

### **Freedom To... Not Freedom From**

**by Shoshana Levine Schechter**, Director of the Mechina Pathways Basic Jewish Studies program at Stern College for Women

B'nei Yisrael in Mitzraim were told to slaughter a sheep and smear its blood on the door posts and door frames of their homes as a sign to prove their newfound dedication to God. Many commentaries agree that the sign was both for the Jews and for God, explaining that B'nei Yisrael would see the blood and understand the significance of their public renunciation of Egyptian gods and their newfound belief in God, while at the same time, God would see the blood as a sign of their devotion and servitude to him. The מִכִּילֵּתָא suggests that the blood that G-d sees on the doorposts harkens us back to יִצְחָק עִקְדֵּיתָא and "reminds" God of the blood of the ram that Avraham offered in the place of Yitzchak which symbolizes the dedication and sacrifice to his master, his אֲדוֹן. Only after Bnei Yisrael followed in Avraham's footsteps, demonstrating their devotion to God and their willingness to serve Him through the מִצְוָה of קִרְבַּן נֶפֶשׁ did they merit their redemption.

That devotion to God and willingness to serve Him is the underlying meaning of מִצְרַיִם יֵצֵאתָ. Through the redemption from Egypt we learn the underlying goal of Judaism- to be "יְהוָה עוֹבֵד" - to serve God. We learn that freedom does not mean freedom from all work and responsibility, but rather the freedom to serve God.

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### **The Power of Repetition**

**by Rabbi Simcha Willig**, Judaic Studies in the James Striar School at Yeshiva College

In my youth, I heard the same seder stories, tunes, and divrei torah every single year... and that's why I remember them. The mitzva to teach the next generation is described in terms of repetition (V'shinantam) because review strengthens our educational experience. The Seder night is no exception. We repeat the same itinerary, foods, rituals, and songs year after year, which is why we remember and teach these traditions to the next generation. Bubbie's famous matzo balls didn't become famous because she made them once.





## **Teachers and Learners at the Pesach Seder**

**by Dean Rona Novick**, Dean of the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration

It is commonly understood that an essential task of the Pesach seder is chinuch, teaching the children. Is the role of children therefore to be the focus and recipients of our chinuch? Is our job on Pesach to educate and transform the children at the table? Or is it possible that the focus of the chinuch of Passover is broader, and that the line between teacher and learner is less clear.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, in his sefer *Planting and Building*, writes about parents' responsibility to daven and bench out loud – and he makes it clear that this is not simply for the child's benefit.

"We must say Birkas HaMazon out loud, deliberately and thoughtfully. We must do this for ourselves and we must do this for our children. Such behavior plants emunah in the child long before the child can comprehend sophisticated discourses on issues of faith . . . A child is a constant reminder to parents that they must behave properly, as agents who have been entrusted with a valuable deposit that must be protected (p. 52)."

There is clear evidence that not only do students learn, teachers learn as well. The Ohr HaChaim explains that the mitzvah to tell our children about the redemption from Egypt exists all year, but only if the children ask. On Pesach night, the mitzvah is for us to teach them, whether they ask or not.

Most often, we are teachers because we are asked to be, and then we focus on the students and their needs. On Pesach night, when we are required to experience Yetziat Mitzrayim as if we, ourselves, lived through the horrors of slavery and experienced Hashem's great triumph in bringing us to freedom, we do not wait for students to express a need. We do not wait for a question. On this night, unlike all other nights, we do not depend on the learners to transform us into teachers. We teach, whether asked to or not. Through our teaching, we learn too, and the Seder's majesty, its puzzles and riddles, its conversations and questions, transform us all.

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## **Why The Jewish People Needed to Begin as Slaves**

**By Rabbi Lawrence Hajioff**, Judaic Studies at Stern College for Women

Our beginnings were very humble. We didn't start as accountants, doctors or lawyers. The Jewish people began their nationhood as slaves. This was crucial to who we were to become. It would teach us to treat others with love and respect because we know as a people what it's like to be the underdog. When we've had the chance to enslave others, we didn't do it.



Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (*Michtav M'Eliyahu*, Vol. I, p. 158) adds that every time there is a need to give a righteous person the possibility of rising to a very high level, they are thrown into the worst environment so that they should learn that evil is futile, and thus strive to reach the highest limits.

Similarly, when Israel needed to prepare to accept the Torah, God did not send them to the Heavenly Yeshivah from where Moshe took the Torah, but the opposite, He sent them into Egyptian servitude.

That's the secret of Egypt. Greatness comes from great challenges.



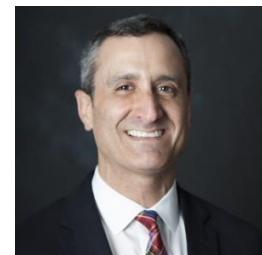
## **Breaking the Middle Matzah** by Rav Moshe Weinberger, Mashpia at Yeshiva University

Rav Asher Anshel Katz, the Veiner Rav, explains the symbolism of breaking the matzah at the Seder at Yachatz. The Rav points out that the shmurah matzos we eat on Pesach are round, hinting to the Pasuk in Tehillim which states יתהלכון רשעים סביב - "the evil doers walk in circles." Many people unfortunately fall into a vicious circle of repetitive events without purpose. We wake up in the morning, go to work to make a living, spend the earned money and go back to work again. This was a lifestyle lived as slaves in Egypt - running around in circles, doing backbreaking labor for our masters without purpose. However, at Yetziyas Mitzaryim, Hashem broke this vicious cycle and showed us a life of Torah and Mitzvos which brings meaning to life and allows us the ability to come close to God. We break the middle Matzah at the Seder as a prayer to Hashem to take us out of the purposeless daily grind we sometimes find ourselves in and bring to us a life of deep purpose.

