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HaMizrachi seeks to spread Torah Eretz Yisrael throughout the world. HaMizrachi also contains articles, opinion pieces and advertisements that represent the diversity of views and interests in our communities. These do not necessarily reflect any official position of Mizrachi or its branches.
The following story is a personal one, our family story. One that my grandfather of blessed memory would tell us time and time again. It was about his lucky escape from Lithuania as a 17-year-old boy with his family on one of the last boats out of Europe before the outbreak of World War Two.

Louis Gecelter was young man from Kovno, a keen sportsman who participated regularly in Maccabi sporting events. In the summer of 1937, he represented Maccabi Kovno at a regional sports festival for young Jews from across Europe. Here he met young German Jewish boys his age for the first time. While talking to them, he was shocked by the stories he was hearing – the yellow star, public discrimination and disgrace at all levels of German society.

He immediately sensed he must tell his mother to come and hear these terrible stories for herself. Although the sports grounds were miles away – and he would only be coming home after the festival had ended – he found a creative solution. He wrote a note to his mother and asked the captain of one of the steam ships on the river next to the grounds to deliver the note to the lady who runs the kiosk further upstream. Thankfully, the note made it to his mother, my great-grandmother Sonia, and its message was clear: “Come now on the very next boat and hear what’s happening to the Jews in Germany!”

And she came indeed, listening very intently to the young German boys and girls. The moment my grandfather returned home, she gathered the family together, and – in my grandfather’s words – she declared to the family in Yiddish, “Mir muzech packen, dir kinder zogen dem emes” – we must pack, the children speak the truth.

Thank G-d, my great-grandmother had the wisdom and insight to decide it was time to leave and within months they had gone. They wanted to go to Palestine but the gates were closed due to British immigration restrictions, so they made their way to South Africa.

Tragically, all extended family who stayed behind perished in the Holocaust.

My grandfather arrived in South Africa and married my grandmother (a marriage that lasted 75 years!), built a family, became a Jewish community leader, and they made aliyah when he was 59. All his direct descendants subsequently followed suit and live in Israel today. He passed away peacefully a few years ago at the age of 97. He would always say how he owed his life to that fortuitous meeting at the sports festival and his mother’s great wisdom and foresight.

From potential destruction to ultimate deliverance. From clouds of darkness to radiant light, and from the brink of despair to a bright and hopeful future.

Like myriads of other Jewish family stories, I believe our family story reflects the essence of Jewish history as told in the Haggadah and provides a pertinent perspective as we combat the global corona crisis.

After all, no festival shapes our collective identity more than Pesach. It is the time we engage in national storytelling. We sit together as a family and attempt to crystallize the meaning of our people’s very existence – our birth, our suffering and our salvation. We aim to tell our children what it means to be a part of the Jewish people.

We tell our collective family’s story.

Indeed, the stories we tell ourselves are critical to our collective identity. According to Harvard History Professor, Jill Lepore, this is the crisis facing America today. She argues that Americans have forgotten how

Continued on page 4
to tell their national story with clarity. She suggests the reason for this is that over the last 50 years, much of academia has shunned any discussion of nationalism, seeing it as something negative and dangerous. By doing so, others step into the vacuum and create stories which don't necessarily reflect the true American story.

Lepore says a country must have a national story, otherwise it risks losing its way. Yes, writing national history creates plenty of problems. But not writing it creates more.

Our Prophets and Sages understood this well and created our national narrative at the very dawn of Jewish history. They defined what our collective identity and destiny are all about. This is the story of Pesach and this of course is our Haggadah.

So what is the essence of our story? What is the foundational idea at the core of the Haggadah?

Our Sages posit that the quintessential theme of the whole story can be captured in four words – מַתְחִיל בִּגְנוּת וּמְסַיֵּם בְּשֶׁבַח – begin with shame, end with praise. This short and sharp insight not only captures the primary plot of the Exodus but reveals an underlying pattern in all of Jewish history.

Life comes with difficulties and challenges. But it is in no way defined by them.

Whether the challenges are physical or spiritual, one thing is clear. It is the beginning of the story and not the story itself. The story may begin with darkness, pain and suffering but somehow always ends with light, hope and redemption.

The Jewish story contains tragedy but is never tragic.

Life has bitterness, lots of it, but it is fundamentally sweet.

There is evil in the world, but good will eventually prevail.

As these lines are being written, Covid-19 has caused the most unimaginable and drastic consequences all over the globe. We are living through chaotic, daunting and uncertain times.

Our challenges – just like in Egypt – are both physical and spiritual.

Physically, tens of thousands have died, hundreds of thousands more are ill and we are experiencing an unprecedented spread of the virus to almost every country in the world in such a short time. Israel is approaching a full national lockdown as are many countries around the world causing unprecedented physical isolation and social distancing. The financial ramifications for so many individuals and countries are staggering.

Spiritually, a host of religious and halachic challenges, such as the shutting down of all synagogue services, public Torah classes and shiurim and many regular chessed services, to mention but a few. Instead of the natural scenario of grandparents sitting with grandchildren on Seder Night, countless families will be separated, many for the first time ever.

However, thankfully, the Pesach Haggadah grants us a unique paradigm through which to view these events.

Although the future remains uncertain and none of us know how things will unfold, we believe and know that they will end, and somehow for the better. We know from our collective family story that pain, suffering and uncertainty will transform into a better and brighter future. Perhaps even to a more mindful and balanced world, more humble and appreciative societies demonstrating more creativity and interconnectedness. Perhaps a better world somehow strengthened with new purpose and vigor, better equipped and resolved to face life’s great challenges and opportunities ahead.

Please G-d, let it be soon!

Chag Sameach!

1 Foreign Affairs Periodical, March/April 2019, p. 10.
2 Mishna Pesachim, 10:4.
3 With respect to the Haggadah’s theme of מַתְחִיל בִּגְנוּת וּמְסַיֵּם בְּשֶׁבַח, the Talmud (Pesachim 116a) mentions two opinions. Rav says it’s referring to the spiritual realm, the journey from idolatry to belief in G-d, and Shmuel says it’s referring to our physical survival – from suffering and servitude to freedom and redemption. Rav Yitzchak Alfassi rules that both opinions are accepted in practice and both appear in the Haggadah.

Rabbi Doron Perez is the Chief Executive of World Mizrachi
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Makat bechorot. The death of all of their firstborn – refuse to free the Jews and that Moshe informing Moshe that Pharaoh will suddenly, Hashem adds an ultimatum, wants to free the Jewish people and can express their frustration to Moshe. Their stated goal is to convince the Egyptians of Hashem's hegemony but their real intention was to inspire the Jews who live amongst the Egyptians.

Finally, after nine plagues, the Jews are ready and it is time for makat bechorot. Before the plague can occur and for it to single out the Jews as Hashem's first born, the Jews have to identify themselves by sacrificing the Korban Pesach and marking their doorposts with its blood. Hashem knows which homes are Jewish and needs no sign; it is the Jews who need to self-identify.

Though the actual Exodus occurred in the morning, the geula began the night before with makat bechorot. Hence we have our Pesach Seder at night and not during the day. We are meant to commemorate not only the Exodus, but makat bechorot too. Not only what Hashem did for us, but also what we had to do to deserve it.

The night when this all occurred – both that year and in future years – is called leil shimurim, for both Hashem and the Jewish people. Rashi explains that the shemira refers to Hashem's waiting and looking forward to the moment He could redeem the Jewish people. Ramban explains that Hashem was waiting for the time the Jewish people would be worthy of redemption by sacrificing the Korban Pesach.

Shemira means to watch and protect and refers to Hashem's protecting the Jewish homes during makat bechorot. The Jewish people's shemira of the mitzvah of Korban Pesach merited Hashem's shemira during makat bechorot.

The Ibn Ezra explains that we are shomer the mitzvah of Korban Pesach in future generations to show our appreciation of Hashem's shemira on that original night in Mitzrayim. The Talmud- teaches that Hashem continues being shomer over us on the night of the 14th of Nissan for all generations.

Additionally, the Sefera explains that just as Hashem waited and tolerated for the moment when the Jews would be deserving of geula from Mitzrayim, he waits for the time we will be ready for the final Geula as well. The Rema7 adds that we open the door when we recite at the Seder to show our faith in Hashem's shemira of us and that this merit will indeed bring our own geula.

May we continue to be shomer the mitzvot of Pesach in a way that merits us the shemira of the ultimate Geula!

1 This explains why Chapter 6 reintroduces Moshe and Aharon (6: 14-27). It is introducing a new ‘version’ of the story.
2 See Rashi 7:3. This explains why Hashem had to harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he would continue to resist wanting to free the Jewish people. Pharaoh may have been convinced, but the Jews were not yet ready.
3 See Mechilta (Bo 6), which emphasizes that the sign was on the inside of the door because it was aimed at the Jews living in the home.
4 See Berachot 4b.
5 See Shemot 13, which focuses our commemoration of Yetziat Mitzrayim on makat bechorot and on korban Pesach which merited our redemption (See Machzor Vitri on the Haggadah DH Beha’ar).
6 This explains the significance of Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya’s opinion (Berachot 9a), that the Korban Pesach needed to be eaten before chatzot, the time makat bechorot occurred.
7 Orach Chaim 480.

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Even if we were all wise... all Sages and well learned in the Torah, it would still be our duty to tell the story of the departure from Egypt. And the more one elaborates upon the story of the departure from Egypt, the more one is to be praised.”

Immediately after teaching the above imperative, the Ba’alei haHaggadah recount the narrative of the Five “Star” Sages in Bnei Brak, who fulfilled the above: “Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon were telling of the departure from Egypt all night until their disciples came and said to them: Our masters, the time for the recitation of the morning Shema has arrived.”

This was an odd phenomenon – firstly, at least three of the four Sages mentioned – Rabbi Eliezer (from Lod), Rabbi Yehoshua (from Peki’in) and Rabbi Tarfon were Rabbi Akiva’s masters and teachers! Why were they spending Seder Night with their student (from Bnei Brak)? After all, students generally visit their teachers on festivals.

Secondly, Rabbi Eliezer in particular taught1 that one is required to celebrate yom tov in one’s home, based on the pasuk, “You shall rejoice, you and your household,”2 which he contradicts through spending Pesach night in Rabbi Akiva’s home.

The Aruch HaShulchan3 suggests that the Seder in Bnei Brak took place after the destruction of the Second Beit HaMikdash, most probably during the harsh Hadrianic persecutions following the failed Bar Kochba rebellion. This was one of the most tragic and despairing eras in Jewish history as Jewish leaders were being tortured to death and a harsh Roman exile was yet to follow.

How could Pesach – the holiday of freedom and redemption – be celebrated that year in the midst of terror and persecution? Who could inspire the leaders to retain their faith and optimism? All agreed that Rabbi Akiva, who could laugh upon hearing the rejoicing of Roman officers and seeing foxes/jackals (or Roman officers) emerging from the Kodesh Kodashim, confident in the fulfillment of the prophecies of consolation,3 could offer them the inspiration they needed!

Rabbi Akiva debated with Rabbi Tarfon regarding the proper conclusion to Maggid: “Rabbi Tarfon said, ‘Blessed art Thou, O G-d... Who has redeemed us and has redeemed our forebears [past tense] from Egypt’ – and did not seal [the blessing]. Rabbi Akiva continued and concluded Rabbi Tarfon’s blessing: ‘...So shall our G-d and the G-d of our forebears [past tense] bring to us other festivals and celebrations for peace, rejoicing in the rebuilding of Your city and reveling in Your service; and we shall eat therefrom the paschal lamb and the sacrifices... Blessed art Thou, Who has redeemed Israel.’”

Rabbi Akiva’s beracha of thanksgiving for past and future redemptions would be recited that year (even in the presence of Rabbi Tarfon) as he hosted this monumental Seder as one of the five-“star” leaders of his generation. For though he may have been the student, that year and onward, he would teach and inspire generations to maintain faith in G-d and the destiny of Am Yisrael. He would live and die with the words Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeynu Hashem Echad on his lips – constantly engaged in Kabbalat Ol Malchut Shamayim (accepting the yoke of Heaven) however dire his circumstances.

Under quarantine and danger, Rabbi Akiva teaches us messages of redemption every Seder; the secret is not only to retain optimism and recount the redemption of the past as a prelude to the future, but simultaneously to strengthen oneself in religious commitment. It is no surprise that Rabbi Akiva’s own students had to come to announce – “Our masters, the time for the recitation of the morning Shema has arrived.” The Rabbis were well aware of the ideal time to recite Kriyat Shema; in fact they had been engaged in reciting Rabbi Akiva’s Kriyat Shema all night as they rekindled their faith in redemption, in martyrdom and in acceptance of Ol Malchut Shamayim.

The students had yet to partake in such a Seder; otherwise they would have known that the dawn heralding the redemption had already risen hours earlier, as the Pesach story was retold throughout the night in Bnei Brak.

1 Sukkah 27b.
2 Devarim 14:26.
3 Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, 1829-1908 in his commentary on the Haggadah, “Leil Shimurim.”
4 Makkot 24b.
5 Pesachim 116b.

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There are two historical events that are the basis of our entire religion – Yetziat Mitzrayim and Ma’amad Har Sinai. On these two occasions, G-d demonstrated the truth of all of the ikarei emunah (the principles of faith) to the Jewish people. He showed that He exists, is demonstrating the truth of all of the laws of nature. G-d thereby verified that He alone possesses the ability to change the laws of nature. G-d thereby verified that He is the Creator; otherwise, He would not have dominion over nature.

At this time, G-d also taught Bnei Yisrael the ikar of geulah. The yoseid of biat haMashiach is that G-d not only created the world but that He has an ongoing involvement in it. He wants to see mankind ultimately fulfill its purpose in bringing the world to a proper resolution. At the time of Yetziat Mitzrayim, G-d stepped in to punish Pharaoh and redeem the Jewish people, and He will similarly lead the world to an ultimate geulah in the times of Mashiach.

Through G-d’s direct intervention, we also learn the ikerim of the Am HaNivchar (Chosen Nation). Finally, the ikerim of the truth of nevuah (prophecy), the primacy of nevuot Moshe, and Torah min haShamayim are predicated on Ma’amad Har Sinai.

How do we know that our religion is the true religion? Rav Yehudah HaLevi stresses the fact that we have a historical tradition that began with an event witnessed by a great mass of people – 600,000 men between the ages of 20 and 60, in addition to those younger and older, women, and the eirev rav. This great mass of people experienced firsthand the 10 Plagues, Yetziat Mitzrayim, Kriyat Yam Suf, and Ma’amad Har Sinai, and this is how our religion was established. This historical tradition was passed down to us by our parents and grandparents, who told us about these events. Our ancestors were not a band of drunkards and liars. We know our parents and grandparents to be honest, trustworthy people. They did not lie to us!

The Christians claim that Oto HaHalsh performed miracles, but those purported miracles were supposedly witnessed by only a few disciples. Mohammad’s prophecy was similarly only a personal experience. In contrast, the incidents recounted in the Chumash were witnessed by millions of people, and that is why we have a much stronger historical tradition than all the other religions.

Based on this understanding, Rambam interprets the verse in Shir HaShirim, “Turn, turn, O Shulamit (perfect one); turn, turn, that we may see you.” The nations of the world say to the Jewish people, “Turn away from G-d. Why do you not follow our religion? We also have a historical tradition!” The verse concludes “What will you see in the Shulamit like a dance of the camps?” The Jewish people respond, “If you were to demonstrate something commensurate with Ma’amad Har Sinai, where there was machane Shechchina opposite machane Yisrael – namely, a historical tradition witnessed by millions of people – we could follow your religion. But you cannot. We know the authenticity of our religion.”

Rambam further notes that the word ‘return’ appears four times in the verse, to hint that Klal Yisrael will be coerced to abandon its faith four times – during the rule of each of the four kingdoms that will subjugate us, the last of which we are still currently experiencing. Yet G-d has promised us that even as they force us to adopt their faith, the Torah will never be removed from us, as the verse says “for it shall not be forgotten from the mouth of its offspring.” It is for this reason that Rambam maintains that there is a mitzvah to read the parasha of Ma’amad Har Sinai once a year.

These two events – Yetziat Mitzrayim and Ma’amad Har Sinai – are crucial to teach us all of the ikarei emunah. That is why we have a daily mitzvah to mention Yetziat Mitzrayim and a special mitzvah on Pesach night of sippur, to relate the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim at great length and with much elaboration, and especially to transmit it to succeeding generations.

