

*Submitted by Rabbi Wendy Pein*

Begin with a story

When the Baal Shem Tov had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer. And then he was able to perform the task.

A generation later, the Maggid of Mezrich was faced with the same task. So he went to the same place in the woods, but he had forgotten exactly how to light the fire as the Baal Shem Tov had done. He said, "I can no longer light the fire, but I can still speak the prayers." And so he prayed as the Baal Shem Tov had prayed, and he was able to complete the task.

A generation later, Rabbi Moshe Lev had to perform this same task. He too went into the woods, but not only had he forgotten how to light the fire, he had forgotten the prayers as well. He said, I can no longer light the fire, nor do I know the secret meditations belonging to the prayers. But I do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs, and that must be sufficient. And sufficient it was.

But when another generation had passed, Rabbi Israel Salanter was called upon to perform the task. He sat down in his golden chair in his castle and said, "I cannot light the fire. I cannot speak the prayers. I do not know the place in the forest. But we can tell the story of how it was once done, and that must be sufficient. And sufficient it was.

Passover asks us to do one simple thing: Tell the story.

We begin our session with some questions, as was the Greco-Roman tradition around which the Seder itself evolved.

1. What is the Mishnah?

The Mishnah – first written summary of the Oral Law, codified in approximately 200 CE by Yehudah HaNasi.

2. What is the Talmud? The Talmud is the second written body of Oral Law. It is composed of the Mishnah, statements of Jewish Law, followed by further explanation called the Gemarah, Together, the Mishnah and the Gemarah make up the Talmud.
3. Haggadah – telling, the telling of the Passover Story, term is used to denote the ritual book that is used during the Passover Seder which includes the order of the ritual for the Passover seder The Haggadah is composed of many statements from the Mishnah, verses from the Torah, the five Books of Moses, as well as other scriptural readings, prayers, customs, and traditions.

Who is Rabban Gamaliel? Rabban Gamaliel lived after the Second Temple had been destroyed. He has a famous statement in the Mishnah which states that "he who has not explained the ritual items of Pesach, Marror, and Matzah has not fulfilled the obligation of the Seder. Therefore, Rabbi Gamaliel, who lived after the Temple had been destroyed and therefore sacrifices were no longer being

performed, was really advocating that we continue to eat roasted lamb on Pesach. He was trying to teach the Jewish people how to act at the post-destruction Pesach meal. Through his teaching, Rabbi Gamaliel was trying to ensure the continued observance of the festival of Pesach in the Diaspora, and in this way, through his teaching, he was trying to ensure the survival of the Jewish people as a whole.

In the Mishnah, Rabban Gamaliel taught that one who does not say these three things on the night of Passover, has not fulfilled his obligation. And these are they: Pesach, Matzah and Marror

Let's take explain each if these symbols separately.

1. Pesach – refers to the sacrificial lamb that the Israelites ate during the first Passover. In the book of Exodus we are taught, that “God passed over the houses of our forefathers in Egypt” (Exodus 12:27). This Torah verse alludes to when the Israelites sacrificed a lamb and put the blood on the doorposts of their households so God would pass over their houses during the tenth plague
2. During the time of temple – lamb was sacrificed and shared by all  
After the second Temple was destroyed, there were no longer sacrifices, and so the ritual of the sacrificial lamb was no longer observed.

Freedom –at a cost of blood?

Instead we tell the Passover story about how God passed over the doorposts of the Israelites and therefore educate our families about God's redemption of our people from Egypt. Today, the Pascal lamb is remembered by the presence of the shank bone on the Seder plate

## 2. Matzah – unleavened bread

--it is the bread of affliction, meaning that this is the bread our ancestors ate while they were in slavery, So, according to this definition, Matzah represents a poor man's bread, the bread one eats while impoverished and enslaved

--However, the Torah also teaches us that matzah is the type of bread we ate during the Exodus. When the Israelites were fleeing Egypt, they did not have time for the the dough to rise, so they strapped it on their backs, and it cooked while the sun was beating down on their backs as we fled Egypt, and it became baked as flat, unleavened bread. What we call matzah today. According to this definition, then, matzah becomes a symbol of our redemption and freedom.

