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Happy Passover

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Passover feature

The Passover Haggadah: Four sets of four

The number "four" carries special meaning in Judaism, and nowhere does this manifest itself more conspicuously than in the Passover Haggadah

By CHANA FALIK

From practical everyday halacha (rules of life) to mystical concepts of Kabbala, the number "four" carries special meaning in Judaism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Passover Haggadah, which we read this Saturday night, April 7 and Sunday night, April 8.

PASSOVER SEDER

No other night or meal in the yearly cycle of Jewish holidays has as many observances, details and specifics as the

Passover seder (from the Hebrew le-sader, "to order" or "to arrange"), which in this case form a definite pattern designed to help us re-experience the redemption from Egypt. It is to be experienced in its entirety, for as the medieval Jewish philosopher Maharal wrote: "Let nothing appear petty in one's eyes, even if there are many things at the seder which would appear not to matter... for there is nothing insignificant among them."

Commentators have written many books about the underlying structure and order to the seder. The obligation to tell and retell the Exodus story lies at the heart of the Passover seder, and thus the Haggadah (from the Hebrew le-haggid, to tell) has a set order to its reading. Structure, strong foundation, order, and even balance are also characteristics of the number "four." As if to



An Orthodox boy sits at the seder table in his Jerusalem home waiting to ask the Four Questions. WZPS photo by Flash 90.

emphasize these parallels, the Sages included four sets of four within the Haggadah: The Four Cups of Wine, the Four Expressions of Redemption, the Four Questions and the Four Children.

FOUR CUPS OF WINE

Wine is a symbol of joy, for as the psalmist wrote: "Wine gladdens the heart of man (Ps. 104:15). On Passover, we exclaim the love and mercy of the Almighty, who redeemed His people even though we hardly knew Him, and were no more worthy of redemption - tradition tells us - than the Egyptians. Indeed, what is unique about the seder meal is the

number of cups of wine to be drunk. Every other festival of the Jewish calendar and on every Sabbath we drink one cup, the kiddush cup of wine, or at most two cups (the kiddush cup and a cup of wine following the Grace after Meals). During the seder, however, we drink four cups of wine. The first cup of wine - the kadash, commonly called kiddush (sanctification), is mentioned at the beginning of the seder. The second cup is drunk during the magid, the telling of the Exodus story. The third cup is attached to the end of the birkat hamazon, the Grace after Meals, while the fourth and final cup is drunk at the end of hallel, the songs of praise to God in gratitude for our redemption.

The psalmist also refers to the cup of wine as the symbol of redemption ("I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon God's Name" - Ps. 116:13). With this point in mind, our Sages link the Four (Cont. on page B9. See "Passover Haggadah").

Passover feature

Passover Haggadah

(Cont. from page B8.)
Cups of wine to the four expressions of redemption mentioned in Chapter Six of the book of Exodus.

FOUR EXPRESSIONS OF REDEMPTION

The scriptural recounting of the Jews' exodus from Egypt is told - fittingly - in the book of Exodus. In describing His plans to Moses, Almighty God uses four distinct terms of redemption: Ve'hotzaeti ("I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt"); Ve'hitzalti ("I will save you from their work"); Ve'ga'alti ("I will redeem you with a strong arm and great judgments"); and Ve'lakachti ("I will take you unto Me for a nation"), Exodus 6:6-7.

The first pair of redemptive acts refers to freedom from the physical burdens and sufferings of Egypt, and is remembered through the kiddush and the cup of wine accompanying the re-telling of the Exodus story. The second pair expresses freedom for the Nation of Israel, God's Chosen ones, and is reflected in the third cup of the seder - which we drink following the last sentence of the Grace after the Meal, which reads: "The Eternal will give strength to His people, the Eternal will bless His people with Peace." The fourth cup is drunk immediately following the recitation of the hallel which includes the saying, "It is good to give thanks unto Thee oh Lord, our King."

