

The Synagogue at Malden Bridge

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A Pesach Meditation

by Mark Dickerman

Pesach is unique. It is not simply a commemoration of the liberation of Jews from slavery in Egypt, but a return to a time when as a people we learned to recognize God. And yet, we celebrate this occasion of deep religious significance in our homes, with a complex and detailed ritual, performed at a dinner party!

Pesach is marked by contradiction. The table is beautifully set and we dine like aristocrats, yet we remember our enslavement. We are required to recline as if at a Greek banquet yet the broken matzoh and saltwater remind us of our oppression. We also taste bitterness--maror--yet we eat it with sweet charoset. The charoset, symbolizing our bitterly oppressive labors, is a sweet combination of wine, nuts and fruit. Our Pesach table is set with sorrow and joy, slavery and freedom, death and eternal life.

Pesach is freighted with ritual significance, both large and small; from the preparatory search for leavening -- the chametz -- and the obsessional effort to isolate it, through every detail of the Seder and the Haggadah, every bit parsed and debated, every bit layered with history and tradition. There is just too much to grasp. And yet,

each and every person can engage the holiday. Pesach is a process that is designed to last a lifetime and beyond.

In my childhood, we had Passover at my parents' house on Long Island. I remember my grandfather in his white kittel, my grandmother in the kitchen, and their children--my aunts and uncles--who talked and joked while my grandfather read. He read every word, in Hebrew, from the old Maxwell House Haggadah. His children were first-generation Americans who had willed themselves into new identities after his crossing of another turbulent sea. They saw the Seder as significant but mostly as a reminder of the tyranny and oppression always in attendance in this world. My brother and I sang the Four Questions. We were the only ones in the circle of cousins who had learned them. When my grandparents were gone it all faded. The gatherings were no more.

My time in the desert was still to come. But many years later, I found myself charged with answering the Four Questions at the head of a Seder table, where my children and their cousins and their parents gathered. At our table there are always Jews and Christians and Buddhists, gathered as one family. There is much to explain to our children and we have more

questions than we did before.

We know now that all answers are incomplete. Now, we can see the contradictions, and our duality, in ways we didn't see when we were young. The precepts of Pesach ring out. God alone took us out of Egypt with an outstretched hand and signs and wonders. In every generation we must regard ourselves as having personally been redeemed from Egypt. Those who discuss the Exodus at length are worthy of praise. Our American home is a different place under these conditions.

In the house of a slave, you are not free to live your own story or even to tell it. Your children belong to your master. So the Halachic constriction to explain to our children helps us understand what it is to be free. Pesach has its own way of making the familiar strange through the reconciling of opposites. In this case, it brings us near to gratitude.

At the end of the Pesach story, we see that those who are oppressors are not redeemed. The redeemed are those with nothing. The lowest are uplifted. What do we do with that?

The Synagogue at Malden Bridge is located at the Wesley United Methodist Church in Malden Bridge, New York at the intersection of Albany Turnpike and Shaker Museum Road. Visit our website at www.maldenbridgesynagogue.org



Point of View

Inca Jews? You've Got To Be Kidding

By George Carey

No—as a matter of fact a group of indigenous Incas have converted to Judaism and have made Aliyah to Israel. Moreover other members of their community in Chile have converted and are awaiting their turn to join their friends and neighbors in Israel.

In November of 2001, a delegation—a Bet Din—was sent from Jerusalem to Chile, comprising four each of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Rabbis, chosen for their proficiency in Spanish, to perform Orthodox conversions on behalf of members of the Inca—Jewish community from Trujillo, Cajamarca and Lima Peru. As a result, some seventy five of them went to Israel to join approximately 300 of their fellows who had already made Aliyah in 1991-92!

According to reports of the Israeli Shema Yisrael Torah Network, and Scattered Among the Nations (SAN is an organization dedicated to calling attention to the needs

of isolated Jewish Communities around the world), the initiative for the conversion of these Incas to Judaism stems from two factors:

1. Several members of the Community began to study the Books of the Hebrew bible as Christians. This led to their attempts to live by the writings in the Chumash. It became clear that Christian practice diverged widely from that standard. Study for conversion was the next step, sometimes under very difficult circumstances. SAN reports that Luis Aguilar of Trujillo who was a licensed, practicing engineer with five years of University training, chose to switch to a poorly paying job because of the difficulty of keeping the Sabbath. The lack of opportunity to practice his religion while practicing his profession was decisive in his resolution to choose to prepare for Aliyah.

