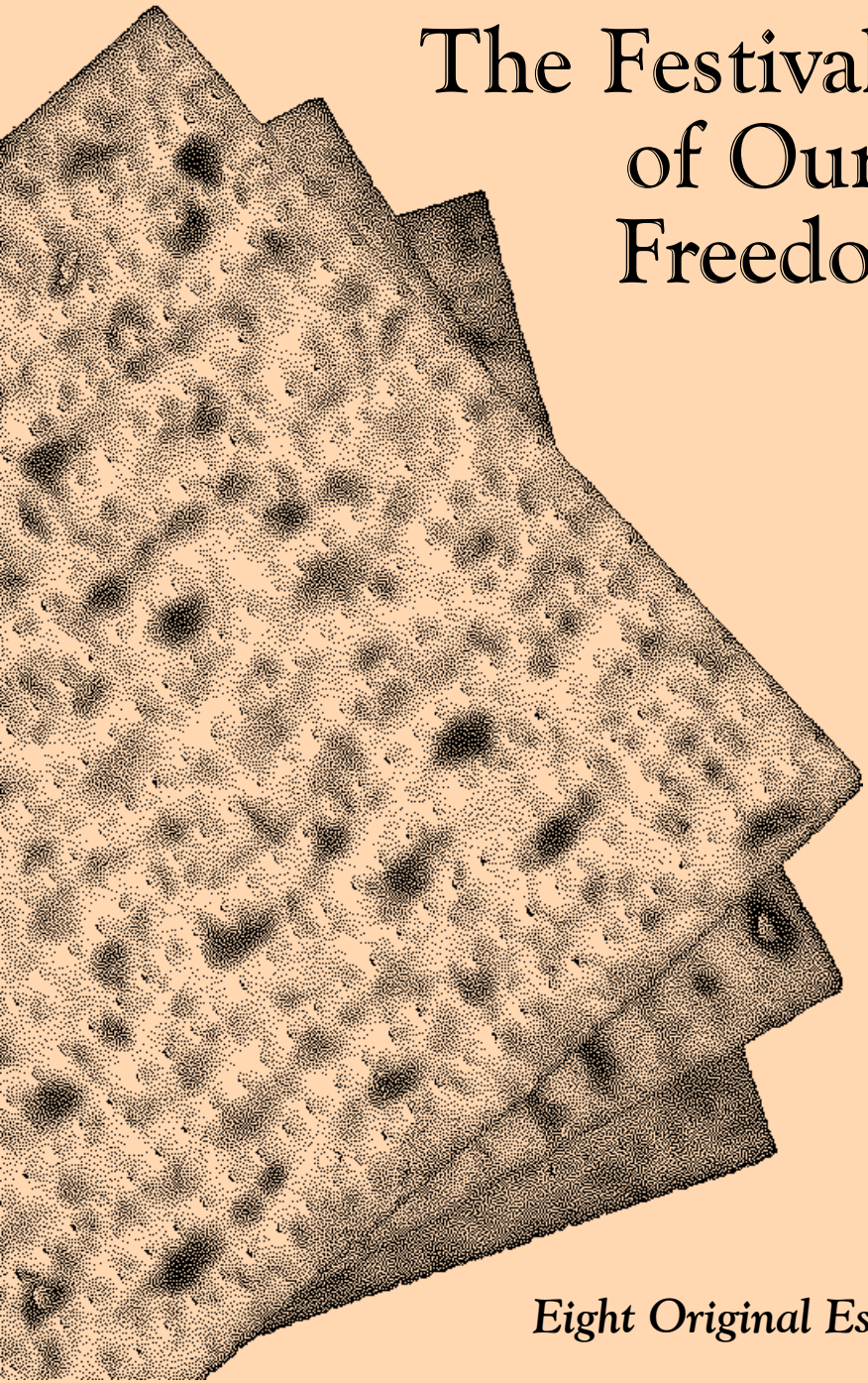
A Passover Reader

The Festival of Our Freedom

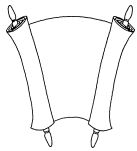


Eight Original Essays

A Passover Reader

The Festival of Our Freedom

Eight Original Essays
by the Staff of the
Cincinnati Community Kollel



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To enrich
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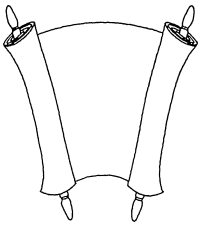
and providing access
to our spiritual heritage.



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Preface

Freedom lies at the very core of our celebration of Passover, when we commemorate the Exodus. We know that we left the bonds of Egyptian slavery, but into what type of freedom did we enter?

Moses seems to have been bothered by the same question. Where were the Children of Israel headed with their newfound freedom? G-d responded that Moses was to lead them to Sinai, to join G-d in the covenant of the Torah (see Exodus 3:12).

Is the Torah, then, really our new freedom? Yes, answers the Mishnah. "There is no free man except one who engages in Torah study." (*Ethics of the Fathers* 6:2)

This is quite perplexing. The Torah may be inspiring and meaningful, but can it really be a tool for personal freedom?

Irving Bunim, in his commentary to this Mishnah, quotes the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's analogy for human freedom. "I have on my table a violin string. It is free... But it is not free to do what a violin string is supposed to do—to produce music. So I take it, fix it in my violin, and tighten it until it is taut. Only then is it free to be a vio-lin string." As Bunim puts it, "an uncommitted life, free of any higher goals and responsibilities, brings a bondage worse than slavery."

The Torah, then, is more than just a set of rules and ethics. It is a conduit for human aspiration, allowing us to be, truly, all that we can be.

In the pages that follow, the staff of the Cincinnati Community Kollel offers you a chance to study the Torah. These eight essays are designed to educate, inspire, and enhance your Passover holiday.

Enjoy!

Rabbi Meir Minster

Rabbi David Spetner

Rabbi Meir Minster

Women and the Process of Redemption

Although women are generally exempt from time-sensitive mitzvos, the drinking of the Four Cups at the Seder is one of several exceptions. The Talmud[1] cites Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi who explains that this is because "They, too, were involved in that miracle [of redemption]." Rashi understands this to mean that they were involved in *bringing about* the redemption, based on another Talmudic statement,[2] "In the merit of the righteous women of that generation, Israel was redeemed from Egypt." The merit mentioned here refers to the efforts of Jewish women to invigorate their husbands and encourage them to bring forth offspring, even in the face of the crushing labor imposed on them by the Egyptians,[3] thus ensuring the perpetuation of the Jewish people. However, this is certainly not the only example of their contributions to the Jewish people during these difficult times. Throughout the story of the Exodus, we find references to the praiseworthy actions and role of the women, at times in contrast to those of their male counterparts. By examining these episodes and their common, underlying theme, we can learn

1 Pesachim 108b. Elsewhere, similar statements are cited in regards to reading the Megilah on Purim and lighting the Chanukah candles.

2 Sotah 11b

3 It is interesting to note that according to the Talmud (ibid.), the women were equally subjected to this type of unbearable work, yet they found the strength for both themselves and their husbands.

much about our ability to face suffering and adversity, and about G-d's expectations of us to endure and to bring redemption.

Early in the book of Exodus,[4] we are introduced to the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Pu'ah. Bravely defying the commands of Pharaoh, they refused to kill newborn males and instead supplied them with water and food.[5] According to the Midrash,[6] these women were actually Yocheved and Miriam, mother and sister of Moses; the names mentioned here are merely descriptions of their care and attention for the well-being of these infants.[7] They expended all this effort and sacrifice, for children whose future seemed hopeless, destined only for slavery and bondage.

Continuing the narrative, the Torah describes the birth of Moses, suggesting that it was the first birth following his parents' marriage—and ignoring the birth of his two older siblings, Miriam and Aaron. The Talmud[8] explains that this was, in fact, their *second* marriage, and by explaining the background to this event, the Talmud highlights the pivotal role played by Miriam.

Seeing the futility in bearing male offspring, only to have them thrown in the river under Pharaoh's decree, Amram (Miriam's father) separated from Yocheved (her mother). Amram was the leader of his generation, and all Jewish men followed his example and divorced their wives.

Miriam protested to her father that his decree was worse than Pharaoh's. "Pharaoh decreed only against the newborn males, but you have decreed against all newborns!"

Adopting his daughter's perspective, Amram remarried Yocheved publicly, thus encouraging others to follow and maintaining the continuity of the Jewish people.

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4 Exodus 1:15-18

5 Rashi, ad loc.

6 *Shemos Rabbah* 1:13, Sotah 11b

7 Shifrah, because she beautified (*shipur* in Hebrew) the child at birth. Pu'ah, because she cried (*po'ah*), spoke, and cooed to the child.

8 Sotah 12a

Miriam was not only responsible for this second marriage; she also prophesied regarding Moses's birth: "My mother is destined to bear a son who will save the Jewish people." When Moses was born, the house filled with light, prompting Amram to proclaim, "My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled!"

However, when they were later forced to cast Moses into the river in a basket, her father questioned the verity of her words. "My daughter, where is your prophecy [now]?"

Miriam, undeterred by this setback, observed Moses from a distance, to see how the events of the redemption would unfold. Her faith was rewarded, for when Pharaoh's daughter retrieved Moses from the river, Miriam was in a position to arrange that his own mother, Yocheved, would nurse him.