The contemporary American-born Israeli rabbi Shlomo Riskin writes in his Passover Haggadah commentary that "Judaism is first and foremost an experience, and experience can and must be taught." The story of our redemption can be told in simple terms for even the youngest of children. As Rabbi Riskin says, "It is through symbols that the story becomes more vivid. The symbols encourage the questions, whether they be those of the

THE FOUR QUESTIONS

The Four Questions of the magid section are traditionally asked by the youngest present at the seder table. They are:

1. On all other nights we eat either leavened bread or unleavened (matzah); on this night why only unleavened bread?
2. On all other nights we eat herbs of any kind; on this night why only bitter herbs?
3. On all other nights we do not dip our herbs even once; on this night why do we dip them twice?
4. On all other nights we eat our meals in any manner; on this night why do we sit around the table together in a reclining position?

The question, Jewish tradition tells us, is much more important than the answer. Anyone who has learned even one sugia (clause) of Gemora (Talmud) knows that the technical terms for questions are found more often than any other. Questions reflect curiosity and a search for growth or meaning.

The Four Questions of the Haggadah reflect an ironic mix of servitude and redemption. For example, the subject of the first question, matzah, the bread of slavery, is also a symbol of freedom. Bitter herbs, the subject of the second question, are symbols of servitude, but we use them as hors d'oeuvres, and we even go so far as to dip them - another sign of luxury. Next, we dip our karpas (celery) in salt water, a symbol of Jewish pain and tears, yet we recline as a mark of our redemptive status.

The way one answers these questions, the Haggadah teaches us, is dependent upon who is doing the asking. The more a parent or teacher can fit the manner of study to the quality and potential of each child, the more effective a teacher he or she will become. This leads us to the next topic.



Students at a 1998 Margaret Park School Hebrew Bilingual Program seder dip their fingers in "wine" (fruit juice). It's traditional to drink four cups of wine at the seder.

THE FOUR CHILDREN (LITERALLY FOUR SONS)

The Four Children of the Haggadah are: the Wise Child, the Wicked Child, the Simple Child, and the Child Who Does Not Know How to Ask.

The Sages who compiled the Haggadah answer the question posed by each of the four children according to the type of child who asked it. The question asked by the Wise Child regarding the "statutes and judgments" commanded by the Almighty indicates a curious, intellectual spirit. Yet in our answer, we indicate that Judaism is not only an intellectual exercise, rather it is something to be "tasted" (as symbolized by mention of the Afikoman - a piece of matzah eaten at the conclusion of the Seder meal) and lived not only in the mind, but also with one's physical body and five senses.

The Wicked Child's question regarding what this service is "to you" excludes him/her from Jewish heritage and tradition. The Haggadah indicates that we need to answer the Wicked Child on his/her own terms by saying, "This is what God did to me" - i.e. me and not him, hinting that it would be a good idea if he or she began the search out of a spirit of questioning, instead of out of the dictates of telling.

The Simple Child asks, "What is this?" The Hebrew term for simple, tam, reflects the notion of naivety, earnestness and wholeheartedness, and not the English connotation of a simpleton. The essence of a tam is that the exterior reflects the interior; there is no deceit. The Simple Child, then, represents those who are religiously or ritually naive, and thus our answer to him or her addresses the heart of the Almighty's redemption - "With a strong hand the Eternal brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage."

The last of the four children is the one who does not know what to ask or even that he is supposed to ask. Our approach is to prompt him or her with questions of our own through understanding and love, instead of through impatience.

All four children present challenges of their own, and all four types are represented within the whole of the Jewish people.

The four sets of four in the Haggadah reflect another characteristic of this special number: as long as there are four - four table legs, four walls, and, yes, even four types of people - the structure will remain sound and balanced. However, if even only one of the four is removed, the structure will become weak and unstable. If this sounds like Alexander Dumas' "All for one and one for all" it should, because the final Redemption to come - hinted at in the Haggadah - is dependent upon our embracing all Jews, everywhere.

Chag Sameach!

- WZPS.

Legal service below extends Passover greetings to Winnipeg's Jewish community

The triumph of the human spirit...

We celebrate with you the traditions of Passover, the hope for peace and the promise that Pesach holds out for all.

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