise above our challenges to sanctify God’s name.

With God’s presence in the natural world as the true ideal, miracles indicate that we have come up short; miracles are necessary interventions by God to set the world back on its natural, intended path. When we celebrate a miracle, we appreciate that God will never forget us. It serves as an inspiration for us to do better and to recognize divine providence in the natural world.

At the Seder, our goal is “to see ourselves as if we personally are leaving Egypt.” Our generation has the power and tools necessary to bring about our own redemption. Open miracles should not be required for this to happen. We have the ability to sanctify the natural world to the greatest extent humanly possible.

Moshe is only minimally mentioned at the seder to remind us that while the redemption from Egypt required a leader of Moshe’s stature, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that only Moshe can lead redemption. Rather, if our generation hasn’t been granted a Moshe, it must mean that we don’t need him. We have a responsibility to put in the effort to bring about our own redemption without miracles, and without Moshe, but rather with the unique strengths, abilities, and challenges that God has given us.

## **Joseph and the Four Cups of Wine**

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Why do we drink the four cups of wine at the Pesach Seder? According to R. Yehoshua ben Levi - in some texts it is R. Shemuel ben Nachman - the four cups of wine are related to the four times that the word 'cup' is mentioned by Pharaoh's jailed butler as he recounts his dream to Joseph in the common prison they share. It is this dream that foreshadows the butler's release from prison and return to service as a trusted member of Pharaoh's court. Joseph's clarification of the dream also leads to his own release from prison: it is this same butler who recalls the unfortunate 'Hebrew lad' who helped him when later Pharaoh is plagued by his recurring dreams. Joseph is

summoned from prison and soon emerges as second only to Pharaoh himself in the rulership of Egypt. Although it is interesting that the word appears four times, we certainly may wonder what this has to do with the Exodus from Egypt which we celebrate at the Seder? What relevance do the troubles of Pharaoh's butler have for us?

We may wonder what Joseph's personal attitude was towards Egypt. Joseph lived in the pre-bondage period and rose to be second in command. He rescued the Egyptian economy during seven years of drought, enriched the Crown and fed the populace, winning honor and glory for himself. By all accounts, Joseph "made it" in Egypt. However, a survey of Joseph's career reveals an interesting trajectory. Initially, he seems totally absorbed in the realm of his responsibility and office. He names his first son Menashe, meaning, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home." Gone are the troubles of his youth, the fights with his brothers, the sibling rivalries caused by his dreams of glory. Gone, too, are the dreams of Abraham and the special covenant established by God with the family. Joseph is an Egyptian, with an Egyptian name, wife and family. He sits among the mighty in one of the mightiest nations of the ancient world.

However, the name he chooses for his second son is Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction." Why is Egypt the land of his affliction? Does it refer to his earlier servitude and imprisonment, or has his view of Egypt begun to change? Is Joseph really a free man or is he beginning to feel some sense of bondage in this foreign land in which his star has risen?

The answer is clear: Joseph realized that he too was a slave. Despite the trappings of wealth and power, ultimately this was not his land. The more he rose in prominence, the more pronounced his sense of alienation. The very prominence, position and power made him more of a slave: the "trappings" were actually a "trap."

So what is the connection between Joseph's four cups and the four cups of the seder? R. Yehoshua ben Levi is reminding us that Pesach is not just for the poor and the oppressed; Pesach is for the Josephs of our people too. While appearances may seem benign, Jews must always be watchful. I do not wish to suggest that Western countries are beginning to turn against us. But let us examine the question from another angle. How did Joseph feel about all of his accomplishments? He had reached the pinnacle of power and contributed mightily to the well-being of the country. Ultimately, however, whatever he produced was not really his; it was Egypt's might and glory that was expanded. Joseph secured temporary safety for his family and temporary fame for himself in Egypt. But soon after there 'arose a new king who not know Joseph.' Soon after that there was nothing for him nor his people. Egypt moved on to a new chapter of its own history. Joseph turned out to be a temporary side-show not even remembered in Egyptian records.

