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## Passover Primer

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# 8 Ways to Boost Your Seder Experience

by Rabbi Yaakov Palatnik

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Let's face it - we have all experienced some pretty boring Seders, or some that have turned into just another family dinner party devoid of meaning. In order to bring more meaning and enjoyment back to the family Seder, try the following:

**1)** Go to the dollar store and buy some "visual aids" for the ten plagues. When you get to that part of the Haggadah, throw out a pile of plastic frogs, snakes and spiders (for the plague of wild animals), ping pong balls and marshmallows (hail), sunglasses (darkness), etc. Be creative and fun. The kids (and adults) will love it.

**2)** Buy some dollar store "prizes" for kids. When they ask a good question (which is what you're trying to stimulate), give out a prize. Also give prizes for asking the Four Questions, good singers, etc... The kids will keep busy playing with their prize (doll, soldier, etc.) until they think of another good question and jump back in.

**3)** Explain to everyone that they are like royalty on Seder night. And since kings and queens do not pour for themselves, everyone gets a "pouring partner" who fills up their glass with wine or grape juice (or a combo) at the appropriate time. Pair people up and have fun!

**4)** Read the Haggadah in the language that you best understand. That means

English is fine. Share the reading by going around the table and taking turns.

**5)** It's okay to stop during the reading for a good discussion of the topic at hand. Encourage an atmosphere where people feel comfortable asking questions about what's being said in the Haggadah. Once a question is asked, invite everyone to think about a possible answer, and/or to look in their Haggadah to find one.

Prepare some questions in advance, such as:

- If the Haggadah tells us that even today we are still slaves and not free, how do we understand the Jewish definition of freedom?
- The Passover Seder is the key night of the year to transmit Jewish pride. If a family member or close friend told you that they planned to raise their children without any Jewish education or identity, what would you say to encourage them otherwise?
- The wise son doesn't sound so wise. He doesn't seem to know anything. What is the Jewish definition of wisdom?
- The Haggadah says: "Next year in Jerusalem?" What does the Land of Israel mean to you? If you thought the existence of Israel was in danger, what would you do to help save it?

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*Keep the kids busy until they think of another good question.*

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**6)** Tell everyone to eat a light meal before coming to the Seder. That way they won't be starving and want to hurry through the Haggadah. This is not a dinner party; the reading and discussion of the Haggadah is the whole point of the evening! Let people know in advance that they will be reading through the Haggadah and discussing issues... long before the real food is served.

**7)** Assign topics ahead of time to your various guests. For example, give

someone the section on the Four Sons and ask them to prepare a meaningful explanation to present at the table.

**8)** At the Seder, have everyone use the same Haggadahs so that they can easily follow along. Make sure it has a "non-archaic" translation. Also, to get some good discussion material, trade in your Maxwell House Haggadah for one with commentary. Dozens of terrific Haggadahs are available in any Jewish bookstore or online from [artscroll.com](http://artscroll.com).

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# Passover Seder Fact Sheet

*by Rabbi Shraga Simmons*

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Passover (Pesach in Hebrew) commemorates the Jewish Exodus from Egypt 3,300 years ago, following 210 years of slavery. Passover is regarded as the "birth" of the Jewish nation.

Passover is an 8-day holiday (in Israel, seven days). It is marked by the celebration of an elaborate Seder on the first two nights (in Israel, on the first night only).

Here are some handy tips for making your Seder "religiously correct":

## Seder Checklist

Seder means "order" because there are so many details to remember. Your Seder table should include:

- Seder Plate
- Matzah cover and matzahs
- Wine and grape juice
- Haggadahs with commentary (dozens of great ones are available - see [ArtScroll.com](http://ArtScroll.com))
- Cup for Elijah
- Saltwater
- Pillows for reclining
- Afikomen prizes

The items on the Seder plate are placed following the order of the Haggadah, so that whatever you need next will be located closest to you, to avoid having to "skip over" any mitzvah. Three matzahs should be placed on the table - covered, and separated from each other by a napkin or cloth.

## Tonight's Mitzvahs

There are actually seven different mitzvot we perform at the Seder. Two are from the Torah:

- 1) telling the Exodus story
- 2) eating matzah

The others are rabbinical:

- 3) eating Marror (bitter herbs)
- 4) eating the Afikomen (an extra piece of matzah for dessert as a reminder of the Passover offering)
- 5) saying Hallel (Psalms of praise)
- 6) drinking the Four Cups of wine
- 7) demonstrating acts of freedom and aristocracy - e.g. sitting with a pillow cushion and leaning as we eat and drink, and beginning the meal "with a dip."

### Four Cups of Wine

We drink four cups of wine corresponding to the four expressions of freedom mentioned in the Torah (Exodus 6:6-7). It is best to use red wine, since this alludes to the blood spilled by Pharaoh, the blood of the Ten Plagues, and the blood the Jews put on their doorposts.

Since we are free people this evening, everyone pours for each other - like royalty with servants. As another expression of freedom, we lean to the left and back while drinking the Four Cups of wine.

Everyone should have their own wine cup, which holds at least 3.3 oz (98cc). For each of the Four Cups, try to drink the entire cup (or at least a majority) in about 30 seconds.

Notice how each of four mitzvot we perform at the Seder are all done over a full cup of wine: 1) Kiddush, 2) Maggid (telling the Exodus story), 3) Birkat

HaMazon (Grace After Meals), 4) Conclusion of Hallel.

## Dipping the Karpas Vegetable

Everyone washes their hands in the manner of washing for bread: pouring water from a cup, covering each hand up to the wrist. (This is done without saying a blessing.)

Take the Karpas vegetable - celery, parsley or potato - and dip it into salt water. Say the blessing ("borei pri ha'adama") and eat a small piece.

## Ten Plagues

Every time one of the plagues is mentioned, we dip our finger in the wine and spill a drop. This reminds us that our cup of joy is not complete because people had to die for our salvation. Thus it is considered insensitive - after completing the drops - to lick one's finger!

Rather than the "pinky" finger, use your "pointer finger" (Etzba in Hebrew), which corresponds to the declaration in the Torah that the plagues were Etzba Elokim - "the finger of God" (Exodus 8:15).

