

SACRED SOUNDS

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Passover 2016

Pesach and the Jewish Home

By Cantor Michael Krausman

While I prowl the supermarket for Pesach purchases, prepare to shlep boxes of dishes around the house and try to figure out how many chairs we will need for the Seder, I am reminded of one of the most significant and unique facets of our heritage: the focal point for the practice of Judaism is the home, not the synagogue. While it is certainly true that our synagogue serves most effectively as the hub for communal worship, education, and support, the most important aspects of Jewish practice take place outside of the walls of the shul, in the Jewish home.

Pesach is the prime example of this phenomenon. In fact, the main mitzvah of Pesach is to transmit the story of our enslavement and subsequent redemption to our children. We fulfill this vital commandment by an experiential re-enactment of the travails of our ancestors through the medium of the Seder. Not only do we transmit our Jewish history to the next generation during the Seder, but the gathering of relatives and the collective experience of traditional foods and rituals affords a golden opportunity for the sharing of the family history and customs that make each individual Seder unique and unforgettable. But even beyond the Seder, the whole preparatory process of taking in different foods, using different dishes and removal of *chametz* (leavened products) creates in the home a wonderfully spiritual atmosphere in a particularly Jewish context.

The significance of the Jewish home goes far beyond Pesach. Hanukkah, with the lighting of the menorah, and Sukkot, with the building of the sukkah (booth), are two other festivals whose chief observance takes place in the home. Moreover, kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws, adds a special dimension of spirituality to the way we approach food. Of course, Shabbat, the cornerstone of Jewish practice, is centered on family experiences and observances, the majority of which take place in the Jewish home.

But the importance of the Jewish home is not nearly limited to ritual. As we know, the best way to insure that the next generation remains firmly connected to Judaism is through effective Jewish education, including Jewish summer camp, and a strong Jewish home. This goes beyond making sure a mezuzah hangs on each doorpost. A Jewish home must be replete with Jewish symbols--Judaica must grace the china cabinet and Jewish art should be proudly displayed on the walls. Jewish music should be played, not only on the CD player but also in

the context of piano and other music lessons. Jewish history and culture can be transmitted in the context of the stories read at bed time. Naturally, Jewish food is a huge part of this equation; not only in terms of eating but also in cooking and baking. Taking time, for example, for family hamantaschen or challah baking is a vital part of creating an affirmative Jewish home. Even arts and crafts projects can become so much more meaningful when a Jewish theme is employed.

Maintaining an authentic Jewish home is vital for the continuation of our culture and the transmission of our Jewish values and observances to the next generation. The home is not only the focal point for Jewish ethical and ritual practice, but the root of meaningful spirituality. As we celebrate the beautiful and evocative festival of Pesach, we should aspire to extend the experience of the Seder beyond Pesach and to enjoy our freedom to create a Jewish home environment, not only on Shabbat and festivals, but all year round.

Cantor Michael Krausman serves Beth El Synagogue in Omaha, NE



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Creating a Meaningful Seder

By Cantor Ken Richmond

As the Ladino song says, "Purim lanu, Pesach a la mano," which loosely translated means that if Purim is here, we're in trouble, because Passover is approaching quickly. This time of year always brings a mix of panic and excitement. Pesach is my favorite holiday, and I think that many people enjoy (and stress out over) the opportunity to take a holiday into one's own hands, and to celebrate it as one wishes in one's own home, or the home of a relative, friend, or neighbor. I wanted to share some pre-Passover musings to help us in our preparations this year.

The more you prepare for Passover, the more satisfying the seder and holiday experience will be. Preparations include eating and giving away *hametz*, doing a spring cleaning, reviewing and learning new Passover melodies or writing Passover parodies, studying Passover commentaries, making Passover decorations, cooking, teaching our children about Passover, planning the seder, and searching for and burning the *hametz*. For our family *seder*, we usually give assignments to our guests, which might include bringing props, or as we did last year, writing poems to introduce each step of the seder (one night was haikus, the other night was a choice of acrostic or didactic cinquains). We listen to Passover CDs in the car and in prior years would play them in a loop while the kids slept. And everyone helps with the final frantic food preparations and setting the table.