The Talmud also scrutinizes the actions of Pharaoh's daughter in this episode.[9] The dip in the waters of the river for which she had initially come was much more than an ordinary royal bath. She wished to wash herself of the idolatry of her father's house and to immerse herself for the purpose of conversion to Judaism. When she moved to rescue Moses, her attendants questioned her insolence. "When a king issues a decree, even if the entire world does not observe it, at least his children can be counted on to observe it; yet you are violating the decree of your own father!" Ignoring their objections, she extended her arm and reached for the basket, an act of treason as well as folly—the unusual term *amasah,* used by the Torah to describe her arm, indicates that she was, in fact, too far from the basket to reach it. Miraculously, though, her arm lengthened and she was able to grasp the basket and draw it out of the water.

Miriam, ultimately, was able to provide an answer to her father's question about her prophesy.

When G-d split the sea and drowned the Egyptians, the Exodus was complete and Moses' role as G-d's servant in the redemption was uncontested.[10] Appreciating the *quid pro quo*

9 Sotah 12b

10 Exodus 14:31

nature of the Egyptians' punishment, and seeing G-d's hand in both their suffering and redemption,[11] Moses led the Jewish men in a song of praise, while Miriam led the Jewish women in song with tambourines and dances.

The record of Moses' song begins with the word *az* ("then"), a reference to (and an admission of) the fact that he had once doubted G-d's ways, during the early stages of the redemption. He had voiced those doubts with the word *me'az* ("from the time")—"From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has harmed this people, yet You did not rescue Your people."[12] Now that it was clear that all the suffering and setbacks were necessary steps in G-d's plan for redemption, Moses corrected his earlier words of complaint with words of praise.[13]

In contrast, the Torah introduces Miriam's words by saying: "Miriam called out (literally, *answered*[14]) to *them* (the women), 'Sing to G-d for He is exalted above the arrogant...'" The word "them," in this verse, is written in the masculine form rather than the more appropriate feminine form, prompting the commentators to offer various explanations. Perhaps there is a hint here that in Miriam's song there is also a response to her father and her family—that her prophecy had been fulfilled, all according to plan.[15]

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11 See note 13.

12 Exodus 5:23:

13 *Shemos Rabbah* 23:3. As explained by the *Bais Haleivi*: "When the Jewish people were in Egypt, they did not fathom G-d's purpose [in imposing the] exile, and they felt much pain from the severity of the bondage. Moses complained to G-d, 'From the time I came to Pharaoh...' for he, too, did not fathom G-d's execution of the exile. Now that they had been redeemed, however, they understood that the exile had been for their benefit and that from the exile had come honor to heaven. For this they sang praise, both for the exile and for the redemption, and in this way Moses corrected his earlier sin."

14 In Hebrew, *vata'**an***. The verb ***an**a*, which is the grammatical root of *vata'**an***, often means answering. In a simple reading of the verse, it means "she called out *to elicit a response*."

15 See Sotah 12b, where the Talmud explains that Miriam is specifically described here as "the prophetess, sister of Aaron" in reference to her prophecy concerning Moses.

The use of the tambourine by the women also speaks for their faith. Where did these instruments come from? *Mechilta* explains: "The righteous women of the generation were certain that the Holy One, Blessed is He, would perform miracles for them, so they took tambourines out of Egypt." They sensed that the miracles they had seen in Egypt had not reached their conclusion; the story of the redemption was, as yet, incomplete, because the closure and sense of meaning found only at the Splitting of the Sea was still missing. The irony in this miracle, the drowning of the Egyptians through their own actions, was the necessary ending to show G-d's control of all the events of the Exodus. It would seem more than just a coincidence that the tambourine, a round instrument, and the circular dances (described by the verse as *machol*, a circle) both symbolize completion and fulfillment in Jewish thought.[16]

We find yet another example of the critical role of the women in the fact that the password for the redemption, the double use of the Hebrew verb *pakod* ("remember"), was entrusted to Serach, daughter of Asher. When the elders of the Jewish people wished to be assured of the authenticity of Moses' claim to be the messenger of G-d's redemption, they conferred with her. Upon hearing that Moses had delivered G-d's message using this double expression, she confirmed that this was consistent with the tradition she had received from Jacob and Joseph.[17] Later, she revealed to Moses the location of Joseph's interment, allowing the Jewish people to fulfill their promise to bring his bones up to the land of Israel with them.[18, 19]

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16 This symbolism, found often in Jewish works, can be understood in the following way: Choosing any point on a circle and continuing along its perimeter, one will have the sense that he is distancing himself from his point of departure. The truth is, however, that the farther he travels, the closer he is to returning to the starting point. This idea of connecting the end with its beginning represents the ultimate in planning and control, with the final outcome literally following a set course from the outset.

17 *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer*, Chapter 58; also, see Rashi to Exodus 3:18

18 Sotah 13a. See Tosafos there, where these two events are connected.

19 Other examples not addressed here directly include Tzipporah's role in saving

What is the significance of this double expression as the password for the redemption, and how does the fact that a woman was its guardian fit into the context of the above mentioned episodes?

There is another question lurking within the details of our earlier observations. As mentioned, the true identity of the heroic midwives was obscured, and their real names – those that would easily connect them to Moses – were not used. For that matter, none of Moses' relatives are mentioned by name in the narrative of his birth. His parents are simply referred to as "a man from the house of Levi" and "a daughter of Levi." As for his older siblings, who are at first ignored altogether, Miriam appears only as "his sister," and Aaron is omitted entirely. True, when Moses returned to Egypt, the family was finally reunited and properly identified, but why the initial anonymity, especially in the book of Exodus (which in Hebrew is called *Shemos*, "Names")?

The Maharal[20] finds in this last question an insight into G-d's providence in exile and redemption and into the role of our own actions in His plans. Amram and his illustrious family, righteous leaders and heroes in their own right, were certainly the most deserving and appropriate people to bring Moses into this world. However, they did not *create* Moses, "the redeemer." They were not responsible for his arrival at this particular point in history. Even if no deserving family existed, even if no appropriate environment could be found, Moses would have been born to someone—as if from out of a vacuum. *Moses was part of G-d's plan.* "Moses was prepared for redemption from the six days of Creation."[21] Had his parents been named, we might be-

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Moses' life by performing a circumcision on their son (Exodus 4:24-26) and G-d's initial instructions to Moses, where it would seem that it would be the women exclusively who would borrow items from the Egyptians upon the Jews' departure. (Compare Exodus 3:22 with Exodus 11:2 and 12:35-36). These examples would seem to fit the general pattern of those discussed here.

20 Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (1525—1609), in *Gur Aryeh*, Exodus 1:15

21 Based on *Bereishis Rabbah* 30:18 and 1:4. It is far beyond the scope of this essay to

lieve that Moses was the product of their actions. It would then seem that redemption was part of some natural course of events—great people produce great men of destiny; no people can be held back forever; eventually men arise to fill the needs of the times. In effect, this type of thinking sees G-d's role in this world as very limited, only responding to man's actions.

Taking the Maharal's point one step further, this misconception might lead to a belief in a devastating corollary as well: When our actions can not naturally bring about change, when there seems little hope for their success, they are not worth taking. This would be a tragic mistake and is, in fact, the opposite of G-d's expectations of us.

Both of these misconceptions could not be further from the truth of the reality in Egypt. G-d's hand was directly involved in every aspect of the suffering of the exile, as well as the ups and downs of the redemption process. The entire Jewish people saw this at the splitting of the sea, changing forever their perspective of past events. The women, however, sensed this from the start and measured the value of their actions accordingly. At every opportunity, women did what was right, never considering the possible futility of their actions or their chances for success. They did what they could and left the rest in G-d's hands.

The key that lies in the double expression of remembrance in the password of redemption is that G-d is always keenly aware of our situation and our plight, taking into account all of our actions and difficulties. Both exile and redemption are part of His plan, but the process can be arduous, full of calculated twists and turns. Exile certainly challenges our ability to perceive G-d's presence, and we feel alone and abandoned. Redemption begins, and we excitedly sense that G-d has remembered us;

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discuss the interplay between man's free will and G-d's plans for this world. Could Moses have chosen a path of living for himself that would have prevented him from carrying out his destiny? Surely this touches on the secrets of G-d's existence and the limits of our finite understanding. However, it is fundamental in Jewish belief that both of these principles, man's free will and G-d's ultimate control, are absolute. See Maimonides, Laws of Teshuva 5:5.

then it sputters and we wait, it seems, for G-d to remember us again. It is up to us to remember that G-d's providence is constant, though it may not be apparent. This awareness can help us deal with whatever life brings us. All of our experiences, pleasant or harsh, have meaning and purpose and are, ultimately, for our benefit. They were, after all, G-d's plan. This knowledge can also motivate us to steadfastly do what is right, following the example set by our mothers in Egypt, never to be paralyzed by the challenges that we face.

We can all drink to that.

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Rabbi David Spetner

Petty Larceny

Stealing the *Afikoman*

One of the most ancient (if not *the* most ancient!) educational events in human history is the Passover Seder. The Torah instructs us to tell our children the story of the Exodus in rich detail, and the Jews have been doing so from the generation that left Egypt on forward.