Spill a total of 16 drops - 3 for "blood, fire and pillars of smoke," 10 more for the plagues, and another 3 for Rabbi Yehudah's abbreviation.

After all the drops have been spilled, the cup should be refilled.

## Eating the Matzah

To fulfill the mitzvah of eating matzah on Seder night, eat 2/3 of a square matzah, or 1/2 of a hand-made round matzah (approx 45-50 cc). Try to eat this amount within 4 minutes.

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*Everyone pours for each other, in the manner of royalty.*

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Before eating the matzah, wash your hands as follows: Fill a large cup with water, pour half the water over your right hand (up to the wrist), then half the water over your left hand. Then say the blessing (written in the Haggadah) and dry your hands. From this point onward, be careful not to talk until you've eaten the matzah.

## The Bitter Herbs

Even though many have the custom of using horseradish for bitter herbs (Marror), Romaine lettuce is actually preferable. The quantity of lettuce to eat is leaves totaling 8-by-10 inches (about 28 cc). Be careful to check the lettuce, since there are frequently small (non-kosher!) bugs in the leaves.

If fresh horseradish is used, it should be an amount equivalent to about half the size of a typical egg. "Red horseradish" in jars bought from the stores should not be used, since it is actually a mixture of beets and horseradish.

The bitter herbs are dipped into charoset, a bricks-and-mortar mixture of dates, wine, nuts, apples and cinnamon. The Talmud says this serves as an "antiseptic" to dilute the harsh effects of the Marror.

## Korech Sandwich

Take the bottom matzah (remaining from the original 3) and make a sandwich with the Marror. For this mitzvah, it is okay to use smaller amounts. For matzah: 1/3 of a square matzah, or 1/4 of a round matzah. For Marror: 3.6 by 2.7 inches of Romaine lettuce, or 0.7 compacted fluid ounce of horseradish.

## The Festive Meal

It is traditional to begin the meal with an egg, just as in Temple times when everyone ate the Chagigah offering.

The meal should not include any roasted meat, in order to distinguish from that of Temple times, when the "Pascal lamb" was eaten roasted.

The meal should preferably conclude before midnight, in order to eat the Afikomen by that time.

## The Afikomen

Children have a custom of "stealing" the Afikomen and then holding it ransom for a prize. (If nothing else, this keeps them awake and interested.) The Afikomen should preferably be eaten before midnight.

The Afikomen should be eaten while you are "full," yet with still some room in your stomach. Each person should eat approximately 2/3 of a square matzah, or 1/2 of a hand-made round matzah. If eating this is difficult, you may eat half the amount. Eat the Afikomen within 4 minutes of the first swallow, while leaning to the left.

After the Afikomen, nothing else should be eaten for the remainder of the night - except for drinking water, tea, and the remaining two cups of wine.

Enjoy the Seder, and remember: Next year in Jerusalem!

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*The sweet charoset dilutes the harsh effects of the bitter herbs.*

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# 15 Steps to Freedom

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

On Passover, we embark on a personal journey from slavery to freedom. To guide our quest, we use the Haggadah - a book outlining 15 steps to freedom. Passover occurs on the 15th of Nissan (the Jewish month), teaching us that just as the moon waxes for 15 days, so too our growth must be in 15 gradual steps.

## 1) Kadesh - Kiddush

To begin the Seder, we make Kiddush to sanctify the day. The word "kiddush" means special and unique.

In Egypt, the Jews were forced to build the store-cities of Pitom and Ramses. These cities rested on swampland, and every time the Jews built one level, it sunk into the ground. Slavery is a life with no accomplishment, no achievement, no meaning.

The first step to personal freedom is to recognize that you are special - a distinct combination of talents, skills and experiences that qualifies you to make a unique contribution to the world.

## 2) Urchatz - Washing Hands

We wash our hands at this point in this Seder, the Talmud says, because this unusual activity prompts the children to ask questions. Passover teaches that to be truly free we must approach life with child-like wonderment. "Who is the wise person?" asks the Talmud. "The one who learns from everyone."

Coming at springtime, Passover is the holiday of renewal. Nissan is the first chodesh ("month"), which has the same letters as chadash ("new"). The Seder implores us to be a curious student of life.

## 3) Karpas - Vegetable

We take a green vegetable and bless God for giving us food. "Who is the rich person?" asks the Talmud. "The one who appreciates what he's got." When we are grateful for all that we have, then even a small piece of vegetable becomes a beautiful gift.

On a deeper level, we dip the vegetable in salt water to appreciate that even those things which may elicit tears - a lost job or a broken relationship - can be positive lessons of growth.

## 4) Yachatz - Breaking the Matzah

We break the middle matzah, and put it aside to serve later as the Afikomen. A key to freedom is to anticipate the future and make it real.

The definition of maturity is the ability to trade a lower pleasure now for a higher pleasure later. Children demand instant gratification.

"Who is the wise person?" asks the Talmud. "The one who sees the future." We break the middle matzah, not for now, but for later, because true freedom is a long-term proposition.

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*Slavery is a life with no accomplishment or meaning.*

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## 5) Maggid - Telling the Story

On Seder night, we use our gift of speech for the central part of the Haggadah: telling the Passover story. The very word "Pesach" is a contraction of the words *peh sach*, meaning "the mouth speaks." The Hebrew name for Pharaoh, on the other hand, is a combination of *peh rah*, meaning "the bad mouth." Just as speech has the power to build, it also has the power to destroy. Gossip and slander drive apart families and communities.

Speech is the tool of building and construction. God used it to create the world. ("And God said: Let there be light.") On Passover, we use speech to communicate, connect, and relate the glorious story of our Exodus.

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## 6) Rachtzah - Washing Hands

At the Seder, we wash our hands as a preparatory step before the matzah, in order to carefully consider what we're about to consume. One who is concerned with spiritual and physical health is discriminating about all forms of consumption: which movies to watch, which friends to spend time with, and which ethical standards to absorb. The streets are filled with a multitude of options. Be a discriminating consumer.