The next guiding principle that we wrestle with each year is how to fulfill the verse in the *hagaddah* that says "In every generation each person should see him or herself as if he or she has personally come out of Egypt." What is our personal Egypt this year that we would like to break free of? What is Egypt for the group? How do we feel like we are coming out of Egypt again when we just did it last year? We may address this question in various ways during the storytelling time in the seder. We might share some "personal Exodus stories" or the "Exodus stories" of our ancestors. We may bring a new object for the Seder table that represents something we're trying to free ourselves of this year. We may discuss modern slavery and what small steps we might try to take to combat it this year. Even if every issue is not discussed at the seder, it's good to keep in mind throughout the weeks of preparation-- what can I free myself of this year? How can I make my surroundings more free? What can I do to counter oppression?

Another important thing to balance at the seder is tradition and change. Many traditions arise and evolve among family and friends, so that it "wouldn't seem like Pesach" without certain dishes, melodies, people, or traditions, such as who asks the four questions or how the Afikoman hunt unfolds. But while it's important to preserve many aspects of the seder from year to year, it's also important to experiment with new ones-- a new special food, melody, commentary, activity, or even Hagaddah. This is a good time of year to think: what is something new that I can bring to the seder this year?

Finally, the four children that we read about during the seder remind us that we need to tailor our seder to the people involved. For us that means starting early so that we can have a full seder while still allowing most of our family to experience most of it, and having a lot of roasted vegetables at Karpas time so that we don't get too hungry and cranky. It means doing magic tricks and "Godly play" and stories at the kids' level, and sometimes sending the kids out to prepare a play while the adults have a more serious discussion. It means trying to take advantage of the various talents of all the people in the room: dramatic, artistic, social, linguistic, musical, and intellectual. It means creating a seder that's a lot of fun for the children but isn't primarily a kids' seder.

Wishing you in advance a *zish Pesach*-- a sweet, happy, kosher Passover!

Ken Richmond is the cantor of Temple Israel of Natick, MA.

He and his wife, Rabbi Shira Shazeer, are raising their boys with Yiddish as their first language.

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It's All in the Telling of the Story

By Cantor Jeremy Lipton



Perhaps you recall the classic scene from Barry Levinson's 1990 movie *Avalon*, the story of a Polish immigrant family's acculturation into life in America, in which the extended family comes together for an annual, communal meal. In the overall context of the movie, the highly ritualized, recurring meal is merely a pretext to mark the metamorphosis of the family members' relationship with one another. That the meal happens to have been a Thanksgiving celebration is a nod to the film's attempt to universalize the American immigrant experience in the early 20th century. But this is clearly a Jewish story, and strongly reminded me of my family's Passover seders when I was a child, complete with parents, grandparents, multi-generations of aunts, uncles, cousins and others who might as well have been related, but were definitely and permanently part of our extended family. In fact, if you were to flash forward another generation, this scene could have easily been representative of the elaborate *Pesach sederim* in our Los Angeles home as our two sons were growing up.

Why Pesach? What is there about the celebration of our ancestors' miraculous Exodus from Egypt that makes our Jewish and familial memories so potent? Is it the special foods we consume? Is it the unusual rituals that we perform during the *seder*? Is it the drama of the story that keeps us engaged in its telling and retelling? Is it the fact that we are commanded to relate this transformational experience to our children and our children's children as if we ourselves personally left Egypt—from slavery to freedom?

We always had extremely large and elaborate *seдарim* when our kids were little. It wasn't unusual for us to remove all of the regular furniture from our living room and replace it with one large, extended table that filled the entire empty space in order to accommodate both family and friends. It may have meant weeks of preparation designing an experience that would keep the kids interested, and offer the multi-generations of adults the possibility to engage with the text and enter into a discussion of the laws and minutia of how to keep *Pesach*. It definitely meant cleaning, cooking and finding new and unique representative items that would creatively illustrate the ten plagues. It included the writing of a new play each year for the kids to rehearse and perform to tell the story of the Exodus during the *Maggid* portion of the *seder*, complete with costumes, props, and set pieces. Of course the meal was important—there had to be something unique that satisfied each and every person, but the experience of how we all related to each other in our retelling of the story was the ultimate goal. We successfully created indelible Jewish memories that filled our Jewish souls through planning and the involvement of each and every participant in our *seдарim* and in the telling of our story.