One of the most exciting parts of the Seder, for children, is "stealing the *afikoman*." What sort of an educational experience is that supposed to be? Should we be teaching our children to "steal?" What is the symbolism that we are imparting to them and to ourselves?

In order to understand the symbolism of the *afikoman* we must first examine some of our own attitudes. We live in a pluralistic culture where there is a high value placed on strategic partnerships between parties of varying ideologies. (Case in point: This idea is so dominant that the notion of the State of Israel maintaining a specifically Jewish character comes under fire from many quarters. Indeed, how *are* Jew and Arab to live harmoniously in the same country when, for example, the national anthem of Israel refers to the "Jewish spirit?")

This is not a new issue. The uniqueness of the Jewish people among the family of nations has been a point of controversy ever since our ancestor Abraham first challenged the common thinking of his day and espoused a belief in one all-knowing and all-powerful G-d. That he was subsequently charged with the mission of founding the family/nation that would be the standard bearers of that faith only made matters more contentious.

Abraham, though, would not truly be the founder of this people. He had a son, Yishmael, who—although circumcised—would not be part of Abraham's special covenant with G-d, per G-d's instruction (Genesis 17:18-21). Abraham, therefore, could not fully personify the essence of the Jewish people. We are not called the Children of Abraham, because that is a title we would share with another people—who are not bound by our eternal covenant with G-d.

Abraham's heir, Isaac, also had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Isaac, though, had no divine directive to choose one son over the other. Thus we find Isaac, at what he feared might be the end of his life, with a desire to include Esau as his heir, and to formalize his decision by bestowing special blessings upon Esau. Isaac sent Esau out to hunt and bring him meat delicacies, which he would use, the commentaries explain, to put himself in the proper state of mind to offer these divinely inspired blessings.

Jacob, at the urging of his mother Rebecca, disguised himself as Esau, brought his father two kid goats prepared by his mother, and received the blessings in his brother's stead.

No sooner had Jacob exited from his father's presence, when Esau entered and presented his father with his prepared food. In what seems like an epiphany of sorts, when Isaac realized that Jacob had stolen the blessings, he willingly affirmed Jacob's receipt of the blessings and assigned only secondary status to Esau.

In explaining to Esau that Jacob had stolen his blessings, Isaac used an interesting Hebrew word to describe Jacob's subterfuge. Isaac said, "Your brother came *b'mirmah* and took your blessings." The literal meaning of this word is "with deceit—" or, more generously, "with cleverness."

The Torah, though, can also be understood through *remez* (literally, allusion), a method of interpretation that often uses a form of numerology called *gematria*. In *gematria* each Hebrew letter is assigned a numerical equivalent. The *gematria* of the word *b'mirmah* offers us an astounding insight that was devel-

oped by a Chassidic master, Rabbi Zev of Strikov.

As we mentioned above, Isaac was concerned that his end might be near. Our Sages point out that the very righteous often die on their birthdays. Thus, according to the Midrash, Isaac offered his blessings on Passover eve, which was also his birthday.

Rebecca prepared two kid goats for Jacob to bring to Isaac. Rashi cites a Midrash that one of the kid goats was actually to serve as Isaac's Passover offering. (Although the historical events which led to the declaration of the Passover holiday were yet to happen, the patriarchs recognized the latent spiritual force behind each of the commandments and wished to fulfill them. The events of the Exodus merely actualized the potential force that had always lain in wait.)

The connection between the Passover offering and the *afikoman* is quite direct. The *afikoman* that we eat today is simply a piece of matzo taken from the middle of the three matzos on our table. It is merely a "stand in" for the real *afikoman* of the times of the Temple—the meat of the Passover offering. The word *afikoman* itself actually means "dessert" and is borrowed from the following law, cited in the Mishnah (Pesachim, chapter 10): "One may not eat dessert after the final taste of the Passover offering." The Talmud explains that this is in order that the taste of the Passover offering (or, for us, of the matzo) should linger with us throughout the night.

The law of *afikoman*, says Rabbi Zev of Strikov, was employed as the *b'mirmah*, or clever strategy, of Jacob. Jacob had given his father the Passover offering to eat, so that when Esau arrived with his delicacies to receive his blessing, Isaac was unable to eat! He had already eaten his *afikoman*. What is truly astounding is that the gematrias (numerical equivalents) of the word *b'mirmah* and the word *afikoman* are both 287!

What is most curious of all, though, is that Rashi and the Targum (Aramaic translation) understand the word *b'mirmah* to mean *b'chochmah*—with wisdom. The Haggadah describes

the wise son as someone who wants to know all about the details of the law. The Haggadah advises us to share with him just one of the myriad detailed laws of Passover. Which law are we told to tell this wise son? "One may not eat dessert after the final taste of the Passover offering—" the very law that "wise son" Jacob used to steal the blessings!

How are we to understand the great import given to this law, which exhorts us to savor the taste of the *afikoman*? The answer may lie in the very change of attitude expressed by Isaac upon discovering Jacob and Rebecca's ploy. Many commentaries understand that Isaac initially had a vision that he would be the founder of Israel and that his two sons would serve as two components of the Chosen Nation. Jacob would serve as the internal, spiritual force, while Esau would focus on the external and provide sustenance to the nation. Hence, Isaac believed that the blessings of physical bounty needed to be given to Esau.

Rebecca, however, understood the true content of Esau's character and his unfaithfulness to G-d's mission for the Jewish people. She had been told by a prophetic message, while still pregnant, that "there are two nations in your womb." (Genesis 25:23) She understood that from only one of her sons would the Jewish nation arise.

In Scripture, as well as in the words of our Sages, the Jewish people are compared to a lamb. That, perhaps, is the symbolism of the *afikoman*. The taste of the Paschal lamb is not to be adulterated by other, foreign tastes and the Jewish people are destined likewise to remain alone among the nations. They are to be unencumbered by "strategic partnerships" with entities not truly committed to the covenant with G-d.

We ask our children to "steal" the *afikoman* and, in so doing, reenact the fateful Passover eve of antiquity when Jacob guaranteed the destiny of the Jewish people. Through our *afikoman*, we affirm the words of the Torah (Numbers 23:9): "Behold! It is a people that will dwell alone and [it will] not be counted among the nations."

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Rabbi Ely Behar

Pesach, Peh Sach

A Kabbalistic Perspective

Every single word in the Torah is exploding with depth and meaning. Let us try to discover some of the beauty that lies behind the word "Pesach."

It is a word many of us have uttered countless times in our lives. "Hey, what are you doing for Pesach?" "Did you buy your matzoh for Pesach yet?" "I can't wait to start cleaning for Pesach!" ("Yeah, right.")

The traditional translation of the word "Pesach" is Passover, meaning that G-d passed over our houses during the final and most brutal plague afflicted upon Egypt. It was the final act before the Jews' exodus from Egypt.

We could write an entire essay speaking about the ramifications of that translation of "Pesach." However, I would like to focus on a deeper, more hidden aspect of this word.

Kabbalistic sources reveal that the word "Pesach" consists of two Hebrew words, *peh sach*—"a speaking mouth." What does a speaking mouth have to do with the most fundamental holiday of the Jewish year?

Our exodus from Egypt is what formed us into a nation. This is the Exodus that we are required to mention and contemplate twice a day. The Ramban (Nachmanides) says that this Exodus is the foundation of our faith and the backbone of many of the 613 commandments in the Torah. It would be hard to imagine that any one word could capture the significance of such an event.

However, a search through the Torah reveals that *speaking*

is the integral theme of this holiday. Again and again the Torah connects speaking with our redemption from Egypt. Rabbi Matis Weinberg (of Jerusalem, noted speaker and author) points out that when it comes to the story of Passover, the Torah requires that we use every variety of verbal communication.

Here are a few examples of this phenomenon:

> In order that you may *recount* to your children and grandchildren that I made a mockery of Egypt, etc. (Exodus 10:2)

> And it shall be that when your children *say* to you, "What is this service to you?" you shall *say,* "It is a Pesach offering to G-d." (Exodus 12:26-27)

> On that day you must *declare* to your children, "It is because of this that G-d acted on my behalf when I left Egypt." (Exodus 13:8)

In addition to the above mentioned verses and others that reinforce this understanding, there is perhaps an even more compelling proof to this idea: The Haggadah, the centerpiece of the Passover Seder, means simply "the declaration."

In order for us to understand the importance of speech, we must go back to the beginning of Creation.

> "And G-d formed the man of soil from the earth and blew into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became *a living soul."* (Genesis 2:3)

Targum Onkelos,[1] in interpreting this verse, reveals to us the essence of Man. Onkelos interprets the words "a living soul" to mean "a *speaking* soul." Rashi explains that Onkelos is bothered by a question. According to the Torah, animals also have a living soul; if so, what makes man different from animals? Onkelos' answer is that man has the ability to speak. Speaking is what makes man Man. Since Man's existence is the purpose of Cre-

1 An Aramaic translation of the Torah. According to the Talmud, it dates back to the time of Sinai.

ation, this means that the entire cosmos was created in order for man to speak.

Now our job is to understand why speech plays an integral role in Creation, and in turn why it is the center of the holiday of Passover.