We "wash our hands" to cleanse and distance ourselves from unhealthy influences. Freedom is the ability to elevate ourselves and to say: "I choose not to partake."

## 7) Motzi - Blessing Over Food

The Hamotzee blessing thanks God for "bringing forth bread from the ground." Yet in truth, God brings forth wheat from the ground and man turns it into bread. So we actually thank God for giving us two gifts: 1) the raw materials, and 2) the tools for transforming them.

Today, we fine-tune our environment with air-conditioning, synthetic foods and cosmetic surgery. In truth, we cannot create anything perfect; we can only tune into God's ultimate perfection. The human brain has 10 billion nerve cells, a communications network rivaling the Internet.

When we say Hamotzee, we hold the matzah with all our ten fingers - reminding us that while human hands produced this food, it is yet another gift from the Creator and Sustainer of life.

## 8) Matzah - Eating Matzah

Both bread and matzah are flour mixed with water, then kneaded into a dough and baked. What is the difference between them? Dough which sits unattended for 18 minutes becomes leavened bread; matzah is baked quickly.

The spelling of "matzah" is similar to "mitzvah": Just as we shouldn't delay in the baking of matzah, so too we shouldn't procrastinate in performing a mitzvah.

Why 18 minutes? 18 is the numerical value of "Chai," meaning "life." If baseball is a "game of inches," then life is a game of seconds. Seize the moment. Delaying even one moment can mean the difference between an opportunity grasped or lost.

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*Bread helps us tune into God's ultimate perfection.*

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## 9) Marror - Bitter Herbs

At the Seder we say: "In every generation they rise against us to annihilate us." The Egyptians, Crusades, Inquisitions, Pogroms, Holocaust, Arab terrorism: Intense and irrational violence has stalked our people to every corner of the globe. Why the hatred?

The Hebrew word for "hatred" (sinah) is related to the word "Sinai." At Mount Sinai, the Jewish people were imbued with ideals of morality and justice - "love your neighbor as yourself," and care for the widow and orphan.

This is a message that evil cannot tolerate. Hitler said: "The Jews have inflicted two wounds upon mankind: circumcision on the body, and conscience on the soul." How right he was and how much more work we have to do.

Throughout the generations, the forces of darkness have sought to extinguish our flame. But we have somehow prevailed. At the Seder, we eat the bitter herbs - in combination with matzah - to underscore that God is present not only during our periods of freedom (symbolized by matzah), but during our bitter periods as well. He will never forsake us.

## 10) Korech - Sandwich

The Hillel Sandwich is broken matzah held together by bitter herbs and charoset. So too, the Jewish people can become fragmented by divisiveness. But we are held together by our common links to

Torah tradition and our shared historical experiences.

In Egypt, the Jews were redeemed because of unity: unified by commitment to each other and to their collective future. Weeks later at Mount Sinai, we stood together and accepted the Torah "with one heart and one mind."

Today, the biggest threat to Jewish survival may be from internal dissent. Our only response is to love each other unconditionally. The inclusion of the "wicked son" in the Seder expresses our conviction that no Jew is ever irretrievably lost. We are one family, responsible to love and care for one another.

## 11) Shulchan Aruch - Festive Meal

It seems strange that a "step to freedom" of Seder night should be eating the festive meal. The Jewish attitude toward physical drives and material needs, however, is unique. Rather than negating or denying the physical, Judaism stresses the importance of feasting and marital relations. Our religious leaders are not celibate, nor do they meditate all day on a mountaintop.

God wants us to have pleasure. The Talmud says that one of the first questions a person is asked upon reaching the Next World is: "Did you enjoy all the fruits of the world?" On Seder night, we eat the festive meal to teach us that true freedom is the ability to sanctify life, not flee from it.

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*Freedom is the ability to sanctify life, not flee from it.*

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## 12) Tzafun - Afikoman

The last thing we eat all night is the Afikoman. We eat this final piece of matzah not because we are hungry, but because we are commanded. Physical pleasure, though an integral part of our lives, must also serve higher values.

Our bodies are the vehicles for moving us through life. They require care and attention, but not to the extent of assuming a pre-eminent position. There is a difference between eating healthy and flying to Europe in order to dine at a five-star restaurant. A person dominated by material strivings is anything but free.

"Who is the strong person?" asks the Talmud. "The one who conquers himself."

Become a master of self. Put your soul in control.

## 13) Barech - Grace After Meals

The "Grace After Meals" was instituted by Abraham 4,000 years ago. He would invite idolatrous travelers into his tent for a hearty meal, then insist that they thank God for the food. Abraham was called Ha'Ivri ("the Hebrew"), literally "the one who stands on the other side." He was a peculiarity in his society, a lone voice in the wilderness.

Would we have been able to stand up to that kind of social pressure? Slavery is a pre-occupation with self-image and status. ("What will others think if I voice my objection?")

The Hebrew word for Egypt is Mitzrayim - from the root meitzar, which means narrow and constricted. When we left Egypt, we became free of the societal

forces which restrict us to a narrow path of fashion, image and ideas. Freedom means doing the right thing, even when not socially popular.

## 14) Hallel - Songs of Praise

As the feeling of freedom inebriates our souls (helped along by the four cups of wine!), we sing aloud in joy. When the Jews came out of Egypt and witnessed the upending of evil - the Egyptians drowning at the sea - they broke out in song. The Seder is performed specifically at night, for on Passover we turn darkness into light.

## 15) Nirtzah - Conclusion

We conclude our Seder with the prayer, "Next Year in Jerusalem." Every synagogue in the world faces Jerusalem. It is the focus of our hopes and aspirations. The Talmud says creation began in Jerusalem, and the world expanded outward from this spot. Medieval maps show Jerusalem at the epicenter of Asia, Europe, and Africa. From Jerusalem, the whole world is cast into perspective.

The name Jerusalem means "city of shalom." Shalom means "completion" - the seamless harmony of humanity genuinely embracing a common vision. Jerusalem is a vision of God in our lives, a metaphor for a perfected world. Year after year, each successful Seder brings us closer to the final redemption.