**Matzah – the bread of haste. If you aren't prepared when an opportunity comes for liberation or action, you must take it anyhow. If you delay, if you procrastinate, if you want to be totally ready for the moment before you act, then you will probably lose the moment in which you might act. Think of the Jews in Germany, etc.**

Matzah comes from flour that made up of the five grains from which chametz, leavened bread is made. These five grains include wheat, barley, spelt, rye, and oats. However, we do not allow the flour made from these grains and water to ferment and then rise. Therefore, it takes careful action on our part not to allow the flour and water to become chametz

Today, when we participate in the Seder and eat matzah instead of chametz during Passover, we do our active part to affirm our Jewish identity. In today's world, we can choose whether to positively identify with Jewish people and celebrate Passover or become slaves to habit and assimilation and forego the Passover ritual.

3. **Marror** – taste the bitterness of slavery, by tasting it, can't ignore it, reminds us that there are those still enslaved today, despite our freedom, marror reminds us that slavery and oppression should always leave a bitter taste in our mouths

The Haggadah includes a teaching from the Mishnah that “in every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he himself had personally departed from Egypt”

Explore bitterness – taste, feel, experience the bitterness before we can move on ....Pain can be instructive, it can teach us that something is wrong and needs to be fixed. Eating marror – makes us most beyond our own bitterness to consider the bitterness of others.

As yourself or others – what can we do to eradicate a little bitterness in the world?

**Rambam or Maimonides interprets this verse not just “to see himself” but to show himself, to act as if he had departed from Egypt.** Rambam teaches us that we should act out the experience in order to make it come alive for ourselves and our families. This is why, according to Maimonides, that we recline and drink four cups of wine at the Seder. A slave can't recline, but we can now that we are free. We eat a leisurely pace whereas a slave can only eat in haste. We ask questions because even asking questions is a sign of intellectual freedom which a slave may not have. In addition, there is a tradition, that one does not pour one's own cup of wine, but that somebody else should pour it for you. Having someone else pour your wine and being able to do so for someone else are symbols of freedom and gentility which a slave does not experience.

The Mishnah also teaches us that in the telling of the Passover story, we should begin with Israel's disgrace, and end with Israel's glory.

**Mitzrayim**—root of the word is narrowness, narrow straits, “yetziat Mitzrayim”, coming out of Egypt, where our people were constricted, physically and spiritually, and then delivered eventually into the Promised Land

Mitzrayim – it was a **physical place**, Egypt, from which our people were enslaved and then with the help of God, then liberated and freed.

However, we can also interpret Mitzrayim to be a “narrow”, **constricted mental state of being**.

Egypt was not only a place of physical slavery but also one of **mental and spiritual oppression**.

Our people could not worship their god freely, and were treated as less than equal by the Egyptians.

Therefore, **“yetziat Mitzrayim,” coming out of Egypt also means being able to be spiritually free, worship as one chooses, and being treated equally by others.**

On Passover as we celebrate the historical Exodus from Egypt, we should also be celebrating the ways in which we are spiritually free today. We can choose to be Jewish in so many different and diverse ways, and celebrate and explore our Judaism through multiple Jewish denominations. We have “come out Egypt” physically as well as spiritually over the course of over 3,000 years, and this is something to celebrate and not take for granted.

Finally, let us return to the quintessential symbol of **Matzah, unleavened bread**.

We have learned how matzah represents the bread of affliction, of poverty, of slavery, and also how it represents the bread of liberation, for we ate it in haste as our people were being freed from Egypt.

In contrast to Matzah, chametz or leavened foods, have been allowed to rise. Chametz or leavened foods may then represent the puffed up parts of ourselves, our inflated egos, our arrogance, our excessive pride.

By foregoing chametz during Passover and eating only unleavened foods such as Matzah, we are returning to the core of our true selves, reminding us of the Jewish value of humility.

As we physically remove the chametz from our households, we may also spiritually remove all the inflated elements of our personality. Eating matzah reminds us to attempt to return to the most basic, humble parts of ourselves.

The Passover Seder reminds us, “once we were slaves unto Pharaoh, but now we are free.”

Reciting these words at the Passover seder remind us that we are a link in the chain of Jewish history. Matzah requires an act to prevent it from becoming chametz. So, too, do we need to act in order to affirm our Jewish identity in today’s world.

In the spirit of Rabban Gamaliel, may our celebration of Passover be one of many steps in which we, too, help ensure the continuity of the Jewish people, from the Exodus until today.