2. Segundo Villanueva of Trujillo exercised leadership in improvising ways to approxi-

mate Jewish practice as closely as possible. They handmade Shoferot. They photocopied every page of the Chumash onto parchment and stitched them together by hand. The Siddurim that they were able to get from second hand sources were already worn when they received them.

Thus, out of the disjunction of Christian practice with their perception of their responsibility to God according to Mosaic Law, coupled with the persistent efforts of steadfast leadership, 300 Inca Jews were able to go to Israel in 1990-91, led by Villanueva. Their homemade improvised Torah is now in an Israeli Museum. In 2002 Luis Aguilar and the second group joined them. There are still some 280 members of the group left in Chile, preparing for conversion and Aliyah.

For further information consult info@scatteredamongthenations.org



COUNTING THE OMER: A Practical Guide to Becoming Great in 49 Days

With the mitzvah of counting the 49 days, known as Sefirat Ha'Omer, the Torah invites us on a journey into the human psyche, into the soul. There are seven basic emotions that make up the spectrum of human experience. At the root of all forms of enslavement, is a distortion of these emotions. Each of the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot is dedicated to examining and refining one of them.

The seven emotional attributes are: 1) Chesed- Loving Kindness, 2) Gevurah - Justice and discipline, 3) Tiferet- Empathy and Compassion, 4) Netzach- Endurance, 5) Hod- Humility, 6) Yesod- Bonding, 7) Malchut- Sovereignty and Discipline.

The seven weeks, which represent these emotional attributes, further divide into seven days making up the 49 days of the counting. Since a fully functional emotion is multidimensional, each includes within itself a blend of all seven attributes. Thus, the counting of the first week, which begins on the second night of Pesach when we actually count, "Today is day one of the Omer..." would be governed by meditations on Chesed. Within the week of Chesed, each day reflects upon the seven attributes sequentially: Day 1) Chesed, day 2) Chesed with Gevurah, day 3) Chesed with Tiferet, and so forth. Upon conclusion of the 49 days we would arrive at the 50th day-- Mattan Torah (a gift of Torah). After we have achieved all we can accom-

plish through our own spiritual initiatives, sounding the depths of our own psyches, we then hope to receive this gift from above: true freedom—the ability to transcend our human limitations and touch the divine—unattainable by means of our own limited faculties alone. The following are examples of meditation themes and exercises.

Day 2 -- Gevurah of Chesed: Discipline in Loving-kindness

Healthy love must always include an element of discipline and discernment; a degree of distance and respect for another's boundaries; an assessment of another's capacity to contain your love. Love must be tempered and directed properly. Ask a parent who, in the name of love, has spoiled a child; or someone who suffocates a spouse with love and doesn't allow them any personal space.

Exercise for the day: Help someone on their terms not on yours. Apply yourself to their specific needs even if it takes effort.

Day 8 - Chesed of Gevurah: Loving-kindness in Discipline

The underlying intention and motive in discipline is love. Why do we measure our behavior, why do we establish standards and expect people to live up to them -- only because of love. Chesed of gevurah is the love in discipline; it is the recognition that your personal discipline and the discipline you expect of

others is only an expression of love. It is the understanding that we have no right to judge others; we have a right only to love them and that includes wanting them to be their best.

Ask yourself: when I judge and criticize another is it in any way tinged with any of my own contempt and irritation? Is there any hidden satisfaction in his failure? Or is it only out of love for the other?

Exercise for the day: Before you criticize someone today, think twice: Is it out of concern and love?

Day 18 -- Netzach of Tiferet: Endurance in Compassion

Is my compassion enduring and consistent? Is it reliable or whimsical? Does it prevail among other forces in my life? Do I have the capacity to be compassionate even when I'm busy with other activities or only when it's comfortable for me? Am I ready to stand up and fight for another?

Exercise for the day: In the middle of your busy day take a moment and call someone who needs a compassionate word. Defend someone who is in need of sympathy even if it's not a popular position.