As the Seder draws to a close, we sense that true freedom is close at hand. We shout aloud: "Next Year in Jerusalem!" We're on our way home.

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*Jerusalem is the focus of our hopes and aspirations.*

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# My Dayenu Ring

by Sara Yoheved Rigler

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The diamond ring I inherited from my mother was my most beautiful possession. My father had given the ring, a band of 16 perfect diamonds, to my mother shortly after their wedding in 1944. The ring adorned my hand every Shabbat. Every time I looked at its glistening perfection, my Shabbat joy soared.

Then, sitting at the Shabbat table six weeks ago, I glanced down at my ring and was horrified to see a gaping, black hole. A prong of the white gold setting had broken, and one diamond had fallen out. My horror gave way to a frantic search, with all members of the family on hands and knees searching the floors in the kitchen and living room, then sweeping, and finally giving up. The diamond was gone.

Every time I looked at my ring, all I saw was the gaping, black hole, like a beautiful woman smiling to reveal a missing front tooth. My gorgeous ring had become a toothless hag. Bitterly, I took it off and put it in its box. I could not bear to look at it.

Replacing the diamond would be an expensive and complicated procedure, as the setting itself had to be repaired. We were not just then in a position to undertake the expense. The ring remained in its place of exile every Shabbat, and whenever I, by force of habit, reached for it, I was poignantly reminded of my bitter loss.

Then one Friday evening two weeks ago, I missed the ring so much that I decided to take it out and wear it. After all, I reminded myself, there were still 15 perfect diamonds there for me to enjoy. Why focus on what wasn't there when I could choose to focus on what was there? A ring is round, I told myself, and whenever the black hole faces me, all I have to do is turn it to reveal the still-perfect other side.

This turned out to be a potent spiritual exercise. Whenever I glanced down and saw the ugly hole, I said to myself, "I will choose what I will look at," and I turned the ring until all I saw was the sparkling, perfect diamonds.

Then something strange happened. At one point, I looked down and saw the hole. Instead of turning the ring, I chose to look at the diamond adjacent to the hole. I gazed at it intently, noticing its clear almost-blue color, its exquisite cut, and its happy sparkle. Then I realized with a start that in the 15 years I have owned the ring, while I loved the ring as a whole, I never really bothered to look at the individual diamonds. Losing one diamond made me begin to appreciate the beauty of the remaining diamonds.

## The Dayenu Song

One of the favorite parts of the Passover Seder is the song, "Dayenu." The 15 verses of this song enumerate the various

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*I began to appreciate the beauty of the remaining diamonds.*

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kindnesses God bestowed on our people during the Exodus, such as taking us out of Egypt, splitting the sea for us, taking us through it on dry land, taking us to Mount Sinai, giving us the Torah, etc. The refrain, "dayenu," means: "It would have been enough for us."

Anyone who stops to consider the lyrics would find them enigmatic. After all, it's preposterous to proclaim that if God had split the sea for us and not led us through it on dry land, "it would have been enough for us." If God had not led us through it on dry land, we would have all been slain by the pursuing Egyptian army. As well, what good would it have served us to be led to Mount Sinai and not to be given the Torah? In what sense is any of these individual steps "enough for us"?

The song teaches the same lesson as my no-longer-perfect diamond ring: Stop and

notice the greatness of each and every part. The splitting of the sea itself was a tremendous miracle. Appreciate it for what it was, regardless of the next step in the progression.

The Torah requires us to remember the Exodus from Egypt every day. Such remembrance leads to gratitude, the core characteristic of the Jewish people. The very name "Jew" derives from the Hebrew name "Yehuda," which means "thank" or "acknowledge." In the midst of the Seder, the song "Dayenu" teaches us how to achieve that quintessential virtue of gratitude: Focus, really focus, on each individual blessing you are given. Regardless of what came before or after it.

Every blessing is a stand-alone gift, just as every diamond is its own treasure.

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# The Mystical Art of Passover Cleaning

*by Rabbi Chaim Levine*

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Ah, spring. Hay fever, spring fever. The sound of lawnmowers being restarted after months of hibernation. What spring would be complete without houses full of neurotic Passover cleaners, scurrying around hardware stores looking for everything from sandpaper to gas torches.

To the uninitiated, perhaps all this Passover cleaning looks a bit mundane.

What exactly does bending down to scour out the space under the fridge have to do with purification of the soul and achieving true freedom?

Here's how it works:

In Judaism we approach the spiritual through our involvement in the physical. Sitting by a river meditating is nice, but real spirituality comes from making the mundane sacred.

Further, we see the physical as bridge to the spiritual, because Judaism recognizes that the physical has been created as a visceral mirror for abstract spiritual concepts. Case in point: cleaning for chametz.

The Talmud states that actual mitzvah of cleaning out your chametz is to be done with a candle. After the chametz is found, it is then to be burned in a flame.

The Sages say that the wick of the candle is a metaphor for the body, and the flame is a metaphor for the soul. Just as a flame always points upwards to the heavens, so too, no matter what you do with your body, your soul always stays true to its source. Your essence always remains pure and good, no matter what you do with yourself.

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*An arrogant, puffed-up ego is nothing but a lot of hot air.*

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## All Puffed Up

Chametz - the air that puffs up dough into bread - is the ego. Just as chametz makes bread look bigger than it is without adding any substance, so too an ego filled with self-importance is ultimately nothing but hot air.

How do we remove the ego? The answer is through the seemingly mundane act of Passover cleaning.

We take the candle and shine it in the darkest hidden cracks, exposing the chametz. When we look at ourselves through the lens of the soul, we expose the chametz hiding within and recognize it as a puffed-up illusion. Once exposed, it goes up in smoke.

## Season of Freedom

Passover is the season of freedom. But freedom can only come if you have released yourself from enslavement to the ego.

If your ego has you in a death-hold; if you run after success because you think only success will you be happy; if you need other people's praise and reassurance to feel okay about yourself, then you are a enslaved. If you can't control your anger, or you are trapped by your fears, then you aren't free.

Burning away the chametz of your personality frees you to the life of the soul.