This essay is adapted from Rav Schacher on the Haggadah.

1 Kuzari 1:25, 1:83-91, 4:11.
2 Igeret Teiman 3.
3 7:1.
4 Devarim 31:21.
5 Devarim 4:9.
6 See Derech Pikudecha, mitzvot aser 21, chelek hamachshavah, in the name of Maharam Chagiz.

Rabbi Hershel Schachter is Rosh Yeshiva and Rosh Kollel at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University
This Year,
Give Your Parents the Precious Gift of Peace of Mind…
and Your Children the Priceless Gift of Meaning

Most of us lead ordinary lives and yet, each and every family has a story to tell that is uniquely their own.

Having a book compiled for the benefit of my children and grandchildren and future generations was indeed the right decision, and I would encourage others to do the same before all is forgotten.

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To discuss your ideas and wishes for a book to immortalize your loved ones and leave a meaningful legacy for your family, please contact Danny Verbov at dannyverbov@gmail.com or call +972-523115682
Seder Night is a festival of faith. It is a time when we want our whole family to undergo a process of growth. We want the whole family to be free. Here are a few suggestions on the idea of freedom you can share and discuss around your Pesach table.

We suggest that the week beforehand, you ask each member of the family to ponder the question: “What does freedom mean to me?”

Maggid begins with Ha Lachma Anya: the Lechem Oni – the poor man’s bread our forefathers ate in Egypt, and ends with HaShata Avdei – LeShana HaBa’a Bnei Chorin – “This year we are here – next year free men.”

This is the goal of Seder Night – to go free! Let us go on a journey through the Haggadah that will enlighten us as to what true freedom means in our times.

All who are hungry, come and eat; all who are in need, come and join our Pesach Seder

Concern for others takes us out of slavery.

Rav Soloveitchik explains: “The essence of freedom is the inclusion of the ‘other.’ The slave thinks only about himself, but a proud, free person thinks about and includes others. Seder Night symbolizes the birth of a ‘Chesed (Giving) Community’ – a community in which the slaves who were just now redeemed from slavery, leave their isolation and total involvement in themselves, and join a kind and giving community.”

A slave is constantly thinking about how to survive, so he can only think about himself. A free person, full of power and vigor, is able to remove himself from his self-centeredness – to think about others and how to help them. Thinking about others is the thought process of a free person!

Before all else, leaving slavery for freedom teaches us that it is forbidden to control others. In the next stage, the Torah commands us to act with kindness towards others – to live in a world of giving, the world of free people. Our goal at the Seder is to go free; to be able to see the other, to transform ourselves into people who positively influence and give to others as people truly free.

Why is it important to remember that we were once slaves?

The Torah begins the first set of mitzvot after Har Sinai precisely with the laws of a Jewish slave. From this we can learn an essential point in our covenant with G-d.

The foundation of the entire Torah is faith and belief in G-d. “I am the L-rd your G-d” is the first of the Ten Commandments. Our basis for faith in G-d does not begin with ‘I am G-d who created the world’ but rather “I am G-d Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” Going from slavery to freedom is what enables a person to fully connect and communicate with G-d, and freedom is the basis for all of the mitzvot. Only then, after we have left slavery and become free, can we receive the Torah. A person who is enslaved to another cannot be a full servant of G-d – not only technically, in that his master disrupts his ability to keep the mitzvot, but also psychologically and spiritually. He cannot feel his full dependence on G-d alone while he is beholden to his master.

For Am Yisrael there is no such concept as slavery for life, as it says: “They are My servants” – all of Am Yisrael is subservient to G-d. Therefore, they cannot be enslaved to humans, for the

Why is this night different from all other nights?

What is the purpose of the four questions?

Clearly, the main point of asking questions is to receive answers. However, there is an additional goal here. The Gemara states that if a person has no children, someone else asks him the four questions; and if he is all alone, he must ask himself. What does this mean?

A slave does not question things. Only a free person is independent and strong enough to ask and challenge. This is even true regarding questions of faith. A free person connected to G-d and to his faith is not afraid to ask questions. Questions will not undermine his or her world of faith.

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basis of serving G-d is that every man and woman must be free to serve Him.

Slavery damages the concept of “I am the L-rd your G-d” in two ways, for both sides – the slave and the master:

1. Slavery prevents the slave from the freedom to serve G-d alone.
2. Slavery causes the master to feel superiority, which prevents him from feeling subservience to G-d.

If so, *Avadim Hayinu* – We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and G-d took us out – it was this Exodus which enabled us to become servants of G-d. However, our control over other people also blocks us from our ability to be true servants of G-d. On Seder Night, let us emphasize our slavery in Egypt so that we will never try to oppress and control others; so that we may understand that doing so prevents us from being true servants of G-d. Problematic control is not only found in slavery in the classic sense, but can occur in many other relationships where one side takes advantage of their strength or position to control and dominate the other side, such as a boss/employee; husband/wife, parent/child, etc.

This is what has stood by our fathers

In every generation they have tried to annihilate us. So it was with the Crusades, the Inquisition, Spain’s expulsion of the Jews, and the Holocaust. In most of these cases, Am Yisrael were spiritually strong and did not abandon their faith.

Why is it so important for us to know that G-d took us out of Egypt?

Firstly, it leads us to trust and have faith in G-d, as the Torah states in several places: “And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be your G-d, and you will know that I am the L-rd your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”

However, there is an additional point here. If we had left the slavery of Egypt through a national struggle, it is safe to assume that we would not have become servants of G-d; a people who would subjugate themselves to doing G-d’s Will in this world. “Slavery” to a spiritual and moral world, to a world of ethics, principles and good character traits, turns a human into a free person by virtue of the fact that the spirit is what rules him, and not his body or his physical desires.

Rav Kook teaches us that “The difference between a slave and a free person is not just a question of social standing, whereby one happens to be enslaved and the other is not. We can find an intelligent slave whose spirit is free, and the opposite, a free man with the mentality of a slave. The nature of true freedom is that uplifted spirit through which the individual, and the entire nation, is uplifted and inspired to remain faithful to their inner essence – the mental and spiritual attribute of the Divine image that lies within them.”

And G-d took us out of Egypt with a strong Hand and an outstretched Arm

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We start the Haggadah talking about the lowly state in which we found ourselves at the beginning of the process of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Why do we say עבדים היה לפורע and not the more concise עבדי פראה וּכְדָּו. Pharaoh’s slaves? After all, in Tehillim, we are called אבני הַשָּׁם, so the parallel would be אבני פראה. Is there a major difference between the two phrases?

If we continue moving backward in history, the real beginning of the geula was the moment G-d appeared to Moshe by the sneh, the burning bush, where He told him to return to Egypt and lead the Jews out.

The question is asked why the sneh was deemed the most appropriate vehicle for this initial conversation? A lowly burning bush doesn’t seem to be the glamorous mechanism we would have envisioned.

Rav Soloveichik suggests that there is a fundamental difference between עבדי פראה and עבדים היה לפורע. Hayinu leParoh, we were to Pharaoh, means a social reality, an external physical state in which we found ourselves. We were subjugated to servitude, but it didn’t go to our core. Avdei Paroh, servants of Pharaoh, on the other hand, would have meant an identification, an internal connection between us and Pharaoh, between us and his ideals and values. That was not the case. As the Midrash tells us, we didn’t change our names, clothing, etc. On the outside, it might not have been noticeable but G-d knew we were Avadim leParoh and not Avdei Paroh.

What was the sneh? A bush on fire yet its inside stayed whole. It was not consumed. It was only burning externally. Moshe had his doubts about the Jewish people. Did they really deserve to be saved? What merits did they have? G-d appears to Moshe in the form of the sneh, as if to say these people are pure and perfect on the inside. It’s just the outside that’s on fire. Go redeem My people.

When we finally did leave Mitzrayim, we became Avdei Hashem, not just avadim hayinu leHashem. We identified with His values, became shaped by His mitzvot, and matured through His dictates. Let us continue to allow the Torah to define who we are, to inspire our core inner self, and may we all be zoche to a true holiday of geula veYeshua – redemption and salvation.

Rabbi Shalom Rosner is a Rebbe at Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh and Rabbi of the Nofei HaShemesh community.
Why is This Haggada Different from All Other Haggadot?

Dr. Daniel Rose explains the new Koren Magerman Youth Haggada

About to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told that they were to become a nation of educators... Freedom is won not on the battlefield nor in the political arena but in the human imagination and will. To defend a land you need an army, but to defend freedom you need education. You need parents, families and homes and a constant conversation between the generations. Above all you need memory – the kind of memory that never forgets the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery.” (The Jonathan Sacks Haggada)

Rabbi Sacks exquisitely encapsulates the essence of Seder Night. In perhaps the widest celebrated ritual service across the Jewish world, we ensure future generations are socialized into our national narrative, identity, and values. At the seder table, there are two central actors, the Parent-Educator (an archetype Jewish personality in Jewish civilization) and the child.

Rabbi Sacks also hints at the pedagogy utilized by the Parent-Educator with the help of the haggada: memory. National memories are transmitted through ritual and storytelling, and Seder night combines these two magnificently. What do ritual and storytelling have in common? They are both experiential. They facilitate the experiencing of values and narrative in a way that other more cerebral modes cannot. To quote Rabbi Sacks once again: “Tell the story while you are doing the deed, because values are caught not taught. They are communicated by what we do more than by what we say.”

The haggada itself, using language from the Talmud, tells us how best to do this: “In every generation each person must see himself as if he had come out of Egypt”. In an obvious attempt to advise us how to best achieve this, the Rambam, in his Mishneh Torah, changes the language somewhat from “see himself (lirot)” to “present himself (leharot)”. By controlling every aspect of the Seder, including the way we dress, eat, sit and act, we can imagine ourselves and each other as if we are there at that moment in history when we were freed from Egypt. This is the moment when national memories become personalized.

We created the new Koren Magerman Youth Haggada with all of this in mind and designed a haggada that places the child at the very center of Seder night. It aims to transmit our national and religious heritage in a way that children can comprehend by using experiential education techniques and activities that draw inspiration from the rituals of the evening itself.

Each page asks the reader a question, suggests an activity (suitable for all present around the table) that highlights the themes addressed on that particular page, features a quote or story connected to the ideas on the page, and shows a beautiful illustration that can be approached as a commentary in itself on the text.

All of the tools and resources in the Koren Magerman Youth Haggada, together with the explanatory Parent-Educator Companion (available free with purchase from www.korenpub.com) give parents and educators everything they need to ensure the Seder will revolve around the children at the table, and make Seder Night a magical evening of impactful, engaging, and fun, experiential education.

Daniel Rose is the editor of the Koren Magerman Educational Siddur series and developed the Koren Magerman Youth Haggada.

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1. The Jonathan Sacks Haggada
2. Talmud Bavli Pesachim 116b
3. Laws of Chametz and Matza, 7:6
What we pray for is a good indication of how important things are to us. We pray for long life, good health, parnassa, and nachat from our children. The intensity of our prayers reflects the degree of their importance. Nothing equals the intensity of our prayers for life and health, because without these, whatever else we have pales in comparison.

In the more comprehensive sidurim, there is an introductory prayer attributed to Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk, one of the foremost Chassidic masters.

As in other prayers, we pray for forgiveness of our sins, for Divine guidance, for good judgment, and for freedom from the enticement of the yetzer hara, the inclination to indulge in animalistic behavior. But there is one request not found anywhere else, to the best of my knowledge. We ask G-d to “help us to see the merits in our fellow humans and not their faults.”

It is not uncommon for some people to be critical of others, but is far less common to praise others. Seeing faults in other people is likely to be defensive. It is a way to bolster one’s own sagging self-esteem.

The Talmud says that the faults we see in others are actually our own faults. The Baal Shem Tov once happened to see a Jew violating Shabbat, he prayed for Divine enlightenment. It was revealed to him that he had once heard the defamation of a Torah scholar. Inasmuch as the Zohar says that a Torah scholar has the kedusha of Shabbat, this was tantamount to a violation of Shabbat.

Before being critical of another person’s behavior, think of your own defects. The Baal Shem Tov said that the world is a mirror. As we are generally blind to our own shortcomings, G-d arranges that we should see them in others, and we should realize that we must correct our own faults.

The next time you wish to say something negative about someone, pause and think. You might be revealing your own shortcomings.
A popular section in the Pesach Haggadah is that of the Four Sons, within which is a strange give-and-take involving the rasha. His question is deemed to be outright heresy and is met with a severe response. Whereas the other three children receive straightforward verbal responses, the rasha is treated to two additional components. The Haggadah instructs the responder to “hakheh et shinav” – do something to the rasha’s teeth, and to inform him, in the third person, that had he been enslaved in Egypt he would not have been redeemed. Why is he given these two additional components, what is meant by hakheh, and is there a connection between these anomalous aspects?

Most explanations translate hakheh as to “blunt” or “dull” his teeth. This unusual word may contain the key to the entire response. The anonymous compiler of the Haggadah cleverly inserted his message assuming a knowledgeable readership familiar with our holy writings.

The word hakheh is not the common word spelled with a chaf, meaning hit, but rather the rare Biblical word הַקהָה. It appears in only three places in Tanach: Jeremiah 31:28-30, Ezekiel 18:2, and Kohelet 10:10. From Kohelet an unequivocal definition can be deduced – “blunt.”

The other two verses address the concept of the culpability of one generation for the sins of another, a fundamental issue with seemingly contradictory sources in Tanach. One of the clearest statements of individual accountability is a proverb found in almost identical form in Jeremiah 31:28-29 and Ezekiel 18:2-4, and it is in that context that the word hakheh appears. Jeremiah states: “In those days they shall say no more: ‘The fathers have eaten unripe (sour) grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge (tikhena).’ But everyone shall die for his own iniquity; every man that eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge (tikhena).”

Could the Haggadah’s intention in using hakheh in the response to the rasha be to immediately recall for the reader the verses from Ezekiel and Jeremiah and their parables? It may thus be intended to convey the following message: the rasha had excluded himself from all Pesach rituals, yet he was not worried about his fate. Even if all this is really required he feels he has no need to worry. After all, the people around him are his family, and they are all engaged in performing G-d’s commandments. In his way of thinking, some of that merit would transfer to him. The compiler of the Haggadah therefore instructs “blunt his teeth!” That is, remind him of those “sour grape” verses. Neither guilt nor merit automatically crosses generational lines.

In other words, if you, rasha, were in Egypt and had not been engaged in the proper activity you would not have been redeemed. The merit of your family would not have helped. There is no automatic transference of merit. Each person is responsible for his own deeds and is capable of teshuva. The burden of one’s sins and the suffering one might endure cannot be attributed to previous generations, nor should one sin in the anticipation that the burden of guilt will be borne by subsequent ones. Jews cannot rest on the laurels of righteous ancestors; each generation must establish its own merits and legacy. The exception to the rule of individual accountability is community zechut (merit) and that is why we also inform the rasha that by removing himself from the community he has forfeited that too.

The blunting of the rasha’s teeth is a subtle yet powerful reminder of personal responsibility. This individual accountability cannot only doom him – as he is explicitly told – but can just as readily rescue him, since he is judged on his actions and his actions alone. We are telling him that he is not beyond hope, but it is up to him to rescue himself. The message to the rasha is a powerful message to us as well – each person is given free choice and sinks or swims on his own merit.

1 A complete treatment of this topic can be found in Ari Zivotofsky, Personal Accountability and Blunting the Teeth of the Rasha, Alei Etzion 18 (5778), pp. 155-170, Alon Shvut.
When we notice narratives in the Torah, which have no connection to the commandments, we are inclined to think they are entirely superfluous, or too lengthy... but this is only because we did not see these incidents with our own eyes... For miracles are only convincing to those who witnessed them; whilst for coming generations, who know them only from the account given by others, they become a story that might be denied. It is inconceivable that miracles would continue and last permanently for all generations. The greatest of the miracles described is the stay of the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years... But G-d knew that in the future people might doubt the accuracy of the account of these miracles, in the same manner they doubt the accuracy of other narratives. They might think the Israelites stayed in the wilderness in a place not far from inhabited land... or that manna came down in those places naturally... To remove all these doubts and to firmly establish the accuracy of the account of these miracles, Scripture enumerates all the stations, so that coming generations may see them, and learn the greatness of the miracles... Stories are vulnerable. Indeed, this is often a problem in courts: a testimony repeated and challenged can constantly change and lose credibility. Nevertheless, a serious problem for the judicial system might be the solution for us.

