

# Insights to the Pesach Seder

*From the Rabbinic Alumni Committee of the  
Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary*

## Arba Kosos

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**A** number of different reasons are given for the *arba kosos* used on seder night. One reason given is because the word “kos” appears four times in Parshas Va-yaishev during the discourse in prison between Yosef and the Sar Ha-Mashkim (butler), as the Sar Ha-Mashkim relates his dream to Yosef.

Interestingly, the term “*mishtay hayayin*” (feast of wine) appears four times in Megillas Esther (Chapters 5,7), and yet, that is not offered as a reason for us to have *arba kosos* at the seder, even though the Purim miracle and the downfall of Haman occurred on Pesach! This would certainly seem to be a valid reason for us to drink four cups of wine at the seder.

Perhaps the reason for embracing the cups of wine mentioned in Parshas Vayaishev as the basis for our drinking four cups is because Pesach marks the celebration of freedom for Am Yisrael, a veritable birth of a nation. The Purim story, as related in the Megilla, occurred during a nadir in Jewish history, at a time of golus.

Mordechai impressed upon Esther not to reveal her identity or to divulge her origins. Yosef, on the other hand,

even while in the dangerous depths of dungeon incarceration, proudly, and without fear, advertised his origins as an “*Ivri*,” a Jew. Therefore, it is only fitting that on the night marking our geula and independence and formation into the Chosen Nation, we model our seder activities upon the events of Yosef Ha-Tzadik.

## Karpas

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### The Karpas Connection

**A**t the very end of Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet’s lecture, “The Eulogy for Joe DiMaggio,” he recounts an amazing story that happened over thirty years ago at Maimonides Day School in Brookline, Massachusetts.

One evening, after Mincha, while waiting to start the Maariv service, the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav, asked one of the members of the minyan for a special favor. “Moe,” the Rav said, “we have thirty minutes before we are going to daven Maariv. Can you do me a favor and teach me all the rules of baseball? I want to know how the game is played.”

Although shocked by this unusual request, Moe gave the Rav a thirty-

minute crash course on the minutiae of baseball: three strikes you’re out, four balls and you walk to first, stealing a base, and other arcane particulars. At the end of the thirty-minute tutorial, Moe mustered enough courage to ask the Rav why he wanted to know how to play baseball. The Rav replied, “My grandchildren are visiting and I want to be able to talk to them about what interests them.”

One of the greatest Talmudic scholars of the 20th century knew what few teachers remember — always begin a class or lecture by first engaging your audience with that which interests them. Once you have gained their attention, you can continue teaching any lesson you wish.

If this is true in the classroom, how much more important it is at the Passover seder when we are Biblically commanded to be teachers, recalling and reenacting the story of Exodus. To assist us, our sages devised the Haggadah, a teacher’s manual and text, created to stimulate thought and discussion. A problem, however, arises with the very first ceremony right after Kiddush.

According to tradition, we wash our hands and dip a vegetable into salt water. If the purpose of the Haggadah is to arouse stimulating discussion, partaking of an hors d’oeuvre seems to fail the test. Could *karpas*, which can

hardly fill the stomach, feed the mind? In a setting where all ceremonies are meant to challenge and intrigue us, why did the rabbis select such an innocuous ritual to engage their audience?

Perhaps we can find our answer in an explanation taught to me by the late Rabbi Isaac Bernstein of London. Rabbi Bernstein noted that a Talmudic passage at the end of *Pesachim* (65b) describes how the pascal lamb was carried home after it was slaughtered and sacrificed in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The Talmud states, “A Baraisa taught: Each and every one put his pascal lamb in its skin and swung it behind him. Rabbi Illish said like Arabian merchants.”

Why, however, would Jews carry their pascal lamb home to their Pesach seder looking like Arabian merchants? What could this possibly mean? In attempting to answer this question, the 19th century scholar, Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, in his commentary to the Haggadah, *Yeriot Shlomo* (printed in Rabbi Yaakov Emden’s *Siddur Beit Yaakov*), detects what appears to be a major deficiency in the Haggadah’s narrative of the Passover story.