There is another spiritual idea that comes from chametz that, when understood, teaches the true nature of the ego.

Both bread (chametz) and matzah are made from wheat and flour. The difference is that chametz is puffed up. In other words, chametz consists of nothing less than matzah itself! Similarly, the ego is nothing but a corrupt desire whose basis is a drive from the soul. For example:

- The soul wants to help humanity and fix the world. The ego's perverted version of this noble drive is the desire for power and control, the urge to conquer the world.
- The soul wants to connect with other people meaningfully. The ego corrupts this desire into a drive to manipulate and take from people.

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• The soul wants to connect with the Divine. The ego wants to use spirituality to serve its selfish needs.

By seeing that the ego is often just a corruption of a noble desire, we can easily move past it and choose to be truly free.

Here are a few exercises that you can try this Passover.

1) Ask yourself: "What ego-driven behaviors are enslaving me? What would life be like if they weren't there?" Ask God for the wisdom and understanding to see them for what they are.

2) Try so see that some of your biggest ego problems are actually a corrupt form of something beautiful from the soul. Then pursue the noble, pure expression of that ego-driven behavior.

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# The Great Chametz Clean-out

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During the week of Passover, Jews are forbidden to eat or possess any chametz - leavened grain. For this reason, we dispose of (or sell) all bread, cookies, pasta, beer, etc. - and purchase only products labeled "Kosher for Passover."

To avoid any problems of residual chametz, we clean the house from top to bottom: refrigerator, kitchen cabinets, countertops, etc. Don't forget to check your car. And we also use special sets of dishes and pots for Passover.

On the evening before Passover, we conduct a careful search of the house for chametz. This is done by candlelight/flashlight and is a memorable experience for the whole family. Before beginning the search, recite the blessing:

*Baruch Ata Ado-noy,  
Elo-heinu Melech ha-Olam,  
asher kee-dish-anu bi-meetz-vo-sav  
vi-tzivanu, al bi'ur chametz.*

After the search for the chametz is completed, we renounce ownership of any undiscovered chametz by declaring: "Any chametz or leaven that is in my possession, which I have not seen, have not removed and do not know about, should be nullified and become ownerless, like dust of the earth."

Any remaining chametz is either burned the next morning or is sold to a non-Jew for the week of Passover. The sale must be serious and legally binding; it should be done only through the assistance of a qualified rabbi. Any food that is sold must be put in a cabinet and taped shut.

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# Haggadah Insights

*User-friendly ideas that are perfect for sharing at the Seder*

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## Hungry and Needy

*Rabbi Tom Meyer*

The Hagaddah says: "All who are hungry - come and eat. All who are needy - come and join the Passover celebration."

It's hard to believe that as you're reciting this on Passover night, a crowd of homeless people will be hanging outside your door. Or that if you say it loud enough there's going to be a rush into your house. So what does the Haggadah mean?

The message is that we cannot have true personal freedom unless we care about other people - both their physical and spiritual needs. That's why the Haggadah says: "All who are hungry... All who are needy..." Don't these two things sound similar? The first one refers to physical hunger - if you're hungry come have a bite. The second is spiritual - if you have any kind of need, join us.

Why is caring about other people so crucial to our own sense of freedom? Because we cannot get out of our ego unless we care about other people. A person has to get outside himself and realize that the welfare of others is part of his own happiness and freedom.

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*The welfare of others is part of our own happiness and freedom.*

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## Four Sons, Four Questions

*Rabbi Tom Meyer*

How do the Four Sons relate to the Four Questions? And what does it mean for us today?

The wise son corresponds to the first of the Four Questions: "On all other nights we eat chametz, on this night matzah." Matzah is the most basic food imaginable. The essence of wisdom is to get back to the essentials, the understanding of what's life about. Pull back from your ego and see what really counts. That's the wise son.

The evil son says: "What's all this Passover stuff to you? I don't need this." He excludes himself from the Jewish people. He's mocking, making fun of it all. He's not really even asking a question.

Why isn't the evil son placed last? Isn't he the worst? Why did the Sages list him after the wise son? Because even though the evil son is fighting, at least he's engaged in the discussion and you've got somebody to talk to. He's alert and thinking. If you can turn him around, you've got another wise son.

You may ask why the evil son is listed here at all? Because he's still part of the Jewish people. We have to make an effort to reach him.

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This parallels the second of the Four Questions: "On this night we eat bitter herbs." The evil son represents bitterness. On the surface, he says "Who needs God? I want the fancy house and the expensive car." He may appear happy, but because he's spent a lifetime trading in "meaning" for bodily desires, in the quiet moments he senses how bitter life really is.

To be chasing your desires is a bitter trap. That's Maror.

The third son is the simple son. He's not stupid; he's just simple and plain. He may not be an intellectual, but he wants to do the right thing.

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*Each of us is a composite of these four sons.*

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The third son corresponds to the third question: "On this night we dip twice." The simple son relates to the experiential aspect of Judaism. He's the type of person who takes a trip to Israel, gets inspired and asks himself the question, "What is life all about?"

Unfortunately it's often anti-Semitism that focuses the third son. We dip into salt water which represents the tears of the Jews. The biggest thing holding Jews together in today is the fear of Israel falling and the memory of the Holocaust.

The fourth son is the one who doesn't know how to ask. So what do we tell him? "Because of this that God did for me..."

The fourth son is apathetic. He's not thinking and he doesn't much care. So we tell him the same answer we give to the evil son - because apathy can be very easily turn into hate and rejection. And that's why this son is listed last. If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.

The fourth son corresponds to the fourth question: "On all other nights, we eat sitting or reclining." At the Seder, we're free and we should use that opportunity to direct ourselves toward meaning. But the apathetic son is laid back and could go either way. He could change and care, or he'll just slump back and go to sleep.

The hardest thing about reaching Jews today is they're apathetic.

In truth, each of us is a composite of these four sons, the four types of Jews. To some extent, we're all searching and thinking - like the first son. Yet sometimes we treat life as a joke and we rebel - like the second son. And sometimes it takes a shocking experience to arouse us to think and change - like the third son. And at times we feel apathetic, walking around in a daze - like the fourth son. These are the four sons within each of us.