Let me explain. Here’s a story I heard from the Jewish educator Avraham Infeld. As a young man, Infeld came to the Hebrew University to study Physics, which was a family tradition. He spent two days at the Physics lab and on the third day he looked out of the window and saw a beautiful young lady going to the Jewish History department. “And so,” he says, “I got my BA in Jewish History instead of Physics.” The young lady eventually became the mother of his children, but at that point he needed to explain it to his very dominant father. He wrote a long aerogram² and nervously awaited the response. When it finally arrived, he realized his father was very angry. Not at him though. His father was furious at the Hebrew University. He said: “Jews don’t have a history, Jews have a memory!”

I’m not sure the young Infeld understood this at the time. History might be a book on the shelf, Memory is the dynamic identity one deals with on a daily basis – identifying, debating, shaping who one is. (Infeld later said that his atheistic father used to say: “I’m not sure there is a G-d, I don’t know if we ever really were in Egypt, but the one thing I do remember clearly is that He took us out of there.”)

Remembering and retelling the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim is not only about telling the history. It’s about creating an identity. An identity that is dynamic and constantly relevant. “El Motziam miMitzrayim”³ is not in the past tense, ‘the G-d who redeemed them from Egypt;’ it is an ongoing present tense:⁴ the G-d who is continually redeeming them from Egypt. Every time we tell the story, it changes somewhat, integrating into our here and now, creating our current memory, shaping who we are.

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1 Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed Part 3, 50.
2 A sheet of light paper folded and sealed to form a letter for sending by airmail.
3 Bamidbar 23:22.
4 Or HaChaim HaKadosh, Bamidbar 23:22.

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Where Should Maggid Begin?

The Mishnah' provides guidelines for how to tell the story (משהו נשתלך עבורי ערב) of the Exodus. One could entertain several possibilities. The simplest and most obvious approach would be to begin with Bnei Yisrael's enslavement in Egypt. After all, that is exactly where the book of Exodus begins! On the other hand, one could start a bit earlier, with the story of Ya'akov and his family going down to Egypt; or even with the story of Yosef being sold by his brothers – for that is the underlying reason why Rav and Shmuel argue concerning what is meant by Brit bein HaBetarim bein שUIImageViewנים העברת רוח. Yetziat Mitzrayim actually begins – from enslavement in Egypt. After all, that is where our story by first thanking G-d for keeping His covenantal promise to Avraham Avinu, is critical, because it will ensure we remember and apply its message in our daily lives as G-d’s people.

In Parashat Lech Lecha, when G-d first chose Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation, they entered a covenant, in which G-d not only promised the Land to Avraham's offspring, He also informed Avraham that before inheriting that Land, his offspring would need to endure many years of enslavement and oppression in a foreign land. Only afterward would G-d redeem them, and then in a most glorious fashion.

It appears that this long historical process of ‘slavery and redemption’ was part of a Divine plan that would facilitate the transformation of this chosen family into G-d's ‘model nation.’ When this nation would arrive at Mt. Sinai and collectively enter into an eternal covenant to become G-d’s people, they would also receive numerous laws to guide their society to become kind and sensitive to needs of the less fortunate. The Torah will use the refrain of “Remember you were once a slave in Egypt” or alternatively, “Remember you were once a stranger is someone else’s land” as a motivating phrase following each of these commandments of social sensitivity. To prove this point, see Vayikra 19:36-39 and the other examples listed in the footnote.

In another example, toward the conclusion of the Law section in Parashat Mishpatim, we find:

“You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”

From this perspective, Bnei Yisrael's slavery in Egypt and their subsequent redemption was not incidental; rather it was part of an orchestrated set of events with a Divine purpose. This experience of bondage in Egypt could be understood as a sort of ‘basic training’ – to prepare Am Yisrael for their future destiny. As the purpose of that process was to facilitate the goal of becoming G-d’s ‘chosen nation,’ it was first forecasted when G-d convened the Brit bein HaBetarim with Avraham Avinu. Telling the story once a year, and beginning that story with Avraham Avinu, is critical, because it will ensure we remember and apply its message in our daily lives as G-d’s people.

Therefore, at our Seder, when we begin our story by first thanking G-d for keeping His covenantal promise to Avraham Avinu, we are not only thanking G-d for His kind act of Redemption, but we are also reminding ourselves how that story must affect the manner in which we behave every day (and night) of our lives.

Or as Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya shared with his colleagues at their all-night Seder in Bnei Brak: “We tell the story once a year so that we ‘remember the day we left Egypt’ every day (and night) of our lives.”

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It remains one of the most counter-intuitive passages in all of religious literature. Moshe is addressing the Israelites just days before their release. They have been exiles for 210 years. After an initial period of affluence and ease, they have been oppressed, enslaved, and their male children killed in an act of slow genocide. Now, after signs and wonders and a series of plagues that have brought the greatest empire of the ancient world to its knees, they are about to go free.

Yet Moshe does not talk about freedom, or the land flowing with milk and honey, or the journey they will have to undertake through the desert. Instead, three times, he turns to the distant future, when the journey is complete and the people – free at last – are in their own land. And what he talks about is not the land itself, or the society they will have to build or even the demands and responsibilities of freedom.1

Instead, he talks about education, specifically about the duty of parents to their children. He speaks about the questions children may ask when the epic events that are about to happen are, at best, a distant memory. He tells the Israelites to do what Jews have done from then to now. Tell your children the story. Do it in a maximally effective way. Re-enact the drama of exile and exodus, slavery and freedom. Get your children to ask questions. Make sure that you tell the story as your own, not as some dry account of history. Say that the way you live and the ceremonies you observe are “because of what G-d did for me” – not my ancestors but me. Make it vivid, make it personal, and make it live.

He says this not once but three times:

“It shall be that when you come to the Land which G-d will give you as He said, and you observe this ceremony, and your children say to you, ‘What does this service mean to you?’ you shall say, ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the L-rd, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and spared our homes.’”2

“On that day you shall tell your child, ‘It is because of what the L-rd did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”3

“In the future, when your child asks you, ‘What is this?’ you shall tell him, ‘With a mighty hand, the L-rd brought us out from Egypt, from the land of slavery.’”4

Why was this the most important thing he could do in this intense moment of redemption? Because freedom is the work of a nation, nations need an identity, identity needs memory, and memory is encoded in the stories we tell. Without narrative, there is no memory, and without memory, we have no identity. The most powerful link between the generations is the tale of those who came before us – a tale that becomes ours, and that we hand on as a sacred heritage to those who will come after us. We are the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, and identity begins in the story parents tell their children.

That narrative provides the answer to the three fundamental questions every reflective individual must ask at some stage in their lives: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live? There are many answers to these questions, but the Jewish ones are: I am a member of the people whom G-d rescued from slavery to freedom. I am here to build a society that honors the freedom of others, not just my own. And I must live in conscious
knowledge that freedom is the gift of G-d, honored by keeping His covenant of law and love.

Twice in the history of the West this fact was forgotten, or ignored, or rebelled against. In the 17th and 18th century, there was a determined effort to create a world without identities. This was the project called the Enlightenment. It was a noble dream.

To it we owe many developments whose value is beyond question and that we must strive to preserve. However, one aspect of it failed and was bound to fail: the attempt to live without identity.

The argument went like this. Identity throughout the Middle Ages was based on religion. But religion had for centuries led to war between Christians and Muslims. Then, following the Reformation, it led to war between Christian and Catholic. Therefore, to abolish war one had to move beyond identity. Identities are particular. Therefore, let us worship only the things that are universal: reason and observation, philosophy and science. Let us have systems, not stories. Then we will become one humanity, like the world before Babel. As Schiller put it and Beethoven set to music in the last movement of the Ninth Symphony: Alle Menschen werden Brüder, “All men will be brothers.”

It cannot be done, at least as humanity is presently constituted. The reaction, when it came, was fierce and disastrous. The 19th century saw the return of the repressed. Identity came back with a vengeance, this time based not on religion, but on one of three substitutes for it: the nation state, the (Aryan) race, and the (working) class. In the 20th century, the nation state led to two world wars. Race led to the Holocaust. The class struggle led to Stalin, the Gulag and the KGB. A hundred million people were killed in the name of three false gods.

For the past 50 years, the West has been embarked on a second attempt to abolish identity, this time in the opposite direction. What the secular West now worships is not the universal but the individual: the self, the “Me,” the “I.” Morality – the thick code of shared values binding society together for the sake of the common good – has been dissolved into the right of each individual to do or be anything he or she chooses, so long as they do not directly harm others.

Identities have become mere masks we wear temporarily and without commitment. For large sections of society, marriage is an anachronism, parenthood delayed or declined, and community a faceless crowd. We still have stories, from Harry Potter to Lord of the Rings to Star Wars, but they are films, fictions, fantasies – a mode not of engagement but of escapism. Such a world is supremely tolerant, until it meets views not to its liking, when it quickly becomes brutally intolerant, and eventually degenerates into the politics of the mob. This is populism, the prelude to tyranny.

Today’s hyper-individualism will not last. We are social animals. We cannot live without identities, families, communities and collective responsibility. Which means we cannot live without the stories that connect us to a past, a future and a larger group whose history and destiny we share. The biblical insight still stands. To create and sustain a free society, you have to teach your children the story of how we achieved freedom and what its absence tastes like: the unleavened bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery. Lose the story and eventually you lose your freedom. That is what happens when you forget who you are and why.

The greatest gift we can give our children is not money or possessions but a story – a real story, not a fantasy, one that connects them to us and to a rich heritage of high ideals. We are not particles of dust blown this way or that by the passing winds of fad and fashion. We are heirs to a story that inspired a hundred generations of our ancestors and eventually transformed the Western world. What you forget, you lose. The West is forgetting its story. We must never forget ours.

With the hindsight of 33 centuries we can see how right Moshe was. A story told across the generations is the gift of an identity, and when you know who you are and why, you can navigate the wilderness of time with courage and confidence. That is a life-changing idea.

1 That, of course, is the primary theme of Devarim.
2 Shemot 12:25-27.
3 Shemot 13:8.
4 Shemot 13:14.

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Pesach has three divisions of time. The beginning of Pesach is highlighted by the story of our Exodus from Egypt – the Pesach Seder. In its unique fashion, it outlines the path of the Jewish people throughout the ages. The Seder symbolizes the tenacity of Jewish faith – faith in our G-d and in our future, in our history and in our ancestors.

In effect, the Seder reinforces within us the core Jewish belief that our grandfathers were not liars and that the tradition of the ages from Egypt and Sinai is true, valid, relevant and vital in all places and times. The timelessness of the words and rituals of the Seder further strengthens our inner beliefs. It provides us with optimism and hope for our future in spite of all of the current dangers and problems.

We have the innate belief that the young ones who sit today at our Seder table will, in good time, conduct their own Seder and thereby guarantee the survival and continuity of the Jewish people. Merely bringing Jewish children into this world at birth is already a declaration of faith in our future and confidence in the eternity of the Jewish people.

Moreover, the living memory of an event that occurred to our people thousands of years ago strengthens that confidence and deepens our determination to continue and succeed no matter what. This above all else is the gift that the Seder table and Pesach night grant us.

The intermediate days of Pesach – Chol HaMoed – represent the ability of Jews and of the Torah to treat the mundane activities of life and the world with holiness and a special reverence. I remember when one of my daughters worked as an actuary in the offices of a large American insurance company. The company graciously allowed her to be absent on the Jewish holidays. However, she was never able to satisfactorily explain to them why on Chol HaMoed she was able to come in to the office and accomplish the work to be done that day.

The world understands that there can be holy days and less than holy days. It finds it difficult to comprehend how a day can be holy and somehow less than completely holy at one and the same time. Pesach teaches us that we are to sanctify the mundane and the unholy regular activities of everyday life.

The trips, tours, meals and outings during the days of Chol HaMoed are different in kind and spirit than those we enjoy during the rest of the year. The fact we are still eating matzah only reinforces this uniqueness. It reminds us of the reason for our Exodus from Egypt and the purpose of our state of freedom – to be a special people, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

The final day of Pesach commemorates our miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh and his army at Yam Suf. The times the Jewish people have been seemingly on the brink of annihilation are too numerous to count. We have suffered partial annihilation, grievous losses but never total defeat and destruction.

From Pharaoh through Amalek, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Latin Christians, Moslems, Germans, Soviets, Arabs, some present-day NGOs and many others have tried to destroy the Jewish people. We are resented for our particularism and when we assimilate we are resented even more. Yet every time it appears that history’s curtain is ready to fall on us, something unforeseen occurs and Jewish resilience drives us to survival and renewal.

The drama of Jewish survival at Yam Suf repeats itself in different forms throughout the history of civilization. Though many have wondered about this strange and exceptional phenomenon, no logical or completely rational answer has ever been advanced. The L-rd has split many seas for us over the past three millennia of our existence.

Pesach reminds us of this inexplicable historical truism. Somehow, merely knowing this fact of history is alone sufficient to enable us to continue to build and achieve no matter what our enemies say and do.

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(Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, the Laws of Charity 10:7-14)

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Chad Gadya (One Kid) is a playful cumulative song in Aramaic and Hebrew, sung at the end of the Seder. The traditional melody may have its roots in Medieval German folk music. It first appeared in a Haggadah printed in Prague in 1590, which makes it the most recent inclusion in the Seder liturgy.
The Vilna Gaon explained that each verse alludes to a person or an event in Jewish history. Hence he interprets the symbolic meaning of this sequence of people, animals and objects, as follows:

**KID** – the birthright, mentioned in Bereishit 25. This is the right to take the baton passed from Avraham to Yitzchak; to continue Avraham’s mission to build a world full of loving-kindness and monotheism and devoid of idolatry, child sacrifice and other evils.

**FATHER** – Ya’akov Avinu, who bought the birthright from his twin brother Esav, who had been born first.

**TWO ZUZIM** – the bread and stew with which Ya’akov paid Esav for the birthright.

**CAT** – Ya’akov’s sons’ envy toward their brother Yosef, leading them to sell him into slavery in Egypt.

**DOG** – Egypt, where Yosef became Viceroy, and where eventually Ya’akov’s entire clan and the subsequent Israelite nation lived, were enslaved and finally redeemed.

**STICK** – Moshe’s staff, used to summon various plagues and to part the waters of the Sea for the Israelites to cross.

**FIRE** – the Israelites’ thirst for idolatry. This was a persistent bane for over 800 years, from the year they left Egypt until the destruction of the First Temple.

**WATER** – the Sages who eradicated idolatry.

**OX** – Rome (Esav’s descendants), who destroyed the Second Temple.

**BUTCHER** – Mashiach Ben-Yosef, who will restore full Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel.

**ANGEL OF DEATH** – the death of Mashiach Ben-Yosef.

**THE HOLY ONE BLESSED BE HE,** of course, needs no introduction; here He arrives with Mashiach Ben-David.

The repetition in each stanza underscores the ebb and flow of Jewish history – sometimes we’re down, but then we rise up. While most of the song looks back, it ends with an optimistic view of the future, a fitting conclusion to the Seder.
This is how you must eat [the Passover offering]: with your waist belted, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand. You must eat it with chipazon — in haste.¹

The word chipazon is uncommon. It appears only three times in the entire Bible. Twice it is used to describe the Israelites’ haste when they fled Egypt. Why did they need to be ready to depart at a moment’s notice?

According to the Midrash, there were in fact three parties in a rush for the Israelites to leave Egypt. The Egyptians, afraid of further plagues and catastrophes, wanted the Hebrew slaves to clear out as quickly as possible. The Israelites were in a hurry lest Pharaoh change his mind yet again, and there was a third party in a state of urgency. The Midrash speaks of the chipazon of the Shechina. Why was G-d in a hurry?

A HASTY REDEMPTION

The redemption from Egypt needed to be fast, like the swift release of an arrow from a bow. Here was a group of slaves who had almost completely forgotten the greatness of their souls, a treasured inheritance from their ancestors who were widely respected as holy princes. With a decisive wave of G-d’s hand, a nation brimming with courage and nobility of spirit, unlike any people the world had ever seen, was formed. This was the dramatic birth “of a nation from the midst of another nation” on the stage of human history.

