

# The Pesach Experience

BY: RABBI SHAYA COHEN

The history of the Jewish people has been a wondrous, thought-provoking phenomenon that has startled observers until this very day. One of the most outstanding features of that history, one that has raised many an eyebrow, is the meticulous and unyielding exactness with which the Jewish people have observed *Pesach*. The image of a mother or grandmother on her hands and knees scrubbing an obscure corner of the house making everything *Pesachdik* has been indelibly inscribed in many of our hearts and has inspired Jews throughout the ages.

What is even more interesting than *Pesach*'s unique effect on the observant Jew, is the way it has left its mark on even the most unaffiliated portion of our people. It seems that while *Shabbos* and *Kashrus* have tragically become obsolete in our society, the traditions of the Passover Seder, be it the recital of the *Haggadah* or the eating of the *Matzah* or *Moror*, have been repeated year in and year out. Why? What is it about *Pesach* that motivates the Jewish father and mother to expend their last ounce of energy preparing for it? What is it that brings Jews, in all corners of the world together, to share in what seems to be a mere ritual? Finally, what is it about *Pesach* that touches the heart of even the most skeptical and distant Jew to recount to his son the glorious story that begins, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt."?

To understand this, we first have to delve into the ultimate meaning and message of *Pesach*. The *Ramban* comments that before the Jews were witness to the miracles that occurred in Egypt, the human race had never directly seen G-d's all encompassing creative powers. There were many men who, through their intellect and awareness, came to recognition of G-d and even to His Divine involvement in the details of man's existence. However, never was it so clear on such a large scale, that Hashem was in total control of the entire universe.

Faith in Hashem, as human experience will bear out, must be constantly reinforced. The *Ralbag* explains that the purpose for which the Jewish people sang the *Shira* (the song of praise sung at the Red Sea) after the splitting of the sea, was to reinforce and enhance their faith in Hashem. Even after seeing miracles of such magnitude, there still remained an aspect of their faith that needed to be strengthened. A strengthening that could only come from ideas as spiritually uplifting as were expressed in the *Shira*.

Just as for the Jews who were let out of Egypt by G-d it was necessary, through the *Shira*, to imbed even deeper in their hearts what was already so clear in their minds, so, too, is it incumbent upon us to do the same. It is in this respect that *Pesach* serves as a present day song of praise. By recalling the redemption in all of its splendor, from the power that was displayed during the plague of the firstborn to the love that was expressed through the *Ananei Hakavod*

in the desert, the Jewish people reawaken and rejuvenate their faith and trust in G-d. This faith and trust has no doubt given them the strength to survive this long exile, with all of its horrors.

There can be no greater source of inspiration than to relate the intricate details and amazing precision with which the plagues were meted out. A glass of blood in the hands of an Egyptian became water when touched by a Jew. Darkness, so thick it was paralyzing, was non-existent for the Jews, who walked about in sunlight. These events clearly illustrate G-d's constant control over nature. They serve to remind us that every occurrence is a direct result of G-d's will; and when we need help, there is but one direction to turn. This is the message that *Pesach* carries, and it is our obligation to internalize it properly. But the Torah, with its infinite wisdom, felt that purely remembering was not enough. In order for this message to be understood to the fullest, there had to be more.

Basic human nature prevents a person involved in one matter from concentrating on another. Were we to celebrate *Pesach* while involved with everyday matters, we would no doubt be less than receptive to the high ideals that the holiday conveys. It is only when we refrain from work and clear our minds of all worldly matters, that we can hope to elevate ourselves to the level expected of us. It is for this reason that the element of *Chag* (festival) is such a vital one. It is the first step in the Torah's system to prepare us for this eventful week.

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The mitzvah of cleaning the house of all *Chometz*, in conjunction with the obligation to eat *Matzah*, is essential in helping us actually relive history. By eating the same *Matzah* they ate, by being deprived of *Chometz* just as they were, we acquire a greater appreciation of Hashem's love for the *B'nei Yisroel*. They serve to remind us of the speed with which the redemption came. Although we were already enslaved for 210 years, when the moment of redemption came, Hashem made it happen immediately. To spend just a few extra hours in a land as depraved as Egypt was unthinkable if it could not be justified by some Divine will. Not only did Hashem not delay the redemption, but our Sages tell us He was anxiously awaiting that moment to come, when He could finally establish the Jews as a nation guided by Torah. Hashem was so determined to take us out immediately, that He did not allow the Jewish people enough time to bake their bread. It is this message of Hashem's love that the *Matzah* conveys.

The eating of *Matzah* and the absence of *Chometz*, is just the first step in our attempt to relive the Exodus. Almost every aspect of the Seder night serves to place us in the mindset of being in Egypt and makes us feel that we, too, were redeemed along with the rest of our nation. Be it the salt water, symbolic of the tears our forefathers shed, or the *Moror*, reminiscent of the suffering, or any of the other various laws and customs of the Seder, they all instill within us a greater sense of what transpired with our forefathers.

There remains, however, one other mitzvah involving *Pesach* which could be the most powerful of all. The Torah commands us, "And you should tell your child on that day..." It is apparent from the *Rambam* that the purpose of telling is not only for the child's sake, but also for the father's. When a man, whether he is thirty or eighty, relates this story to his child, he becomes linked to

a heritage that goes straight back to that glorious day, over 3300 years ago. The recital of the *Haggadah* and the remembrance that this is the same story his father told him, which he heard from his father, onward through the ages, fills him with a confidence that cannot help but spur one on to greater spiritual heights. It is a staggering thought that not just one person can boast of this uninterrupted transmission through the centuries. Rather it extends to all corners of the world — from America to Ethiopia, from Russia to Australia. Millions of Jews in all walks of life, who have nothing more in common other than their coveted heritage, gather in their homes on one special night. Generation after generation, they tell a story they have heard so many times before, as it was told by the original generation of millions of eye-witnesses. This is, without a doubt, the greatest living testimony to the truth and relevance of our age-old *Haggadah*. What an awesome responsibility the Torah entrusts us with, when it asks us to keep up this heritage?

If we approach *Pesach* with these thoughts in mind; if we fulfill its halachic requirements with the care and precision it deserves; if we are aware of our responsibilities in teaching our children the Passover story, then *Pesach* has the potential to change our lives. We need only to take advantage of this opportunity.