There are many blessings which a Jew is obligated to recite every morning. According to most authorities, two of these blessings must be said back-to-back. The first blessing thanks G-d for the makeup of the human body, with all its many openings and cavities, which give us the ability to live and be healthy. The second blessing thanks G-d for creating and maintaining our souls. Two words connect these blessings: *Umaf'lee la'asos*, which means, "who acts wondrously." What wonder are we referring to here? The Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserlis) explains that the greatest wonder of Creation is that G-d is able to put a spiritual soul inside a physical body. The fact that the physical can connect to the spiritual is a *peleh*,[2] a "wonder."

How can *we* make this connection between the physical and the spiritual?

We know that the most effective way to express ourselves is by speaking. We connect to others and form relationships through speech. Speech is a *connector*.

Similarly, the way we connect the physical to the spiritual is through speech. Maimonides, in his magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, calls the section dealing with the laws of speech "*Sefer Hafla'a,*" or "The Book of Wonder." That is because the wonder of Creation, the connection between the physical and spiritual, is accomplished through speech.

An example of this is the different levels of respect one is required to have for his superiors. The Torah requires a person to have more respect for one who teaches him Torah than for his father. This is because a father brings his child into *this* world, but a rabbi brings his student into the *next* world. A rabbi teaching Torah gives his student the ability to connect with and ulti-

2 *Peleh* and *maf'lee*, both Hebrew words, share the same root.

mately reach the spiritual world. All of this is accomplished through *speaking* words of Torah.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz, M.D. (noted Jewish author and educator) shows how this idea actually manifests itself in the human body. The lower part of the body is the physical part, and the head is the intellectual or spiritual part of man. The neck is what connects these opposing spiritual and physical components of man. Our organ of speech, the voice box, is found in our neck, the "connector." It is remarkable that speech, which connects man to the spiritual world, is found in the specific part of the body that connects the physical and spiritual!

Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner (one of the greatest twentieth century Jewish thinkers) gives us an even deeper insight into speech. After all that we've explained above, one cannot question the severity of using speech improperly. For this reason, the Maharal wrote, "There is no way repent for the sin of evil gossip." If one damages the thing that makes man Man, there is no way to fix it. Similarly, the Maharal[3] bewails the sin of foul language. However, Rabbi Hutner explains that there is an even more severe misuse of speech. According to Rabbi Hutner, the worst misuse of speech is when one goes back on his word. When one gossips or uses profanity, he *damages* his capacity for speech. On the other hand, when one goes back on his word he *diminishes* his power of speech, showing that his word has no meaning. This removes the incredible power one has to *connect*. When one goes back on his word, he shows that his speech has no power. If one's words do not go into effect, than they cannot affect anything, they cannot accomplish anything, and they cannot *connect* anything.

Now we are ready to understand our holiday of Pesach, the time when we became a nation—not just any nation, but the Chosen Nation. We are the nation that was chosen to connect the physical world to the spiritual world. Only upon the exodus from Egypt did we have the freedom to accomplish this goal.

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3 Rabbi Judah Loew, of Prague (1525—1609)

The Exodus culminated with the receiving of the Torah, the book that teaches us how to make the connection.

Moses was the leader who took us out of Egypt and received the Torah for us, making him the "champion of speech." He gave us the ability to tap into the secret of Creation, by receiving and transmitting the Torah, which teaches us to perfect our speech.

After what we just learned, we can make an incredible insight. Pharaoh, Moses' archenemy, came to him during each plague, begging him to remove it. And each time, Moses replied, "I will, if you let my people go!" What happened next? Moses kept his end of the deal and stopped each plague. Did Pharaoh keep his end of the deal? No! Pharaoh went back on his word again and again. During each plague, he promised to let the Jewish people out, but when it came time to make good on his promise, he refused.

As we mentioned above, going back on one's word is the worst thing one can do. It destroys the essence of Man, making our job of perfecting speech, the goal of Creation, impossible. Moses, the champion of speech, made the greatest contribution of all time to the goal of connecting the physical and the spiritual. Pharaoh was the exact opposite; he tried to destroy this ability to connect. The war against Pharaoh was a war of speech, and on Pesach we won this war.

Now we understand the words *peh sach*, "a speaking mouth." Speech is a central theme on Pesach, because on Pesach we defeated Pharaoh and won the ability to speak. Our redemption from Egypt represents the emancipation of our speech. Speech allows us to connect to G-d and the source of good.

This Pesach, let us work on the perfection of our speech. Together may we merit to make the ultimate connection, with the coming of the *Moshiach*, the Messiah, speedily, in our day.

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Rabbi Yehudah Bienstock

Moses is Missing

The most central figure in the story of Passover is, without a doubt, Moses. Moses spoke with Pharaoh, warned him of the impending plagues, and eventually carried many of them out. He led us out of Egypt, split the Red Sea, defeated Amalek, and cared for us for forty years in the desert through thick and thin.

Yet the Haggadah, which we read at the Passover Seder, makes no mention of Moses. His name is not mentioned even *once*. Doesn't this seem ungrateful?

The Mishnah, in *Ethics of the Fathers*, says "Whoever repeats a thing in the name of the one who said it brings redemption to the world…" The Mishnah at first glance seems to be saying that merely repeating something in the name of the one who said it will bring redemption to the world. How can such a seemingly small act make such a powerful impact? Can simply giving credit where credit is due bring redemption to the world?

The Maharal[1] offers an interesting explanation of this concept. When G-d performs a miracle, the purpose is to awaken in us the realization that G-d is the source of all blessing and that He alone performs kindness and good to his nation, Israel. Therefore, says the Maharal, if the person through whom G-d performed the miracle takes even the slightest amount of credit for himself, if he claims that he was somewhat instrumental in the performance of the miracle, that destroys the purpose for which the miracle occurred in the first place. G-d performs miracles only to publicize His name and His dominance over all of creation, not to bring honor to individuals.

According to the Maharal, we interpret the Mishnah as fol-

1 Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (1525—1609)

lows: A person who does not take credit for that which he has not accomplished will be the vehicle through which G-d will bring redemption to the world. Utilizing such a person will bring the utmost honor and glory to G-d, because he will not attempt to steal the show. G-d rests his presence on humble, honest people—those who see G-d in their lives and attribute their successes to Him.

If we closely examine the life of Moses, it is clear that Moses possessed this characteristic to the utmost degree. At the time of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses was already eighty years old. Yet the Torah relates only three stories about the life of Moses prior to his becoming the leader of Israel:

1. Moses spotted an Egyptian man beating an Israelite and killed him.
2. Moses then saw two Jews fighting. He rebuked them and was then forced to flee Egypt after his role in the Egyptian's death was publicized.
3. Moses fled to Midian, where he encountered Jethro's daughters being accosted by the other shepherds at the well, and he saved them.

Out of all eighty years, the Torah chose to relate only these three stories. Why these in particular? What is the underlying theme echoed by these stories?

Rabbi Matisyahu Solomon resolves this difficulty, based on a parable cited in *Midrash Tanchuma*.

> A person was bitten by a wild donkey. He quickly ran to the river to cleanse the wound. As he reached the banks of the river, he spotted a child that was drowning. He stretched out his arm and saved the child from certain death.
>
> The child thanked him. "Without you I'd be dead!"
>
> The man replied, "I didn't save you. The donkey that bit me saved you!"
>
> It was so, too, with the daughters of Jethro. They thanked

Moses for saving them, to which Moses replied, "I didn't save you. The Egyptian I killed saved you."

Rabbi Solomon explains that Moses himself did not fully understand the chain of events that ultimately led to saving Jethro's daughters. Why he killed the Egyptian and was forced to flee Egypt puzzled him. Only after he saved Jethro's daughters from the shepherds did he understand G-d's plan. Had he never killed the Egyptian he would never have been in Midian to save Jethro's daughters. Therefore, when they approached Moses to thank him for saving their lives, Moses took no credit. Rather, it was the "Egyptian man" who saved them. Moses gave all the credit to G-d, who led Moses to Midian to save them.

Although the Torah mentioned only three stories about Moses, they aren't merely random incidents in his life. Rather, these life experiences are why Moses merited to become the leader of Israel. Moses took no credit for himself. His concern was only to sanctify the name of G-d. Moses performed great miracles beginning in Egypt and continuing until his death, years later. He was never interested in his own honor or self-promotion. He was only concerned with the honor of G-d. That is why he was chosen to be the leader of Israel.

In Genesis, the Torah relates that Jacob had a dream in which he saw a ladder leading up to heaven, and angels of G-d were ascending and descending simultaneously. *Da'as Zekeinim* explains that the angels that were returning to heaven were the angels that had carried out the destruction of Sodom years earlier. Because they told Lot that *they* were going to destroy Sodom, they were punished and had to remain on Earth for 135 years. Instead of giving G-d credit for the miracle that was about to occur, they took some of the credit for themselves. Instead of sanctifying G-d's name to the fullest, they stole a little for themselves. For that they were forced to remain outside the inner sanctum of G-d *for 135 years*.

The lesson is quite clear. A messenger of G-d must have the

purest of intentions only. Even the slightest amount of self-promotion can have grave consequences.