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## Power of a Question

*Rabbi Shraga Simmons*

The Seder is based largely on the idea of "questions." We ask the Four Questions, and the Four Sons are identified by the type of questions they ask.

Why are questions so important?

The Maharal of Prague (16th century Hungary) explains that people generally feel satisfied with their view of life. Thus they are a bit complacent when it comes to assimilating new ideas and growing from them. But when a person has a question, that is an admission of some lack. This creates an "empty space" which now needs to be filled.

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Growth begins internally, with a question. Judaism's basic view of education is that nobody can teach anyone anything new. Rather, a teacher conveys information in a way that allows the student to get in touch with what he already knows - and re-discover it on his own.

At the Seder, we "ask" questions and create a "lack." By doing so, we open ourselves to the depth of the Exodus experience.

Got a good question? Ask it at the Seder!

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## Building Pitom and Ramses

*Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf*

The Haggadah relates: "The Egyptians oppressed us, as it says: 'They placed taskmasters over them, in order to afflict them with burdens. And for Pharaoh they built store cities named Pitom and Ramses' (Exodus 1:11)."

The human need for meaning may be second only to our need for air. It is so basic that even the existentialist who sees existence as nothing more than an anxiety-riddled fluke, is forced to come up with some sort of meaning with which to pad the dreary cell of life. It is so powerful that an entire branch of psychoanalytic thought rests on the assertion that when one is deprived of meaning, all is lost, yet given a sense of meaning, one can prevail over the worst suffering and deprivation.

Pharaoh knew exactly what he was doing. The Talmud relates that the region of Pitom and Ramses was a wet, sandy marshland - hardly fit for a construction site. But Pharaoh's real aim was destruction, not construction. He chose

the site of Pitom and Ramses because he hoped that the futility of Jewish efforts would give rise to a sense of inescapable anguish. (Like being a sports fan in Cleveland.) Each morning the Jews were once again saddled with the fate of fruitless labors. Brick after meaningless brick, their hollow feeling of agony intensified.

The story is told about a man who was exiled to Siberia, where he was kept in solitary confinement. His punishment was to spend endless hours each day turning a massive wheel that was attached to his cell wall. As the prisoner turned the wheel, he imagined the many useful purposes for his forced labor: grinding wheat in a mill, or drawing water to irrigate the fields.

After many years, he was finally released from captivity. Before heading home, he said to the guards, "After all my years of hard work, I'd like to know what I achieved." They took him to the other side of the building where he saw the wheel was attached to nothing. All his suffering had been meaningless. The man collapsed and died on the spot.

When the Jews left Egypt, we began to search for meaning and purpose. Paying bills, putting kids through college, and retiring comfortably are surely more purposeful goals than endless pursuit of movies, restaurants and the latest electronic gadgets. But for a human being driven by a God-inspired soul, such a purpose still falls short of our vast eternal potential.

Part of the responsibility of freedom is the obligation to fill our lives with meaning. And in a world filled with a thousand follies masquerading as cherished activities, that responsibility weighs particularly heavy.

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*Our need for meaning is second only to our need for air.*

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# Matzah: Moving Beyond Ego

*Rabbi Tom Meyer*

Matzah is the central symbol of Passover. Why? Most people would say because the Jews were rushed out of Egypt so fast that the bread didn't have time to rise.

But there's one problem. The night before the Jews left Egypt, they ate matzah at that first Passover Seder. So obviously, matzah is an inherent component of Passover, and rushing out the next morning was a continuation of that symbol.

First, let's understand why matzah is the central lesson of Passover. Matzah is the most simple, essential form of bread. If 18 minutes pass when you're kneading a dough, or if you add yeast to dough, then it starts to leaven, to puff up.

This puffing up - the rising which the yeast produces - symbolizes a person's own inflation with himself. A central concept of freedom is "pulling back from the ego." Of course this doesn't mean you should never have ego - because we know that the rest of the year we are allowed to eat regular bread! But Passover provides a point where we get back to basics, to what we really want without all the additives and superficialities.

Matzah teaches us that to really be in control of yourself, you need to know what you want - straight without the luxuries. This doesn't mean luxuries are wrong in and of themselves. If you know that you don't need two beautiful new cars, and you know that you could get

along with one older car if you had to, and you know that your children are much more important than any car - then it's no problem having two beautiful new cars, because everything will be in perspective.

On the other hand, what if the cars take on such importance that when your child gets a little mud on the car you go berserk. If we feel that the additives and superficialities are essential to our lives, then our ego gets in the way and we lose sight of what really counts.

Passover is all about breaking free of that. Matzah says you've got to get back to essentials and focus on what really counts.

Jewish tradition says to burn your remaining chametz on the morning before the Seder. Some people have the custom to write down a list of their character flaws and throw it into the flames. The goal on Passover is to completely rid ourselves of all "chametz," to move beyond our ego and to be rid of that confinement forever.

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## Life's Bitter Herbs

*Rabbi Shraga Simmons*

The Haggadah says: "What is the reason we eat this Marror? Because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt. As it says: 'They made their lives bitter through the hard labor, with mortar and brick and all kinds of work in the field. All their labor was carried out under conditions of excessive force' (Exodus 1:14)."

Every life has its bitterness. We may get sick, lose our job, or suffer a broken relationship. What does it all mean?

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*Write down your character flaws and throw it in the flames.*

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Judaism says that everything in life has meaning and purpose - even the suffering. Sometimes we are able to see the reason, and sometimes we can't. Sometimes the reason is only revealed over time.

The story is told of the farmer whose horse ran away. All the people of the village came to console him. "How terrible, your horse ran away."

"I don't know," said the farmer. "Maybe it's bad, maybe it's not."

A few days later, the horse returned home with an entire herd of wild horses that it had befriended along the way. All the villagers came to congratulate him. "Such good luck - your horse ran away and now you've got a whole stable full!"

"I don't know," said the farmer. "Maybe it's good, maybe it's not."

