

## **Shabbat Hagadol 2008: The Sacredness of the Seder**

Everyone has a favorite moment of the Jewish year. Whether it is the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, the building of the Sukkah before Sukkot, the lighting of the Hanukkah candles or any of the other moments marked by our tradition's beautiful rituals. For me, my moment will occur tonight at the Passover Seder. Every year as we all rise for Kiddush near the beginning of the Seder, I get a little bit of a chill as I look around me and I see the faces of family members and community members, friends and guests, and I imagine the millions of Jews who are similarly gathered in their homes across the world celebrating the story of our people. For me, it is a magical moment, infused with meaning and inspiration. It is one of those moments that I think about periodically throughout my year. And it is a moment that I know is completely created because of the mitzvah set out in the Torah, which asks us to gather together in order to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Thanks to this commandment we have developed the wonderful tradition of the Seder, one of the treasures of our religion, which reminds us of what a magnificent and rich heritage we have as Jews.

And further, what makes the Seder even more special is that it not only links us to other Jews who are similarly participating in the present but to all of the generations that came before, as well as those that will be sitting at the seder table in the future. There is something about the Pesach seder that is timeless, that links past and future -- that allows one to transcend the present. Thus, there is an inherently mystical aspect to the nighttime tradition of the Seder, full of its unique customs and rituals. The seder experience is evocative and stirs the emotions. It, therefore, has the potential to be a powerful event in the personal spiritual lives of the participants and can also be a key experience in the continuous development of the participating group's Jewish identity. For at its core Pesach teaches us the answer to the basic question of why it is so important for each Jew to remain a part of our story. Every type of person is included from wicked to wise; and everyone is invited be one poor or wealthy.

That is why it saddens me sometimes to hear that so many Jewish families end up viewing the Seder rituals as something to rush through, endure or skip entirely. While I understand that many seders include young children who must be engaged properly, which is difficult, as well as includes those who are novices in regard to Jewish practice, we must remember that if planned properly and if the participants have the right attitude, these obstacles can surely be overcome. As a rule, ritual rarely comes to life unless it is given the proper kavanah, the respectful participation and passion that it deserves. And the only way to create such a focus is for the people participating to have the proper appreciation for the beautiful and sacred privilege they have to be able to participate in the ritual in the first place. The key to making things meaningful is to remember how fortunate we are to be able to be a part of such a wonderful event.

Yet, as I have told many of you in the past, just as with the creation of any good event, creating a meaningful seder requires pre-thought and pre-planning. Each year we must ask ourselves again, how can we make this year's Seder meaningful? On what theme should we focus? What tunes shall we sing? In what discussion or activities shall we

engage? For the Seder begs for our active participation. As it says in the Hagaddah itself, “We, each of us, must see ourselves as if we, today, left Egypt”. We have been commissioned to capture for ourselves, in a personal way, those feelings of what it means to be free, what it means to be in a relationship with God and what it means to be on a journey to Sinai, Revelation and then to the Promised Land.

That is why the mitzvah of telling our story is not just a recitation of the relevant Torah verses. It is not only about learning information or hearing about the past. That is why, instead, we sit in our homes around the dinner table and participate in a complex ceremony of rituals that engages us on so many levels. Even before the theory of multiple intelligence the rabbis understood that to capture, in a powerful way, the meaning of the genesis of our people, we couldn't simply talk about it or think about it, we had to experience it in every way possible, with all our senses, with our entire being. Therefore, we talk, recite, discuss, eat, drink, dip, sing, ask, answer, search, find, imagine, act, feel and pray. We do all of these things using a carefully orchestrated script and traditional symbols to allow us to digest each aspect of our story so that over our lifetimes we can experience the plethora of meanings of the Pesach story, which we believe can help reveal to us who we are and why it is important to be a Jew.

In fact, the Talmud contains several stories of the rabbis' creative attempts to engage their Seder guests and their children in the experience of living our people's history. Through drama and games, special foods and strange behaviors, the key was to make this night different from all others so that it would stand out in the mind and elicit in us unique feelings. The Passover Seder can be likened to a drama whose performance each year has similar elements but which is still never experienced in exactly the same way. Each year, as our own Jewish identity evolves, the Seder strikes us differently. Every time we experience this potent ritual we travel deeper into the Jewish story, of which the Exodus is the first chapter.

