

A Schmooze on Getting Ready for Passover

written by Ozer Bergman

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CO: Where will you be for the Seders Ozer?

OB: First of all, here in Eretz Yisroel we only have one. I can't go into the whole thing so I won't, but I do want to mention that the Arizal says that it's not that in Eretz Yisroel you only have half, having only of the two Seders. It's the other way around. The Arizal explains that in Chutz l'Aretz (the Diaspora) conditions are such that the job, the tikkunim, all the rectifications that need to be made, cannot be made in one day. So, Chutz l'Aretz needs another day to finish the job. In Eretz Yisroel, conditions are such that whatever needs to be accomplished on the first day of Yom Tov can be done. So that's why Eretz Yisroel has "only" one Seder. It's not a call for people in Eretz Yisroel to feel proud of themselves; it's got nothing to do with us. It's not a call for people to get on a plane and come here. That's a more complicated issue for each person to deal with. Ideally Eretz Yisroel is the place to have the Seders, but it's a complicated issue. People have to figure it out with the help of tefilah (prayer) and with the help of a competent advisor.

CO: The Rebbe also speaks about Kedushat Eretz Yisroel. Specifically, he wrote differently when he came back from Eretz Yisroel then before he left. Is that correct thinking? He said that the Torahs he wrote when he came back from Israel were at a higher level than what he had written before.

OB: Yes, it's much "higher," whatever that means. The Rebbe said that he was embarrassed about what he had taught before he was in Israel. He asked that anything he taught before he went to Eretz Yisroel be locked away and that nobody should

see it. That's not a quote, that's the gist of what he said. Eretz Yisroel is Eretz Yisroel; if you know what that means you can figure out what the Rebbe z"l meant. Even though now is a time of galus (exile) and Eretz Yisrael itself is in galus, it still retains a lot of its natural kedushah (holiness) and somehow everyone has access to it. Those of us who are actually part of the space in Eretz Yisroel live a bit more so. I'm going to be spending the Seder at home. That's the short answer. □

CO: Very good. Baruch Hashem. I've been reading Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom. It's an amazing sefer that everyone should use and read and learn. There's one piece that struck my eye. They have a tremendous English index in the back that is very powerful. You get access to all kinds of things. There is a great Index in the back that contains all the quotes in Tanach right through and it struck me and I'm going to write about this myself on my blog. You can go through and get a really nice slice through Tanach. There are over 300 citations in wisdom. So the Rebbe spoke about the idea of studying through Tanach. All of in one's lifetime. This is a good way of doing it, or at least to get a start.

Then I looked at a section he wrote about stringency. He says that these ultra strict practices were nothing more than foolishness. He also told us that he spent much time thinking of all these unnecessary restrictions. This is probably controversial. I'm not sure how we want to handle it, but it would seem that the Rebbe said don't drive yourself nuts and don't drive your wife nuts. I'm getting involved with unnecessary strictness and he ridicules such strictness as unnecessary on Pesach. Can you talk about that? Are you willing to talk about it? I don't know if I should even bring it up.

OB: Well I don't really know what to say about it. In general, the Rebbe was against taking the joy out of Yiddishkeit. Part of the drawback of being machmir (overly stringent) is that

one loses the joy of the mitzvah that one is being strict about. It's not only about Pesach. The specific example that the Rebbe brings is talking about Pesach but it's also in relation to any other area of Yiddishkeit. I haven't thought about it, but to answer your question. One of the Chassidim had asked the Rebbe a question about a certain chumrah (stringency) and the Rebbe sort of laughed it off. The Rebbe said that's not the focus and that he had been involved himself in that when he (the Rebbe) was younger and he moved away from that. This is not an unintentional pun, but a lot of people become enslaved to the chumrah. This is exactly what we are not supposed to do. Just like when the focus stops being the Ribono Shel Olam and truly doing what he wants in the best possible way. Sometimes the best possible way becomes the avoda zarah (idolatry) and becomes the new Pharaoh. Hashem is not necessarily forgotten but is no longer the main focus. Now this is something the Rebbe also talks about but not necessarily in the same context. This is certainly related to the very first lesson of Likutey Moharan where the Rebbe says that the yetzer hara always appears first as a malakh with a white crest, disguised as a malakh that wants us to do something good.