Day 24 -- Tiferet of Netzach: Compassion in Endurance

Healthy endurance, directed to develop good qualities and modifying bad ones, will always be compassionate. The compassion of endurance reflects a most beautiful quality of endurance:



an enduring commitment to help another grow. Endurance without compassion is misguided and selfish. Endurance needs to be not just loving to those who deserve love, but also compassionate to the less fortunate. Does my determination compromise my compassion for others? Am I able to rise above my ego and empathize with my competitors? Am I gracious in victory?

Exercise for the day: Be patient and listen to someone who usually makes you impatient.

Day 35 -- Malchut of Hod:
Nobility in Humility

Walking humbly is walking tall. Dignity is the essence of humility and modesty. The splendor of humility is majestic and aristocratic. Humility that suppresses the human spirit and denies individual sovereignty is not humility at all. Does my humility make me feel dignified? Do I feel alive and vibrant?

Exercise for the day: Teach someone how humility and modesty enhance human dignity.

Day 40 -- Hod of Yesod:
Humility of Bonding

Humility is crucial in healthy bonding. Arrogance divides people.

Preoccupation with your own desires and needs separates you from others. Humility allows you to appreciate another person and bond with him. Healthy bonding is the union of two distinct people, with independent personalities, who join for a higher purpose than satisfying their own needs. True humility comes from recognizing and acknowledging God in your life. Am I aware of the third partner -- God -- in bonding? And that this partner gives me the capacity to unite with another, despite our distinctions.

Exercise for the day: When praying acknowledge God specifically for helping you bond with others.

Day 48 -- Yesod of Malchut:
Bonding in Nobility

Examine the bonding aspect of your sovereignty. Healthy independence should not prevent you from bonding with another person. On the contrary: self-confidence allows you to respect and trust another's sovereignty and ultimately bond with him. That bond will strengthen your own sovereignty, rather than sacrifice it.

Does my sovereignty prevent me from bonding? Could that be because of deeper insecurities of which I am unaware? Do I recognize the fact that a fear of bonding reflects a lack of self-

confidence in my own sovereignty?

Exercise for the day: Actualize your sovereignty by intensifying your bond with a close one.

After the 49 days of Counting the Omer, after having fully achieved inner renewal by merit of having assessed and developed each of our 49 attributes, we arrive at the fiftieth day. On this day we celebrate the Festival of Shavuot, the giving of the Torah (Mattan Torah). After we have accomplished all we can through our own initiative, then we are worthy to receive a gift (mattan) from Above which we could not have achieved with our own limited faculties. We receive the ability to reach and touch the Divine; not only to be cultivated human beings who have refined all of our personal characteristics, but divine human beings who are capable of expressing ourselves above and beyond the definitions and limitations of our beings.

Article submitted by Larry Machiz, who arranged permission to excerpt from "A Spiritual Guide to Counting the Omer" by Rabbi Simon Jacobson, now available on line in English and in Hebrew at <http://www.meaningfullife.com/product.asp?3=158>. The home website is <http://www.meaningfullife.com>.

We Sadly Note the Passing of our Members

Leah Tolpin, who died on April 13, was a psychoanalyst who was born in Belgium. She and her family escaped the Nazis, wound up in Portugal, and managed to secure visas to the United States. Leah spent some years living in Israel, and had a lifelong dedication to it. She was also an avid outdoorswoman who could often be seen biking on local roads. Leah is survived by her husband Bernie, who lives in Manhattan and in East Chatham, and their three children and four grandsons.

Carl Bakal, who died on March 18, was a writer, editor, and public relations professional. His book *The Right to Bear Arms*, published by McGraw-Hill, was one of the earliest calls for gun control. During World War II, he was on photo assignment for the Army Signal Corps in the Far East and Germany. Carl is survived by his wife Shirley, who lives in Manhattan and East Chatham, and their four daughters and eight grandchildren.

Our community was greatly enriched by the presence of Leah and Carl and we will miss them. We send our condolences and loving thoughts to the Tolpin and Bakal families.



Member's News

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the following members and supporters who contributed to our congregation in all sorts of ways, and to highlight to accomplishments of our very talented members.