The omission of Moses from the Haggadah is, in truth, a tribute to Moses. Although Moses played a central role in the Exodus, we are able to relate the entire story without mentioning his name once. That is the greatness of Moses. He took no credit for himself and didn't expect any thanks or recognition, to the point that his name isn't needed in the Haggadah at all. It's as though he weren't even a participant at all. In reality it's the opposite—to mention Moses would be a *slight* to his honor. Without Moses, the entire purpose of the Exodus, to glorify and spread the name of G-d, would have been impossible.

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Rabbi Yehiel Kalish

Enough Gratitude

I would like to share with you a story that comes from the heart—our Rabbis tell us, "Matters that emanate from the heart [are sure to] enter the heart."

In the year 1997, Eli Cohen died of heart failure. He was just 33 years old and was survived by his wife Gila and two daughters, Chana, twelve, and Chaya, ten.

Eli had a small insurance policy. When all the bills were paid, however, Gila needed to find a job. Before, she had been a full time mother. Now she needed to find a job and support her family.

After looking for several weeks, Gila found a job, yet she was stressed out. After all the house responsibilities from the previous night and working a full day, she was just too tired to do anything—not to mention that she was dating in order to find a new husband. Every night Gila cried herself to sleep, praying that G-d would listen to her and help her through this terribly difficult time of her life.

One day Gila came home and found what appeared to be dirty dishes in the sink. She thought to herself, *Wow, Chana made dinner. What a relief!* Gila was too excited to even express herself; yet before she even had a chance, the list of chores began to accumulate and grow in her tired and weary mind.

For two weeks straight, Gila came home to find dinner prepared and, at times, the laundry cleaned and folded, as well. Not wanting to risk complimenting her daughter too much, Gila never brought up the subject.

One Friday evening after the Shabbos meal and during a relaxing game of backgammon, Gila turned to her eldest daughter and said, "I just wanted to thank you for all the

household work you have done the last couple of weeks."

With a quizzical look on her face, Chana replied, "What are you talking about, Mom? I thought you just prepared dinner before you went to work!"

Gila was gripped with fright. She wondered who was coming into her home, and whether the food being provided for her children was safe—or even kosher. That evening, Gila cried herself to sleep and with each tear there was a prayer to the Creator of the world: *Please help me. Please help me get my life back together.*

That Monday, Gila stayed home from work. She kept her car in the garage in order not to arouse suspicion. At 3:30 that afternoon, Gila received a surprise. A car pulled up and Gila ran to the window to see what was happening. What she saw moved her so much that she just began to cry, hysterically.

Before I tell you the end of the story, I would like to share with you a novel yet beautiful idea we can learn from the song "Dayeinu." For some, "Dayeinu" is the highlight of the Seder. (Aside from the *tzimmes*,[1] of course.) While it may be a highlight of the evening, its meaning is sometimes overlooked.

When we approach "Dayeinu," we begin with the following words: *Kama ma'alos tovos lamakom* ***aleinu***. Normally we assume the translation for this irresistible phrase to be, "How many wonderful favors has the Almighty done **for us**?" However, Rabbi Leib Gurewicz,[2] of blessed memory, presents a different explanation of this sentence. He explains the word *aleinu* to mean "encumbent upon us." Thus the phrase would now read, "How many wonderful favors does the Almighty *demand from us?*"

I know what you're thinking: Doesn't the Haggadah now proceed to list what *He* has done for us?! For example: "Had *He* fed us the manna and not given us the Sabbath, it would have

1 *Tzimmes* is a traditional carrot dish. [Some consider matzo balls to be the highlight of the Seder. *-Ed.*]

2 Former Dean of the Gateshead Yeshiva.

been enough... Had *He* given us the Sabbath, and not brought us before Mount Sinai, it would have been enough." How can we even suggest a translation of "encumbent upon us?"

Perhaps Rabbi Gurewicz is introducing us to a novel understanding of this all-too-famous yet misunderstood ballad: The more G-d does for us, the more we have to respond in kind. Now, with a much clearer idea of what Rabbi Gurewicz is trying to share with us, we can set forth the following summary of his thought: All these favors, which the Almighty did for us as we left Egypt, require the proper form of gratitude. When reciting "Dayeinu," we are listing these favors, and by doing this we are put in the proper frame of mind for showing our true appreciation.

For the sake of clarity, as well as practicality, I would like to share with you an example. The Malbim,[3] in his commentary to Psalms, points out the following fascinating concept. He begins with a question. In Psalm 118, the Psalmist writes:

> Give thanks to G-d for He is good; for His kindness endures forever!
>
> Let Israel say now, "For His kindness endures forever!"
>
> Let the House of Aaron say now, "For His kindness endures forever!"
>
> Let those who fear G-d say now, "For His kindness endures forever!"

What is the difference between the four groups presented here?

The Malbim, in his answer,[4] explains that the first group represents the nations of the world. The nations of the world have a requirement to thank G-d for giving life. Yet in paragraph two, there is a charge for a separate form of praise that is special for the Jewish people. And in the third paragraph, there

3 Acronym for Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809-1879), Rabbi in Germany and Russia.

4 This essay will discuss only the first three groups. See the Malbim (Psalms 118) for an explanation of the fourth.

is yet another charge for praise. This time it is to the House of Aaron, the Kohanim (the Priests).

It is clear why the Jewish people are charged with their own form of praise, for Jews merit to perform the mitzvos (commandments) of the Torah, while the nations of the world do not. Therefore, Jews are required to praise G-d on a different plane than are the nations of the world.

However, what is the difference between "Joe Jew" and "Joe Cohen?"

Kohanim have twenty-four mitzvos more than regular Jews, the Malbim points out. "Why?" asks the Malbim. Why do they have twenty-four more mitzvos? The answer the Malbim gives is fascinating. The Kohanim receive twenty-four gifts, the *matnos kehuna*,[5] and for each gift they receive they have to give something back. Because they receive more, they have to give more. Thus, they are called upon to give their own special praise.

This idea also works well in explaining the obscure argument immediately preceding "Dayeinu" in the Haggadah, and why it was placed there.

The basic argument is as follows: According to the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer, G-d inflicted two hundred plagues upon the Egyptians at the Sea. According to Rabbi Akiva, there were two hundred fifty.

What is it all about? What is the debate? Rabbi Gurewicz says, the above theme is indeed the basis of this disputation. Because the truth of the matter is that the more the Almighty does for us, the more we have a duty to do for Him. Therefore these two rabbis looked into the various responsibilities that we have to do for the Almighty and, based on the number of responsibilities, they determined the number of miracles that were wrought for us—or, more correctly, the number of plagues from which we were delivered.

Rabbi Eliezer said there were two hundred miracles, and

5 Special gifts given only to Kohanim, in support of their service to the community. Some of the gifts include the meat of certain sacrifices, the showbread, and Terumah.

therefore we have been given the mandate to perform two hundred positive commandments. For the sake of clarity, let me explain. Because there are only two hundred positive commandments, it must be that there were two hundred—no more, no less—miracles from which we were delivered.

Yet traditionally it is known that there are 248 positive commandments.[6] Why, then, does Rabbi Eliezer say that there are only two hundred? Because two hundred mitzvos revolve on and around the individual, and forty-eight are bestowed on the community.

Rabbi Akiva, as we said earlier, is of the opinion that two hundred fifty miracles were brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt. What was his calculation? There are 248 positive commandments, plus two items which are so fundamental that they are not even included as commandments—because without these two items you can't begin to serve G-d.

What are the two fundamentals? The first is the first of the Ten Commandments, "I am G-d your G-d." For without acknowledging the existence of G-d, there's no place for mitzvos. What is the two hundred fiftieth? I guarantee you, my friends, that this is a bolt out of the blue—the second basic element: Keeping one's word. An essential premise, without which we cannot begin to serve G-d, is the idea that when we give our word, we must abide by it.

I believe this last idea parallels Rabbi Gurewicz's thesis: The more G-d has done for us, the more we have to do for him.

Let us now return to our story. What had moved Gila so profoundly?

> At 3:30 that afternoon, Gila received a surprise. A car pulled up and Gila ran to the window to see what was happening. What she saw moved her so much that she just began to cry, hysterically.
>
> When the door opened, Gila's sister-in-law Nechama,

6 This follows the count of Maimonides.

stood in surprise to find out that she was caught, food in hand. They cried together that afternoon in recognition of this small yet meaningful act of loving kindness. The gratitude Gila now feels for her sister-in-law knows no bounds. All this, for such a small, yet well thought out, act of loving kindness: Chesed.

Both the message from this story and our thesis are clear. It is so easy for us to identify with Gila's feelings of gratitude for her sister-in-law, but when we think of the gratitude we should have for the Almighty, something gets in the way. Therefore, this year, as we read the Haggadah and relive the Exodus on Passover evening, let's pay attention to all the wonderful things G-d did for us. Let's apply it to today, as well. What a wonderful exercise, to think about all that the Almighty does for us! Let us awaken the feelings of gratitude, feelings that will lead us to reaffirm our commitment to G-d's Torah and his mitzvos.

Have a happy and kosher Passover.

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Rabbi Yitzchok Preis

Magic Wands and Miracles

The Showdown in Egypt

Sticks are turned into snakes, water is turned into blood, and dust is turned into lice.