CO: The frum yetzer hara ("pious" evil inclination).

OB: Right He can be disguised like that and as a "wolf in sheep's clothing" as it were and then the person ends up losing his way. I try not to have so many stringencies all year long.

CO: My Rabbi who I go to for shiylahs says "Just listen to your wife and don't butt in."

OB: Well that depends. It's a person's wife. For a number of years somebody sent out, a pre-Pesach guide in the name of Rav Scheinberg of Yerushalayim, Yeshiva Torah Or, saying that people do go overboard and lose the sense of joy involved in relation to Pesach.

But to get back to what the Rebbe said in general about chumrah—that connects to one of the Rebbe's prime eitzos (suggestions/advice): there is a need to learn halakhah (Jewish law) every day and to learn it well.

The Talmud occasionally says, "The power of the one who permits is greater/stronger," because to say something is forbidden is easy, i.e., you don't have to know anything to forbid it. But to be able to say it's OK to do something, takes a very firm basis in the knowledge of halakhah. The Rebbe's saying not to be machmir implies that one should make sure to know his halakhah as well as he can. It's not a Pesach topic, but something I would like to address one day.

C0: Those were my questions, do you have some points that you would like to address?

OB: Usually, I try to have a theme for the Seder. As the Rebbe puts it, one can go through the entire Torah with one of his lessons. So what I do is I try to see the Haggadah in light of a particular lesson in Likutey Moharan focusing on a particular point. I haven't yet mapped that out for this year. So I have to do that. This year, I also want to delegate more of the talking to my children. My sons, anyway, will certainly have what to say, but I also want my daughters to speak up more and get used to being practiced to say divrei Torah, in an appropriate venue.

C0: Could you suggest a lesson of Likutey Moharan for people to study and try to bridge it over to the Haggadah that would be accessible?

OB: Perhaps the easiest one would be Lesson #20 in the first part of Likutey Moharan. This section has been translated and has notes. In part of that lesson, the Rebbe is talking directly about Eretz Yisroel and the Seder and its connection to Eretz Yisroel. Another lesson is #78 in the second part of Likutey Moharan. It is translated in the Breslov Research Publication The Treasury of Unearned Gifts. That concept of

the treasury of unearned gifts is the main theme of Lesson #78. There the Rebbe talks about the idea of the derekh (road) to Eretz Yisroel. So I would say those two, look at them; see what you can do with them.

CO: Where do you get your matzah?

OB: For many years, barukh Hashem, I have been buying matzahs from Komemiyut. They're kosher, they taste great, they're not cheap. They're not the most expensive and they're not the least expensive either. I feel comfortable with their level of kashrus. They are also usually fresh, so that's what we use.

CO: Are there any special Breslov minhagim (customs) that you practice at the Seder?

OB: No.

CO: That's quite a statement. There's a lot of depth to that. Generally, Breslov does not advance a vigorous list of minhagim that other groups might. Why is that?

OB: Why? Because the Rebbe didn't make a big deal out of minhagim. As far as I'm concerned that's a very beautiful thing. In one sense it leaves the opportunity for those that were not born a Breslover to come in without having to throw away anything that his father or grandfather did in order to now become close to Rebbe Nachman. You can continue those same minhagim, and there's no contradiction in any well-founded Jewish minhag to the path that the Rebbe was and is teaching. That's one.

Two, it seems to me that the Rebbe's lack of focus on minhag is similar to his view of chumra. The minhag itself can become an obsession: this is how you do it, that's how you do it. It's not terribly critical whether you wind your tefillin away from you or towards you. It's not particularly critical if it's this way or that way. If there's a kosher, halakhic opinion, and you are behaving according to it, for the right reasons, and to the best of your abilities, that's what the

Ribono Shel Olam wants and what Rabbeinu z"l taught us again and again.

