

# MAKING THE SEDER MEANINGFUL

**The holiday of Passover** marks the anniversary of the birth of the Jewish nation. The story of the Jewish nation begins in enslavement in Egypt, continues with its liberation by G-d in great Hollywood style, and climaxes with the receipt of the Torah, our national constitution at Mount Sinai shortly thereafter. To the best of my knowledge no other nation ever got its start in bondage without its own land or army. Strange isn't it? Perhaps you can start with this question at your Passover Seder. Let me know what you come up with.

The main event of the Seder is the reading of the Haggadah. The word Haggadah means to tell, or to relate. The Haggadah is a vivid narrative that is set in the context of a parent-child dialogue. Passover, with the Haggadah as its focus, tells every Jew three things: who you are, where you came from, and what you stand for.

The message inherent in the Haggadah is that Jewish identity and continuity hinge on encouraging children to ask questions -- and being prepared as parents to provide sensitive and substantive answers. In Judaism, being knowledgeable is not merely a good thing it is a prerequisite. Without knowledge you can never really know yourself and can never truly be free!

## **The Opening of the Seder and The Four Questions**

There are two major themes of the Passover Haggadah: Freedom acquired through knowledge and the person that he is lacking information that he needs. It takes a certain degree of humility to ask questions. An arrogant person thinks he knows it all so he doesn't ask questions. Our Sages say that a wise person is someone who seeks wisdom from all people and is constantly asking questions. It is no wonder that our people have made it a national pastime to answer a question with another question. In a sense a question is admittance that you don't know it all. That is the beginning of wisdom and true freedom, for without knowledge you are a slave to your illusions, ego and the temporal ideas of the day.

Gratitude is also recognition of a lack and an expression of appreciation that that lack was taken away. The beginning of the Seder is marked by an invitation to those less fortunate than ourselves to join us, helping us to focus upon and appreciate our blessings. Perhaps even more importantly it gives us pause to reflect upon and appreciate those who have assembled together with us at the Seder. In Judaism, appreciation sensitizes us to the world outside of our own egocentricity. Ultimately this sensitivity helps us discover G-d, who is the hidden source of all our blessings and ultimately should be the prime focus for our gratitude.

The Four Questions asked by the youngest child at the Seder exposes the seeming paradox that is at the heart of the Passover: Two of the questions concerning reclining and the dipping of the Karpas in salt water alludes to freedom, while the other two questions about matzah and marror alludes to our slavery. Which condition are we commemorating? The answer is that we are being asked to appreciate both as coming from a common source and leading to a common purpose. Just like a day is made up of day following night, so too the nights of our lives are preludes to greater heights of illumination which the break of dawn will bring. The duality of Pesach focuses our attention to the big picture of our lives, where we don't dwell on the negative in isolation, nor do we become complacent with the positive. We see them woven together into the tapestry of our lives and of the history of our People. The Four Questions prompt us to offer thanks to G-d who formed us into a special people through the smelting furnace of Egypt, and then redeemed us to be His Nation that would be privileged to receive the Torah and to enter the Land of Israel.

In our own lives we also have to go through our Egyptian bondage. At the Seder we should focus on the growth that we attained through these trials and the ultimate personal redemptions that we experienced at their conclusions.

## **The Four Sons**

First of all, why all these fours? (The four questions, sons, cups of wine etc.) Four represents a degree of spiritual completeness and firmness. Just like a table is called stable and complete with four legs, spiritual completion often involves four stages.

The four sons in order are the wise son, the rebellious son, the simple son and the son who doesn't even know how to ask. There are many messages in this segment of the Haggadah, yet one parallel to our present situation is both striking and disturbing.

The four sons represent four generations of Jews. The wise son is the Torah scholar from Eastern Europe with his long beard, piety and devotion to the spiritual legacy of his forefathers. Then

came the rebellious son who made the break through the enlightenment, or Communism or through the American Melting pot and left the traditions of his father, separating himself from his People. The son of the next generation (the simple son) often was raised in conflict, continuing in the secular path encouraged by his father yet feeling a warmth and pull towards the traditions of his bubby and zeide. His Jewish self is marked by contradictions yet he feels a strong sense of Jewish identity. Then came his son, in our own generation who doesn't know his great grandparents or their history, doesn't feel the same sense of Jewish identity as his father and really isn't interested enough to ask any questions. He has suffered through Hebrew school, what more do you want from him? The battle of our generation is the son who doesn't know or care to ask questions.