A meteoric Exodus from Egypt with wonders and miracles was critical to protect this fledgling nation from the dark confusion of universal paganism. The Jewish people needed to be quickly extracted from the idolatrous Egyptian milieu in which they had lived for centuries so they would be free to raise the banner of pure faith and enlightened ideals.

THE FUTURE REDEMPTION

The third time the word chipazon appears in the Bible is in Isaiah’s breathtaking description of the future redemption. Unlike the Exodus from Egypt, “You will not leave with haste — chipazon — or go in flight. For the Eternal will go before you, and your rear guard will be the G-d of Israel.”²

Unlike the miraculous upheaval that brought about the dramatic launch of the Jewish people, the future redemption will be a gradual process, advancing step by step. Why will the future redemption be so different from the redemption from Egypt?

In Egypt, the Hebrew slaves had adopted their neighbors’ idolatrous culture. Their redemption required supernatural intervention, a Divine rescue from above. But the future redemption will take place within the laws of nature. It will emanate from the stirring of the human heart, itaruta deletata — an awakening from below. The Jewish people will rise from their exilic slumber, return to their homeland, regain their independence, reclaim their forests and cities, defend themselves from enemies who seek to destroy them, recreate their academies of Torah, and reestablish their spiritual center in Jerusalem. Step by step, without overriding the laws of nature, so that even the Ba’al HaNess, the beneficiary of the miracle, is unaware of the great miracle unfolding.

Unlike the dramatic Exodus from Egypt, the future redemption is not an escape from the world and its influences. Over the centuries, the Jewish people have succeeded in illuminating many dark aspects of the world. Our influence has refined the world on many levels. The impact of our Torah and lifestyle, which we observed with dedication and self-sacrifice throughout the exile, served as a beacon of light for many nations.

We must draw upon the heritage of our redemption from Egypt and our miraculous birth as the people of Israel. The current process of redemption, manifest in the revitalization of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, must not be detached from our national mission as a light unto the nations. Then our future redemption will be not in haste, but will advance steadily, like the ever-spreading light of daybreak.³

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¹ Shemot 12:11.
² Isaiah 52:12.
³ Adapted from Sapphire from the Land of Israel

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Family, food, wine and matzah. While these are some of the most common associations of Pesach, it is also a time for personal introspection. We also have many philosophical questions – why are we so careful to get rid of every last chametz crumb in our homes? What’s the true meaning and symbolism of chametz? Is there more to this holiday than just an intensive spring cleaning?

The process of preparing bread (the quintessential chametz), mixing seeds of grain with water and yeast is a highly creative one. According to Rabbi David Fohrman, the breadmaker himself becomes G-d-like, through ruling over the ingredients and molding them to suit his or her creative needs. However, Pesach is a unique time when the Jewish people are commanded to embody a different spirit – namely, to stop baking bread in a normal manner, to stop wielding that awesome G-d-like power for seven days, and to step back from the creative mindset that, when unchecked, often leads one to a sense of misplaced arrogance. Therefore, when we limit our bread making to unleavened bread, without the yeast rising, we are pulling back from this creative process. The holiday of Pesach, our annual disposal of chametz, serves as a stark reminder that only G-d is truly in charge of the world and all that occurs in it.

The Maharsha points out that yeast rising within the dough is symbolic of an inflation of our ego and the temptation to pursue all of our physical desires. Some behavioral scientists posit that arrogance is often a front for internal fears. Hence, if chametz symbolizes arrogance, which sometimes masks our fears, this will impact our existing relationships and our ability to develop new relationships. Only once we rid ourselves of our emotional chametz – arrogance and fears – will we succeed in our relationships and gain internal freedom.

This is the time we pay attention to our ego. We take a long hard look in the mirror and focus on our lives and for some, the way we date. According to Ted Leonhardt, feelings of pride and arrogance often serve as defense mechanisms. They are a method for hiding and/or compensating for our insecurities. We may reject others before being rejected by others. Some people are always looking at a potential relationship and searching for reasons why it just won’t work for them, instead of why it may work. Perhaps the other person went to the wrong school or is too tall or too short.

In her book “Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway,” Susan Jeffers states that to succeed in a relationship you must face your fears. A person must acknowledge the roots of their fears. This is never easy, as most people do not naturally possess this level of self-awareness. Most people cannot realize they are sabotaging their own relationships vis-a-vis their own arrogance and insecurities. Furthermore, we must recognize that we are often trying to avoid rejection or a negative emotional outcome. We need to take a long hard look and acknowledge that we can handle rejection or failure, and still stand tall. Fear can be managed best when it is recognized and confronted.

Most people will say they are not afraid. But are we truly being honest with ourselves? Everyone who is human experiences fear at some point in their lives. Fear has a unique hold on us. Many of us are stuck in our ways and afraid to admit we do not want to change.

However, fear also leads to growth.

When one realizes that growth means facing fears, challenging comfort zones, one will own any areas requiring self-reflection and change and move forward. This is achieving real freedom; freedom from assumptions about the very specific type of person we need to be with, freedom from worrying we cannot handle the pain of rejection, freedom from fear and insecurities. We need to erase expectations of rejection and be more open to prospective matches and relationships. We need to broaden our horizons and date more wisely, with a greater level of self-awareness and self-esteem. This flexibility allows us to foster relationships and see if potential exists for a deep emotional connection.

Let us take the time to thoroughly self-introspect and remove the chametz in our lives. And, in doing so, we will overcome any arrogance and fears. May this freedom in examining our relationships bring personal happiness and fulfillment. Dayeinu!
Several years ago, my wife and I were hiking in a state park near our home when we heard the music of children’s laughter off in the distance. We veered off the path to follow the source of the sounds and found a 30-something man wading waist-deep in the stream along with his three preteen children – all of them fully clothed. Not wanting to intrude on their privacy, my wife and I watched them splashing, cavorting and giggling, before moving on.

It was simply the most beautiful “Kodak Moment” one could imagine. (For those raised with digital cameras, Kodak is a company that makes film, and they ran ads for many years in which photographed treasured times in one’s life were “Kodak Moments.” Film is what old people used to put in their cameras before taking pictures.)

I very strongly urge you to do everything in your power to spend quality time with your children and help each of them create their own album of “Kodak Moments.” Parents often make the mistake of thinking they need to take their children on exotic vacations or to an expensive amusement park for them to enjoy themselves. That is just not so. They don’t need your money; they need you. That fellow I saw in the park didn’t spend a dime on the outing with his kids, but the memories they will carry of their impulsive plunge into the stream together with their father will remain etched in their minds for life.

One of the great ironies of life is that when our children grow through their teenage years and beyond, it is so challenging to get them to spend time with us. However, when they are younger and craving for our attention, we often are too busy, too preoccupied, too distracted and too unaware of how important our time with them is to their emotional health. When our oldest was eight years old, I taught myself – and later each of our children – to ski and golf because I felt those two activities would allow me to spend huge blocks of time with them in their adolescent years. (Where else other than a chairlift can you get your teenager to spend 10 minutes with you, 20 times in one day?) And when the realization hit me years ago that between learning with our sons and taking them to shul, I was spending far more time with them than I was with our daughters, I decided to create a yearly NBA (No Boys Allowed) vacation with our two eldest daughters, when I would spend two-three days with them alone – without my wife or sons. They are both married but to this day, they regularly mention our NBA vacations and talk about how much they looked forward to them all year long.

When our youngest daughter, Sara, was 10 years old, she and I were planning our NBA vacation. I told her I would take her shopping for the trip the night before and asked her if there was anything special she wanted me to purchase. With a straight face, she asked me to get her a cell phone battery. Perplexed, I asked her why she needed a battery for a cell phone she didn’t have.

“No, Tatty,” Sara responded with a twinkle in her eyes, “for this trip, I want you to take the battery out of your cell phone and give it to me.”

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Haggadah Thoughts

Seder Night is not a “A Day of Remembrance” for the Exodus from Egypt, but the time to experience it anew. Here are a few stations to look out for on the journey:

**KADESH**
Seder Night begins with a command... Kadesh! Sanctify, because Pesach teaches us what our role is in the world: to sanctify. This is our destiny, to sanctify the profane, to make the world holy. You want to be a free person? Sanctify your reality! A slave is someone who lives within an existing reality – he just works, survives, gets by somehow, passes the time. A free person knows he’s here to change, to develop, to raise up the mundane, to elevate reality to a higher plane. That is the first command on Seder Night.

**URCHATZ**
How much dirt and filth have we accumulated since we went through Urchatz last Seder Night? We have a lot to clean and eradicate.

**KARPAS**
Before we eat the main meal, a little bite of a vegetable in salt water precedes our discussion of the Exodus from Egypt and our sharing words of wisdom.

There are those who see a life lesson in this. One should appreciate the little things, the seemingly insignificant details. G-d asks that in His huge world of abundance and riches, we also pay attention to the little bite of karpas. After all, Seder Night is a night of education. How can you be truly free if you don’t express gratitude for every little thing you receive? A person who does not appreciate the little things is not worthy to receive the bigger ones.

But there’s more.

How do we relate to food, as slaves wanting to go free? Is being hungry freedom? No, but having your spirit control your body is. A free person is able to focus on the goal, and wait for a meal even if he or she is hungry. The karpas is there to show us that we are not like slaves who pounce on the slightest morsel. We may smell the enticing smells from the kitchen but we’re prepared to wait. First let’s talk words of Torah.

As Rav Rimon writes in his Haggadah: “One needs to know how to be free. A person who is free from all responsibility and does whatever he wants, is not free. A free person is one who can do everything he wants, but only does what his pure soul instructs him to do. A free person is someone who knows how to control his freedom.”

**YACHATZ**
We snap the middle matzah into two and leave the smaller half in between the two other matzot. We hide the other half as the afikoman.

Here’s one explanation: Even the snapping, the break, the hardships, are part of the redemption process. We believe that sometimes we need to break what we have now in order to move forward and reach new and higher levels. And here at the Seder, even when we break the middle matzah, we are expectantly looking forward to better times, to revealing the afikoman. We intuitively know our setbacks are only temporary stations on the way to full freedom and redemption.

And of course there’s another important idea here. It’s the children who have to restore the afikoman, the missing piece. The next generation is responsible for repairing the breaks that we didn’t manage to repair. We
Sivan Rahav Meir and Yedidya Meir

may have grown tired or forgotten the aim, so it’s the children who have to remind us of the path, to shake us up a little.

We open the proceedings with a declaration: this is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in Egypt. Anyone who is hungry and needy, should come in and eat, come and join us at our Seder table.

In other words, the first thing we do as free people is to care for the needs of others.

When man first set foot on the moon, Rav Yosef Kahaneman smiled, moved the curtain on his window aside, looked up at the moon and then down on the people on the street outside. He said, “Man may have reached the moon but he still has yet to reach his fellow man.”

In other words, it’s easier to achieve scientific breakthroughs than to create deep and caring relationships with each other.

Seder Night is our chance to correct that.

Go out and learn – who is more of a danger to us today? Lavan or Pharaoh? Lavan is an inveterate trickster, switching Rachel and Leah, and swindling Ya’akov at every turn. He wanted to gain control of Ya’akov’s family – “The daughters are my daughters and the sons are my sons and the flock my flock and everything you see belongs to me,” when in fact they all belonged to Ya’akov.

Lavan wanted Ya’akov’s family to become Aramean and integrate with his family, hence Lavan’s decree is far more serious than Pharaoh’s. Pharaoh was very clear and direct. His was a physical attack against the Jewish males. In contrast, Lavan tried to uproot us all, to upset the root of our identity and existence, and that is a far greater and more elusive danger.

We can stand up to a physical fight, and thank G-d we have overcome many horrific struggles in our history. But total spiritual assimilation? Much harder to withstand. If another nation controls us socially and culturally, we are in grave danger. Hence the remedy tonight is צֵא וּלְמַד – go out and learn what it means to be a Jew.

To ask G-d to pour out His anger against the non-Jews is not exactly politically correct, so it is important to be clear. There are no private revenge missions. We are fighting our enemies while upholding our ethics and the fact we are created “in the image of G-d.” Having said that, we can certainly pray – that the good will vanquish the evil, and that those who are out to destroy us will themselves be destroyed.

We pray for Divine justice.

We have reached the peak of the evening. We have worked hard and now end the Seder with a series of wonderful songs. Officially though, halachically, the Seder is over. Rav Kook wrote that all the simanim of the Seder, all the different stages, are written in an imperative form: sanctify, wash, break, bless, etc. while Nirtza is written in the passive form.

This teaches us that we’ve been through an internal process tonight, and we’re now at a different level, a new level. We’re wanted, Nirtza. Our souls are now attuned and desired for the way of G-d.

Who Knows One? seems like a cute children’s song and a useful tool to keep the children up and alert till the end of Seder. According to one explanation though, this song is a type of association game, a test of where we’re holding. We’ve been through a process tonight and now we check ourselves to see if we’ve absorbed the messages.


This song is a raincheck on where our minds are after a night of intense education. Are our priorities straight? Two are the two tablets, four are our four mothers, 12 are the 12 tribes, and – after such a wonderful night – these are the elements of our identity, our most natural world of content, that we ought to be thinking of.

Chag Kasher VeSameach!

Sivan Rahav Meir and Yedidya Meir are popular Israeli media personalities and World Mizrachi’s shlichim to North America
Although we were redeemed from Mitzrayim on the first day of Pesach, the geula was not complete until the seventh day, when G-d drowned the Egyptians in Yam Suf. The Seforno explains that until then we were still like slaves running away from their master. But when our “masters” drowned in Yam Suf, we became fully free.

Perhaps we can extend this idea further. The ultimate conclusion of the Exodus occurred when we entered Eretz Yisrael and built the Beit HaMikdash, as we conclude the 15 stages of the geula in the Haggadah with “VeHichnisanu l’Eretz Yisrael ubana lanu et Beit HaBechira” – And He brought us in to Eretz Yisrael and built the Temple for us. Until that point, we were still running away from Egypt – physically, mentally and spiritually. The 40 years in the desert were needed to extricate Egypt and all that it represented from within us. Once we entered Eretz Yisrael, we were fully redeemed people, ready to utilize our freedom and direct it towards drawing nearer to G-d and His will. We created a society in Eretz Yisrael which was the antithesis of all that Egypt represented – one of holiness, purity, and total dependence on G-d and His Torah. We were then able to build the Beit HaMikdash and spread the Torah’s ideals across the world.

As individuals, we too must all go through these stages of geula, extricating ourselves from our personal Mitzrayims and fully freeing ourselves from them. We must then utilize this freedom to sanctify ourselves by creating an environment of holiness and purity for ourselves and our families, ideally in the holiness and purity of Eretz Yisrael. Finally, we must build a Mikdash to spread holiness to all around us.

As in the days when we left Egypt, may G-d continue to show us miracles with the coming of the Mashiach speedily in our days.
During Sefirat HaOmer, we count each day towards Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah. So why do we call this period Sefirat HaOmer rather than Sefira LeKabbalat HaTorah?

Furthermore, Rabbi Yochanan says in the Midrash: “Never let the mitzvah of the omer be light in your eyes.” Even though the omer comes from barley, which is animal fodder, one might consider it a mitzvah of low significance and therefore deal with it leniently. But Avraham Avinu only received the Land in the merit of the omer, as it says, “And to you, I gave this Land” [on condition] “You keep my covenant,” referring to the brit of the omer. In other words, Chazal teach us that the omer is not simply a mitzvah, but a brit.

A mitzvah with the status of brit influences all of the other 612 mitzvot, as indicated by the gematria of the word ברית. What is so special about the mitzvah of the omer that bestows upon it the status of brit? Other mitzvot with this status – mila, Shabbat, learning Torah – influence our lives in major ways. But why does omer receive this status as well?

The answers to these questions lie in the definition of the word omer. In Hebrew, the root ע-מ-ר has three definitions:

1. עומר, a measurement – in the desert, Bnei Yisrael were commanded to eat an omer of manna, one-tenth of an eifah;
2. מעמר, gathering together twigs and the like – one of the 39 melachot prohibited on Shabbat, and
3. להתעמר, to misuse an object in one’s possession – the Torah forbids one who takes an אשת יפת תואר (beautiful woman) captive in battle and decides not to marry her to keep her as a slave, saying, לא תתעמר בה.

These three definitions complement one another, providing a more accurate definition of omer.

