

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School
Rhythms of Jewish Living
Instructor: Dr. Marsha B. Cohen
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>
E-mail: marbcohen@gmail.com

Topic: Pesach II (The Seder)
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/pesach.html>

Key Idea - Last week we studied several texts concerning Pesach in the *TaNakh*, and how the holiday we know today evolved from the fusion of the biblical *chag hapesach* (the Passover lamb feast) and *chag hamatzot* (the festival of unleavened bread). This week we will work our way through the Passover *Haggadah* (“telling”), which liturgically links the rituals of the Pesach seder. The seder is structured around 4 promises God makes in Exodus 6:6-7. There are three biblically mandated *mitzvot* which are presently observed during the course of the *Seder*: eating *matza*, eating *maror*, and the *telling of the story* of the Exodus from Egypt.

Our discussion of the texts:

Text 1: Exodus 13:8. The biblical text that serves as the basis for the annual recounting of the Exodus.

Suppl. texts: The 15 Steps of the seder (Song #1)

- (1) *Kadesh* is the recitation of the festival *Kiddush* over the first of the four cups of wine will be drunk at the seder, symbolizing the four promises God made to the Jewish people). The *shehecheyanu* beracha is added to the *Kiddush* on both nights of Pesach, after which the wine is drunk while reclining to the left.

Text 6: Jerusalem Talmud, Pesachim 10:1, 37b. Why four cups of wine?

- (2) *Urchatz*-handwashing without a blessing.
- (3) *Karpas*-dipping of parsley or celery into salt water. *Karpas* symbolizes the earth’s renewal during the springtime, when Pesach must be observed, and the salt water a reminder of the tears shed by our ancestors during their suffering.
- (4) *Yachatz*-the middle *matza* of the three on the Seder plate is broken, covered, and hidden away until the conclusion of the meal, when it is “redeemed” and eaten.
- (5) *Maggid*-the telling. This *mitzva* represents the core and essence of the Seder. According to the rabbis, the more one discusses the redemption from Egypt, the more praiseworthy one is.” This has led to extension and amplification of the *Haggadah* through the inclusion of *midrash* and other commentary. A dozen texts from the *Haggadah* that, taken together, fulfill the mitzva of telling the story.

Text 11: HaLachma anya (Song #2), describes *matza* as the bread of affliction but also the of freedom in the future, of which all who are hungry are invited to partake

Text 3: Mishna Pesachim 10:4. Originally the Four Questions (“*Mah nishtana*”) were designed to encourage discussion of the unique observances at the Pesach meal in case they did not arise spontaneously from the child’s own curiosity, to initiate the recounting of the story of the Exodus

A. The first telling of the story of the Exodus, in response to the four questions posed, *Avadim Hayinu* (“We were slaves”) explains that God brought us out of Egypt in fulfillment of **the first promise** (“I will bring you out...”) and so we are obligated to tell the story of the Exodus,

Text 4: Arba’ah Vanim (“Four children”)- The Torah gives the command to tell the story of the Exodus four times [Ex. 12:26; 13:8; 13:14; Deut. 6:20], and the parable of the Four Children builds upon the differences in wording and context. Each person has his or her own level of questioning which must be responded to, as each person must have his or her own understanding and experience of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the escape and redemption from bondage in Egypt (*Mitzrayim*=”tight place,” from the Hebrew word *tzar*, meaning “tight” or “narrow”) to physical and spiritual freedom.

B. The second telling, the second promise (“I will deliver you...”). *Mitchila oydei avoda zara* (“Our ancestors were originally idol-worshippers”) is a brief capsule of Jewish history from Abraham, the first monotheist whose father was an idol worshipper, through the descent into Egypt and the enslavement of the Israelites. *Baruch shomer havtachato/V’hee she-amda* (Song #3--“Blessed is the One who keeps His promise”) is an expression of faith that there is a Divine plan at work in the universe, and that God keeps and will keep His promise to save us from destruction by our enemies.

C. The third telling, the third promise (I will redeem you...). *Arami Oved Avi* begins with the assertion that Jacob’s father-in-law, Laban, tried to destroy the Jewish people and concludes with God bringing us out of Egypt. This statement was recited during the offering of the First Fruits at the Temple [Deut. 26:1-11] but within a very different context and understanding. *The Ten Plagues* (Song #4) were among the signs and wonders with which God brought us out of Egypt. *Dayenu* (Song #5) is a list of all the things God has done for which we owe thanks and gratitude.

D. The fourth telling, the fourth promise (“I will take you as my people”). Rabban Gamliel (d. 50 CE) is cited by the rabbis of the Mishna as establishing the minimum requirements of a Seder: explaining the reasons for eating the *pesach* (Passover sacrifice), *matza*, and *maror* (bitter herbs). After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the Passover sacrifice was no longer eaten but it was nevertheless discussed, while the eating of *matza* and *maror* remained, along with the telling of the Exodus, the central observances at the Seder. ***B’chol dor vador* (Song #6):** In every generation each person is required to see themselves as having been brought out of Egypt.

Text 10: *Lefichah*... thanks God for the deliverance from slavery, suffering and sorrow to freedom, festivity and joy, in order for us to be able to celebrate Pesach. Psalms of praise (a short form of Hallel are recited). The conclusion of the last telling looks forward to the fulfillment of the **fifth promise**, “I will bring you into the land...” (Exodus 6:8). (It is on account of this fifth promise that a **fifth cup** is poured--the “cup of Elijah”--but not drunk.)

Text #7: Brachot over the mitzvot of handwashing, *matza* and *maror*.

- (6) *Rachatz* or *Rachtza*-ritual handwashing followed by the recitation of the handwashing *beracha*.
- (7) *Motzi* -two blessings are recited over the *matza*. The first a food *beracha* recited as over any type of bread, leavened or unleavened.
- (8) *Matza*- the second *beracha* is for performance of the *mitzva* of eating *matza*.
- (9) *Maror*- a bitter herb, **preferably romaine lettuce**, is dipped in *charoset* and eaten after recitation of the *mitzva beracha*.

Text 8: *Mishna, Pesachim 10:5*. Why we eat bitter herbs.

Text 9: *Mishna, Pesachim 10:3*. Why we eat *haroset*.

- (10) ***Korech***-The 1st century sage Hillel’s custom of eating all three ritual *pesach* foods together is commemorated.
- (11) ***Shulchan orech***-the Passover meal.
- (12) ***Tzafun***-the saved portion of the middle *matza*, the *afikomen*, is eaten last.
- (13) ***Barech***-the Grace after Meals (*birkat ha-mazon*), with *pesach* inclusions.
- (14) ***Hallel***-An appeal for God’s justice (during which it is a folk custom to open the door for Elijah) followed by more hymns of praise (**Songs 10 and 11**).
- (15) ***Nirtza***-The expression of hope that the *seder* observance has fulfilled all the requirements and been acceptable, and that in the future we will be able to observe it at an even higher level. *Nirtza* is traditionally followed by the singing of folk songs such as *Chad Gadya* and *Echad Mi Yodeah* (Songs 12-17) and recitation of Song of Songs (*Shir haShirim* – **Song #18**).

Text 12: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*. Laws of Holidays 6: 17-18. The requirement on Pesach to be joyous and to provide for others.