To some people this is shocking. Rabbi Rosenfeld z"l didn't even wear a gartel (special belt chassidim wear when praying)! To some, that's sacrilege. It's a good thing to wear one, it's a nice thing, but it's not a required thing. It certainly can help one's Jewishness to do it, but there is no absolute requirement for it.

That was the focus of the Rebbe. Many minhagim have developed and many minhagim are dear and precious—but they are not the main focus of Yiddishkeit. That said, there are traditions, I guess you could call them minhagim, of how things were done in certain Breslov communities. Some of that may be a reflection of the Rebbe's teachings and how the Rebbe did and may have done it, and some of that is a reflection of where those communities were located back in Europe.

CO: That's one of the greatnesses of Uman, where you see any sort of dress every sort of dress present from people from Morocco, to Eastern Europe and America. That's one of the amazing things that I think about Uman. Many families will have sort of mixed events. Passover is one of the most observed holidays of all Jewish holidays. You will have non religious, religious, extremely religious kinds of variants and sometimes people who are so-called "off the derekh." Is there a Breslov-centric way of thinking about how to make the Passover experience pleasant for people coming in order to make everybody feel comfortable? Is there any eitzah (advice)? I know that when the haskolonicks (Enlightenment Jews) came, the Rebbe would play chess with them and relate to them on their own level without compromising himself.

OB: It's a difficult question. It isn't something you can really answer because a lot of times and in a lot of situations it is different, especially out side of Eretz Yisroel. So for people who are not observant to come to a Seder, that might evolve certain halakhic questions, that I do

not want to address.

But, assuming somebody is at the Seder and he or she may not be able to understand what is going on, you need to explain “now we are doing this, now we are doing that and this is how it works.” The Hagaddah is not supposed to be a monologue at all. The Hagaddah is supposed to be an open event, in the sense that we say kol dikhfin, yeisei v’yeikhal (Everyone who is hungry can eat), we invite people not only to show up if they’re hungry for matzah and gefilte fish, but it’s also for anyone hungry for Yiddishkeit, something to feed a soul. Come. If you are inviting somebody for that reason you should be open and ask what he/she would like to be served. Offer them a choice. Speak to them and answer them in a language that they need, as we see from the four sons you have to answer the chakham (wise son) this way and the rasha (wicked son) that way. So you have to let them ask and you have to answer in their own language. It’s not an easy task at all, because a lot of things have to be balanced—keeping the focus on the events of the Exodus, the foundations of our faith, the guest’s needs and the family’s needs, etc.

In addition, reciting the hagaddah is not only about repeating the words, but about putting one’s kishkas, one’s guts, into it. Rav Moshe Weinberger shlit”a (of Woodmere, New York) reminds us that one has to view the Seder from the perspective of himself having left Egypt. He compares it to a familiar situation: Someone says something funny and when you relay it to someone who wasn’t there, it doesn’t come across right. So you say, “You had to be there to appreciate it.” Yetziat Mitzrayim (the exodus from Egypt), too—you had to be there to appreciate it. That’s the avodah (job).

That’s what we are trying to do. We try to recreate for ourselves and for those at our Seder, this inner-experience within. You were there! You are there! So the host should be prepared to speak out from his own personal emunah (faith), not only a fancy dvar Torah connecting this and that, or a gematria of some sort—this adds up to that. It should be something really deep and personal about one’s own Yetziat

Mitzrayim whether it happened that morning or whether it happened 10 or 20 years ago, and feeling it and seeing it—Yetziat Mitzrayim, right here and right now, at the Seder.

CO: What's the mood now in Eretz Yisroel going in to Pesach? I was at a Shabbos table and there was tremendous concern and upset about the matzav (situation) in Eretz Yisroel. The problems with Gaza and the Palestinians, the fear of Iran, all these huge things. People in the United States, not so much in Canada, are very freaked about the economy. A lot of rabbis are talking about the "End of Days" because of all the things that are happening. It sort of gets fuzzy after a while, I must admit, and the conversation drifts. But, it's on everyone's mind, especially in my community in Toronto. There are so many problems.