Anonymous

Marcia Neeley

Richard N. & Patricia K. Goldstein

S. Donald & Dorothy N. Zaentz

Lydia and Bernie in memory of Carl Bakal and Leah Tolpin

And Thank You to everyone who sponsored and hosted our Kiddushim: Ginger and Marc Feldman; The Parents of the Hebrew School; The Bakal family in honor of the naming of Sofia Ellen Ugarte Bakal; and Alice and Burt Swersey

Mazel Tov to:

Perry Rothman-Ostrow for her

equestrian achievements

Roberta Meyerson on the exhibition of her paintings at the

Spencertown Academy

Judith Rosenbaum on receiving her Ph.D from Brown University, and on her new job as Director of Education at the Jewish Women's Archive

Joyce Sarner, whose film was chosen for the FilmFestival of Food and Wine in Italy

Shirley Bakal and her family on the naming of her granddaughter, Sofia Ellen Ugarte Bakal

Sy Balsen, for his exhibit of Panoramic photographs in The Old Chatham Country Store.

And Thank You to those who have hosted SMB programs in their homes:, Annette Schickman - Or's March workshop; Shirley Bakal--April Potluck dinner and Havdalah; Alice and Burt Swersey- Or's May Workshop; Larry and Janey Machiz- Shavuot Tikkun. We thank Zvi Cohen for the dairy delicacies for the Tikkun, and Yehuda Hanani, Judith Rosenbaum, Chuck Simon and Or Rose for teaching at the Tikkun.

And Thank you to Beverly and Larry Bader for a subscriptions to two Jewish periodicals .

Take Note...

SY BALSEN will be displaying his Panoramic photographs during the month of May at The Gallery at the Old Chatham Country Store. Sy previous worked for Nikon Camera and designed and built furniture as the New Chatham Joiner. He also currently works at a local high school as a school psychologist.

PERRY ROTHMAN-OSTROW has won a place on the United States Team at the Icelandic Horse Congress held in March in California. She will thus compete in the Icelandic Horse Youth World Championships in July in the Netherlands on a team to consist of six riders between the ages of 14-17. Each contestant at the US team trials sent a video to California which was officially judged by a qualified visiting Icelandic Horse Judge. Perry, along with her faithful Icelandic equestrian friend and companion, Krummi (Kroo-mee) of Roberts Woods Farm in Monterey Massachusetts, placed on the United States team along with two girls from Alaska, two from California, and one from Massachusetts. The competition is scheduled for this summer.

In addition to winning a place on the USA team, Perry also won the Spaejari (spay-yar-ee) Youth Award. This is an annual award for an Essay describing the mutual dedication and devotion existing between an Icelandic Horse and its young rider and care giver. Perry won award for her essay on Krummi, the Icelandic Horse on which she qualified to ride for the Icelandic Horse Youth World Championships. She will receive a cash prize and a plaque.

ROBERTA MEYERSON presents a solo show of her recent paintings at the Spencertown Academy from May 15 through June 27. There will be a reception on Saturday May 15 from 4PM to 6PM and all are invited.

Roberta's work is about pattern and texture and narrative expressed through portraits. They are mostly, but not exclusively about women. Affixed to her canvas are fabrics, notions, jewelry and other found objects upon which she paints with acrylic, oils and oil sticks.

Roberta's work has been shown widely in N.Y.C and the metropolitan area, the Hudson Valley and in Toronto, Canada.



On Pesach, dialogue is the action of the ritual. And it is dialectic. The questions we answer spur us to ask more questions. When I compare my life now to the life of my ancestors, I find myself asking about my own conduct in the world. Do I worship idols? To what am I a slave? How am I oppressive? Oppressed? Can I be free? What do I serve? Do I have a master?

Pesach is personal and trans-generational, ordered and improvised, sad and joyous. It is about our lives, our families, our culture, our history, our future. When we ask the Four Questions of Pesach with our family, at home, the responsibility for our lives and of our lives is clearly upon us. And that responsibility is about what we do, “the commandment of the Four

Do I worship idols? To what am I a slave?

Cups, the commandments regarding dippings, the commandment of discussing the Exodus from Egypt, the commandment of eating matzah, bitter herbs, haroset, and afikomen...” It’s how we make the invisible real.

It is said that Pesach begins with our search for chametz and ends with the search for matzoh; that the larger half of the middle matzoh is concealed as afikomen because more is hidden than revealed; that Pesach begins and ends in the darkness.

But there is light always. It’s the rhythm of our lives: in darkness and then in light, the process continues.