It is important to note that it is no accident that Passover is the first holiday of the year. According to the Torah Nisan is the first month, not Tishrei, the month that begins with Rosh Hashanah. Thus, our history does not begin with a concept or with the birth of an individual, but with a story about the creation of our people. The entire history of the world and our patriarchs is contained in one book of the Chumash, while the story of the Israelites takes up the final four. The message is: it is this story that serves as the touchstone for our connection with God and each other, as well as serves as the conduit for the transmission of our tradition. The Exodus becomes our foundation story and the Seder our way of trying to capture its power in our own lives.

To illustrate the power of such a story to connect us to this pivotal moment we can turn to the Baal Shem Tov. It was said that when the Baal Shem Tov had a difficult task to perform, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate on the secrets of his heart and the prayer was answered. A generation later the Maggid of Mezritch was faced with the same task. He would go to the same place that the Baal Shem Tov went and he would say, "We no longer know how to light the fire but we still say the prayer." And it was done. A generation later Moshe Leib of Sassov, when he had

to perform this task, went to the woods and said, "We can no longer light the fire nor do we know the secret meditation of the prayer but at least we know the place". And it was accomplished. In the next generation Rabbi Israel of Rishin, when he had a problem, sat down where he was and said: "We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayer, we do not place but we can tell the story of how it was done". And the story had the same effect. The stories we tell are our bridges to our history, to what we are all about. And telling them with passion can be very powerful indeed.

And As Rabbi Harold Schulwiess wrote, "We are now the story tellers". We are now like Rabbi Israel of Rishin. Parents and grandparents must be the storytellers for their children and grandchildren. For this narration is not always lived out in the classroom or the synagogue, and is not only provided by the rabbi or by the hazzan. But this particular story is to be enacted, explained and read at home in the context of family and friends. In the Jewish home which is referred to as "beit mikdash ma'at", a sanctuary in miniature. Some things, in order to be effective, cannot take place in the synagogue. They need to be done at home in order for their full potential to be realized, in order to reach all of those who need to be reached. And thus tonight in your homes, your tables will truly become altars and those who tell the story will transform into the priests. The seder participants become the leaders and the transmitters. Understanding the seder in this context helps us to see that it is both beautiful and sacred, enjoyable and fun, yet significant and serious. It is unique and powerful event to be cherished by all.

For it is through the seder that we find one powerful way to transmit the ethics, theology and history of the Passover story to the next generation. We do this primarily through the symbols and through our re-enacting history. At the Seder there is a Passover plate with a shank bone and bitter herbs and a mixture called haroset, and some roasted eggs and four cups of wine, three layers of matzos, unleavened bread. Each of these foods means something and we eat and use them all. As Israel Zangwill put it "On Passover Jews eat history." We ingest it and make it our own. We internalize the lessons of who we are and allow that to shape who we will become.

And tonight we have the opportunity to experience these lessons, while sitting in our homes with people we love -- eating, laughing, singing, bonding and learning. What I ask from you is both simple and difficult, that tonight you remember that the rituals of the Seder are a blessing, a way to bring holiness and morality into our lives in a meaningful way. I ask you to remember to savor the moments of the Seder and allow yourself to ingest the story of our people. And I ask that you give of yourself to others around the table, adding your story to theirs as well as to the continuing master story of the entire Jewish people.

I therefore conclude by sharing with you a remarkable ceremony I recently learned about from Rabbi Schulweiss, originally instituted by Rabbi Naphtali of Ropschitz. The cup of Elijah, symbol of the messianic future when all forms of slavery and servitude will be eliminated, when the world will be at peace, is passed from person to person at the table. Each person pours a little wine into Elijah's cup from his own cup, until it is filled. In this way, we recognize that we must act together, each contributing his own best talents and energies, to bring Elijah's promise to the world. Only through the efforts of all of our

hands will the world be redeemed. Ken yhi ratzon – May it be God's will! And may the seders we conduct tonight and tomorrow night help us discover the ultimate messages of what it means to be a Jew.

Hag Sameah!