OB: I think the issue with the Gazans and Iranians is not particularly news. Maybe some of the actors are different; maybe some of the players and some of the particular issues are different. But, overall I don't think it's any different than it was in the recent past. So I don't know about that.

About the whole end of days business, I posted a piece on "The Simple Jew" blog within the last three or four months. I wrote a piece about not being an alarmist, I'm not from the alarmist group. People have been saying for a long time "Oh, this is a siman (sign) and that is a siman." I'm not saying it's not a siman, but so many people are so sure that Mashiach is coming this year, because this or that rebbe said and the Chafetz Chaim came to one of his students in a dream. Anyone who is concerned about these things can read what I wrote in that piece on "A Simple Jew" <<http://asimplejew.blogspot.com/search?q=alarmists>>.

About the economy, the truth is I would like to talk to Rabbi Kramer a little bit about it. I haven't had the chance to just sit with him and schmooze about these topics. It's interesting because on one hand, even when 9/11 happened, people were also saying this is it, America is gone, the dollar etc. I don't go

for that sort of talk. Also this seeming financial collapse is really no different from other past financial meltdowns, which not only the U.S. but other countries suffered through and came out of.

I think a more important question is: Are we responding properly to it? Yes it's true Jewish institutions, especially Torah institutions are suffering because the people who give them money have less and less trickles down. Maybe we are supposed to understand that we really don't need money. Maybe the whole point is not to worry about how we're going to survive, but maybe we really don't need money.

CO: Or leverage in money at least; Money that's beyond our needs, money that's borrowed, money that's finagled.

OB: Well certainly money that's not kosher we don't need. In general, it was pointed out and I think I wrote something about it and Chaim Kramer wrote something about it that the Rebbe says in Sichot HaRan (Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom #51) that money is nothing. The whole world is one big Ponzi scheme. The Rebbe says openly that people have been making money from way back when; where is all that money?

CO: Where are all the riches accumulated since the beginning of time? Where is it all? It is absolutely nothing, he says.

OB: Right. We really don't need money. Money is overrated. That said we got to make Pesach and I'm still going to daven because I need money to make Pesach. □

But at some point we have to ask ourselves: Is money really necessary? We have to eat, we have to deal with money, we have to have families, and all these things. But, is it absolutely necessary? Or maybe not. Certainly, we need to ask: Should we be worried about the fact that there is a financial downturn? Isn't an over concern about the economy simply based on our greed and our fear? Why aren't we trusting in Hashem? In the desert God sent us the manna. He can do the same now. I haven't seen or heard any reactions like that. Why isn't that

our reaction?

One of the things that Rebbe Nachman teaches us is that each Yom Tov (Jewish festival) gives us an infusion of mochin (comprehension), a certain awareness of God and Torah so that we can better deal with the main challenges of this world. On Shavuot we get mochin that help us to deal with the challenge of sex. On Sukkot we get mochin that help us deal with the challenge of food and eating. On Pesach, we get mochin that help us deal with the challenge of money. (This is why we put out our most beautiful keilim [utensils] on Pesach. Pesach relates to Avram Avinu, chesed, generosity. We got all the wealth of Mitzrayim when we left and then at Kriyat Yam Suf (splitting of the Red Sea) we got even more than we got when we left. Specifically, now is the time to try to get in more mochin, become smarter, in how to relate to money. So that's what I have been thinking about.

CO: And the balance of it. Of not needing it, yet needing it.

OB: Right. I just saw a very small piece from the Rebbe, Reb Zushia z"l of Anipoli, motzei Shabbos (Saturday night). The Rebbe Reb Zushia says, that if it were up to him he wouldn't eat. But Hashem gave him a mouth and a tongue and taste, so apparently God wants him to eat, so he'll do his best to eat l'sheim Shamayim (for the sake of Heaven). But certainly if Hashem wanted, he could live without eating. So we can extend that. Certainly if Hashem wanted us to live without greenbacks, we could.

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