Even without the threat of physical violence, Jews must always ask about our real place in this world. A place not only where we can be secure but wherein our creative accomplishments can be our own and not stripped away from us so easily; wherein we are not guests but fully at home in a society for which we are responsible. Thank God, today we have the State of Israel where millions of our people live today. True enough, they are periodically threatened by violence and hostility. But we constantly witness their tremendous courage and their intense devotion to the land. This attachment comes from a sense of being fully at home and standing firm to protect that home when it is under attack.

Where, indeed, is our place and the place for our children? Where can we really build a special Jewish life for ourselves, our children and our people? Where can we avoid the problem of assimilation which decimates our people even when we are free from physical attacks? We are building a good community here but we know the answer. R. Yehoshua ben Levi suggested it to us a long time ago.

When we drink the four cups of wine, we remember not only the slaves who were freed from their bondage and oppression, but also Joseph who, in his own way, was also a slave to Pharaoh in Egypt. He too was freed by Moses when his bones were taken out during the Exodus. He finally was placed to rest in the homeland he knew was the only homeland that the people of Israel ever had or ever will have.

## The Seder of Magid

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There is a reason that Moshe Rabbeinu established that we begin studying upcoming festivals thirty days prior to their commencement. There are laws to review, new situations to assess and insights and renewed inspiration to derive. But nothing compares to the preparations we make for Pesach. For many this *hachanah* translates to a trip to the local Kosher grocery and spending a pay-check or two, hours of cleaning and scouring and perhaps attending shiurim on the latest kosher-for-Pesach rules and regulations. How many of us spend parallel time preparing for our hallowed task of *Sipur Yetzias Mitzrayim*, our annual task to tell the story of our redemption from Egypt? The children come home with projects, songs and *vortlach* – depending on their age. They learn new ideas, angles and commentaries. While their participation is laudable and encouraged, we are the ones leading our s'darim and we too should take seriously the task of telling this most precious story of the miracles, of shame and redemption.

Chazal in their inspired wisdom were ahead of their times regarding pedagogy. The model of the *arba banim* demonstrates their knowledge and appreciation of differentiated instruction. They grasped the notion that people learn better with visual aids (*b'zman shematzah umaror munachim l'fanecha*) and the didactic tactic of asking questions.

While the *tana'im* taught us that we begin with the shame and conclude the story with praise, how else did the *baal haHagadah* organize the materials in the *Magid* section, the portion of the Seder where we fulfill the mitzvah of *Sipur Yetzias Mitzrayim*? We do have a *seder haseder – kadesh, urchatz...* - but that gives us the overview of the entire Seder. I am not familiar with a cute song that teaches us the different parts of *Magid*.

The Malbim in his Hagaddah unlocks the mystery of the *seder* of *Magid*. He opines that *Magid* is ordered based on a verse we all know: *v'higad'ta l'vincha bayom hahu leimor, ba'avur zeh asah Hashem li b'tzeisi mimitzrayim*, 'you shall relate to your son on that day saying because of this Hashem performed for me when I left Egypt' (Shmos 13:8). He argues that the organization of *Magid* bases itself on this verse.

The words *v'higad'ta l'vincha*, you shall relate to your child, refers to the text beginning with *avadim hayinu* and ending with the fourth child. *Bayom Hahu*, on that day, refers to the portion *yachol merosh chodesh*, which addresses when the mitzvah of *Sipur Yetzias Mitzrayim* is to take place. Although the third section corresponds to but one word in the verse, *leimor*, saying, it represents the largest chunk of *Magid*, namely, from *Mitchilah*, in the beginning our ancestors were idolaters, and concludes after *dayeinu*.

The fourth section of *Magid*, *ba'avur zeh*, because of this, is accomplished via the statements of Rabban Gamliel, pointing out the *pesach*, *matzah* and *maror*. Clearly the word *zeh*, this, is key to this understanding, as we are pointing something out at the seder. The next fragment of our verse is *asah Hashem li*, Hashem performed for me. The Malbim teaches us that the paragraph *b'chol dor vador chayav adam liros es atzmo k'ilo hu yatza mimitzrayim*, in each generation man must see himself as if he himself was taken out of Egypt, accomplishes this. Here the word *li*, to me, is the key. Finally, the last two words of the verse *b'tzeisi mimitzrayim*, as I left Egypt, refer to the first two paragraphs of Hallel, which specifically reference the exodus.