True, Rabbi Kluger notes, we recount how Pharaoh persecuted our people and how God redeemed us from slavery with great miracles. But the beginning of the story is missing. Nowhere do we discuss what caused us to go to Egypt in the first place. Doesn’t the story really begin when his ten brothers sold Joseph to Arabian merchants? Therefore, when we take our pascal lamb home from the Temple, we act like Arabian merchants because Joseph’s sale led to the arrival of our ancestors in the land of Egypt.

If this is correct, where do we find this message at the seder? A great medieval scholar, Rav Manoach, in his commentary to Maimonides’ code, *Hilchot Chametz U’Matzah* 8:5, resolves our dilemma. Rav Manoach states, “And we have the custom of *karpas* as a remembrance of the coat of wool that Jacob made for Joseph which caused the entire episode of ‘and our forefathers went down to Egypt.’” According to Rav Manoach, we dip the *karpas* in salt water at the very start of the seder because it reminds us of how the brothers dipped Joseph’s coat of wool into blood and brought it back to Jacob. *Karpas* follows immediately after Kiddush, even before we break the matzot and begin reciting the Haggadah’s text, because it symbolizes the very first act that led to slavery and redemption.

And yet we must wonder why this act is called *karpas*. Rashi, the classical Biblical commentator, interprets the Hebrew word for Joseph’s coat, *Pasim* (Gen. 37:3), as a garment of fine wool, as it says in Megillat Esther (1.6) “*karpas* and *techelet*.”

*Karpas* therefore represents the story of Joseph’s coat. The Holocaust martyr, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman z”l, once noted that throughout Jewish history, blood libels seemed to flare up around Pesach time. Perhaps, argued Rabbi Wasserman, it is no coincidence; rather it is payback for what we did to Joseph at the dawn of our people’s history.

Just as Rabbi Soloveitchik z”l, engaged the minds of his grandchildren as an educational device, so too our rabbis of old compiled the Haggadah with the engaging device of *karpas*. It connects us to the Haggadah

by stimulating our minds and motivating our souls to learn the real lesson of Pesach right at the beginning of the seder, before we even begin reciting any text.

## Yachatz

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The fourth part to the order of the seder is *yachatz*, in which we split the middle matzah into two pieces. One piece remains for the eating of matza and the other part is *tzafun*, “hidden away,” as the afikoman to be eaten later. The *Chasam Sofer* explains that the symbolism of *yachatz* is that the seder night is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on that which happened in Mitzrayim and the redemption that resulted. The second part of the night, which is represented by the hidden matzah, corresponds to the future redemption, the nature of which remains hidden to us at this time. The focus of the seder night should be about the tradition that we are passing to the next generation. It is about the tradition of a people who have experienced a redemption from slavery, yet who await to be redeemed once again. May we merit to see the fulfillment of the promised redemption in our time before our very eyes.

# Maggid

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## Putting the Seder in Perspective

One of the sections in the Haggadah that I have always found perplexing is the paragraph that begins “*V’hi She’amda.*” While there is no disputing the sobering, yet also uplifting, message it contains — namely that throughout our history there have been nations that have tried to annihilate us and it is only with the help of the Almighty that we have survived — the placement of the section remains puzzling. We are at the start of the seder and have just begun to tell the story of our Exodus from Egypt, and then we seem to veer off course before returning to our narrative.

Moreover, even the acts that accompany the recitation of this paragraph highlight its uniqueness. One of the key facets of the manner in which we engage in *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* is that we tell the story over the uncovered matzot. Whether they are the bread of affliction or the bread of freedom, the matzot powerfully symbolize critical components of our experience in Egypt, and their visible presence is crucial to our recounting of the story. Surprisingly, when we get to the section of “*V’hi She’amda,*” we cover the matzot and instead lift our cups of wine. What has changed? Is this paragraph not part of the Haggadah?

Perhaps we may suggest that indeed this section is not part of the Haggadah in the classic sense, but

rather it is the message that we are to take away from the seder experience. Undoubtedly, it is important for us to relive the events that occurred in Egypt, for they form the foundation of our existence. It was through our servitude and subsequent freedom that our identity as Am Yisrael was forged, and therefore it is incumbent upon each one of us to tell the story to our children and make sure that they continue the chain for future generations.