Moshe and the magicians faced off in a very peculiar showdown. The final year of our Egyptian exile can almost be deemed a public contest between Miracle and Magic. At no other point in history do we find G-d repeatedly and dramatically altering natural order to bring His will to fruition. At no other time is a conflict so centered on the relative powers of magician and messenger of G-d. Striking, as well, is the role of the *mateh,* the staff utilized by Moses. In each of the early confrontations between Moshe and Pharaoh, there appears to be a duel of sorts between this staff and the magic wands at the hands of the Egyptian sorcerers.

We will attempt to address this mysterious topic, thereby developing a better understanding of the roles of magic and miracles, and how we can better warrant the latter. Much of the following is based on the teachings of Rabbi Moshe Shapiro as developed in the work *Mima'amakim*.

The Torah refers in several instances to *kishuf*, a term which is usually translated as magic. Maimonides was in the very small minority of classical Jewish thinkers who may have understood *kishuf* to be something other than "the real thing."[1]

1 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 11:16, and Maimonides' commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin 7

The vast majority of early and contemporary Torah commentaries understand *kishuf*, especially as displayed in Egypt, to be real. To what degree any vestige of this dark talent still exists is beyond the scope of this essay, but at least in earlier times *kishuf* was a reality.[2]

The very notion that witchcraft and magic can exist raises philosophical concern. It would appear that such practices contribute to rejection of the Almighty. The ability to interact with and seek salvation by using forces that appear to be at odds with G-d can certainly yield a breakdown in one's relationship with Him. The practitioner could develop such dependency on these forces as to lead to their worship. The sense of control that one gets when breaking out of the restraints of the physical world can also lead to total rejection of any Supreme Being. Atheism, or even self worship, are natural results of this perception of being "unbounded." That this is recognized by G-d is evident in the very Torah itself, when G-d implores us to avoid turning to such practices. He ends His dialogue on the matter by telling us that we should instead "be complete [in your faith] with the L-rd, your G-d."[3] Why, then, would G-d have created such forces in the first place?

In his great mystical-philosophical work *Derech Hashem*,[4] Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato explains as follows. A fundamental element of Creation is Man's free choice. If G-d makes Himself absolutely apparent, we have no choice but to do His bidding. If he makes Himself so remote as to be undetectable, we cannot be held accountable for neglecting Him. Therefore G-d maintains a balance, through which we are always capable of "finding" Him but simultaneously have the "freedom" to let Him remain hidden from us. In any given era, the greater the potential granted for connection to G-d, the greater the potential for disconnection from Him as well. With regard to the creation of

2 See glosses of Vilna Gaon to Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 179:13

3 Deuteronomy 18:9-13

4 3:29

forces like witchcraft, *Derech Hashem* describes, "…just as He made available to Man a way to achieve enlightenment, holy inspiration—beyond physical nature [e.g., prophecy and Divine inspiration]—so was it necessary that there be for this great good its opposite… that Man should have the capacity to draw darkness, spirit of impurity—beyond physical nature." At least in those eras when G-d allowed as intimate a bond with Himself as prophecy, He allowed Man the potential to find equally satisfying negative options also.

Ancient Egypt was the world capital of *kishuf*. Even Harry Potter would have been overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of the occult in this society. Pharaoh's chief advisors were astrologers and national policies were determined by horoscope readings. The royal court was comprised of wizards, who doubled as dream interpreters. Egypt was also the epitome of a culture that swallowed the ego-inflating poison that comes with these talents. When the Midrash[5] contrasts the attitudes of the righteous and the wicked, Pharaoh is singled out as the example of one who viewed himself as "standing on/above the Nile." Egypt worshipped the Nile, yet, from Pharaoh's perspective, it was he who dominated his own god. **Pharaoh**'s very name can be reconfigured (in Hebrew) to spell ***haoreph***, which means "the back of the neck"—a symbol of stubborn defiance. Armed with their magic wands, Pharaoh and his army of Egyptian sorcerers thought themselves to be "in control" and felt themselves "above" the controlling forces of nature or deity.

It was specifically into this magic-oriented society that G-d sent Moses with his miracle-producing staff. The Talmud[6] describes Pharaoh's chief sorcerers challenging Moses.

> "Why bring more produce to the produce center?" [I.e., why bring more "magic" into the land with the best magicians?]

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5 Bereishis Rabbah 69:3

6 Menachos

> Moses responded, "Were I to prove the superiority of my vegetables in a land not known for good produce, others would challenge it—'Had he brought them *here*, we would show him that his are no better than ours.' To prove that my vegetables are truly superior, they must be compared to the ones that are thought to be best!" [I.e., it is specifically in Egypt that I must prove G-d's control to be superior to any magicians.]

As we shall see shortly, it is precisely through the staff that this proof was to be demonstrated.

We can now investigate the role of Moses' staff in battling not only the magicians with their wands, but also the defiance of G-d their magic had produced. In recounting the Exodus, Moses reflected on the fact that G-d saved us "with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great awesomeness, with *otot*—signs—and with wonders."[7] The Passover Haggadah has us analyze the variety of expressions which all seem to point to the same thing: G-d's power. The Haggadah describes the unique meaning of each term. The term *otot* is determined to refer specifically to the use of the staff.

Before explaining this, we must look at another perplexing Midrash. The Midrash[8] describes Moses' concern, "How shall I bring the plagues upon him (Pharaoh)?" To which G-d responds, "This staff you shall take in your hand." What was Moshe' concern and how does G-d's response alleviate it?

Prior to this showdown in Egypt, we don't find G-d interrupting the laws of nature in dramatic, public fashion. Previous miracles were generally well masked, or at least relatively private. Moses was now being given a mission to represent G-d in a very different fashion. Initially he was surprised at this prospect. By what means was *he* to make G-d more manifest in the world, if G-d generally keeps Himself hidden? To this G-d responded by introducing His scepter, the staff. A king actualizes

7 Deuteronomy 26:8

8 Tanchuma Va'eira 9

his intentions when he issues a command accompanied by the extending of his scepter. Similarly, G-d told Moses that He intended to make His Control known to Pharaoh. Through Moses, the staff would be extended, signaling the command to G-d's servants—to all of Creation. The various forces of nature would then respond to His charge, revealing that it is G-d who is in absolute control. The very forces the magicians thought they controlled responded to the staff-induced decrees, and the ultimate "I'm-in-control-and-don't-need-G-d" society was brought to undeniable recognition of G-d's supremacy.

As we celebrate Passover, we are encouraged to reflect on our unique relationship with G-d. He encourages us to recall a time when He "broke the rules" and displayed Himself prominently. By reminding us of this each Passover, G-d does us an incredible favor. He helps us keep a focus on His involvement in the world and in our lives, even when He is not easily perceived. In recalling G-d's ability and willingness to make Himself known, we are empowered by the awareness that He is always there for us and that He remains ready be found by all those who truly seek Him. Let us hope that the day will soon come when we will all have found G-d. He will then have no reason to remain hidden and we will merit the open, intimate relationship He so desires to share with us.

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Alter B. Raubvogel

Like Splitting the Sea

Give thanks—
To G-d, for He is good, for His kindness is eternal...
To He Who alone performs great wonders...
To He Who split the Sea of Reeds into parts...
He gives bread to all flesh...
Give thanks to G-d of the heavens, for His kindness is eternal.
(Psalms 136)

Was it difficult for G-d to split the Sea of Reeds?

G-d created the sea, so He should be able to make it do whatever He wants. In fact, our Sages[1] tell us that when G-d formed the oceans, He stipulated with them that they must eventually split for the Children of Israel.

Yet many a sage has remarked that he faces a dilemma "as difficult as the parting of the sea."

The Talmud uses the splitting of the sea as a simile for three great challenges. The most famous of these is in a passage at the beginning of Sotah (2a).

> Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchok said, "...Raish Lakish... would say this: [Heaven] only pairs a man with a woman on the basis of his [good and bad] deeds..."
>
> Rabba bar Bar Chana said, "Rabbi Yochanan added, *'And it's as difficult to pair them as it is to split the sea...'*"
>
> Is that so? Didn't Rav Yehuda say, "Rav said, 'Forty days before a fetus is formed, a heavenly voice proclaims: "The

1 Maimonides (commentary, *Ethics of the Fathers* 5:6); Zohar, quoted below.

daughter of so-and-so will marry so-and-so!"'" [I. E., putting a couple together is as simple to G-d as issuing a command.]

[The Talmud then answers its own question.] There is no contradiction. [Rav, who held that making a match is simple] spoke of one's first, preordained spouse. [Rabbi Yochanan, who compared it to splitting the sea] spoke of one's second marriage.[2]

Remember that last point. It will be important later.

A second comparison to the splitting of the sea is made at the end of Pesachim (118a).

Rav Shizvi said in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, "[Providing for] man's sustenance *is as difficult as splitting the sea,* for it is written (Psalms 136), 'He gives bread to all flesh,' right after the verse 'To He Who split the Sea of Reeds into parts.'"

A few lines later, we find a third challenge.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said, "Constipation is as difficult as the day of death, *and [its relief is] like the parting of the sea...*"

That last quote might raise some eyebrows, but consider this: Our Sages must have given great weight to all three of these situations, or they wouldn't have codified them in the Talmud for posterity.

So we have to ask two questions: What is special about these four processes (parting the sea, making a couple, providing sustenance, and relieving constipation), and how can anything be hard for G-d to do?