During the 40 years Bnei Yisrael traveled the desert, the manna fell every day except Shabbat. Once they crossed the Jordan, the manna stopped and they no longer received their bread effortlessly but became partners in its creation. Partnership with G-d is certainly advantageous but contains a great risk as well. When a person toils and succeeds, he may mistakenly conclude that his own efforts caused his success, not any input from G-d.

The mitzvah of omer counteracts this misperception. The Torah commands us to sacrifice barley, animal fodder, so we understand that even the lowliest of foods comes from G-d. In order to amplify this lesson, the Torah commands us to count up to the omer for 49 days. When a person lives in such a way, he can gather (מעמר) as much as he wants with no danger of misusing it (להתעמר); quite the contrary, he will mete it out in proper measurements (עומר).

This may be the depth behind the phrase לכרות ברית, to cut a deal. There is no greater oxymoron: לכרות means to sever, while a ברית is something that connects. The idea is that the two parties to the brit must cede a little bit in order to receive. G-d desires to cede something to us, and He wants to cede even more. The more we use what we have properly, the more He desires to give us. The brit of the omer is, therefore, the brit through which Avraham Avinu merited Eretz Yisrael. To inherit the Land is only possible if we truly feel that everything not only came from Him but continues to come from Him: “When you come to the Land that I give you,” in the present tense.

May G-d grant us the ability to truly feel that everything emanates from Him, and through this may He grant us evermore.

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht, a prominent Israeli scholar and educator, is a Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University’s Mazer School of Talmudic Studies.
To help prepare for the Seder, HaMizrachi presents you with *divrei Torah* about the foods found on your Seder table: *matzah*, wine, *maror*, *karpas*, *charoset*, *zeroa* and *beitzah*. 
At the beginning of the Pesach Seder we hold up the **matzah** and say, “This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt.” During our time in Egypt we were so rushed and pressed by the Egyptians, there was no time to enjoy a meal. The pressure of time forced us to get the calories into our bloodstream as quickly as possible and get back to work. The Egyptian taskmasters would have opted for IVs if they had the technology. So **matzah** represents our slavery.

But later in the Seder, we hold up the **matzah** another time and ask, “Why **matzah**? Because G-d took us out of Egypt so quickly that we didn’t have time to let the dough rise.” That means **matzah** represents freedom!

Which one is it: slavery or freedom? How can one thing symbolize two opposite concepts?

Imagine being in Egypt the night before the Exodus took place. After hundreds of years of slavery, of being bossed around, we finally get to be free people! To make our own decisions, shape our own destiny, use our time the way we want to! Pharaoh opens the gates and we exuberantly run out of Egypt, thinking, “Ahh, now’s my chance to get a Jacuzzi, a smorgasbord at the local deli, or take that long nap I’ve been waiting 210 years for.”

But before we know it, G-d arranges for us to be rushed out of Egypt so quickly that we grab our food and supplies and run to our first resting stop in the desert, the city of Sukkot.

“The Egyptians were also urging the people to hurry and leave the land... the people took their dough before it could rise.”

And when we finally stop and open our luggage, what do we find? **Matzah**! No dough to make bagels, pizza, focaccia, not even a lousy pancake! We’ve been liberated from Egypt but we’re still not free! Now we’re stuck having to follow G-d’s directions.

The Torah emphasizes this anomaly when G-d tells us, “The Jewish people are my servants because I took them out of the land of Egypt.”

It sounds like we just changed taskmasters! Before it was Pharaoh making us build cities and now it’s G-d making us pray, give charity, keep Shabbat, honor our parents, etc.

Did we really become free on Pesach or just exchange whom we’re serving?

The answer is that limits engender freedoms. If you want to achieve anything in life, you need to make choices and limit other options, implement those choices and not just dream about success, and stick with your goals even when things get tough. Olympic athletic hopefuls have to put a lot of limits on themselves — training, diet, daily hours on the track, letting their lives be controlled by a demanding coach. It’s those very limits that allow them to really achieve their goal of winning the gold. They are a lot more free than the others who may have that same potential, but watch the Olympics from their couch saying, “Maybe one day...”

Freedom is not hours of mindless web surfing, indulging in a smorgasbord, or hanging out on the beaches of Hawaii. That’s serving your body instead of serving your higher self, your aspirations for greatness. Animals aren’t free; they’re stuck being animals, living according to their instincts. Fashion divas aren’t free; they’re serving popularity and public image. Party animals aren’t free; they constantly need the next thing to keep the high going.

As Bob Dylan so eloquently wrote, “You gotta serve somebody.” And as Rabbi Noah Weinberg defined, “Freedom is being able to pursue what you really want to do (your higher goals), not what you feel like doing (your momentary impulses).”

So **matzah** represents both freedom and slavery, because they’re not opposites. “Enslaving” yourself, pushing yourself and committing yourself to a higher purpose in life is challenging, but it’s the only way to taste that real freedom of breaking your own barriers and reaching greatness.

As we eat the **matzah** on Pesach night, let’s remember that we want to leave our personal Egypt, get to our own Mount Sinai experience and bring out our full potential. Striving for real meaning and growth in life is hard. And that’s what makes it so delicious when you get there.

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1. Shemot 12:33-34.
Why Wine?

Seder Night is an evening of many distinct practices with the common thread of helping relate the story of our Exodus from Egypt. We tell the story, lean as free people, eat matzah and maror (and ideally korban Pesach), dip in charoset, and more. The Seder is our guide to reenacting what our ancestors experienced more than 3,300 years ago.

However, there is another central practice that seems ostensibly unconnected: drinking wine. The Mishnah states that a person should drink no fewer than four cups of wine at the Seder. And indeed, moments of drinking wine are woven through the evening at the beginning, middle and end. Why? How does drinking four cups of wine foster the recall of yetziat Mitzrayim?

Who has the obligation to drink wine? According to the Ba’alei HaTosafot, only the head of the household. One could suggest that for Tosafot, the cups of wine serve as an anchor and manifestation of the other verbal mitzvot of the Seder. One has the obligation of kiddush and makes it over a cup of wine like all other Shabbatot and holidays. One has the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus, and thus has a filled cup present throughout Maggid, drinking it at the conclusion of that step. Birkat HaMazon is recited over a cup after the holiday meal as at other times, and the final cup is linked to reciting Hallel in thanks for having been saved by G-d. According to this approach, drinking the four cups is not inherently an expression of going free from slavery, so much as the vehicle that bears the declarations of celebration and freedom contained in the Seder.

In contrast, the Rambam indicates that each individual participating in the Seder should drink their own four cups of wine, and that it is an expression of going free. In what way might the four cups directly represent the experience of liberation? One connection made by the Talmud Yerushalmi is that Pharaoh’s cup is mentioned four times in the story of Yosef when he interpreted the dream of the wine steward. Still, why would we engage in symbolic gestures about the unrelated earlier story of Yosef?

One could suggest a twofold linkage here. First, that Yosef’s interpretation of the butler’s dream is his first step towards the palace. Once he explained the dream, he was positioned to be remembered for his interpretive gifts and brought to Pharaoh when needed later. That led to his elevation to be the royal Vizier. In time he would welcome his father and brothers and their families to Egypt to settle, and ultimately they were forced into slavery. Hence the wine cups in Pharaoh’s dream were the first step in Bnei Yisrael’s slavery. When we celebrate our freedom, we pause to remember the seemingly insignificant first steps that led us down this painful path.

Secondly, Yosef himself was imprisoned at the time he interpreted the butler’s dream. After he explained what they represented, he was set free. This is the story of an individual who was trapped and then given back his own life and ability for self-direction. The Rambam notes that each person should see himself or herself personally as if leaving Egypt. Yosef serves to remind us that the Seder is an experience of personal emancipation as well. It is quite easy to get lost in the national perspective of the birth of our people, so the cups of wine remind us of Yosef’s experience as an individual yearning for and realizing redemption.

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A n interesting pattern in the Jewish calendar leads to Seder Night always falling out on the same weekday as another profound evening: Tisha B’Av. Sure enough, this year’s first Seder is on Wednesday night (April 8) and Tisha B’Av falls out on a Wednesday night (July 29) as well. It’s strange because these two nights are so different! On Tisha B’Av we refrain from all food and drink while at the Seder we enjoy a huge meal and four cups of wine. On Tisha B’Av, we sit on the floor in mourning, chanting Eicha and Kinnot in hushed tones, and at the Seder we recline in luxury, singing Hallel with great joy.

While for the most part, Tisha B’Av and Leil HaSeder are polar opposites, there is one moment at the Seder where the connection makes perfect sense. When we eat maror, we recall the pain and torture of our slavery in Egypt. “What is the significance of maror?” we ask in the Haggadah. “Because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt.” Maror represents the pain and suffering of slavery in Egypt and is, therefore, the symbolic bridge between Pesach and Tisha B’Av, the day representing all Jewish suffering.

Maror has another dimension with an even stronger link to Tisha B’Av. During the times of the Beit HaMikdash, maror was an essential ingredient of the Korban Pesach. Whereas on Sukkot and Shavuot it was enough for representatives from each family to participate in Aliyah LeRegel, on Pesach, all men, women and children would ascend to Jerusalem to eat the Korban Pesach with matzah and maror. Maror connects Pesach with Tisha B’Av for when we eat the bitter herbs, we are reminded of the devastating loss of the Beit HaMikdash.

However, as Jews, and especially on Pesach, we cannot remain depressed for long. History has taught us that when we are at the lowest of the low, the seeds for our eventual ascent are planted. We dip the bitter maror into the sweet charoset in affirmation of our belief that G-d has, and always will, rescue us from the grief of galut and bring us to the gaiety of geulah.

One of the key personalities of the Seder is Rabbi Akiva, who lived through the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Imagine the bitter tears he must have shed while eating the maror in Bnei Brak just years after the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash!

However, Rabbi Akiva didn’t let the bitterness he experienced prevent him from inspiring his generation. He famously comforted the grieving mourners at the site of the ruins of the Temple, and taught the Jewish people an eternal lesson - our deliverance would come through the destruction. When everyone cried, Rabbi Akiva laughed, for he understood the connection between Tisha B’Av and Pesach.

The Yerushalmi teaches that the Mashiach will be born on the 9th of Av. He will then have to grow up and experience life’s difficulties and challenges. He will taste bitter herbs and cry painful tears, yet his universal mission will not go unfulfilled. He will lead the Jewish people and the entire world towards the final redemption, which will take place during the month of Pesach. As it says, “in Nissan we were redeemed and in Nissan we will be redeemed again.”

This year, so many of us are not celebrating the Seder as we had originally planned. Trips to Israel were cancelled, Pesach programs closed, families prevented from coming together and many of our fellow Jews are eating the Seder all alone due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Therefore, when we eat the maror on Wednesday night, let us think of the connection to Tisha B’Av and Rabbi Akiva’s laughter. Let us taste the sweetness of the charoset and sing “LeShana Haba BiYerushalayim HaBenuya” and let us look forward to Mashiach, who was born on the 9th of Av and whose imminent arrival will surely come soon!

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1. See Orach Chaim 428:3, Rama 476:3.
4. Rosh Hashanah 11a.

Rabbi Tuly Weisz is the director of Israel365, which teaches non-Jews about the biblical significance of Israel, and the editor of “The Israel Bible,” a Tanach exclusively dedicated to highlighting the Land and the People of Israel.
Why do we eat karpas? And why do we call this vegetable—be it potato, parsley or celery—by this unusual name?

Our Sages teach that we eat this vegetable simply to pique the curiosity of our children. It is unusual for us to eat a lone vegetable at this stage of the meal, and this shifts our children into a question-asking mode. Nevertheless, while this may be effective, there must be a reason why we use this specific custom to generate questions from our children, so let’s explore the deeper meaning behind karpas.

The vegetable could represent the lushness of Egypt. The Torah describes this land, which received its sustenance from the Nile, as a “garden of G-d.” The Jews became comfortable there and enjoyed all that Egypt had to offer. In fact, when they were in the desert the Jews longed for the vegetables they had eaten in Egypt.

We take that vegetable, symbolizing materialism, and dip it into salt water, which symbolizes tears. This could suggest that the very comforts indicating all was well for the Jews in Egypt actually served as the catalyst for the tears that flowed during the harsh persecution and slavery. Our comforts in Egypt enabled us to become successful and to be influenced negatively by Egyptian culture. Those successes led to Pharaoh’s fears about the power of the Jews, and those negative influences led to spiritual decline. The combination of our spiritual failures and the king’s fears led to our servitude. Hence, the symbolism of the vegetable and the saltwater.

Perhaps we call the vegetable karpas to conjure up an image from the one time the word appears in Tanach—at Achashveirosh’s feast at the beginning of Megillat Esther (1:6). That feast was the height of physical indulgence, and the Jewish participation in it demonstrated the material comfort and spiritual disconnection the Jews felt during their exile—with the continuation of the story being the king’s decree to annihilate them.

There is another explanation of the word karpas that works beautifully with our approach. The Maharil teaches that the word karpas spelled backward is the letter samech followed by the word perach. The samech alludes to its numerical value of 60, which represents the 600,000 Jews who were enslaved in Egypt. Perach can mean one of two things. It literally means “hard work,” thereby representing the Jews’ slave labor. The word can also be divided into two words, peh and rach, which means “soft mouth.” This alludes to Pharaoh’s approach of first speaking to the Jews kindly and softly, and only gradually shifting them into slave mode. This connects to the process of the Jews feeling comfortable in Egypt and being talked into doing whatever the king kindly asked them to do, which then led to the suffering of slavery.

Modern exile consists of many luxuries for the Jewish people. We live with a general abundance of material wealth and with greater security and success than ever before. The message of the karpas has never been more relevant and critical for us. We must recognize that all this comfort and success outside of Israel will eventually end in tears. It might not happen in the very near future, but history has taught us that no matter how unrealistic it may seem at the moment, that dreaded time of persecution in exile will come.

Of course, the hope should be that this recognition leads many to explore aliyah. But we must also focus on those who plan to remain in the Diaspora and the importance of internalizing the spiritual dangers of where those material blessings and comfort within a host culture can lead. Perhaps this focus on spiritual growth and focusing on avoiding a spiritual decline will protect us from experiencing painful persecution in our times.

The karpas provides us with the perfect opportunity to discuss these issues at our Seder table and convey these important messages to our children.

1 See Rashi and Rashbam to Pesachim 114a and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 473.
3 See Bamidbar 11:5.
O
f all the symbols on Seder Night, perhaps charoset is the most difficult to understand. On Seder Night, we see something quite unusual, in that we are commanded to cite the reasons for the mitzvah as part of the mitzvah itself. One who does not explain why he is eating “Pesach, Matzah and Maror” has not fulfilled his obligation. Not only that, but Halacha also determines the official explanation for each of these mitzvot on Seder Night. One cannot suggest one’s own reason, but must state the ‘official’ reason. This is a very special halacha, because in general Halacha does not involve itself with the reasons the mitzvot were given, but only the actions we have to perform. Moreover, even when dealing with reasons, there is a broad spectrum of possibilities, and Jewish philosophers throughout the ages have offered many explanations for every mitzvot, while here there is one formal ruling of the reason for these mitzvot.

Against this backdrop, charoset stands out. We do not know the source or the reason. It doesn’t explicitly appear in the Torah and it’s not clear why we are obliged to eat it, or even if we are obliged to eat it, according to the Torah. In the Mishna (Pesachim 10:3), there is a Tannaic debate on this question, in which the basic position is “charoset is not mandatory.” However, “Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Zadok says it is mandatory.” The very fact there is a debate on whether there is a Torah obligation to eat charoset just adds to the mystery.

Based on this debate, there are two types of explanation. According to the first opinion in the Mishna, charoset is perceived as part of the gastronomic directives to soften the sharpness of the maror; however, according to Rabbi Elazar, the charoset is not just an accessory to eating the maror but expresses something in itself, only that the Mishna did not tell us what this something is.

The Gemara and the Midrash offer two explanations: one deals with the texture of the charoset, reminding us of the mud our forefathers were forced to use in their slavery in Egypt. The second deals with the ingredients of the charoset, particularly the apple, claiming it reminds us of the apple trees under which the women comforted their husbands after a rough and tough day at work, and where they gave birth to their babies.