A few days later, the farmer's son was out riding one of the wild horses, and got thrown off, breaking his leg. All the villagers came to console him. "How terrible, your son broke his leg."

"I don't know," said the farmer. "Maybe it's bad, maybe it's not."

A few days later, the government sent representatives to the village with orders to draft every able-bodied young man into the army. All the boys were taken away, except for the farmer's son who had a broken leg.

"Now I know," said the farmer. "It's good that my horse ran away."

The commentators ask: Of the three items in the Haggadah - the Passover offering, Matzah and Marror - why is Marror listed last? Passover and matzah are symbols of our freedom - while Marror, which represents slavery, should chronologically be listed first.

Marror is mentioned last because human nature is such that, even though we intellectually may know that the bitterness is ultimately for the best, still we can't appreciate while we're "in it" - rather only when looking back.

Life is kind of like going to the dentist. One way of enduring the pain is to stay focused on the fact that it's ultimately for the best.

Our loving Father in Heaven only wants what's best for us, and only gives us challenges that we are able to handle. That is why, when we eat the bitter herbs, we dip it in the sweet charoset - for just as in life, the bitter is always tempered by the good.

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## Savor the Afikomen

*Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf*

After the Afikomen, nothing else should be eaten for the remainder of the night - except for the drinking of water, tea, and the remaining two cups of wine.

The law of the Afikomen - once it's over, it's over - is a hint to the lost spiritual art of savoring. The art of savoring is a sensitization technique which allows us to become completely immersed in an experience.

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*In life, the bitter is always tempered by the good.*

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The Jewish art of savoring bids us to fine-tune our senses and to become more fully absorbed in both vision, sound, and their attendant feelings. To experience the dancing and the joy. The music, the tears, the love and the rarefied closeness they stir within us. To consciously engage every day and every moment; to celebrate life, and to imbibe the totality of every experiential step we take.

Upon concluding the Seder, Jewish law

bids us not to taste anything after the Afikomen. This is a night for savoring: ideas, feelings, and images. Allow it to become a part of you. Savor this night of freedom. Only then can you leave. Not with souvenirs, not with photos, but as a different person. A different Jew. And this you will never forget.

Choose one moment you want to remember from the Seder - close your eyes and savor it.

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## Goering & My Grandmother

*by Rabbi Leiby Burnham*

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My grandmother is one of the most fascinating people I ever met. Me'me, as we called her, fought in the French resistance, ran a DP camp in post-war Europe, was a professor in Columbia University and has traveled the world extensively.

Me'me was living in Paris while it was under Nazi occupation. She was working with the French underground smuggling Jews out of the occupied zone of France. She had been an emerging actress in pre-war Paris, and came from a family of well-heeled diplomats, comfortable among the more glamorous echelons of society. Suspicion would be aroused if she were to suddenly start leading a more understated life, so she continued to shop at the finest boutiques in Paris while leading the secret life of a Jewish resistance fighter.

One day Me'me excitedly set out to Hermes' flagship store in Paris to pick up a pair of gloves she had ordered. Much to her consternation, the entire street was blocked off by German military vehicles. Yet she was not going to let half a platoon of Nazis stop her from getting her Hermes gloves.

She also happened to know Paris like an accountant knows a calculator, so she simply went through a few back alleys and arrived at the employees' entrance. She let herself into the store, and immediately discovered why the street was blocked off: Hermann Goering, the powerful Nazi commander, was shopping in Hermes, accompanied by a phalanx of Nazi officers!

Cold fear coursed through her, as well as the repulsion of being in such close

proximity to someone so intimately involved in the butchery of her people. But she quickly calculated that her best move would be to pretend like everything was normal and go about her business with no hint of fright or hatred. She walked up to the counter and asked for her gloves. The Hermes employees assumed she was an accompanying celebrity or official and assisted her expediently.

As she was exiting, she came to a narrow point in the store where only one person could walk through at a time. Right then, Goering was headed in the same direction. Who would go first? (They couldn't possibly squeeze through together, because, as Me'me later told me, "Goering was a very fat man.") Goering, ever the effusive and charming gentleman, motioned for my grandmother to go first with a sweet, "Ladies First." She left the store and continued smuggling Jews out of the danger zone, now with a new pair of Hermes gloves.

"Never confuse culture with morality," Me'me told me. Goering was of aristocratic heritage. He was a patron of the arts and attended opera, and he probably cried while listening to Wagner's beautiful compositions. And he always let the lady go first. But as the architect of the Final Solution, he proved that no amount of culture can substitute for morality.

This is a lesson the Jewish people know well. On Seder night, we recall the Egyptians, in their time the pinnacle of

world culture. They had papyri, pyramids, incredible embalming technique, astrology, art, hieroglyphics, brain surgery, and achievements in every field imaginable. Yet they threw Jewish children into the Nile, forced young and old into torturous labor, and stuck babies in the wall as bricks if the parents didn't make enough bricks themselves.

It is a great irony of history that behind many great civilizations you will find incredible barbarism. The Greeks and Romans clubbed their children to death if they were born with any deformity or, sometimes, just for being born female. They would cheer gleefully as they watched thousands of people kill each other in "games" at the coliseums. The Germans were the most cultured people in the world with their composers, scientists, poets, and scholars leading the world in achievements, yet we saw what they were capable of in the Holocaust.

On Passover we celebrate the Jewish people's redemption from a place of "culture" to a place of morality. We left behind the pyramids and hieroglyphics, and went into the desert to learn the ethical precepts of genuine humanity and civilization, from the Creator of humanity.

On Passover, our mission is to see ourselves as if we are leaving Egypt. We walk in the footsteps of our ancestors, refusing to accept the dominant culture at face value. Instead, we search for the Divine morality that we deeply know is true. This is how we discover real freedom and liberate our souls from the shackles of "cultural servitude," from the dangerous illusion of Goering's "ladies first."

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*Passover celebrates our redemption from "culture" to "morality."*

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# What's the Big Deal about the Exodus?

by Sara Yoheved Rigler

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Why does Judaism make such a big deal about the Exodus? Of course, on Passover it deserves the limelight. But every Shabbat and holiday, in the text of Kiddush, the Exodus from Egypt is thrown in. Every day in the reciting the Shema, we recall the Exodus. Even one of the 613 commandments of the Torah is to remember the Exodus every day.