To make matters worse, it seems that staging the Exodus was even *more* difficult.

2 The actual words of the Talmud are *zivug rishon* (first match) and *zivug sheini* (second match). For purposes of translation, I follow the interpretation of the commentaries quoted in this essay. Other commentaries have very different understandings of these terms and what they represent. (For example, *Ben Yehoyada* maintains that the Talmud is distinguishing between a man's first and second incarnations!) But that debate is the material for another essay.

Midrash Rabbah (Beshalach 22,3) explains:

> What is the difference between the Exodus and the Splitting of the Sea? *The Exodus was more difficult…* Know that [performing] the former was more difficult than [performing] the latter, for in regard to the Exodus, G-d proclaimed "I am the L-rd, your G-d," (Exodus 20:2), while in reference to the Splitting of the Sea, Scripture does not invoke G-d's name.

This last point leads us to ask another question. Assume that something really can be difficult for G-d. If the Sages wanted a symbol of difficulty, why did they choose the Splitting of the Sea, and not the Exodus?

Here we find ourselves on a road once traveled. *Tosafos Shantz*[3] asks this question—why single out the Splitting of the Sea over the other miracles of the Exodus? He answers that a person's second marriage comes at the cost of a first marriage, which would have been aborted by divorce or death, G-d forbid. Likewise, at the Sea of Reeds, G-d rescued the Israelites from the waters of the sea at the expense of the Egyptians, whom He drowned with the same water.

As *The Zohar* tells it (Terumah 170b), the incident at the Sea of Reeds was a close call.

> As the Israelites approached the sea and G-d wished to split the Sea of Reeds, the spirit [which represents] Egypt [in the Heavenly Tribunal] approached and requested justice before G-d. It said to Him, "Master of the World, why do You wish to exact justice upon Egypt and split the sea for Israel? They are *both* guilty before You, and all of Your ways are justice and truth! These [people] worship idols, and these [also] worship idols; these are promiscuous, and these are promiscuous; these have spilled blood, and these have spilled blood!"
>
> But at that moment, *it was difficult for G-d to follow justice*. The Israelites were [already] heading into the sea, as [the Torah] states: "G-d said to Moses, 'Why are you

3 Commentary to Sotah 2a, the passage about finding one's mate

screaming to Me? Speak to the Children of Israel—they shall go forth!'" (Exodus 14:15)

[Yet] it was difficult for G-d to violate justice and rend the sea for them. If G-d wouldn't have remembered the merit of Abraham, our forefather… they all would have been destroyed in the sea—for G-d stood over Israel that entire night, passing judgement…

What we see here is that when our Sages describe the Splitting of the Sea as "difficult" for G-d, that doesn't mean that it was hard for Him to do. *It means that a complex decision was involved.* G-d had to find a way, as it were, to satisfy both His unswerving adherence to justice and truth and His historical objective of creating a Holy Nation. Only after a night of deliberation did G-d come up with a formula that would allow Him to discriminate between Egypt and Israel.

Let's explain what we mean when we say that G-d deliberates. G-d, in truth, is unchanging and all-knowing. G-d doesn't actually have any doubts, nor does He have to go through a process of give-and-take to arrive at a decision. G-d is too great and too complex for us human beings to comprehend.

This poses a great challenge. G-d wants us to emulate Him as best we can, and that requires at least a simple understanding of His ways. How can we relate to G-d?

The solution is what we would call a "workaround." When G-d wants us to understand His thoughts, as it were, He presents them to us in the form of a story line, such as that of the Exodus. This allows us to understand all of the variables that G-d takes into account. It opens up a window into G-d's "thought processes." We can learn the value G-d assigns to every consideration, and then apply those values when we make our own decisions.

The Splitting of the Sea, which involved a decision to sacrifice Egypt for the sake of Israel, is an excellent example of a situation where G-d faces a moral dilemma, as it were, and reaches a conclusion.

Our Sages made three comparisons to the Splitting of the Sea, presumably to indicate that they all involve "deliberation" on G-d's part.

Let's start with the first comparison. *Tosafos Shantz* and other commentators explain that if G-d intends for a person to marry twice, bringing about that second marriage is a complicated business. It means terminating at least one marriage, if not two, beforehand. For example, say Ruth and Boaz are "meant for each other," but Ruth is currently married to someone else (i.e., Naomi's son, Kilyon). G-d does not readily dispose of one person to make room for another. The decision to do this, and the decision *how* to bring this about, would be very complex—just like the decision to part the Sea of Reeds.

The second comparison involves man's sustenance. The passage from *The Zohar* that we quoted earlier also focuses on this issue. It explains that G-d finds a way to provide for *everyone*, good or evil.

Think about that for a minute. Would you?

How about the Palestinian who set off a bomb in Netanya this past March—would you have kept him alive long enough to do it? (I wouldn't have.) Surely G-d knew what that man was going to do, yet He sustained him. Why? Only G-d knows, and we have no right to question it. We can only assume that G-d did not easily destroy innocent lives for the sake of a terrorist. It must have been difficult—like splitting the sea.

Yet, as complicated as it is, we see that G-d *does* provide.

On a personal level, there are two ways of receiving this.

On the one hand, if G-d does provide for righteous and wicked alike, then material success is no proof that a person is living justly. Our Sages tell us that we shouldn't assume that we have earned any of our worldly possessions. If anything, G-d has earned our allegiance by standing by us through thick and thin. We are hopelessly indebted to Him.

At the same time, if G-d provides for everyone, regardless of merit, we can feel assured that G-d will always take care of us,

even though we can't possibly repay Him for the kindness He bestows on us.

These two sentiments, of gratitude and trust, are part of the bedrock of Judaism.

Now we have to address the third comparison. To my frustration, I haven't found any commentary that discusses it.

I would like to explain that the Talmud wants to extend our last point (about Providence) to areas of health and well-being, but that poses three problems. One is that the reader can infer this point on his own, without the explicit help of the Talmud. Another is that the Talmud could have chosen any illness to illustrate this point; why constipation? A third problem is that no matter how I explain this passage, I'll have no commentator of authority to back me up.

However, I once heard another explanation of the comparison to the Splitting of the Sea.[4] It doesn't answer all of our questions,[5] but it is worth mentioning before we end our discussion.

According to this other interpretation, the Splitting of the Sea was *not* difficult, and *nothing* is hard for G-d to do. Things only *seem* difficult from our human perspective.

We sometimes face challenges—loneliness, financial hardship, or illness—that to us seem almost insurmountable. If it really were up to us to overcome these challenges on our own, they *would* be as difficult as parting the sea.

However, to G-d everything is easy. We must trust that G-d can and will help us, just as He split the sea.

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4 It is similar to an explanation given by Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, of blessed memory (*Sichos Mussar*, 5732, No. 26).

5 Such as the significance of all three comparisons and why taking the Israelites out of Egypt was more difficult than parting the sea. Think about these unanswered questions over Passover. Bring them up for discussion at the Seder. If you come up with anything interesting, please drop me a line at alterbentzion@juno.com.

Rabbi Binyomin Travis

Lost at Sea

Lessons from the Splitting of the Red Sea

Though we as a people may find it difficult to agree on what exactly being Jewish in America means, we commonly must face the challenge of maintaining ourselves against the scourge of assimilation. The awareness of the gravity of this issue (the attrition of more of our people than even Hitler was able to destroy) has prompted many Jews, from the most secular to the most religious, to speak out passionately on the matter. Many, together with providing a diagnosis of our spiritual health, offer their opinion on where we as a people must go from here.

This essay is not meant to be a diagnosis; rather, it will focus on the different approaches we have taken and are taking as Jews in an effort to maintain ourselves. To begin, it behooves us to take a look at our history. The great Ramban (Nachmanides) has already told us that *ma'aseh avos siman l'banim,* that the challenges and trials that our forefathers faced will resurface (albeit in different guises) in the lives of Jews of subsequent generations. To look at an incident in our Torah where we see Israel facing a threat from without (even though the nature of their difficulty was different from ours) can help us understand the challenges and trials we face from the outside world in our time.

Perhaps the greatest danger we've faced collectively, as a people, came seven days after we left Egypt, on the shores of *Yam Suf* (the Red Sea). The Jewish people at that time saw Pharaoh and a formidable Egyptian army approaching them from behind. In front of them was the sea, and on both sides, the Midrash tells us, there were herds of wild animals. They were

completely surrounded, and the situation appeared helpless.

Though the righteous among the people remained confident in G-d's salvation, the less committed reproached Moses for taking them out of Egypt. Different factions developed, each advocating a different course of action. There were those among the tribes of Israel who wanted to drown themselves—suicide, yes, but at least they would not suffer again under the Egyptians. Another group advocated surrender and a return to Egypt; perhaps, they reasoned, they could maintain themselves as a people separate from the morally corrupt Egyptians, as some had in the past (although most weren't able to resist the temptations of Egypt). Still others felt the situation called for turning on the Egyptians in battle—a way, perhaps, of trying to assert autonomy, but certainly at a price. A fourth faction suggested running into the Egyptian camp and confusing them; though they lacked the confidence to rally themselves, they felt that at least, perhaps, they possessed the ability to stifle others.

Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz (Congregation Ahavas Torah, in Silver Spring, Maryland) has identified the four perspectives we've just mentioned as present and expressed today in America in our battle against assimilation. There are those who feel it would be best if we divest ourselves entirely (G-d forbid) of our Jewishness, like those Jews who had wanted to throw themselves into the Red Sea. Spiritual suicide, yes, but at least, they reason, they won't have to suffer for their Jewishness. Others maintain, like the second perspective above, that indeed it's possible to retain a Jewish identity in the home, even if society forces us to take on the values of our host nation on the street. A third point of view, expressed and lived by many, feels the only way to fend off the encroachment of assimilation is through isolation, battling American culture by cutting oneself off entirely. Finally we see those who maintain their Jewishness by "confusing the enemy," defining themselves by what they are against (e. g., Louis Farrakhan, the Palestinian Authority) rather than by what they stand for Jewishly.

Each approach, explains Rabbi Breitowitz, is lacking (although, granted, some to a larger degree than others).

Divesting oneself of one's Jewishness obviously won't enable our continuity as a people. (Ironically, we see that this approach did not provide the immunity that its proponents sought, for example, for Jews living in the Third Reich.)

To be a Jew just at home, option number two, denies the reality of Torah as a complete guide for living. Additionally, it doesn't place retaining one's Jewishness at the top of one's list of priorities. If society takes precedence outside, why, ultimately, shouldn't it be afforded the same status in the home?

On the other hand, asserts Rabbi Breitowitz, to go completely against the grain of society (option number three) also has its negative side—though it may be the least self-defeating. Our Sages said *chachma b'goyim ta'amin*, "Believe that there *is* wisdom among the nations," and one who resists that reality misses out on the good the world has to offer. The great Vilna Gaon[1] stated at the end of his life that his study of the sciences, for example, aided his total understanding of G-d's universe.

Finally, while we can't let the injustices being perpetrated against Jews go unanswered, if responding to those evils is the only thing that defines us and unites us as a people, then at some point we're going to begin to wonder what exactly it is we're fighting for. Those groups of Jews which found the expression of their Jewishness entirely in the fight against the injustices of the former Soviet Union were left without a cause, and consequently without religious meaning, when communism collapsed. To quote Rabbi Breitowitz, "Many people try to foster Jewish identity by focusing on the Holocaust, rather than on the lives of *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of the Divine name) that many of its victims led."

So what, then, is the answer? How do we reverse the trend of moving away from our roots and bring back those already estranged?

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1 Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, of eighteenth century Vilna

Let's return to our look at the Children of Israel on *Yam Suf*. This time, instead of focusing on the *response* of the people, let's look at the circumstances that brought the enemy on in the first place.

The Torah tells us that while the Children of Israel were suffering under the oppression of the Egyptians, they constantly cried out to G-d. The Midrash tells us that once the nation was redeemed, once they felt their liberation and were enriched by the gifts they received from the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus, they began to neglect their prayer to some degree. The unfortunate reality is that when times are good we tend to breathe easily and believe we can make it on our own, without Divine assistance.

The Midrash cites the distance that had developed between Israel and G-d as the underlying cause of the dire situation at *Yam Suf*. G-d desires our closeness to him, and will do whatever it takes to make us aware of the importance (for ourselves!) of that relationship.

Rabbi Yerucham Lebowitz, of blessed memory, the spiritual guide of the Mir Yeshiva in Europe, stated that many have a misconception about prayer. "The world assumes," he explained, "that G-d sends misfortunes upon a person, and therefore he must pray to rid himself of his troubles. The truth is the opposite. G-d desires our prayer. Prayer, the expression of our closeness to the Creator, is one of the goals for which we live. In order to stimulate our prayers, G-d visits upon man all manner of tribulations to direct him back to his Divine Creator."

We all know that addressing problems at their roots, before they develop, is far more effective than trying to react once they are manifest. The Rabbis tell us that all of Israel is considered one body, and the actions each of us do have a profound effect on every other member of our people. If it's the loss of a relationship with G-d that we're trying to fight, then reaffirming our own relationship with G-d, through prayer and Torah learning, is responding in kind. Surely every effort must be made to

reach out directly to those who have moved away. But we also must understand that, ultimately, changing another's perspective on his or her Jewishness requires help from Above. Being able to say from the heart, "Please, G-d, let others share the wonderful depth and beauty that is the reality of our relationship," gives us the opportunity to employ a spiritual power endless in its possibility to turn the hearts of even those farthest away.

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Appendix

Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud

The Writing of the Oral Torah

The essays in this collection draw on many sources, but an attentive reader will note that a good number of them are described as "Mishnah," "Midrash," and "Talmud." The following paragraphs explain what these terms mean, and outline their roles in Jewish tradition.

In the Sinai desert, the Jewish people received the Torah. It was given to them in two forms: the Written and the Oral.

The Written Torah (*Torah Shebich'sav* in Hebrew) consisted then of the Five Books of Moses. Later, the writings of the Prophets (*Nevi'im*) and the Hagiographa (*Kesuvim*, such as Psalms and the Five *Megillos*) were added.

The Oral Torah consisted of explanations of Scripture (for instance, that *tefillin*—phylacteries—must be black and square), as well as additional and supplemental laws (such as the obligation to light a menorah on Chanukah).

This second Torah remained a purely oral tradition for many centuries. Eventually, the Sages decided that an outline of this tradition must be composed and written down, to ensure that its transmission would continue undisturbed. The initial phase of this composition ended toward the end of the second century CE, around 100 years after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

The central component of that outline is called the **Mishnah**. It contains quotes and legal opinions from sages who lived during and immediately after the era of the Second Temple. The Mishnah is organized into six series (*sedarim*), each of which contains several volumes (*mesechtos*).

Other teachings of the Sages of this period were compiled in a number of works, the majority of which are called **Midrash**. The Midrash is primarily concerned with explaining and expounding upon Scripture. Some Midrashim cover legal subjects, while others deal with the Biblical narrative, philosophy, and mysticism.

Over the next three or four centuries, two commentaries on the Mishnah were written. Both were called **Talmud**, and both are still studied today. One commentary, the Jerusalem Talmud, was composed by scholars living in Israel. The second, the Babylonian Talmud, became the central body of the now-written Oral Torah. Although many important works have been written in the centuries since (such as *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law), all of them draw on the principles outlined in the Talmud.

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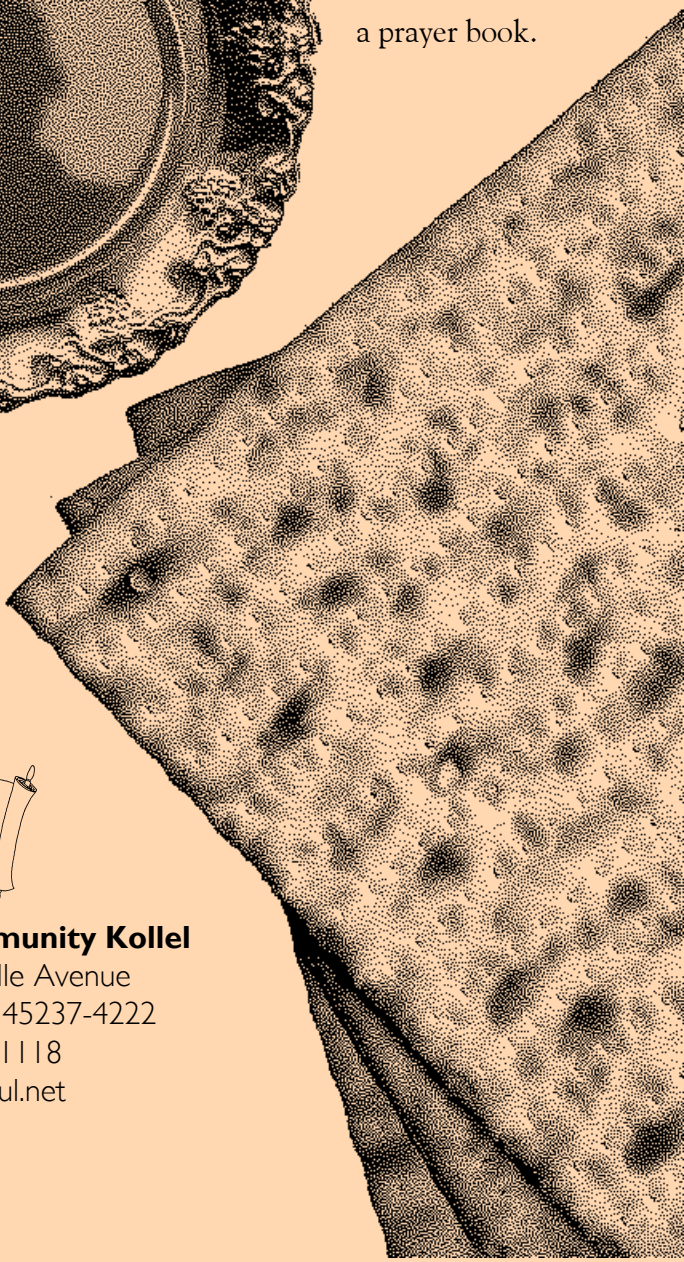

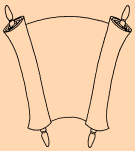

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