Of course, the fact that charoset does not carry an ‘official’ explanation opens the door for much exegesis, creativity, and personal interpretation. So, when we examine the range of theories, we find a widespread theme dealing with the charoset’s special sweetness, and with the contrast between the bitterness of the maror and the sweetness of the charoset. In fact, the juxtaposition of sweetness and bitterness already appears in the Seven Species. The last two species are “olive oil and honey.”

Chazal refer to the olive as an expression of something bitter, for example, “The dove said before the Holy One Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, let my food be bitter as an olive but given into Your hand, and let it not be sweet as honey but dependent on flesh and blood” (Eruvin 18b). In contrast, the Biblical “honey” refers to the date, which symbolizes sweetness.

Therefore, one of the ways to characterize our bond with our history, and with the G-d who manages that history, is the dialectic transition between bitterness and sweetness. This is not simply stating that sometimes we had good times and sometimes bad, because we eat both on Seder Night, and both are connected to the same event – the Exodus from Egypt. The bitterness and the sweetness – according to our weltanschauung – occur at one and the same time. The period itself was terrible, and so we eat maror. But it also engendered things we couldn’t have engendered without Egypt and its challenges, and so we also give thanks for that, by dipping the maror in charoset.

And this is a very fundamental mindset we teach ourselves on Seder Night: even during the most bitter times, a certain sweetness is created, sweetness that could not have been created without the challenges. Even at a time when G-d hides His face from us, so to speak, “Though I walk through the valley of darkness, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow is a Rosh Yeshiva and a founding member of an organization devoted to bridging the religious-secular divide in Israel.
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As we prepare for Chag HaPesach, the time of our freedom, we recall the Korban Pesach offered when the Beit HaMikdash stood. In our times, in its stead, we place the zeroa – the roasted shank bone – on our Seder table; a paltry reminder of the glorious Temple service.

What is the significance of this korban, which represents our freedom as a nation reborn, and through which we were redeemed from slavery?

Rav Soloveitchik writes: "...אָבֹת-שֶׁה לְבֵית שֶׁה לַבָּיִת – a lamb for each home, a lamb for each household – interestingly, the symbol of redemption in the Torah is the Korban Pesach, which is a very strange sacrifice. The concept of chaburah, community, is completely nonexistent in regard to other offerings... Pesach has been linked by the Torah with chaburah to such an extent that one Sage is of the opinion that an individual cannot offer the Korban Pesach; only a group may do so.1 The Pesach sacrifice differs from all other sacrifices because it is a symbol of cherut, freedom. The Torah refers to the Korban Pesach as ‘a lamb for each household’ because freedom expresses itself in the realm of bayit, of community, of being together. Bayit is a new category revealed to the Jews as they gained their freedom.”2

Rav Hirsch3 writes that there would come a time when the nation, oppressed and tortured by Pharaoh, would lie on the ground, seemingly easy prey for the vultures of history. But then, at G-d’s call, the nation would rise up again to eternal life. At that time, G-d would begin the up-building of his people not from the ‘rooftops’ – not from the leadership or the highest echelon – but from the rocklike foundation of the home – שֶׁה לָבוֹת אֲבָטָה, שֶׁה לָבוֹת – namely, from family ties, the mutual bonds that unite parents and children... This is the heart and soul of the family: each son builds his own home as a branch of his parents’ home, and every father lives on through his children and grandchildren. Parents with their children, and children with their parents, knit together and united forever – this is the root of Israel’s eternal flowering. Herein lies the secret of the eternity of the Jewish people.

Rav Soloveitchik continues: "...Halacha coined the term chaburah with reference to the group gathering together for this ceremonial offering. A new fellowship was formed around the Korban Pesach; a new community sprang into existence. Being together, living with each other, sharing something many possess in common was made possible by the ceremony of the Korban Pesach.”

As we sit around the Seder table, we place the roasted bone on our Seder plate. While it is a paltry and sad reminder of all we lost when the Temples were destroyed, it is nevertheless a glorious reminder of the people we are, the ideals we live by, the community we have built and share, and the essence of our existence.

A lamb for each household; a lamb for the father’s house; a lamb for each man and his neighbor who is close to his house.

My brother told me the following true story:

A family was making a bar mitzvah and needed homes to put up their guests. Their neighbors would be away that Shabbat, and they offered the family the use of their home.

The alarm in the home went off on Shabbat. The police showed up.

They asked the guests if this was their house.

“No officer,” they replied.

“Do you know the code for the alarm?”

“No officer.”

“Do you know the names of the family who live here?”

“No, officer.”

“Then what are you doing here?!”

As we were poised to march from slavery to freedom, the command to offer the Korban Pesach taught us what it means to be a free Jew. We live not only for ourselves but for our homes, our father’s house, for our neighbors and friends, for those who live near and those who live far. The truest mark of our freedom is the ability to reach outward, to knock on the door of another, to invite him to our table. Finally free, we are able to say: we have too much for ourselves, please join us. Let’s share.

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1 Pesachim 91a.
2 Chumash Masoret HaRav, Shemot, p.86-87.
3 Shemot 1:1.

Mrs. Michal Horowitz teaches Judaic Studies classes to adults of all ages.
Why is there a beitzah - an egg - on the Seder plate? It seems the least clear of all the items. We put it on the plate before the Seder begins, yet unlike the other items, it has no set role in the upcoming ceremony. The maror (either in horseradish and/or lettuce form) is connected to the commandment to remember the suffering in Egypt by eating bitter herbs. The karpas is used as the first dipping of the night and is the basis of one of the four questions. The zeroa’s name clearly reminds us of G-d’s outstretched hand, and its appearance, certainly for those who use a lamb shank, reminds us of the korban Pesach. The zeroa is not eaten at the Seder because it reminds of the sacrifice we cannot bring at this time unfortunately. But what about the egg? Even for those who have the custom to start off the Seder meal with the egg in saltwater, it comes with no accompanying ceremony, blessing or statement.

There are two reasons generally given. One is that it represents the korban chagigah, the sacrifice brought prior to the korban Pesach so that the latter could be eaten on a full stomach. If the Seder plate contains a reminder of the korban Pesach (the zeroa), it is appropriate to have another food to represent the korban chagigah. This explains the presence of another item on the plate but provides no explanation as to why specifically an egg.

The egg as a symbolic food appears in another tradition, as part of the first food fed to a mourner after the funeral. The custom was originally to use lentils,1 because they were round, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life. Now the custom is eggs. Hence the second reason for the egg on the Seder plate is as a sign of mourning for the Beit HaMikdash, the absence of which precludes bringing both the korban chagigah and the korban Pesach.

Another reason that round, smooth foods are appropriate to serve to a mourner is that they have no “mouth” and thus represent the speechless state of one who has suffered a loss. This provides a striking note to the Seder table. In general, the entire Seder is focused around talking. The main mitzvah of the night is retelling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, something done primarily with words. The Haggadah relates that one who “does extra” in telling the story is to be praised. Many of the actions of the Seder, such as removing the Seder plate, are specifically done to encourage the children to ask questions, once again to use speech. And yet we have one item on the Seder plate that represents silence.

Perhaps this is meant to be a gentle reminder that even at times where speech is the order of the day, we need to be careful in what we say and how we say it. In the context of an extended family meal, this is particularly true. Can the story I am about to relate to enhance the Exodus story make someone uncomfortable? Can asking a question of someone who does not know the answer embarrass them? Am I making a comment that could hurt the feelings of those who worked hard to make the night a reality?

Let us look at the egg for a moment before we begin the Seder, to make sure that what we say on this night is always for the good.

1 Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 35.

Dr. Deena Zimmerman is pediatrician and Director of yoatzot.org, a website for women’s health and halacha

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The expression “in each and every generation” is recited twice each year as we read the Haggadah at the Pesach Seder. Once in Vehi SheAmda: “but in each and every generation, they rise up to destroy us. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivers us from their hands” and once: “In each and every generation, it is the duty of man to consider himself as if he had come out of Egypt.”

The Pesach Haggadah exposes us to three elements of Judaism, in reference to its past, present and future. The first: “And if G-d had not taken our ancestors from Egypt...” The second is a deeper look at the past from the perspective of the present: “In each and every generation, it is the duty of man” ... and the third is an acknowledgment that present and past are precursors of the future: “Bring us to other appointed times and holidays...”

We must remember and contemplate the past to relive it in the present while looking to the future.

The two passages of “each and every generation...” are eternal. They have accompanied us as a nation since the Exodus, and have been a beacon of light during times of suffering and anguish.

The nation has remembered and celebrated the Exodus in freedom and with praise, not as a once-in-a-lifetime event in history’s archives, but as the secret to our constantly standing up to our enemies with steadfast resolve.

According to Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsch, we say these passages in the Haggadah because “Everything that occurred to our ancestors has happened to us too. We do not celebrate an event from thousands of years ago, but rather the premise of our present, our future. We celebrate our salvation and fulfill the precepts associated with it, so as to bequeath our children with the tradition of salvation for the sake of celebrating the same freshness and sacredness of the Exodus.”

Rav Kook wrote: “In every generation, we are obligated to see ourselves as if we left Egypt.’ How do we actualize this outlook? This is not a passive perspective, but an active one. The redemption only started when we left Egypt. It continues and advances in each generation, until the final Redemption.”

“We all must contribute our part, according to our ability and our generation's needs. The Jewish people was born in Egypt with all of its unique traits. But these traits are latent and are only realized over time. Each of us has a special portion in the Torah – as we say in the daily prayers, ‘Grant us our portion in Your Torah.’ So, too, each of us has a special part to play in the nation's redemption.”

In our days, we have merited the ingathering of the exiles and impressive national achievements that have led to political independence. But it is not yet complete. In tandem with these achievements, we must play our part in the redemption of the nation. We need spirit and a vision of a continuous and sanctifying lifestyle, and only then can we be perfectly free people. We will continue to deepen the story of the Exodus, and draw encouragement and courage from the Haggadah’s recounting of G-d’s salvation for His people. May we sing a song of thanks for the final Redemption speedily in our days.

Avraham Duvdevani is Chairman of the World Zionist Organization and one of World Mizrachi’s representatives in the National Institutions.
Born in Lithuania in 1883, Moshe Avigdor Amiel was first taught by his father at the Telz Yeshiva before proceeding to Vilna to study under the two greatest Talmudic scholars of the time – Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik and Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky. He received his ordination at the age of 18 and in 1905 was appointed Rabbi of Swieciany, where he founded a large yeshiva. In 1913, he became Rabbi of Grajewo, on the border between Russia and Germany.

It was during this time that Rabbi Amiel was acknowledged as a great public preacher and his oratorical qualities were said to affect the most hardened hearts. He became one of the first Rabbis to publicly join the Mizrachi Movement and Zionist organizations, applying his speaking and writing abilities to the cause of Religious Zionism and national questions. In 1920, he was elected as one of the delegates to represent Mizrachi of Poland at the Mizrachi World Convention in Amsterdam. There he made such an impression upon the Jewish community that he was given the post of Rabbi of Antwerp, one of the largest and richest Jewish communities of the time. He set up a system of lower yeshivot for girls and boys by creating the Jewish Day School (as it came to be known in America), as well as religious institutes of higher learning.

Realizing that he must set an example and actively fulfill his Zionist ideals, Rabbi Amiel made aliyah in 1936 to serve as Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. This area had the largest Jewish population in the Yishuv and presented many challenges for him. Particularly hard was the constant need to engender good relations between the religious and non-religious segments of the community. During his leadership he set up a yeshiva high school which taught religious subjects in the morning and secular subjects in the afternoon. This yeshiva, named Yeshivat HaYishuv HaChadash, was used as the pattern for the subsequent Bnei Akiva yeshivot. After his death, the yeshiva was renamed Yeshivat HaRav Amiel.

He also continued his work on behalf of Mizrachi in Eretz Yisrael, as well as running many Torah institutions in the country. He was an author of renown who produced many works in halacha, aggada, machshava, and sermons and articles on Religious Zionism. Rabbi Amiel wrote: “Those same Jews whose hearts are filled with love for the Jewish people and the land – Eretz Yisrael – work with all their strength for the good (of the people). For them, nothing is too hard, and if they were impelled to jump into the sea and give up their lives (they would do so). Even though there exists in their hearts a great lacking of faith and they find it hard to accept that the splitting of the Reed Sea is something true and correct, and that they do not understand that all this is part of our belief, for everything is in the hands of heaven and ‘if G-d will not build a house all our work is for naught,’ still these Jews that will not return (to our religion) should not be pushed away with both hands but rather as the left repulses the right should draw them (to you). For there is hope in their future and in the end one is dependent upon another. For just as they have returned to their people, so shall come the time when they will return to their G-d... … Israel is not like other nations... our redemption cannot become manifest without the use of song! ... For not only is our Holy City destroyed and our Temple in ruins, but we live in exile, driven from our Land. We have been made to wander through the whole world and to be redeemed we must indeed create something from nothing. This has never occurred before and it cannot be brought about through diplomacy. It is true that all nations appoint their own diplomats – but diplomats cannot create a country. The salvation of Israel will not come through the use of diplomacy but rather through the use of songs that extol and praise Divine lovingkindness. Only through song will the ruins of our nation and people be saved. It is not for naught that every Pesach we read Shir HaShirim and the excerpt from the Torah of Az Yashir. This is to teach us that the future Pesach will arrive through song as well. For song and freedom are not two separate entities but rather cause and effect.”
Losing Taste for Egypt

I’ve often wondered about the different words the Exodus story uses for chametz. There’s chametz, se’or and machmetzet, without even starting to count the many different words Hebrew has for bread. Although we’re used to translating chametz as leaven or leavened bread, it actually refers to anything produced by fermentation. Which is why we dispose of our whiskey and beer as well as all our less valuable crumbs.

Grain fermentation was crucial to the ancient Egyptian lifestyle. The Egyptians weren’t the first to realize that bacteria forming on moldy bread can be utilized to aerate dough so that it rises, but they quickly adopted the technology developed in Sumer (somewhere around the fourth millennium BCE), improving and varying it to make a wide range of baked goods (think of the baker from the story of Joseph). At the same time, Egyptian society became known for its beer – also made using yeast bacteria. Bread and beer were the two staples of the Egyptian diet. Workers were even often paid in beer! ¹

One of the secrets of good beer – and good sourdough bread – is in the strain of machmetzet – or “starter” – used to ferment the liquid or the dough. This is essentially an old or sour piece of dough added to the mix that begins the fermentation process. To bake sourdough bread, you either need to make your own starter (a risky business!) or acquire some from a friend, relative or baker. You keep the starter refrigerated, taking off a small piece each time you bake, and “feed” the remainder with a mixture of water and flour. The taste of the machmetzet comes through clearly in the bread it produces, so if you have a tasty starter, it’s something you want to hold on to.

Although Egypt produced beer on an industrial scale, the process was similar. Now imagine you’ve had a strain of starter in your family pantry for three generations. It was first acquired when your family arrived in Egypt from Canaan, and your mother and her mother made sure it would never “die out.” And then someone tells you that not only are you leaving Egypt and you have 10 days to pack (while keeping a bleating lamb in your hovel along with all your family), but you’re not allowed to take your machmetzet with you! You are going to have to literally wean yourself off the taste of Egypt and leave your machmetzet behind.

It’s not even as if there was so much to look forward to on this desert jaunt to worship the terrifyingly invisible G-d of Israel in the wilderness. Every Egyptian festival was marked with beer flowing freely from the temple of whichever of its many gods was rejoicing, literally lightening up the party with the levity that comes with leaven – barley beer and bread. But there clearly wasn’t going to be any beer associated with the worship of the One G-d – He’d already banned it from the Israelites’ homes as they hastily downsized, slaughtered and roasted those irritating lambs whole, and gulped down their final meal in Egypt with girded loins and ready-to-go packs on their backs.

So in stepping out of Egypt, the culture they’d known for at least three generations, our ancestors were really taking a hefty decision and making a clean break. They left not only slavery behind, but security – from the routine of getting up in the morning and knowing what you’d be doing all day, however mundane, back-breaking and repetitive – right down to the staples of what kind of comfort food they had available when the going got tough. And nevertheless, they went.

It’s not surprising that they were soon complaining and wishing they could go back, but notice how thoroughly they adopted G-d’s rejection of the puffed-up culture of ancient Egypt. They hungered for Egyptian zucchini, for Nile perch, for juicy watermelons – but not for the barley bread and beer that typified Egypt – the breadbasket of the ancient world.