May the grace of our Lord, our God, be upon us! May the work of our hands be sustained upon us! May He sustain the work of our hands!

Isaac

a poem by

Benjamin Kukoff

What could Abraham have said to him on their way down from Mt Moriah?
That God was testing him—would never let him go through with it.
And didn't the ram in the thicket prove that?

But is Isaac even listening?
That morning, Abraham, waking him caressing his face—
that afternoon, binding him atop sacrificial logs, holding a knife to his throat.

Passive to begin with (and who wouldn't be with those parents),
he doesn't know how to protest, to get angry, to say
God who? Which God? And what kind of God would do this?
Doesn't know to ask what kind of father would listen to such a God?

And that night do they sit around the table, eat as a family,
Abraham, that day, adding to his reputation as God's man,
with Sarah, his consort, self-absorbed as always, basking?
They can't possibly see Isaac, dutifully eating his lentils feeding
his overwhelming despair.

By Benjamin Kukoff (11/18/02)

SMB MISSION STATEMENT

We believe in equality at the Bimah, in a vital and searching study of Torah, in maintaining the tradition of Hebrew as part of the service, and in the ability of each individual to find his or her own meaningful relationship with Jewish culture, heritage, and religion. We believe a synagogue should play a central role in that pursuit, that a Jewish community is a blessing, and that being part of one is a mitzvah.

CONGREGATIONAL GOALS

- To provide a home for egalitarian religious worship in accordance with the principles of Judaism.
- To encourage and deepen a love and knowledge of Jewish practices, principles, and culture among our members.
- To be a source of education for our members, future generations, and the larger Jewish community.



Come to the Tikkun

A tikkun is a traditional way of observing Shavuot, the major that marks our receiving of the Torah. A tikkun gathers the community in the evening to study together, which is what we'll be doing on the night of Tuesday

May 25, starting at 8pm, at the home of Larry and Janie Machiz in Ghent. (Directions will be announced on our weekly update). Last year's tikkun was a textual, social, and culinary event, and this year's promises to be the same. We

will have the same stellar teaching lineup—Or Rose, Judith Rosenbaum, Rabbi Chuck Simon, and Yehuda Hanani—and the same stellar blintzes, cheesecake, and dairy delights, courtesy of Tsvi Cohen. Come one, come all!

Microcinema

Coming Attractions

The SMB Microcinema returns from its winter hibernation with two acclaimed and controversial features:

Sunday, June 6, 7:30pm

CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS

This extraordinary film, an Academy Award nominee for Best Documentary Feature, tells the story of the seemingly normal Friedman family of Great Neck, New York and their emotional and legal struggles when the father and one of the sons are accused of child molestation. Filmmaker Andrew Jarecki uses intimate tapes that the family made to chronicle their lives, along with interviews, to present a jarring and powerful document that plays like a modern-day House of Atreus. "Gripping, lacerating, moving, and tragic—a work of documentary art"—*Entertainment Weekly*.

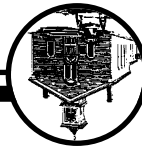
Sunday, August 1, 7:30pm

YOSSI AND JAGGER

A big hit in Israel, this true story of the love affair between two gay Israeli officers on a remote army base on the Israeli-Lebanese border becomes an interesting exploration of the situation of men at war and an important meditation on the role of machismo in Israeli culture. "An unusually subtle and convincing study of group psychology and fluctuating morale under stress in close quarters"—Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*.



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A Shavuot Tikkun at the home of the Machiz' on Tuesday May 25, starting at 8pm. (see inside)

We are happy to announce our next Shabbaton with Or Rose the weekend of June 12-13. Details will follow.

Also-

•Sunday, June 6, 7:30 PM. SMB Microcinema will be showing "Capturing the Friedmans."

Special Event!

•Sunday, July 11, An insider's tour of Art/Omi with Peter Franck and Kathleen Triem--SMB members. (details to come)

Getting the Weekly Update?

Don't rely on the newsletter for the most current SMB infor-

mation. Dates change. Weather happens. And locations of events can shift. To receive our weekly update, email abswersey@taconic.net and add your email address to our list. The update will also offer you interesting insights into the weekly Torah parashah. Your email address is safe with us...it's confidential and is never shared.

Coming Up