We recall the Exodus from Egypt each and every day in our liturgy, from the chanting of *Shirat Hayam* (the Song of the Sea) in the Morning Service to the references of its importance when we make *Kiddush* on *Shabbat*. It is one of the most important defining moments for us as a people, a catalyst from being *B'nei Yisrael* (The Children of Israel) to becoming *Am Yisrael* (The People Israel), with God-given laws and rules to be an independent people that is just, compassionate, and self-reliant. The retelling of this transformative event in our history is the catalyst for our relationship with our past, present and future.

How will you tell your story this year? *Chag Kasher V'sameach!!*

Cantor Jeremy Lipton is the Vice President, Administration of the Cantors Assembly, and serves Congregation Agudas Achim's vibrant community in San Antonio, Texas.



The Exodus: Fact or Fiction (and does it even matter?)

By Cantor Sheri Allen

Preparing for Passover is no easy task but it's well worth the effort. After all, it's for the purpose of celebrating the most significant event in our people's history: freedom from slavery in Egypt. And boy, was it a long time in coming! Ex. 12:40 recounts, "The length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was 430 years; at the end of the 430th year, to the very day, all the ranks of the Lord departed from the land of Egypt."

Or did they??? In an article I read last year entitled "Did the Exodus Really Happen," Rabbi David Sperling, Professor of Bible at HUC-JIR in NY, claims, "...the traditions of servitude in Egypt, the tales of the Israelites wandering in the desert, and the stories of the conquest of the promised land all appear to be fictitious." Kind of makes you want to drown your tears in a bowl of matzo ball soup.

Does this mean that the entire saga of the Exodus was, in essence, fan fiction? Indeed, Rabbi Sperling's argument is compelling. He claims that no actual archeological proof has ever been found suggesting that 600,000 plus people trekked through the wilderness thousands of years ago. After all, with such a large group, you'd think that there would be some evidence left behind: some pottery shards, perhaps a sandal or two? Not to mention the fact that, according to our Torah text, the Egyptians were quite willing to supply the Israelites with some very nice parting gifts: namely silver, gold and clothing.

But Professor Richard Elliot Friedman, author of the acclaimed book "Who Wrote the Bible," surmises that the lack of concrete evidence of the Israelites' wanderings doesn't mean that they *didn't* wander, it might just mean that perhaps *not as many* wandered. He makes a persuasive case that although it might be a stretch to believe that 603,550 males and their families spent 40 years in the desert without leaving a trace, it is very possible that a smaller group, whom he identifies as the Levites, did actually leave Egypt and settle in Canaan.

Contending that there were several Biblical authors, he reveals, "It is in fact only the Levite sources... that tell the entire story of the plagues and exodus from Egypt." And it is these Levitical sources that use the Name Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay when speaking about God. It is this Name that is referred to in the Shirat haYam nine times. He also points out that only the Levites (Moses among them) had Egyptian names, whereas other Israelites did not. The Levites also were in favor of circumcision, which was, apparently, practiced by the Egyptians.

When the Levites finally did make it to Israel, as the primary teachers of the people, they passed down the story of their Exodus, which was later adopted by the whole community of Israel. Their history became our history. Faith transcends certainty. We retell the story year after year because, despite the lack of indisputable historical proof, we claim it as our own.

We may question the specific facts and figures, but the Exodus narrative provides timeless and profound wisdom: have compassion for others, remember that we are partners with God in hastening our redemption, maintain hope in the face of seemingly insurmountable circumstances, and never lose faith in a Power greater than ourselves. Our desire to strive for goodness, to relieve misery, to value human life, is born out of the Divine directive to always remember that we were slaves in Egypt. We understand suffering, and therefore it is imperative that we recognize and take action against it when we witness the suffering of others. These lessons, born out of our understanding of the Exodus experience, are what has shaped us and helped us to survive as a people. So bring on the matzo balls! As we gather once again to symbolically relive the adventure that began in Egypt, it is our task to make sure that this journey will continue to be retold L'Dor Va Dor, from generation to generation.

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