Now we understand the emphasis at the end of the instructions of how to observe that first Pesach in Mitzrayim, with its threefold emphasis on se’or and machmetzet. “No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, his days will be shortened, his life cut short. And the One G-d, who tiene of you with the plagues, shall multiply, and you will be ejected from Egypt. For he is your G-d, he will lead you out of Egypt, so when you eat, you will have to literally wean yourself off the taste of Egypt and leave your machmetzet behind.

Because in the end, the tastes you grow up with are often the hardest ones to leave behind.

¹ The standard Old Kingdom (2686-2181 BC) ration for a laborer was 10 loaves and a measure of beer.
² Shemot 12:19.

Sara Jo Ben Zvi is editor of Segula, the Jewish History magazine produced in Jerusalem www.segulamag.com
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My Ethiopian name is Zaude Tesfay. Today I am known as Sharon Zaude Shalom. I first heard of Eretz Yisrael when I was a small child in a village in Ethiopia, where I helped herd the sheep. When I asked where Jerusalem was, my grandfather pointed in the direction of the city for which we yearned. When I was only eight years old, I came to Israel by myself, with my aunt and uncle. As a child, I thought Jerusalem was made of gold. I dreamed of a land literally flowing with milk and honey, in which everyone was Jewish and the gentiles did not hate them.

Then, rumors began to fly around our village and others that Jews from Jerusalem had come to Sudan to help the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel community, to go to Israel. The gates were open, and whoever wanted to leave could go. None of the villagers thought of waiting. We all did everything possible to get organized and start moving towards Jerusalem. Every item that could be sold, we sold. Whatever we couldn’t sell, we left behind in our clay huts. After 2,000 years, we began to internalize the idea that the road to Jerusalem was open. One night, when the sign to begin the journey was given, the residents of
several villages gathered at a meeting point and we began the historic trek.

Our hasty departure led to complications. In my family, we kept our donkeys, so sometimes we rode, but most of the group journeyed on foot. We walked for over two months from Ethiopia to Sudan, exposed to the dangers of the road. People were certain they would reach Jerusalem within a short time but some were forced to wait in the Twawa refugee camp in Sudan for as long as six years. Conditions in the camp were harsh – it was overcrowded, and the sanitary situation was deplorable. Thousands died of disease. The Mossad and Jewish Agency Aliyah representatives did their best to help the interned Ethiopian Jews. They worked to improve conditions and speed up the stream of Aliyah, all the while operating under stressful conditions and a heavy pall of secrecy and fear. They also had to be careful not to arouse the attention of the presidential Sudanese soldiers.

My family was in the camp, and we were told we would have to wait two or three years for our turn. The mortality rate among children in the camp was particularly high, so some of the parents decided to send their children ahead, to try to save their lives. I was the eldest child in my family. At eight years old, I was told to go with my aunt and uncle to Jerusalem. I was torn between my love for my family and my love for Jerusalem. I followed my parents’ wishes. Along with hundreds of other children and adults, I was packed into a crowded truck. The floor of the truck was covered with a heavy tarp, and we were off.

Conditions inside the truck were foul. It was crowded and hot. People vomited, and the smell was unbearable. No one dared make a sound. Even the children and babies were silent as if they also realized the enormity of the moment and sensed they could put our lives at risk. We didn’t know where they were taking us or how much longer we would have to travel like this. Finally, the truck stopped, and we heard a very loud noise outside. The tarp was lifted from the truck floor and we climbed out.

It was very dark and the roar intensified. I had no idea what it was. Then I saw an amazing sight, something I had never seen before.

Water, water and more and more water rising and writhing like an unfed beast. This was like the shore of the Red Sea – my first glimpse of the ocean. It moved toward us, jaws open, and I can barely describe my fear of the powerful waves pounding towards me. I didn’t know they would stop the moment they reached the shore. Then suddenly a miracle happened. From out of nowhere, from deep within the darkness and the fog, the tumult and the confusion, a team of Israeli Navy commandos rose up out of the sea. They shed tears, and we cried too. A meeting of brothers separated for 2,000 years.

The soldiers loaded us onto rubber boats. It was a dark night, and the boats floated silently into the sea. After a while, the boat reached what I thought was a large, well-lit building – actually an Israeli naval ship. We climbed up through the belly of the boat. Some kissed the deck, convinced they had arrived in Jerusalem. Only the next day, when the sun rose, did we realize we were on the deck of a ship in the middle of the ocean. We sailed to Sharm el-Sheikh in the southern Sinai Peninsula. There they took us off the boat and bussed us to the local airport. From there, we flew to Ben-Gurion Airport, our gateway to the promised Jerusalem – the dream was about to become a reality.

So in January 1982, I found myself standing in front of an Immigration Ministry clerk at Ben-Gurion Airport. Through a translator, he asked me my name and age. I was at a loss for words. Two years previously, in Sudan, I had acted without a word, and here again, I lost the power of speech. I barely managed to whisper my name.

After an absence of 2,500 years, the Ethiopian Jewish community has merited a return to our homeland.

“May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy.”

We have come home.

Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom is the Head of the International Center for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry
Many years ago, I took tourists to this border site on the western bank of the Jordan River, just north of where the waters empty into the Dead Sea and directly east of Jericho. I read to them from the Tanach, how on the 10th of Nisan about 3,300 years ago, Am Yisrael entered the Land here under the leadership of Yehoshua bin Nun after the death of Moshe Rabbeinu. When the Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant stepped into the water it dammed itself upriver at Adam. “While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the L-rd stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.”

“Is the Book of Joshua in the New Testament?” asked an IDF patrol soldier who overheard me. I responded with my own question, which is why would he ask that, and he answered that the only people who came to this site were Christians who read from the New Testament about Jesus being baptized there by John (both men thought to have been Second Temple-era Jews when ritual cleansing was very common).

Then and there, I decided I would bring as many people as possible to Qasr al-Yahud, Jews and non-Jews, teaching Tanach in situ, emphasizing the original connection to a place of such great importance for centuries of pilgrimage. And I have been privileged to do so.

The date of the crossing is quite significant – erev Pesach. The first chag of the year dictates our unique lunar/solar calendar, for Pesach must be in the spring, signifying freedom and new beginnings. The river is full at the end of the rainy season; the deep Syria-African Rift collecting rain and melting snow from the watershed at Ba’al Hatzor, the Lebanese mountains, the Hermon and Golan flowing via the Kinneret then down to the Dead Sea.

Water immersion symbolizes renewal, from the flood of Noah, the crossing of the Reed Sea, tevilla, even birth itself. One can actually look at this seminal event in our history as analogous to the birth process: the spiritual conception of the nation with the giving of the Law at Sinai, 40 years in the desert, fed and completely cared for, the ‘birth passage’ across the Jordan River into the Land, brit mila, the mature actions of conquering, planting, building and sovereignty. The event is of such significance that it is told four times in the Bible. First by Moshe, then G-d to Yehoshua, Yehoshua to the people and then the actual narrative of the crossing.

Incidentally, Jewish mother that I am, I must share how the people ate, since the manna stopped being supplied after a month. Well, Israel’s harvest cycle starts in the spring. Pesach is the barley harvest, Shavuot – wheat (Megillat Rut takes place during the Omer in the grain fields of Beit Lechem, literally the ‘House of Bread’). The summer harvests of figs, grapes and pomegranates ripen at different times depending on the orchards’ elevation – and these fruits ripen earliest in the Jordan Valley due to the extreme heat. So the conquest follows the ripening food east to west, up into the Hill Country as that first summer unfolds.

This site, near Jericho, is also associated with Eliyahu HaNavi from Gilad, on the east bank, who poignantly goes ‘home’ to die: “And Elijah said to him [Elisha], ‘Stay here now, for the L-rd has sent me to the Jordan...’ as they both stood at the Jordan. And Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water, and it divided to this side and to that side, and they both crossed on dry land.” After the chariot takes Elijah: “And he [Elisha] picked up Elijah’s mantle ...and he returned and stood on the bank of the Jordan...He too struck the water and it divided on this side and on that side, and Elisha crossed. And the disciples of the prophets who were in Jericho...”

Later, Elisha performs a miracle for King Na’amans at the Jordan as well.

Qasr al Yahud is associated with new beginnings and miracles. That’s why the 10th of Nisan is Aliyah Day in the reborn, sovereign State of Israel. And why you should go to Qasr al-Yahud, Tanach in hand, and celebrate the site of rejuvenation and modern miracles.

1 Joshua 3:17.
3 Ibid, 5:10-14.

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I n a radio interview, I was once asked, “Why is the Haggadah written in Aramaic?” I suspect the interviewer was used to leaving the Seder quite early because only the first paragraph in the Haggadah is written in Aramaic. The rest is written in beautiful Mishnaic Hebrew.

What is true is that the Haggadah is not exactly what I would have written, if I had been asked to compose a popular text for the entire Jewish people. It simply contains Torah discussions, with no historical anecdotes or references to current affairs. Yet it remains remarkably popular and beloved. This fact reminds me, every year, that the project I have dedicated most of my life to is actually not that important.

What’s in the Haggadah? A lot of Midrashic verses, some clearer than others, some halachic sayings, paragraphs of praise and traditional songs. Almost all hard-core Torah, perhaps with the exception of Chad Gadya. In contrast, I devote my life attempting to make Judaism and its messages accessible through contemporary language and modern concepts. The Pesach Haggadah is seemingly the most popular Jewish text of all, and it makes no attempt to be accessible whatsoever. No stories about Churchill, or even Alexander the Great – no anecdotes, no wisecracks. And still, the vast majority of Jews – religious or not – read some or all of the Haggadah every single year.

I said “And still,” although perhaps I should have said, “And because of that.” It appears that what really grabs people, what hits deep, are specifically not the texts that come to you, but those that invite you into them. This is true not only for texts but for the entire Seder Night, even for food. In many homes, the hostess prepares intricate gourmet foods for the Seder meal, yet the ongoing memory is of matzah, which we eat because it’s a mitzvah, and the kniedlach, which we eat because of tradition. On Seder Night we don’t view things broadly, but we look for depth; not right and left but behind and ahead. Not to our friends and contemporaries, but to our ancestors, alive and dead, and to our own children – those not yet born as well as those currently spilling wine on the tablecloth.

I don’t think it’s bad or unnecessary to mediate Jewish values through stories about Napoleon, Churchill quotes or philosophical concepts from the 21st century. I think it is necessary for certain people. Me for example. But I know that the importance of this is minimal when compared to the classic engagement with Torah in our eternal texts. After all, even Churchill did not quote Churchill, but the Bible. In one of the history books he wrote, he devoted a chapter to the wasted 1930s, which Britain did not use to build a strong army. He called this chapter, “The Years the Locusts Ate.” How did this incredibly busy statesman so easily remember such an unfamiliar verse from the book of Joel?

If you tell me there is no contradiction, you are undoubtedly correct. One can write new Torah ideas on Tractate Chullin and popular current-affairs-related Torah too. Yet one must know what is important and eternal and what is less important and temporary.

I think of this on Seder Night, when I open the Haggadah. Those who are engraved on our people’s collective memory are the Rabbis debating the story of the Exodus – or according to the Tosefta, the laws of Pesach – all night. It is to them and their Torah we return and the rest is the chaff to the wind.

So is my conclusion that my life’s work is really not very important? Certainly not. My conclusion is that my life’s work is not my writing, but my children. With all due respect to books, Facebook, even to this column, they are not my portion in this world. I close my eyes tonight and remember Seder Night in Haifa 40 years ago, as a little boy, sitting between Abba David and Saba Moshe. And then I open my eyes, and I’m sitting on Seder Night between my eldest, David, and my youngest, Moshe, and next to them their beloved brothers and sister, who also carry the names of our ancestors, and I know I have done something good in this world.

Rabbi Chaim Navon is a renowned author and educator
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SHIURIM AND MUSICAL INSPIRATION
EVERY DAY AROUND THE CLOCK

AT mizrachi.org/wbm/live
AND facebook.com/worldmizrachi
The traditional greeting of *Chag Kasher v’Sameach*, is usually translated as a wish to enjoy “A Kosher and Joyous Holiday.” Appreciating this age-old greeting should indicate that, at least this year, more than a wish it is a charge: We must do everything we can to make sure this Pesach is not only kosher but *sameach*.

Generally, much effort before Pesach focuses on ensuring that one’s Pesach is kosher. Yet, beyond all the unique kashrut challenges this year, the greeting also calls for effort ensuring this Pesach will also be *sameach*.

As the pandemic reminds us that our power is limited, as our Pesach plans change to new venues, often much smaller than we hoped, one might think that it is not within our power for this Pesach to be *sameach*. Yet by answering two questions, we might find simcha really all about, and what does it have to do with Pesach?

At first glance, Pesach really has nothing to do with *simcha*. It is the only one of the three festivals for which the Torah doesn’t explicitly command simcha. The fact that there is an actual *mitzvah* to be joyous on Pesach is only because the Three Festivals share certain requirements. This *mitzvah* calls for festive meals, including wine and possibly meat, ensuring that those who enjoy it and are capable have new clothes, children have treats and nuts to keep them awake and interested at the Seder etc. While these *halachot* might seem to indicate that *simcha* requires external actions, the truth is that *simcha* is much more in the heart and soul than in the body.

Rav Soloveitchik noted that the exterior acts of *simcha* that we perform are really only there to provide an external framework so we can experience simcha as a meditative, internal experience. He notes that the Torah always speaks of *simcha* being *Lifnei Hashem*, experienced in the presence of G-d. One who sees oneself as living in a world where G-d is ever-present can actually achieve *simcha* not only on the holidays, but every day of one’s life.

So what is the ticket to *simcha* being this internal feeling of joy?

Two aspects of *simcha* which are often overlooked are its connection to *Emunah* (unwavering faith in G-d) and its call for making others happy. One who is sameach is one who recognizes that G-d is in control and even the darkest moments are somehow all part of a divine plan. Knowing the One Above is “worrying” about the world and our situation allows us to put our worries aside and rejoice.

Secondly, true *simcha* requires that we make our joy contagious: just as G-d provides joy for humanity, we truly experience *simcha* when we provide it for others.

With this in mind, we can understand simcha’s connection to Pesach, where no specific *mitzvah* is necessary as it should be obvious. The Pesach Seder is specifically celebrated in the darkness of the night, where the pasuk describes *V’Emunatcha Ba’leiilot*, night is a time for emunah. Much like the Jewish people who celebrated the initial Pesach when locked in their homes, they partook of the Paschal Lamb with the understanding that they were in G-d’s hands, and He would protect them from all the dangers outside. On the seventh day of Pesach, the nation burst forth in joyous song after witnessing the Egyptians meeting a miraculous demise. At that point, there was true *emunah*, *Vayaaminu BaHashem uv’Moshe Avdo*, and there was truly room for joy.

Every year we relive the Pesach experience no matter what one’s situation, we reconnect to the *emunah*. Pesach was celebrated in the concentration camps to the best of one’s ability, even though one might have wondered maybe Egypt would have been better. Pesach reminds us that difficulty is temporary, somehow part of a master plan we don’t understand, but *bechipazon*, with haste, we will experience redemption.

This year not only can we witness a *Chag Kasher V’Sameach*, but we must! Let this Pesach be filled with emunah that a crisis can be hastily turned around, and as we make others sameach we will truly feel what it means to be connected to G-d.

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Rabbi Binyamin Zimmerman is an author and innovative Jewish educator who serves as the director of Mizrahi Musmachim, a new state-of-the-art semicha program for English speakers in Israel.
ISRAEL’S ROLE IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ANTI-SEMITISM

In every generation, the nations of the world seek to destroy the Jewish people, but G-d saves us” – from the Pesach Haggadah.

Raw antisemitism around the world has risen and morphed into virulent anti-Israel sentiment – making the two phenomena almost indistinguishable. Consequently, the State of Israel has moved from indifference to active involvement in the struggle against such hate.

For the first 25 years of Israel’s existence, Israeli leaders did not view the struggle against antisemitism as their fight. The unspoken attitude in Jerusalem was that “if Jews abroad have a problem with antisemites they can always migrate to Israel,” and “Antisemitism is a Diaspora problem.”

This began to change after the Yom Kippur War when a campaign of political delegitimization against Israel was launched by Arab countries, involving an avalanche of propaganda that blended antisemitism with anti-Zionism, and which led to the infamous 1975 “Zionism is Racism” resolution at the UN.