Just as the *kadesh urchatz* song helps us prepare for a long glorious night of stories, matzah, maror and hallel, the Malbim's insight should help set the table for *Magid*. It helps pace the mitzvah of *Sipur Yetzias Mitzrayim*, and organizes the order of this night which is so crucial to the transmission of our holy *mesorah*.

## Lifting the Veil of Shir HaShirim

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The debate over including Shir HaShirim in the Tanach is well known. Our tradition tells us that Rabbi Akiva was one of the voices who argued in favor of including Shir HaShirim in the Tanach (Yadayim 3:5). Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that many seek to contrast Rabbi Akiva's personal biography with his attitude toward Shir HaShirim and superficially this makes sense. Rashi does describe the plight of the maiden in Shir HaShirim as that of a "living widow" who longs for her husband and her youthful love for him. Rabbi Akiva's wife lived a similar life for twenty-four years and as she waited for her husband to return from his Torah studies she too was described as a living widow (Ketubot 62b). Others point out that in Shir HaShirim the male works as a shepherd and the maiden is described as a *bat nadiv*, the daughter of a wealthy family. As it turns out, Rabbi Akiva worked as a shepherd for the wealthy Kalba Savua and later married his daughter, Rachel. (Kalba Savua means "satiated dog" for whoever came into his home, even if they were as hungry as a dog, would leave fully satiated.)

It is true that the parallels between Rabbi Akiva's life and Shir HaShirim are startling. Shir HaShirim is about love and Rabbi Akiva's life was turned around by the love he had for the daughter of Kalba Savua, who agreed to become his wife if he would commit to Torah study. The imagery of Shir HaShirim includes a shepherd and the daughter of a wealthy family who becomes "a living widow." Thus, some suggest that it would not have been difficult for Rabbi Akiva to see himself and his wife in this imagery. When Rabbi Akiva declares that whoever sings Shir HaShirim in pubs and bars has no share in the world to come (Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:5), he was chastising

those who would make light of the power of love, leaving it for that crude and light headed atmosphere where people drink and sing without thinking.

One of the rabbis of the modern era famous for his great love is Rav Kook, who wrote about *ahavat hinam*, love that knows no reason. This is why it is so meaningful to note that Rav Kook, this modern master of love, in his introduction to Shir HaShirim (Olat Re'iyah II:3ff) takes issue with those who would limit Rabbi Akiva's adoration of Shir HaShirim to the personal biography of his life. Rav Kook writes that such people are unable to truly comprehend what Rabbi Akiva was talking about when he declared Shir HaShirim to be the sanctum sanctorum of Jewish scripture.

Rav Kook points out that Rabbi Akiva's love had the capacity to transcend the personal and the scope of his love was not bound by the limits of his own romantic interests. If one is inclined to draw parallels between the life of Rabbi Akiva and his defense of Shir HaShirim, then one is better served by looking beyond the relationship of a husband and a wife. Instead we should recall that upon seeing foxes trampling where the Beit HaMikdash once stood, Rabbi Akiva was able to laugh because his heart was filled with love for a vision of a blissful future where Rome was gone and Israel returned to glory and this love that filled his heart could transcend the present sorrow and desolation (Makkot 24b). Rav Kook urges us to recall the martyred Rabbi Akiva whose love of Torah transcended fear of death and whose love of God transcended the pain of torture so that as he declared God's unity he was able to let go of his worldly life as he declared God's unity (Berachot 61b). This is the Rabbi Akiva, overflowing with love that transcends his personal situation, who sees the holiness of Shir HaShirim. Thus, to draw parallels between the private love of Rabbi Akiva and Shir HaShirim is to never lift the veil of allegory that covers over the meaning of this holiest of songs. If we wish to lift that veil then we must go beyond that love which is rooted in our private concerns.

## **The Matzah Experience**

**Rabbi Uri Pilichowski**

Beth Jacob Congregation – Beverly Hills, CA

More than a simple wafer eaten thousands of years ago, matzah represents the entire Exodus experience, from the pain of slavery to the joy of emancipation. The Egyptians fed us matzah when we were slaves; it was a high-carbohydrate, low-cost, filling way to feed their slaves. Matzah came to represent bitterness to the Jewish people. However, as much as matzah was the bitter bread of affliction for so many slaves, in an instant it became the eternal bread of freedom for a nation.