At the same time, however, it is imperative for us to acknowledge that our relationship with the Almighty is ongoing; it is not just a part of our past but it also defines our present and shapes our future. This is the message of “*V’hi She’amda.*” While there is much more to the seder night (both in terms of the narrative and the experiential components of the evening), at this point in the Haggadah, we have outlined the basic story of *yetziat Mitzrayim*, and therefore we need to step away for a moment and realize this larger lesson. We cover the matzot precisely to illustrate that at this instant we are not telling the tale of our Exodus but are instead recognizing the relationship that it formed.

We hope and pray each year for the fulfillment of the words of our sages that בניסן נגאלו ובניסן עתידן לגאל — in Nissan we were redeemed, and we will once again be redeemed in Nissan. Perhaps if we truly appreciate the nature of our bond with the Almighty, then this Pesach we will merit witnessing that guarantee become a reality.

# Maggid

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## Beginnings & Endings

At first glance, the Haggadah appears to be a random collection of verses, stories, and statements. However, upon further reflection we come to understand the intentional, yet nuanced structure of this ancient script. The Talmud (*Pesachim* 115) explains: *maschil b’genus u’misayem b’shevach* — we begin with degradation and conclude with praise. We begin the seder by discussing the “low points” or disparaging chapters of our national existence. The sages disagree as to which “low point” we should begin with. Shmuel explains that we begin with, “*Avadim hayinu,*” — we were slaves. We acknowledge that we did not begin as a nation of free men and women. We were slaves who served a human master. Rav states, “*Mitchila ovdei avoda zara hayu avoseinu,*” — in the beginning our forefathers were idolaters. We were not always monotheists, we did not always pledge our allegiance to God, we served and paid homage to other gods. According to Shmuel, over the course of the Pesach seder, we work our way to celebrating our physical freedom. According to Rav, the seder is the opportunity to celebrate our newfound spiritual emancipation. Rav and Shmuel may disagree on the specific beginning and end points, but do agree on the overall structure of the seder night.

What is the meaning of this Rabbinic framework? Why must we start with the negative or disparaging chapters of our national existence? Why not

begin and end with our freedom, emancipation, and positive identity as the nation of God?

The commentaries on the Haggadah share many approaches and answers. First, the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush, 1809-1879) explains that the best way to make a dramatic point is through contrast. Only when we remember our past can we truly appreciate our future.

Second, the great Maggid of Kozhnitz (Rav Yisroel Hopstein, 1737-1814) explains that the greatest danger we face is believing we are beyond salvation. A person may think to himself, “I have done so many terrible things, I have tarnished my soul, I have sullied my reputation, I have failed to actualize my potential; what hope is there for me?” *Maschil b’genus*, even if the beginning is degrading, even if the beginning is stunted and handicapped, *misayem b’shevach*, I choose how the story ends, I can change, I can live better, do better, and create a beautiful future.

Perhaps there is a third lesson as well. Life requires patience. Events occur and we search for answers. Situations

unfold and we try desperately to understand their deeper meaning. We want insight and clarity and we want it now. Clarity will come but it requires the passage of time. *Maschil b’genus u’misayem b’shevach* — the difficult life situations will have a positive resolution (not necessarily the resolution we desire, but positive nevertheless). However, just as it takes time to reach the *shevach* (praise) contained within the Haggadah, it takes time to see our personal praise and resolution as well. It will come — we just have to be patient.

*Maschil b’genus u’misayem b’shevach* — the rabbis were not simply giving us a format for the Haggadah, they were providing us with a format for life. To actualize our freedom and maximize our ability to shape our personal and national destiny, we must internalize the messages of the Haggadah. We must remember that while building our future, we must reflect on the events and messages of our past. No matter how far we have wandered, no matter how estranged we have become from God, ourselves and one another — no person is beyond salvation. We must bear in mind that resolution,

understanding, and happiness will come to those who are patient enough to wait.