Response to antisemitism found a concrete place on Israel’s national agenda after the 1980 Rue Copernic synagogue bombing in Paris and other terror attacks. Then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin took the decision to have Israeli intelligence officials begin advising Jewish communities abroad on security measures.

In 1988, then-cabinet secretary Elyakim Rubinstein established an Inter-Ministerial Forum for Monitoring Antisemitism, and expanded it to include Diaspora Jewish representatives and academic experts. The Forum compiled reports on antisemitism around the world and eventually won a place on the Israeli cabinet’s agenda, reporting once a year.

Nevertheless, back then some American Jewish leaders felt that global antisemitism wasn’t Israel’s fight; that the struggle to educate and legislate against antisemitism should be left to them. They resisted Israeli attempts to lead or coordinate anti-antisemitism activity.

The watershed moment that changed this was the 2001 World Conference against Racism against Israel’s fight; that the struggle to educate and legislate against antisemitism should be left to themselves. They resisted Israeli attempts to lead or coordinate anti-antisemitism activity.

This brought together Jewish leaders and intellectuals from the Diaspora with all relevant Israeli agencies. Sharansky’s intellectual leadership brought discipline and focus to global Jewish community activity against antisemitism. His Global Forum drew attention to the mass production of violently antisemitic and genocidal propaganda in the Arab and Islamic worlds, with Egypt and Iran at the center of the spreading poison. The Forum also highlighted the dangers of cyberhate.

Most importantly, Sharansky invented a critically important effort to expose antisemitism cloaked as “mere opposition” to Israel and Zionism. He showed how anti-Zionism often employs the same tactics of demonization, discrimination and double standards against Israel that antisemites historically (and still today) use against Jews; and with the same aim – to strip Jews and/or Israel of rights or power.

He then introduced a benchmark – the “3D Test” – for distinguishing legitimate criticism of Israel from antisemitism, by scrutinizing criticism of Israel for demonization, double standards and delegitimization. He argued that use of these tactics mark the devolution of commentary about Israel into the dark zone of antisemitic expression and intent.

In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) adopted a working definition of antisemitism based on Sharansky’s work. The IHRA definition explicitly recognizes that anti-Zionism – the delegitimization and demonization of the Jewish State – is a clear and unequivocal expression of antisemitism. Almost all Israeli leaders today believe that the Jewish State must play a role in highlighting and trying to combat both the “old” antisemitism and the “new” toxic blend of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. The convening in January of the Fifth World Holocaust Forum by Israeli President Reuven Rivlin was part of this effort.

But note: Israel expects world leaders not only to memorialize Holocaust victims but to concretely fight current antisemitic expression and activity, in consonance with the IHRA definition of antisemitism. And to do so in a way that protects Israel’s place in the world at a time when the very legitimacy of the Jewish State is under assault.

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THE HILLEL SANDWICH
A Symbol for our Times

“W”ho is like your people, Israel, a unique nation on Earth.” What an amazing country we live in! A country and a Hebrew calendar that carries us through the highest highs and the lowest lows, that embodies the tears, tragedies and triumphs of Jewish life. I marvel at how we can take the diverse events of the next few weeks all in our stride: celebrating in song and story one moment, standing in silence the next, and then returning once again to unbridled excitement.

I call this phenomenon “the Hillel Sandwich.” The sage Hillel, as the Haggadah famously tells us, would take two pieces of matzah, a symbol of our enduring faith in G-d, and sandwich (or should I say “Hillel,” since he, and not some stuffy old Earl, originated the idea!) between them both maror/chazeret, bitter herbs, and charoset, the mortar-like mixture of wine, apples, cinnamon and nuts. This seemingly irrelevant anecdote—and the custom it engenders to this day at every Seder—is an important, indispensable part of the story, for it sends the message that Jewish life invariably contains both blessing and bitterness, grief and glory.

The “Hillel” is the perfect metaphor for the four seminal events occurring at this time of year. We begin on Pesach—the first holiday of our calendar year—with the lavish Seder meal and seven (or eight) festive days of celebration. But this upbeat time is quickly followed first by Yom HaShoah—which has its own brand of maror and charoset, as we recall the horrific slave labor and death camps of World War II—and then Yom HaZikaron, when the nation confronts the bitter reality that more than 23,000 of our finest young men and women have paid the ultimate price for our survival. In a flash though, we move on, almost seamlessly, to Yom HaAtzmaut. The yahrzeit candles are exchanged for ceremonial holiday torches, the Israeli flags that graced the fallen soldiers’ graves are waved proudly on every street, displayed in our homes and even from our cars. The emotional current of these days undulates through our bodies with hard-to-believe ease.

I am always in awe of our unparalleled skill at “changing gears,” at moving from the sad to the sublime, from maror to merriment. The Holocaust survivors and bereaved families who display unparalleled courage during these weeks, who bravely face their fears and join together with the rest of the nation, are our inspiration and our pride. They continually remind us that Israel is a country that upholds ideals worth living—and dying—for.

As I swallow a bite of the Hillel Sandwich, I am reminded of an interview I did some years ago with a well-known symphony conductor, a survivor of the Holocaust who had been in Buchenwald. When I asked him how he had managed to survive, he told me the following story:

“A group of us were taken from our barracks and ordered to dig a trench. The Germans told us they were going to time us, and we must stop digging in exactly four and a half minutes. If we stopped before or after that time, we would be shot. They gave us a signal, and we each picked up a shovel.

The moment before we began to dig, I thought of a musical piece that was exactly four and a half minutes long. And I played that music in my head as I dug. All around me, fellow Jews were stopping and were being killed. But, to the amazement of the sadistic Nazi guards, I continued and stopped exactly at the right moment, and so I was saved. And do you know what? In my head, that same music is still playing.”

The song of the Jewish people can, at times, be as bitter as maror and can break your heart with sadness, but it can also lift your spirits to exhilarating heights. But whatever piece it is playing at the moment, the music will never stop; it will always go on.

1 Shmuel II 7:23.

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The most celebrated ritual across global Jewry is the Pesach Seder. With nearly every type of Jew coming to the table, one of the most famous passages relates to the four children, “one wise and one wicked and one simple and one that does not know how to ask [a question].” Layered with meaning, there are countless interpretations of this ancient passage. While each of these interpretations presents advice in broad strokes rather than being black and white, each is connected and leads towards an approach to the questions posed in providing insight to our Pesach experience and beyond.

Nearly every child has a parent and a teacher. While nature definitely influences the type of person we become, nurturing that nature can be more powerful. One kind of parent/educator is domineering, telling instead of teaching, resulting in a child who is not taken by the treasures of his tradition, feeling alienated and not even knowing how to ask a question. The second type of parent/educator places his universal identity above his particular identity, investing all his energy in broader humanity at the expense of his Jewish community, resulting in a simple son that understands the broader world, but not his unique place within it. The third category or parent/educator does not provide boundaries, allowing the child to grow in his own way and sometimes leading to wickedness because there was no moral compass or sense of meaningful direction. The fourth is the wise role model, resulting in a wise child, for sincerity breeds sincerity and when the child sees the earnest pursuit of wisdom, taught in a palatable way, he often wants to follow suit. The fifth parent/educator is not meaningfully present with the child when it matters most, resulting in the fifth child who is absent from the Seder and other important places.

The phrasing of these four children is strange in its extraneous use of the word “one,” – “one wise and one wicked and one simple and one that does not know how to ask a question.” Perhaps “one” is emphasized before each of the categories because each has a place at the Seder – each person is a world in and of themselves. Moreover, each can be traced within the same single person. While these four approaches sometimes contradict one another, they each provide insight into different stages within each person. Life is by no means a simple process with black and white results; however, the categorization of the four children teaches a lesson to the children just as much as it does to society, educators and parents, encouraging us to think about how we bring up our children and live in the next generation. Ultimately, one-size does not fit all and each person must educate [and be educated] according to his way.

Throughout this journey, each person sits at the table, no matter which stage they are currently leaning towards or how they are labeled. For our community to continue and for each of us to grow, we must keep coming to the table and engage in the important rituals and meaningful conversations the Seder has provided across the generations and will continue to provide every single year!

Rabbi Benji Levy is CEO of Mosaic United
Pesach and Financial Hardships

Pesach is a holiday associated with many extra expenses, and many families struggle under the yoke of this huge burden on their budget.

Our Sages treated overpricing very seriously. Throughout the generations, they also practiced what they preached. At various times, these leaders intervened in the free market and in commercial life. They even took steps to cut prices and lower the cost of living to protect the less fortunate and did not hesitate to issue special regulations.

One of the regulations introduced by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel pertained to overcharging. He was President of the Sanhedrin right before the destruction of the Temple. During that period, the Sanhedrin convened in Jerusalem close to the shops on the Temple Mount. Those were troubled times, characterized by riots, rebellions and infighting between the Jews.

In those days, due to the many sacrificial offerings that had to be made, the price of fowl skyrocketed. For example, a woman who had recently given birth was required to bring five nests as offerings.

According to the Mishnah, “the price of nests in Jerusalem stood at a gold dinar.” That meant each nest cost one gold dinar, which at the time was a lot of money. It made Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel very angry and he swore: “I will not sleep tonight until the price is just a silver dinar.” He refused to remain silent or rest until the price dropped. The Mishnah tells us that he went to the Beit Din and issued a new regulation: it was enough to bring just one nest so the cost would not be so high. By doing so, he displayed courage and demonstrated great public leadership and responsibility, leading to a considerable decrease in the prices of the nests. And indeed, the outcome was: “that same day nests were sold for a quarter.” In other words, the prices of the nests dropped significantly.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s regulation pertaining to women after childbirth was just one link in a chain of financial regulations instituted over the years. Hillel the Elder established the Prozbul, which enabled the wealthy to lend money to the needy without fearing they would lose their investment. In a shemitta year, Shmuel strongly advised myrtle merchants to sell untrimmed myrtles at their actual price because, if they failed to do so, he would rule that three trimmed myrtles could be used. And with regard to another matter, he warned cauldron merchants that if they overcharged for their goods, he would issue a regulation allowing the use of old cauldrons after Pesach.

In later generations, we see many instances in which prominent rabbis issued regulations to prevent profiteering. The most famous one is the regulation instituted by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Krochmal, the author of Tzemach Tzedek, against non-Jewish merchants who would charge excessive prices. Because those merchants knew that Jews would buy fish for Shabbat regardless of its price, they overcharged them. Rabbi Menachem Mendel ordered the Jews to refrain from buying fish for Shabbat until the prices dropped so that even the poor would be able to observe the Shabbat. In the Mishnah Berurah, his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, the Chafetz Chaim also addressed the matter of Shabbat fish prices out of concern for the disadvantaged in society.

Although we may be living in a free market era, it is nonetheless important to occasionally challenge the rules. A free market should be allowed for those commodities people can decide whether or not to consume. But when it comes to basic and essential commodities, not a matter of choice, free-market rules should not apply.

The majority of Jews are not conversant in halacha but want to observe Pesach properly; keeping kosher is important to them. Our spiritual leaders must see whether and how the costs can be contained and prices reduced. That way the less fortunate will also be able to observe Pesach properly and adhere to “and you shall rejoice in your festival.”

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1 Keritot 8a.

Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman is Head of the Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora at the World Zionist Organization and one of World Mizrachi’s representatives in the National Institutions.
As Pesach approaches, we are all busy preparing ourselves for those annual complicated challenges, but our minds also wander to the essence of this amazing holiday. What is slavery? What is freedom? We will pray to be bnei chorin, a free people, yet what does that actually mean? Freedom to do what?

The Torah uses the word chofshi – free, many times in reference to a Hebrew slave’s freedom. Yet when discussing the Exodus from Egypt, this word is never used. The Torah seems to go out of its way to avoid using this term and employs different phrases to describe the upcoming Exodus – “to save His people from the hand of the Egyptians” or “Bringing forth the Children of Israel” or “Let My son go, that he may serve Me.”

Israel was not brought out of Egypt into freedom, but from a cruel and mindless servitude into the meaningful service of G-d. To the Jewish mind, freedom creates a vacuum that can be too easily filled with a moral license to do as one pleases. No, it has to be defined by a commitment to a more enriching ideal. For that reason, only seven weeks after leaving the enslavement of Egypt, the Jewish people accepted the ethics and morals of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

This is also true for our modern-day redemption, in the form of the freedom of religion in our host countries and the miraculous freedom of having our own Jewish State. We have struggled for over 2,000 years to be free and to master our own destiny. However, perhaps we have come to view these freedoms as the ultimate objective of our struggle. Of course they are great and glorious achievements, but they fall short of a truly Jewish political philosophy.

Halacha – Jewish law – is there to fill the void created by freedom and must be accorded a place in the life of all Jewish people and the Jewish State. Judaism must not revel too long in its refreshing autonomy but must stand up to the new challenges this creates, such as making Jewish life relevant and enriching to all Jews wherever they may be. Now we are free from persecution, we must use this amazing gift of freedom to address the important issues. We must start looking for our Sinai.

Do we bury our heads in the sand and pretend that problems do not exist? Or do we continue searching for novel applications of the law and initiate campaigns to solve issues in any way possible, even if this means changing the fundamentals of Sinai? Both have disastrous effects on our rich faith and tradition.

Maybe our Sinai, the fulfillment of our newfound freedom, should start with awareness and mutual responsibility for the dilemmas facing every group and subgroup within our people. Maybe our Sinai should start by breaking down the barriers we ourselves have created between different factions of Judaism worldwide.

Let us make sure there is room around our nation’s Seder table for every type of son, every level of commitment, every variant ideology. We do not have to acknowledge the authenticity of their tradition – or lack thereof – but we must acknowledge them as fellow Jews, fumbling in the darkness for the light of G-d’s presence.

Every exodus needs its Sinai. As we celebrate Pesach this year, may we look for our own Sinai, a Sinai to fill the void, to lead us into a Geula Shelema!
CHAROSET

Let’s look at charoset, חרסות – the mixture of fruits, nuts and spices served at the Seder table. While Jews have eaten charoset for many centuries, the origin of both the word and the food is not entirely clear.

A common assumption is that charoset derives from cheres, חֶרֶס – clay. This is based on its color and thick consistency. Support for this theory comes from the Talmudic passage which says that the charoset should be like the mortar (made of mud) the Israelites used to make the bricks in Egypt. However, the word cheres does not appear in this passage, and the first connection between cheres and charoset only appears in writings in the medieval period.

A closer look at sources from the Talmudic period show that charoset was not eaten only on Pesach. For example, the Mishna forbids adding flour to charoset on Pesach because the vinegar in the charoset would cause the flour to become leavened. According to the Aruch HaShalem, this indicates an exception to the practice the rest of the year, when flour was added.

Many scholars have determined that the charoset was therefore a sour sauce added to meat throughout the year. Dr. Susan Weingarten, quoting an ancient glossary found in the Cairo Genizah, says that charoset in Greek is called tribou. According to that passage, dukkeh has that name because it is “pounded.”

At first glance, it might be difficult to accept that charoset, which is so exclusively associated with Pesach today, was not only used throughout the year, but was found throughout the ancient Greek world. But that is a theme of the entire Pesach Seder. A banquet with discussions, called a “symposium,” was common in Ancient Greece too. However, those events were associated with revelry, whereas the Seder was imbued with holiness. In such an atmosphere, even a simple dipping sauce could remind us of the slavery in Egypt and the joy of the Exodus.

PESACH

Pesach, פֶּסַח, is certainly connected to the verb pasach. But what does pasach mean?

We find it first in Exodus 12:13, where G-d is describing the upcoming plague of the firstborns:

וְהָיָה הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאֹת … וְרָאִיתִי אֶת הַדָּם וּפָסַחְתִּי

וְעָבַר ה’ לִנְגֹּף אֶת מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת הַדָּם … וּפָסַח ה

In such a stressful atmosphere, even a simple dipping sauce could remind us of the slavery in Egypt and the joy of the Exodus.

Exodus 12:13 seems to support “have compassion” or “protect,” whereas verse 23 favors “to skip over.” I suppose we will need to wait for Eliyahu to solve this puzzle as well!

“Like the birds that fly, even so will the L-rd of Hosts shield Jerusalem, shielding and saving, protecting (פָּסֹח) and rescuing.”

1 Pesachim 116a.
2 Pesachim 2:3.
3 Chullin 88a.
4 Bava Kama 69a.
5 Pesachim 10:3 (Leiden manuscript).

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