The significance of matzah illuminates its many qualities and shows how it is not merely something we consume, but an experience that transcends simple symbolism. While we would expect to find many intricate laws of Pesach that would best express the nature of matzah, I'd like to show how it is specifically laws on erev Pesach that best reflect matzah's meaning. Hopefully this will add a new experience to each and every bite of matzah consumed this Pesach.

In contrast to Sukkos and Shavuos, where we simply commemorate past events, on Pesach we relive the Exodus experience. It is not enough to raise our matzos in the air and pronounce that this matzah comes to represent our past tribulations and salvation, but with each and every bite

we are to return to the times of our ancestors, feel what they felt, eat what they ate, all in order to best understand the gratitude they felt towards their Creator. As we chew our matzah, each painstaking bite is designed to put us back in the desert, enduring backbreaking labor and rejoicing over the sweet taste of freedom, all in order to better understand the gratitude we have towards our Creator for continued freedom. The newfound appreciation of our Creator lifts us to new heights of perfection, making us better people with a stronger connection to God.

Rambam states three laws in regards to matzah on erev Pesach: a prohibition of eating matzah on erev Pesach, designed to act as a marker for the night's uniqueness; a prohibition of eating a meal close to mincha on erev Pesach, a general prohibition on erev Shabbos and Pesach to increase one's appetite for the meal, but dissimilarly aimed at whetting one's appetite specifically for matzah; and the practice of limiting eating on the entire day, intended to ensure the matzah's consumption be with extreme hunger, and to ensure that we treasure all mitzvos.

These laws of erev Pesach, unique to all other erev Shabbos and Yom Tov laws seem to point to a different explanation of the mitzvah to eat matzah. It would seem it is not sufficient to merely eat matzah, but one must eat it out of anticipation, hungering for its taste. We've all eaten matzah, and while we might hunger for the main course's vast array of delicacies, it is rare to find someone clamoring for a piece of matzah.

Eating matzah out of dire hunger is unrealistic; this is not the correct understanding of these laws. Matzah wasn't supposed to be eaten out of a ravenous desire for the taste of a dry cracker; it is the experience we are to anticipate. We aren't holding back from the taste of matzah on erev Pesach, but rather it is the reliving of the transformation from slavery to emancipation that we desire. It is this experience of joy that leads to gratitude which strengthens our relationship with God that we are to await for. The mitzvah of matzah lasts seven days, and if we put our minds to it, so can our experience.

## The Seder of Magid

Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum

Rabbi, Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst

We read in the Haggadah "*vayar Elokim et Bnei Yisrael vayeida Elokim*" God saw the Jewish people and He knew them. The Medrash explains: "*R' Yehuda ben Lakish omer, ra'ah she'osim teshuvah v'heim lo ra'u zeh et zeh.*" [Mechilta, Yitro 19] God saw that the Bnei Yisrael were repentant, but they didn't see that in each other. They were returning to God, but privately, secretly, in unrevealed devotion. Underneath the trappings of mere slaves stirred the spirit of servants of God soon to comprise the kingdom of priests – the *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kaddosh*. But none of this was overtly recognizable.

This hidden teshuva doesn't seem to be because the Egyptians would punish a Jew for exhibiting belief in Hashem. Quite to the contrary, the tribe of Levi were granted reprieve from slave labor because they were accepted as Hebrew religious leaders or members of a priestly caste. Rather, it seems that the effect of *galut* – perhaps its most deleterious effect – was this reluctance on the part of the Hebrew man or woman to show open signs of being an *eved Hashem*. Therefore, in

Egypt, while God knew and witnessed the movement of His beloved children back to Him, the children of Israel themselves were unaware and could not perceive the changes taking place all around them as their loved ones, friends and peers allowed their faith in God to manifest within their souls but not to openly emerge.