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## **Are We Truly Free?**

by Rabbi Dr. Daniel Lerner, Judaic Studies in the James Striar School at Yeshiva College



In the Haggadah we proclaim: "Therefore we are obligated to appreciate, praise, laud, glorify, aggrandize, extol, bless, exalt, and acclaim the one who... brought us from... servitude (may'avdut) to freedom (cheirut)..."

While it's appropriate to give thanks to G-d for removing us from servitude to Pharaoh, it's reasonable to ask: Are we truly free? From the outset, G-d's directive to Pharaoh of "Let my people go" was inextricably attached to the stated reason: "So that they may serve me" (Shemot 9:13). Our mission is predicated on serving the Almighty. The Torah (Vayikra, 25:55) unequivocally states: "For the Children of Israel are servants to Me..."

In secular culture, freedom insinuates a lack of restrictions on speech, unbound expression and self-determinism.

What is the Torah definition of cheirut? In Talmudic law, (e.g. Bava, Kamma, 95a) the term "cheirut" describes a state unencumbered by any outside lien. The Talmud, in discussing acquisitions and mergers relates that a possession is not "free" to be sold or transferred so long as it's not under the sole proprietorship of its owner. In Torah life, cheirut indicates the removal of obstacles that might otherwise impede our relationship with God.

There's a story about movie actor Rod Steiger who went to see a psychoanalyst. At their first meeting, Steiger said, "Now, look, before we go into this -- I have to be free to create; I have to be free to do things. I have to be free to get up when I want, to do what I want to do. I can't be regimented; I have to be free!" The therapist replied, "That's fine. Just be careful you don't become a slave to your freedom."

Too often we are slaves to our impulses, to our biases, to our habits, to our work. Pesach reminds us that we have the ability to transcend our drives and our material circumstances and – if we choose to – to experience the liberation of our souls.

Adversity, both external and internal, may pursue us but it need not possess us. The Haggadah proclaims that Gd is our "soul proprietor."



### **Rising Above**

**by Rabbi Ari Sytner, Director, Department of Community Initiatives at YU's Center for the Jewish Future (CJF)**

Our Sages explain that the narrative of the Pesach Seder follows the prescriptive formula of Maschil Bignus, Umisayim Bishvach (Pesachim 116a). We begin the Seder with the shameful chapters of our past, but conclude with the praiseworthy. This paradigm serves as an inspiring model for our exile, where we have confronted many painful challenges and obstacles, only to rise above them, and with the help of G-d, continue to survive and thrive.

The Sages inquire as to where in the Hagadah the shameful chapters of our past can be found. To which the Gemara presents a debate between Rav and Shmuel. Rav believes they are found within the passage declaring that our forefathers were idolaters, while Shmuel believes “Avadim Hayinu” captures our shameful slavery in Egypt. While both perspectives suffice for encapsulating a humble beginning and a shameful past, does it really matter which passage we utilize?

Dissecting their debate, the Vilna Gaon explains that both opinions offer a deeper perspective. The opinion of Rav focuses specifically on the spiritual debasement of our ancestors, while Shmuel focuses on the physical enslavement. While both the physical and spiritual struggles each have their own unique characteristics, they echo to future generations about the importance of being a balanced Jew. For in order for a person to be truly free, he or she will need to overcome a combination of personal challenges that are both physical and spiritual in nature.

It is this timeless lesson from our ancestors, which even millennia later remind us to not allow ourselves to be held back by our past. Any challenge, physical or spiritual, can still be conquered and paint a new reality of freedom, praise and redemption.

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### **The Four Languages of Redemption**

**by Rabbi Yaakov T. Glasser, David Mitzner Dean of the Center for the Jewish Future and University Life at Yeshiva University**



One of the more popular reasons for the daled kosos, the four cups of wine at the Seder is that they represent the four languages of redemption in Sefer Shemos (ch. 6). Yet after hearing Moshe’s encouraging promise of redemption, the reaction of the Jewish people is shocking: **וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה כֵּן, אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, מִקֶּצֶר רִי, וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה.**

But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, because of a shortness of breath and cruel bondage.

The meforshim are puzzled. Why didn't the Jewish people accept the prophecy? The Meshech Chochmah (6:9) suggests a unique approach: The Jewish people could relate to the notion of freedom from their Egyptian oppressors. However, they were not able to see a redeemed existence that provides meaning in their lives. Seder night provides us the opportunity to look at our own lives and identify the kotzer ruach, the shortness of breath which restrains our capacity to transcend our reality and reach for something greater. Seder night is about a transformation where we can see ourselves not for who we are but for who we could become.