## A Message to Our Children

The Torah (Exodus 13:8) describes the Pesach experience as an intergenerational teaching opportunity. Parents must transmit to their children the experiences and lessons of our ancestors and how they shape, inform and influence our lives to this very day. However, the Torah does not want parents to simply lecture or convey information. We attempt to pique the curiosity of the child. We want the child to initiate the questions, we want the child to yearn for answers and so we do many things over the course of the seder that look different and out of place — all in order to create an atmosphere of spiritual exploration. Perhaps the most well-known (and scripted) set of questions at the seder is the Mah Nishtana. The child asks the same four questions about the unusual practices of the seder year



after year in order to initiate the parent-child dialogue. This is the hallmark of the sacred seder night. Then something strange occurs. We recite the paragraph of *Avadim hayinu* — We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. One would have thought that after the child asks these legitimate and good questions, the parent would immediately answer. However, we don't address any of these questions and instead we give a history lesson on the Exodus narrative. Why not answer the child directly? Explain to him why we eat the matzah. Tell her the symbolism of the maror. Explain the behavioral freedom of reclining. The Mah Nishtana questions are solid and the answers to them serve as the foundation of our Pesach experience. Why not answer the questions directly and immediately?

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) provides a magnificent insight. We have many mitzvos — some of which have a readily understandable reason and some which do not. Some mitzvos appeal to our intellect, others speak to our heart, and still others seemingly defy comprehension. However, upon further reflection it becomes clear that even the things we think we understand, we don't truly comprehend. The ways of God are magnificent and mysterious. The actions of God confound and amaze. The decisions of God can both gladden and break the heart of man. So why serve a God we can't understand or comprehend? The answer is contained in one word: belief. We believe in God and we believe that He believes in us. We believe that we are part of a master plan and that every step we take is necessary and meaningful in the actualization of that plan. We believe that our life challenges and difficulties

are not an ends but rather a means to achieve completion, fulfillment, and self-actualization. We believe that God loves us more than any human mind could ever comprehend. We believe that God cherishes His relationship with us. We believe that God celebrates our accomplishments and mourns our losses. We believe.

This is how we answer our children on the seder night. My child asks me thoughtful, meaningful, and significant questions. Why do we do this and that? Why do we observe? What is the meaning of these practices? I can give my child a whole list of technical answers and reasons. I can give my child multiple opinions and levels of understanding as to the symbolic and ritual meaning of everything we do. But instead I do something simpler, yet much more profound. My dear child, I do what I do because I believe. God took me out because He loves me and because He realizes that I have something important to contribute. My dear child, if there is something I want to convey to you tonight — it is my sense of belief. I want to pass on to you the strong belief I received from my father and he from his. I want to give you this *emunah* (belief) because if you have it and if you nurture it, you will feel the warm embrace of the Divine. As parents it is our obligation to teach our children how to practice and observe the Torah and its mitzvos. But tonight, we teach our children how to believe.

Tonight is not the night for complicated intellectual analyses, it is not the night for detailed discussions regarding Jewish Law. Tonight is the night to teach our children simple, beautiful, and genuine faith. How do you teach belief? You model it. When

my child looks to me at the seder, I will try my best to convey to him how privileged I feel to be a Jew. When my child looks at me, I want her to see the joy I have in serving my God. When my children look at me, I want them to feel the privilege they have to be part of a magnificent nation with a holy destiny.

## Motzi Matzah

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Every Jewish child knows that the reason we eat matzah on Pesach is that there was not ample time for their dough to rise as our ancestors were fleeing Mitzrayim. While this may be the manifestation on a physical level, Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl Shlit" a explains that there is an additional reason that we eat matza on a spiritual level. While the physical dough may not have become chametz, their spiritual "dough" almost became chametz. This refers to the fact that the Jewish nation fell to the depths of impurity and were saved just in time, avoiding spiritual extinction. For us, throughout the year, we are challenged by all of the impurity that surrounds us and that has penetrated into our mindsets. Pesach is the time when we celebrate our freedom. Just as Hashem saved us physically and spiritually in Egypt, it is our hope that we will be saved from the chametz that has permeated from society into our lives. Eating matza can therefore be an intensely spiritual experience.