Our Rabbis tell us that the Bnei Yisrael had been quite involved in Egyptian life. Assuredly, they are credited for remaining somewhat distinct by their refusal to alter their style of dress, their Hebrew names and their spoken language. However, chazal also point to their practice of *avodah zarah* - at the least, to their emotional attachment to the cultural and religious symbols and icons of Egypt. The command to designate and prepare an animal that would serve as a *korban Pesach* was a call to abandon those Egyptian deities. "*Mishchu u' kchu lachem tzon*" is understood to mean "*mishchu yedeichem m' avodah zarah*". God was urging Bnei Yisrael to pull away from the idolatry they had for so long practiced. Therefore, because of this influence, even when Bnei Yisrael began to return to God, any Jewish identity that we beheld in one another was only skin deep. The greatness and holiness of our Jewish identity within was known to God alone – "*vayeida Elokim*".

In this regard, how different are we from the Jews of Egypt? As far as outward appearances are concerned, the majority of American Jews have little that lets anyone know that they are of the Jewish faith. Even in the observant community we are far from perfect when it comes to the issue of Jewish appearance and an overt Jewish identity. We can't even boast with the bragging rights of the Egyptian Jews of yore; our (commonly used) first names, our language and our dress are – in the main – very much the same as those of the non-Jews with whom we live and work. Why and how can this be acceptable to us?

Perhaps it is because we today have so much that does identify and define us as Jews and does so from the inside, not merely through outward appearances. There is Torah that we study, *tefilah* that we engage in three times a day, and the four sections of *Shulchan Aruch* that we follow moment to moment, which announces very boldly who we are and to Whom we belong. We are, therefore, less dependent upon the distinctions of name, dress and language. Thus, we are able to see, recognize and appreciate the Jewish character of our friends and neighbors.

When we gain true freedom, we are thoroughly comfortable (even proud) to be seen as Jews. However, Jewish name, dress and language alone do not form this appearance. Virtuous, Torah-prescribed behavior and attitudes displayed in every area of our lives form the *Kiddush Hashem* that proceeds from what we see in each other and what others see in us. They are the substance of the mission upon which we have been sent as we move from exile to redemption.

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9:30 am

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Dr. Debra Kaplan *Dr. Pinkhos Churgin Memorial Chair Assistant Professor of Jewish History*  
**Women, Marriage and Property: From the Rishonim to Early Modern Frankfurt**

11:30 am

Dr. Ronnie Perelis *Chief Rabbi Dr. Isaac Abraham and Jelena (Rachel) Alcalay Assistant Professor of Sephardic Studies*  
**"These Indians are Jews": Lost Tribes, Secret Jews and Brave New Worlds**

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The Arbesfeld Yom Rishon program presents

## Women in Tanach and Talmud Yom Iyun • Sunday, May 2, 2010

Yeshiva University, Furst Hall • 500 West 185th St. New York, NY

**9:15am**  
**Registration**

**9:30am**  
**Professor**  
**Smadar**

**Rosensweig**  
*The Interface of Pshat, Chazal, & Parshanut: The Model of Benot Zelaphchad*

**10:30am**  
**Rabbi Hayyim Angel**  
*Avigayil and David: The Role of That Narrative in Sefer Shemuel*

**Rabbi Shalom Carmy**  
*Halakha and Rape: Three 20<sup>th</sup> Century Perspectives on One Rambam*

**Rabbi Daniel Feldman**  
*Bound by Time? Women and Sefirat Ha'Omer*

**Mrs. Nechama Price**  
*Strong or Weak? Women in Tanach*

**11:30am**  
**Rabbi Mark Dratch**  
*Love, Honor and Obey? Marital Relations and Relationships in the Talmud*

**Rabbi Shmuel Hain**  
*Family Redeemed and Marriage Sanctified: An Overview of Seder Nashim*

**Dr. Aaron Koller**  
*Rabbinic Readings of a Radical Book: Esther in Hazal*

**Mrs. Shoshana Schechter**  
*Reflections on the Mirrors of Mitzrayim: Looking Forward to Make Change*

**12:30pm**  
**Rabbi Yosef Blau**  
*Halakhic Responses to the Changing Role of Women in Society*

**Rabbi Benjamin Blech**  
*If Brit Milah is the Sign of our Covenant with G-d, What About Women?*

**Mrs. Yael Leibowitz**  
*Polarity In Tanach: How David And Goliath Shed Light On Our Understanding Of Megillat Ruth*

**Rabbi Menachem Leibtag**  
*The Women in Tanach Who Have No Name*

**\$10 Admission • Free Admission for YU Students • Mincha & conclusion at 1:30pm**

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