Jewish history is not short on great historical episodes: the binding of Isaac, the revelation at Sinai, the crossing into the Promised Land. Why should the Exodus get top billing?

The Jewish understanding of God has two foundations: 1) God created the world and 2) God intervenes in human affairs. Shabbat is testimony to the first premise; the Exodus is testimony to the second.

Although the concept of God as Creator was widely accepted in the Western world - from the time the Jews introduced it until the advent of Darwin, the second premise has always posed a predicament: If God is intimately involved in human affairs, why is there so much suffering in the world?

This conundrum caused philosophers to devise theories which gave God credit for creating the world, but effectively dismissed Him for the long haul. Thus, the Watchmaker Theory: Just as the watch-

maker sets its mechanism in motion, at which point his job is done, so too God set into motion the laws of nature, after which, "services no longer required."

In other words, God's laws of nature work independently of Him, thus producing random effects in which God cannot intervene. He has turned over the keys of the car to nature, and, no matter how recklessly nature drives, God is confined to the back seat.

A corollary of this theory is that God neither knows nor cares what transpires in the lives of individuals. Because if He did know or care, obviously everyone would be healthy, wealthy and wise.

This concept is anathema to Judaism. Judaism proclaims that nothing happens in the cosmos - no electron encircles an atomic nucleus, no cell divides, no star is born or dies - without Divine will animating it at every nanosecond. As the blessing before drinking a glass of water states: "Everything exists by Your word." Translate: If God did not will that glass to be full of molecules of H<sub>2</sub>O at this moment, poof! It simply would not exist.

This is the real meaning of the oneness of God, which Judaism obsesses on: there are no forces of any kind independent of God. Period. God not only made the watch, but His will keeps it ticking, His energy animates its atoms and molecules, and His providence decides who will own it and for how long.

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*God not only made the watch, but keeps it ticking.*

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This is where the Exodus comes in. The Jewish people were slaves to the mightiest dynasty on earth. As the Midrash says, no slave ever escaped from Egypt, surrounded as it was by potent fortifications and daunting deserts. By the laws of nature, there was no possibility for the Israelite slaves to achieve freedom.

The whole point of the Exodus was for the Jewish people to see, once and for all, that God runs the show, from the minutest detail to the grandest spectacle. Ultimate caring. Ultimate involvement.

Every component of the Exodus was meant to reveal another facet. The plague of lice, the smallest creatures perceptible to the naked eye, was intended to show that God's supervision penetrates to the smallest units of existence. The plague of frogs, where the normally water-loving amphibians jumped into the burning ovens of Egypt, showed that God's will, not brute instinct, rules the animal kingdom.

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This is why the Exodus is repeatedly mentioned and continually remembered. The Exodus demonstrated God's love for humanity and how he intervenes in destiny for the sake of their collective and individual redemption.

Only in an immature, unstable relationship does the wife require the husband to prove his love and dependability over and over again. If every time a Jew is confronted with misfortune, he or she doubts God's love

and closeness, that is a sure sign that the Exodus has been forgotten.

This leaves us, however, with the problem of suffering, an issue that we have been grappling with for millennia, as the biblical Book of Job testifies. The Jewish answer to the conundrum of suffering is laid out on the Seder table.

On this festival of rejoicing in our redemption, symbols of suffering abound: the bitter herbs, the salt water reminiscent of tears, the chorset resembling the mortar of our back-breaking labor. Yet the symbols of redemption and the symbols of suffering are inextricably woven together. The chorset, representing mortar and enslavement, is sweet. The karpas, representing new life, is dipped in the salt water. The bitter herbs are coated in sweet chorset before eating.

This is the lesson of the Hagaddah's recondite account of the five sages partaking of a Seder in B'nei Brak. Rabbi Elazar says that he never understood why the seder had to take place at night until another sage explained to him that only the totality of day and night, joy and suffering can produce the redemption.

The Exodus was our national introduction to God-who He is and how He acts, always with supreme love and caring for our ultimate welfare. In the most visceral way, those who partake of the Seder taste the truth that suffering is an inextricable part of the process of redemption - nationally and individually.

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*Only the totality of joy and suffering can produce the redemption.*

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# Charoset Recipes

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In the biblical Song of Songs, the Jewish people are compared to apples, pomegranates, figs, dates, walnuts and almonds. While many recipes have developed in Jewish communities over the centuries, these are the main ingredients to be used for Charoset.

The Talmud also says that apples commemorate the apple trees under which the Jewish women secretly gave birth in Egypt.

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*A new twist on the traditional Passover table favorite.*

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Further, the Talmud says to make the Charoset thick by adding spices, like ginger and cinnamon. This represents the straw and clay that the Jewish slaves used.

At the Seder, we dip the Marror (bitter herbs) into Charoset, whose wine neutralizes the sting of the Marror.

## Traditional Ashkenazi Charoset

2 cups chopped apples  
2 cups chopped walnuts  
2 teaspoons cinnamon  
2 tablespoons sweet red wine

Combine and refrigerate.

## California Charoset

1 orange  
1 avocado  
3 bananas  
1/2 cup grated coconut  
juice of 1/2 lemon  
1/4 cup pine nuts or almonds  
1/2 cup raisins  
2 tb matzah meal

Peel the fruits, place in blender. Add nuts, raisins and matzah meal. Cover and refrigerate.

## Yemenite Charoset

1/2 cup dried apricots, chopped  
1/2 cup dates, chopped  
3 tb dry wine  
juice of 1/2 lime  
  
2 tb honey  
1 tsp. ground ginger  
1/4 tsp. black pepper  
1/4 tsp. cumin  
1/4 tsp. cloves  
pinch of coriander  
1 small red chili pepper, seeded and minced

The recipe also calls for 3 tb of toasted sesame seeds. Sephardim who eat kitniyot on Passover may add this ingredient; Ashkenazim should not.

Combine and refrigerate.

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