Just like the author of the Haggadah we have to open up a dialogue, show him we care and invite him to rediscover the questions within him. This generation either will make the turn back toward true Jewish wisdom or disappear silently from our Seder table and from the Jewish People, through assimilation forever. This "four generation and out" or "return" is a common phenomenon seen throughout the Jewish world today. The real question is within which group will we and our children be counted?

This would be a great place to have a discussion about just why it is important to be Jewish. Is it a common culture or traditional delicacies that have tied us to each other for millennium or is there something deeper or more enduring? Does the Haggadah offer us any suggestions about what is at the heart of being Jewish and retaining a strong sense of Jewish Identity?

## **Pesach (Pascal Lamb), Matzah and Marror**

In the middle of the Haggadah Rabbi Gamliel says if you don't discuss these three central symbols of the Seder you have not fulfilled the mitzvah of telling the story of leaving Egypt. Why are the laws of the Paschal lamb, Matzah and Marror the central themes that express the essence of the experience of leaving Egypt? This is yet another question for you to ponder.

Pesach -- The Passover offering was a lamb, which just happened to be the god of their Egyptian rulers. It took great courage for the Jewish People to slaughter the Egyptian god publicly and it took even greater fortitude for them to leave this god and the values of Egyptian society behind.

The Jewish People, like all of us, were greatly affected by the values – the gods – of their society. The Torah is teaching us that it is not enough to realize that these values may be skewed. If you want to be free you have to extricate yourself from the grip of the god(s) that enslave you. Which god(s) do you pay homage to? Once you know, slaughter them and set yourself free!



Matzah -- We already spoke of matzah as a symbol of freedom. Matzah is essential bread, all nourishment, no fluff, rise or luxury. On Passover we try to free ourselves from our own personal forms of slavery. Another interesting aspect of matzah is that it must be baked within 18 minutes from mixing the flour and water together. If it is left for 18 minutes and 1 second it becomes chometz and prohibited throughout the week of Passover. In the blink of an eye your freedom can be turned into slavery. The lesson is that if you have an insight into life that can make you a better person, act on it quickly or it will disappear. The number 18 in Judaism stands for Chai, the Hebrew word for life. Act with alacrity this Passover and you will acquire Life!

Marror – We eat marror to remember how the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors through hard labor. Actually, the midrashime tell us it was not just hard labor, it was meaningless labor. The Jews were building cities upon sand. Upon completion they needed to be immediately rebuilt because they would invariably sink into the ground. The greatest form of slavery that can be imposed upon someone is rendering his existence meaningless.

Though we do not have taskmasters with whips standing over us, we often “embitter” our own lives with a multitude of non-meaningful endeavors. The biggest fear that all people have in life is the fear of not getting anywhere. We are constantly plagued by an emotional undertow beneath it all saying, “I’m finite, I’m meaningless”. That’s the bitterness inherent in empty labor. The beginning of the antidote is to connect your labor to something spiritual, something greater and more enduring. Then even the most mundane work is connected to something eternal and never can be taken away from you.

The Cup of Elijah – The Haggadah begins with puzzling questions and it concludes with a symbol and hope for ultimate resolution – the prophet Elijah. We are all familiar with the large cup filled for the Prophet and the open-door policy that we follow. However, did you know that in Jewish tradition Elijah is the Prophet that will announce the dawning of the Messianic Era? And at that time, he will clarify all difficult and as yet unanswered questions of Jewish law and practice. There is an opinion in the Talmud that we are to drink five cups of wine at the Seder. We fill a fifth cup in deference to this minority opinion and we call it Elijah’s Cup because he will eventually resolve this question as well as many others.

What questions or issues have become more resolved for you as a result of this Passover experience? What insights do you have about living that you want to hold onto? What action can you take that will help concretize these ideas or inspiration?

**Have a Happy and Meaningful Passover,  
Project Inspire**